

BLURRING THE LINES BETWEEN FANTASY AND REALITY:  
THE CULTURAL PERVASIVENESS OF THE LORD OF THE RINGS

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## ABSTRACT

The Lord of the Rings, by J. R. R. Tolkien, is considered by many to be the definitive work of epic fantasy. Many critics have even gone as far as to declare Tolkien one of the primary authors of the Twentieth Century. The scope and depth of meaning contained within the pages of his trilogy, which consists of The Fellowship of the Ring, The Two Towers, and The Return of the King, have touched millions of readers, especially as evidenced by the way the works have garnered a broad and fanatical audience within the United States.

Although the trilogy has maintained a consistently high degree of popularity and acclaim worldwide since the first publication of the books in the 1950s, certain periods of history have witnessed a marked increase in attention given to Tolkien's work. This has been particularly apparent during times in American history when the nation has been faced with internal strife or external conflict such as terrorism or the prospect of war. Recent periods of history, which have exhibited these cultural characteristics and which are the focus of this study, are the counterculture era of the 1960s, the Reagan administration's efforts to restore a sense of nationalism in the 1980s, and the era of fear and uncertainty that began with the tragedy of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001.

Focusing primarily on the facets of American society that find a shared cultural relevance within the pages of Tolkien's epic, this study traces many of the possible causes for this resurgence in popularity of The Lord of the Rings. Hence, the cultural theories of Stuart Hall, Edward Soja, and Michel Foucault are applied within, as well as Sigmund Freud's writings on the nature of the collective subconscious, and the repression of trauma. The application of these critical approaches to the tendency of American

culture to turn to fantasy in times of strife enables an examination of the socio-political interaction between the themes inherent in The Lord of the Rings and the characteristic traits of American culture that has embraced Tolkien's fantasy.

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## DEDICATION

For the support and understanding I felt during the writing process, I would like to dedicate this thesis to my mother. The comfort and confidence gained from knowing that you always believe in me is immeasurable.

## INTRODUCTION

The Social Significance of The Lord of the Rings: A Quest for Understanding.

“The words are in the elven-tongue of the West of Middle-Earth in the Elder days [. . .] They say only: *The Doors of Durin, Lord of Moria. Speak, friend, and enter.*” (Tolkien 297).

My initial experience with the magnificent worlds created within the pages of J. R. R. Tolkien’s The Lord of the Rings began in 1976 when a friend handed me a well-worn copy of a book I had never heard of entitled The Fellowship of the Ring. The paperback looked as if it had been thrown off a cliff, washed downstream in a raging river, and finally pounced upon and used as a scratching board by thirty-seven crazed cats. Marveling at the miracle that the pages, well, most of the pages, were still clinging desperately to their binding, I reluctantly accepted, largely out of a sense that I should be polite. I hesitantly looked the book over and wondered what kind of horrible ordeal it had endured to appear in such a state. Then, I put it away until some future day when I would find some time to read it.

Time passed. One day while searching for something to do, I came across the book peering out at me from underneath a stack of detritus much as a wight would gaze out of its barrow in Tolkien’s realm. After reading a few pages that day, and then a few more the next, I found I simply could not put the book down at all. Eventually, after my parents had begun to think they might have to call the fire department to come wrest me away from the book, like some stranded kitten caught in a tree, I finished it. Upon moving on to the remaining tomes within the series, The Two Towers and The Return of the King, I was completely mesmerized by the depth of characterization and enduring truths found within the timeless struggle between good and evil contained within the

books. My curiosity was piqued. How had the One Ring become loosed upon Middle-Earth? What was the significance of the wizened, and somewhat fatherly figure embodied by Bilbo Baggins? I turned eagerly to The Hobbit, and read it out of sequence so that it effectively became a prequel to the remainder of Tolkien's epic tale. This story of the defeat of the great dragon and the seemingly inconsequential discovery of a tiny ring filled in many of the gaps for me, and enriched Tolkien's world immensely. Hence, I completed all volumes, and any other information I could gather that related to Middle-Earth. It was as if the ring had found a place on my own finger. From that moment forth, my life was changed, and I could not relinquish Tolkien and his tale.

Many years passed, and when the prospect arose that I might be able to do an extended study on some aspect of Tolkien's work, I was ecstatic. When the actual focus of the study became defined - the significance of an examination of The Lord of the Rings in relation to its cultural significance and influence - I discovered a compelling sense of relevance concerning the parallels my research would uncover. Especially in regards to events that unfold in the present day climate of increased tension and the looming prospect of an extended war against the shadowy forces of terrorism, an analysis of the manner in which an anxious public embraces the fantasy world of Middle-Earth becomes both a timely and fascinating adventure.

In order to comprehensively examine the interaction of psychological and sociological forces that drive the rise of fantasy in times of strife or war, I needed to focus on the decades in which this social trend was most apparent in hopes that they would yield some insight into this cultural phenomenon. In narrowing the scope of research in this manner, I hoped some recurring motifs might be found. I hoped to find cultural traits



that reflected similar trends during each era that may signal social trigger events which elicit the process. Hence, if similarities could be found within each period in American history, perhaps concurrent themes might appear that would signify a shared cultural meaning between particular aspects of The Lord of the Rings, and the emotional tone of a given era.

In searching for these cultural echoes in contemporary history, my primary focus was on periods in which the popularity of The Lord of the Rings showed a marked increase, both in the distribution of the books and in the manner in which the texts began to pervade society through increased attention and frequent discussion. The material aspects of this popularity within a given time frame were also considered, as any mania that elicits heightened marketing trends in relation to the series must be gauged as a cultural barometer in relation to a seismic leap in popularity of the trilogy. After all, even during the peak of the awakening that occurred amongst the counterculture of the 1960s in relation to The Lord of the Rings, in which many were so deeply affected by the texts that Middle-Earth became a representation of the expanded consciousness found only in a true state of Nirvana, who could have imagined that one day Tolkien fervor would reach such a peak that his characters would each have their own action figures?

The time frames which most clearly show a parallel rise in social tension, especially in regards to war, and a resurgence in the popularity of The Lord of the Rings become the focus of this study. They are the counterculture of the 1960s, which introduced the trilogy to America and revered it to the point in which it achieved cult status; the nationalistic fervor and simultaneous attention turned toward all fantasy which occurred during the early years of the Reagan administration in the 1980s; and the

unprecedented heights with which The Lord of the Rings has entered the social psyche during an era in which the horrors of terrorism and war loom ominously. In regards to the latter time period, which encompasses many present day issues and events, my particular focus will be on the relationship between the trauma suffered by the nation with the destruction of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center, and the manner in which the social psyche has linked the evil inherent in this attack to themes present within the second book of Tolkien's trilogy, The Two Towers.

In applying the cultural theories of Stuart Hall and Edward Soja, especially in relation to their discussion of how signs are disseminated and interpreted within a culture and the derivation of meaning that emerges from the social encoding and decoding of these messages, I maintain that the manner in which shared thought affects the individual is indicative of the tendencies of the collective culture as a whole. In addition, by analyzing the effect of societal tension, and how repressed memories of anxiety or trauma might find release in a similar cultural expression, it is possible to see the extent of the cultural link between the escape provided by fantasy and a society's need to venture into this imaginary realm during times of strife. For the purposes of this study, the theories of Sigmund Freud are also relevant and provide further insight into the nature of this cultural phenomenon.

Perhaps then, through examining fully these aspects of the trilogy, a new perspective in regards to Tolkien may be created, much like returning to discover something new about an old and cherished friend. The fantasy realm, whether it be exploring a murky dungeon in a role-playing game such as *Dungeons and Dragons* or within the adventure of a great novel, has called to me since the day I first opened the

pages of that well-worn book. Tolkien's world has become a part of me, and its environs as familiar and comforting as home. It has been said that once we have departed, we can never truly return home. Within the fantasy genre I have found this to be untrue, as many times I follow the well-trodden path of Bilbo and Frodo Baggins again, and the sense of wonder of that first journey is reawakened. So, to explore a new facet of Tolkien's trilogy I return once more, knowing that new layers of meaning will be revealed, as the Doors of Durin beckon me to "speak, *friend*, and enter" (Tolkien 297).

## CHAPTER ONE

### The Lord of the Rings: A Cultural Icon.

In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit. (Tolkien 9)

While grading papers on a summer day in the early 1930's, Professor John Ronald Reuel Tolkien wrote this line on a stray piece of paper that had somehow found its way onto his desk. Just as the question of how the paper came to be left blank and attracted his attention is clouded somewhat in mystery, so, too, is the origin of this simple string of words. Perhaps something in the papers he was grading sparked the thought, or maybe it was just the first hints of wistful fantasy teasing his psyche on that warm summer evening. Whatever muse decided to visit the professor that day, it began a process that would produce one of the most important pieces of literature, in any genre, of the Twentieth Century, and one which has been given such high stature that, even though it "is no Ulysses in aesthetic achievement . . . it will endure as long as Joyce's masterpiece" (Bethune 46). The breadth of this praise is fascinating, especially when we consider that Tolkien did nothing with his scribbled line on the page for years after first writing it down. He also admitted, in regards to the origins of this stray thought, why he suddenly felt the need to write it at that exact moment when he was quite preoccupied with other things, that "I did not and do not know why [and I] did nothing with it for a long time . . ." (qtd. in Jerome 117)

Even though Tolkien left this line an orphan for so long, its importance in beginning The Hobbit, and then The Lord of the Rings, cannot be overstated. If the acknowledgement that the stray thought which produced this sentence was seminal weren't striking enough, then how would we explain the instantaneous genesis of not

only the word hobbit, but also the birth of a race and culture in a literary equivalent of the big bang? If we were to examine the inception of the term “hobbit,” and its significance to the creation of the remainder of this book as well as The Lord of the Rings, then we must venture into the quizzical approach taken to this issue by the author himself.

Tolkien’s letters, written years later, give some glimpse into his epiphanies. Within these letters, Tolkien expresses for the first time the internal explorations that he underwent while allowing his masterwork to literally write itself:

One of the candidates had mercifully left one of the pages with no writing on it - which is possibly the best thing that can happen to an examiner - and I wrote on it ‘In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit.’ Names always generate a story in my mind. Eventually I thought I’d better find out what hobbits were like. But that’s only the beginning; I spun the elements out of my head; I didn’t do any organizing at all. (Tolkien qtd. in McClusky 32)

Tom Shippey traces the origin of the word “hobbit” back to *The Denham Tracts*, which appeared in the 1840s and 1850s (Shippey 3). Although the term is clearly stated and given definition in these works, and it is entirely possible for Tolkien to have recalled the term during his flash of inspiration, we may look for a more fanciful explanation, and one that is perhaps more appropriate to the genre. Throughout Tolkien’s books, hobbits are continually referred to as rabbit-like creatures, and it is not a stretch, by any means, to relate the nature of these creatures to the habitation Tolkien originally chose for them - burrows. Thus, although he vehemently denied this connection of his race of little earthbound humanoids to commonplace bunnies (Shippey 4), a link must be established,

at least perceptually, between the two creatures. Within the pages of J. R. R. Tolkien: Author of the Century, Shippey also posits that there may be another origin of the term, and one which shares a connection with the mythological nature of spirits and the supernatural. However, although Shippey presents the delineation between the two possibilities for the origin of Tolkien's use of the term as somewhat apart from one another, I might pose that the two may be linked by more than what appears on the surface. Since the earlier derivation of the term "hobbit" had certain qualities of the supernatural affixed, even going so far as to deign them spirits, could it be possible that Tolkien was combining an ethereal quality to a naturally existing creature? This would create a mixture that not only shares traits of both descriptions, but parallels many of the links between Middle-Earth and the real world, as well.

Tolkien had a great love for the natural world, spending long periods in contemplative bliss exploring the countryside. This affinity for enjoying his surroundings and his love of exploration are mirrored in his famous line "not all those who wander are lost" (Tolkien). In regards to his beloved Worcestershire, he states, "Any corner of that country (however fair or squalid) is in an indefinable way 'home' to me, as no other part of the world is" (Tolkien qtd. in Carpenter 27). The supposition of a blending between the supernatural and natural worlds as the origin of the simple hobbits may be carried a bit farther. Perhaps, on that warm summer evening something in Tolkien's mind may well have been rebelling against the tedium of grading examinations, and entered the world of dreamlike fantasy. Upon looking out his window, he may have spied a rabbit entering its burrow in his yard, a commonplace sight in his vicinity, and this sparked a

vast imaginative potential that would lead to the creation of his hobbits, and his world of Middle-Earth.

Whatever the case, I must wonder not only why this line was left alone by the author for so long, but also what brought Tolkien back to it years later to continue his creation? The author's claim that the books largely created themselves speaks to his predilection towards culture, language, and conflict to which he gave free reign.

Although some suggest Tolkien wrote for profit or primarily intended a children's book, both of which have some basis in fact, the explanation which is more related to the actual reasons may be found in his love for medieval tradition and a suspicion of the modern. In an apparent attempt to link times long gone, which he loved so much, with a critique of the invasive qualities of the present, he hoped to rectify the differences between each by finding a comfortable common ground. Tolkien strove to "make a modern myth, something that would connect the past, the England that he loved so dearly, with the modern world he saw" (McClusky 33). It is, perhaps, due to these efforts that much of The Lord of the Rings appears as both religious and cultural allegory, even though the author himself expressed a distinct and "cordial dislike" (Bethune 47) for such comparisons. Despite Tolkien's objections, his books also reveal a clear link to his own feelings, thoughts, and experiences. The expressive quality with which he uses the vibrant brush of description and language to paint his creation speaks of the depth of emotion he was trying to convey. Thus, the experiences of the author and the things in the material world that he was fond of show through in his writings, but the origin of the works cannot be traced simply to an "emotional response" to [these] influences"

(McClusky 33). To find the true nature of the creation, which will also lend some insight into the style and affect of the texts themselves, other factors must be considered.

If aspects such as his love of nature, of Worcestershire, and of medieval times were so prevalent in the life of the author, I must wonder why there was such delay in the actual transcription of these thoughts and feelings onto paper. With the aforementioned influences nudging him towards continuing the tale of the simple hobbit who would be thrust into a complex world full of adventure, and considering Tolkien's fascination with and inherent knowledge of language and mythology, what might have caused him to hesitate? A partial answer may be found in the academic life he was leading at this time. An acknowledged authority on *Beowulf*, Tolkien was constantly working on lectures or other projects related to his fascination with this poem. Another possibility is that he was concerned that his writing might be considered a children's book and that he would be subjected to some form of ridicule by the academic community of which he was a part. A third reason, and one which may hold more weight for those who examine the character of Tolkien himself, particularly his actions and writings after the publication of his works, is that he was concerned about what price would have to be paid for public adoration and fame. This would explain not only why he delayed starting the books, but also why he resisted publication once they were finished, at one point threatening to take his manuscripts to another publisher. During this time he is described as becoming quite "dilatatory and temperamental" (Lord of the Rings-posters.com), not only to those nudging him along towards publication, but also in his public life as well.

The manner in which Tolkien treated fame, once it arrived, lends support to this theory. Although he was satisfied with the treatment and acceptance of his works, he was



bothered greatly by all the attention that was garnered by their publication. This intensely private man, who would spend long hours in solitary pursuits, in later years was so plagued by fans who would appear out of nowhere at his house, or constantly try to reach him on the phone, that he withdrew from the attention and hid away in a new locale with an unlisted number. Considering the fact that after the publication of the books Tolkien quite often referred to himself as the physical embodiment of one of his furry-footed creations, it is not implausible that the author wished, on occasion, that he could hide in a hobbit burrow as well. The comparison between Tolkien and his hobbits, or the man and his myth, is quite succinctly stated by the author as he ruminates on the similarities between himself and his beloved creations:

I am in fact a hobbit in all but size. I like gardens, trees, unmechanized farm lands, I smoke a pipe and I like good, plain food – unrefrigerated – but I detest French cooking. I like – and even dare to wear in these dull days – ornamental waistcoats. I'm fond of mushrooms out of a field, have a very simple sense of humor (which even my most appreciative critics find tiresome). I go to bed late and get up late when possible. (Tolkien qtd. in Grotta 10)

Given the insight these remarks lend to an understanding of the author, we can see some of the traits that would emerge as defining characteristics of The Lord of the Rings, but especially the hobbits' intense love of the simple, private life. The sanctity of this life, due to the creation and widespread acclaim in regards to his works, would be threatened in the same manner as the orc army assaulted Helm's Deep in the second book of his Trilogy.

Summing up his attitude to the detrimental aspects of fame, Tolkien once wrote, “being a cult figure in one’s own lifetime I am afraid is not at all pleasant” (Lord of the Rings-posters.com). In fact, while Tolkien’s creations no doubt had a powerful influence on our culture, and far more so for American society than in the author’s homeland - a fact that puzzled Tolkien greatly - the books also had a profound effect on Tolkien’s life. An intensely private man, often described as a sad and lonely figure, Tolkien could never quite understand what drove people to take his writings to heart quite so utterly and completely, especially The Lord of the Rings, which for some became an alternative scripture to that of their primary religious faith. Always maintaining that his trilogy was “a fundamentally religious and Catholic work” (qtd. in Jenkins 28), Tolkien was undoubtedly more than a bit bothered by those who overlooked his Christian themes, creating a new mythology and doctrine from what he had intended to represent. This was most apparent within the subculture of the American 1960s, when The Lord of the Rings was elevated to such a stature that for some, it did, indeed, become scripture. Due to this frenzy, the author was beset by all manner of visitations from those believing he had created something divine. “This deplorable cultus” (qtd. in Grossman 92), as Tolkien was inclined to refer to them, took pilgrimages to Tolkien’s simple cottage as if it were a site of great religious significance on the order of Bethlehem or Mecca. Hence, there exists an interesting irony in the power of the one ring within The Lord of the Rings, after its discovery by Bilbo in Middle-Earth, and the power of the text after its discovery by millions of fanatical readers in the real world. Both discoveries, fictional and actual, altered Tolkien’s life irremediably. In the concluding passages of The Hobbit, the author describes the utility of the one ring of power. Bilbo, completely unaware of its true nature

and the effect it would have on his life, “kept [his magic ring] a great secret, for he chiefly used it [to make himself invisible] when unpleasant callers came” (Cooper 147). I wonder if during the times he was plagued by his legions of fans if Tolkien did not, just for an instant, wish he too could slip on the ring and vanish as well?

Further evidence that Tolkien’s concern over the ramifications of publication of his books may be found in the shifting nature of the tone and continuity of plot within the works. The playful and light hearted nature of the adventure in The Hobbit, in which the early stages of the book are entirely in accord with what would be considered children’s literature, slowly changes to a more realistic and culturally relevant tone as the tale draws to a conclusion with the slaying of the dragon. The manner in which mature issues of responsibility and greed enter into the story at this point, as well as the clash between dwarves and men that becomes symbolic of real world conflict over property and possession of land, lend clues that Tolkien was responding to a moral and ethical awareness that would be reflected in his literary explorations. These themes are mirrored and more fully developed within the pages of his masterwork that follows.

The Lord of the Rings shows a similar progression. The themes which would be considered more appropriate for adult literature would be allowed to slowly emerge once more, with the opening of the first book in the trilogy still displaying the playful and somewhat adolescent tendencies of its predecessor. As the work progresses, however, the author allows his considerable knowledge in the fields of language and history to blend with wondrous events, producing a mixture of elements that crosses thematic or demographic lines and gains widespread appeal. Some argue that this “ability of Tolkien to write on two levels – for children and adults – is what makes The Lord of the Rings so

successful” (McClusky 84). Tolkien is able to transcend some of the boundaries that might otherwise limit the appeal of a text. He ensures that his tale achieves a shared relevance between many ages, races, and cultures around the world. His innate ability to reach an audience of such a broad scope illustrates the powerful way his writings communicate, crossing cultural lines with an ease of which even the author was unaware while creating his fantasy epics. More than any other facet, this cross-cultural appeal attests to the cultural significance of the works. The primary evidence for this is found in the legions of fans who have eagerly received the texts’ message, and the enduring legacy of the books as their popularity has not only been sustained but has increased over the decades. That the books have meant so much and have been so pervasive within a given culture lends validity to the power of Tolkien’s writings, for “if no ‘meaning’ is taken, there can be no ‘consumption’ . . . [and] if the meaning is not articulated in practice, it has no effect” (Hall 91).

This shared relevance could not be created if not for the manner in which Tolkien applies his scholarly attributes. Many aspects of his works find relevance within the cultural psyche because readers find hints and echoes of the familiar within his pages. One reason Tolkien’s writing touches those who enter his world in this way is because of the complexity and somewhat paradoxical realism found in his fantasy world. Unlike some other imagined realms of magic and heroism, where plot and action during the adventure take center stage, Tolkien allows the complexity of his world to slowly achieve realization in several ways. Hence, as is often written in regards to the books, the world feels experiential because of its extensive history, its languages, and its cultures. It is commonly accepted that the appeal of The Lord of the Rings lies at least partly in the

unfolding history of this ancient world: a lost and mourned past of magic and wonders are slowly revealed over the course of the novels. Connections between this imagined past of Middle-Earth and parallels found with real life events of modern times can be made. This approach allows us to read Tolkien and find “methods of presentation [of historical fact] applicable to both fantasy and history” (Byfield 49). Hence, not only is Tolkien’s creation a vibrant world unto itself, it encapsulates so many metaphorical motifs in regards to the real world that certain facets of Middle-Earth may be seen as having an enduring relevance to readers who exist within the confines of everyday existence.

One such aspect of Tolkien’s writing that achieves cultural significance is his creation of the diverse languages present within his history of Middle-Earth. Each race has an extensive past devoted to it and described in detail by Tolkien, if not within the primary text, then within the pages of the supplementary material he also created. These tomes, which may be considered to complement the novels as a sort of reference guide to Middle-Earth, present and categorize the individual elements of each language inherent to the races of Tolkien’s realm, much in the way the natural world exists as a cultural melting pot. Tolkien’s work transcends the boundaries of age by appealing to both children and adults through his creation of languages. The fact that Tolkien was a devoted and talented philologist is widely accepted as the reason for the apparent ease with which he created individual languages for at least fourteen (Noel qtd. in Colbert 87) of the primary races within The Lord of the Rings. Tolkien’s fascination with the intricacies of language stems from what he believed was an innate “impulse towards linguistic invention [that was] felt by many schoolchildren” (Carpenter 44). Tolkien

found this predilection towards language was a natural part of existence, and he felt it was in its purest form within the minds of the young. Tolkien once remarked:

It's not uncommon, you know [for children to create their own language]. An enormously greater number of children have what you might call a creative element in them than is usually supposed, and it isn't necessarily limited to certain things: they may not want to paint or draw, or have much music, but they nevertheless want to create something. And if the main mass of education takes a linguistic form, their creation will take a linguistic form. It's so extraordinarily common, I once did think that there ought to be some organized research into it. (Tolkien qtd. in Carpenter 44)

Tolkien's use of language, therefore, was but one tool that exists within the pages of The Lord of the Rings which reaches out and finds a certain significance among the members of a given society or culture. Readers are fascinated by the complexity of Tolkien's languages. The linguistic aspects of Middle-Earth are explored by Ruth S. Noel, who has written an exhaustive and comprehensive lexicon detailing the vocabulary of Tolkien's languages. Within the pages of The Languages of Tolkien's Middle-Earth, she describes the importance of language as a cultural tool, and hence the effect of Tolkien's creation. She observes, "Language is so integral to a culture that a linguist can reconstruct a culture from its language just as a biologist can reconstruct an animal from a bone" (3). The unique facets of each language of Tolkien's work mirror eerily the ramifications of language development in our own world. Just as time and history have changed the characteristics of a certain language to reflect that culture's treatment by history, the linguistics of Tolkien's realm have blended vocabulary and syntax until language defines

the “political fortunes of races and groups that speak them [as well as reflecting their] social status” (Stanton 148). Hence, the manner in which language, as viewed as a cultural signifier, is shown to represent the history and characteristics of a given group exists within Tolkien as a microcosm of linguistic issues facing the world today.

Another aspect that gives life to the hobbits and orcs is Tolkien’s symbolic use of geography as setting, and metaphorical motif. Tolkien’s world evolves through a metamorphosis that is not unlike an encapsulated version of the maturation of the planet Earth, with an evolution “through the ages, from a flat world into a round one that eventually became the world that we know today” (Day 45). The creation and arrangement of Middle-Earth is also widely regarded as a reflection of Europe, both in the past and during Tolkien’s time. Tolkien links the world of his imagination quite frequently with that of the real one, suggesting playfully that “Hobbits . . . linger . . . [in the] North-West of the Old World” (Tolkien qtd. in Stanton 13). Those familiar with the European landscape will notice distinct similarities in the author’s descriptions of the various lands of Middle-Earth, as both the topography and plant life present is taken directly from Tolkien’s experiences while wandering through the natural terrain that he so loved. The placement of landmasses and geographical regions achieves meaning within Middle-Earth as well. The enduring effect of Tolkien’s invention of Middle-Earth, and its relevance when paralleled with our own, may be found within the writings of Edward Soja, who observes:

A lifeworld [. . . is] creatively located not only in the making of history but also in the construction of human geographies, the social production of space and the restless formation and reformation of geographical

landscapes; social being [is] actively emplaced in space and time in an explicitly historical *and* [Soja's emphasis] geographical contextualization.

(Soja 136)

If we were to adapt Soja's cultural significance of the creation of human geographies and place them within a social context of parallel meaning between the fantasy world created by Tolkien and to our issues and concerns, perhaps we could begin to understand that the spatial relationships present in each shift over the course of time, maintaining a relevance unique to the genre. The literary adaptability of Tolkien's "lifeworld" (136), therefore, possesses a historical continuity among those who venture into the realm, giving birth to an enduring and changeable relationship between reader and text, and this becomes a testament to the complexity and breadth of his creation. Within the lands of Tolkien's realm, certain echoes of the real world political structures may be seen, as "good flows from, and returns to, the West. Evil lurks in the East where its chief stronghold is; attack upon evil comes from the West" (Stanton 11). This "moral geography" (11) of good versus evil in Middle-Earth may be seen to mirror the geo-political concerns of Tolkien's time, which witnessed the rise of despotic rulers in Europe, and the growing specter of communism in Russian and China. In addition, when modern events in regards to the current diplomatic state of the real world are taken into consideration, the geographical significance of Tolkien's placement is eerily relevant in present times, when evil in the form of terrorism lurks blatantly and stealthily throughout the Middle and Far East.

When we approach Tolkien's creation as not only a fascinating study of how to invent a complete and natural fantasy realm, his prophetic hesitance to release his writings, the resultant effect that with great fame came great loss, and the vibrantly



realistic and almost tangible world he breathed life into with every descriptive page, the fact that The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings have remained immensely popular over time is hardly surprising. This popularity stems, in large part, to their relevance to social issues along a given timeline, and an adaptive cultural meaning that creates its own set of signifiers for the reader, no matter the era in which the works are being read.

Acknowledging these aspects of Tolkien's writing leads me to wonder if there exists within his pages a set of universal codes, whose meaning is "so widely distributed in a specific language community or culture, and learned at an early age, that they appear not to be constructed – the effect of an articulation between sign and referent – but to be 'naturally' given" (Hall 95). Perhaps this, as applied to the inherent timelessness of The Lord of the Rings, is the most concise explanation for not only the appeal of the works to a broad range of ages and cultures, but also for how each reader finds something of personal relevance within the texts, as codes within are as divergent in meaning and interpretation as the demographic base that enjoys Tolkien's world. Nonetheless, this demographic base, although changing over time, still shares certain distinguishing characteristics from one generation to the next.

Evidence of these commonalities may be found within particular moments in recent history in which The Hobbit, and especially The Lord of the Rings have experienced a rise in popularity and an extended influence. Certain defining parallel characteristics or complementary trends within each of these historical societies can be used to explain the resurgence and rediscovery of Tolkien's masterwork. Tolkien marveled at the extent to which American culture heralded his work and elevated it to a stage well beyond that which would merely be cult status (Grossman 92), and the most

compelling examples of this cultural significance may be traced through certain eras in recent United States history. A striking aspect of this examination is how the texts become prominent within the cultural psyche and rise to levels in which themes within the works have clear social relevance for the time, even in periods that are quite different from one another. This apparent paradox of diverse social climates finding meaning appropriate for their era within a given text is surprising, until we examine further both the nature of The Lord of the Rings and the shared issues facing cultures during their respective periods in history. One such common motif is the manner in which the public seems to embrace The Lord of the Rings during times of social or political upheaval, particularly when the nation is faced with the looming specter of war. There seems to be a direct link to the morally unambiguous call for war within the pages of Tolkien's work, depicted in metaphorically accurate detail based on his own experiences in World War I, and a nation's yearning for such clarity during times of strife and dissention. This is particularly apparent when, in quite an opposite fashion from Sauron and the other clear manifestations of evil within The Lord of the Rings, the evil that menaces America is nebulous and illusive.

During such periods of social uncertainty, the increase in popularity of Tolkien's trilogy may be seen as a barometer that gauges the level of anxiety within our culture. Threats to national security emerge and must be faced much like the peaceful lands of Middle-Earth have had conflict thrust upon them with the rise of Mordor. The Lord of the Rings seems to garner most attention, and subsequent discussion, in years leading up to the eventual resolution of such crises. This leads to the conclusion that the defeat of evil

within the pages of the book becomes the public's own hope for a self-fulfilling prophecy of good over evil.

Three main phases in American history emerge as striking examples of this rise in interest in the works of Tolkien with a parallel surge in concern for the nation's security, both from within and abroad. The first such era, and the initial time in which Tolkien and his trilogy emerged and gained a strong cult following in America, extended through the 60s, the Vietnam era, and into the early years of the 1970s. Many factors contributed to the nation's unrest during these times, not the least of which were the national protests and calls for outright rebellion in the face of what was seen by many as an unnecessary and ethically corrupt war. The second such instance in which militarization and subsequent rise in the nationalistic fervor of the country were paralleled by an increased awareness and prevalence of discussion about Tolkien and The Lord of the Rings was during the early to mid 1980s when Ronald Reagan waged war against the "evil empire" (Noonan 201) of communism and the growing threat of terrorism. This period also witnessed a parallel rise in popularity of the fantasy genre as reflected in both the film and literary mediums. World figures emerged during this time, whether real or invented as a nation tried to rebuild pride and security lost during the previous decade, that were positioned as ultimate manifestations of evil that menaced America, much as the lidless eye of Sauron and his henchman, Saruman, plot against the common good. Finally, the dark cloud of insensate evil that has cloaked our world since the recent terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, as well as the reappearance of threats of nuclear annihilation from the Eastern regime of North Korea, and the possibility of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, have plunged us into a period of darkness on the precipice of a

national depression. The mere fact that the country has rebounded so quickly and completely in finding unifying themes is a testament to the resilience of the American people. One of these themes that the nation has turned to, as both a tool to give hope and a means of collective therapy, has again been the return to the black and white certainty of good and evil in of The Lord of the Rings. Within these pages, quite unlike the real world, there exists no threats of the unknown, hidden in ominous shades of gray, and no concern that “the evil” might, in fact, be misunderstood and “the good” might, in fact, be fueled by selfish, unethical greed.

Hence, The Lord of the Rings as cultural icon can trace its roots to the intensely private and nature loving man who created it, as well as clear cut conceptualizations of good vs. evil and the starkly realistic depiction of an ultimately moral and victorious war held within the pages. The discovery of the trilogy by American society goes beyond the need for escape, and was indicative of a cultural hunger for a tangible world over which some measure of certainty existed. This was quite the opposite of the actual existence where events seemed to be spiraling in a chain reaction, flirting with critical mass at any time, and always with the possibility of Armageddon that could follow. The rise in popularity of the trilogy during these times lends a sense of meaning to the ever-shifting interpretation of the themes within the books, just as the trilogy seems to offer solace and comfort in giving definition to the seemingly indefinable eras of strife and fear in American culture, in decades past and present. In this way, the trilogy emerges as a cultural icon during these periods. Recently, as the film version of The Two Towers competed for Oscars, it has become as much a characteristic signifier for our troubled

society as any other defining feature during times of “wars and rumors of wars”  
(Matthew 24:7).

## CHAPTER TWO

### The Lord of the Rings Strikes a Chord in Times of Strife.

“Where now are the Dúnedain, Elessar, Elessar?  
Why do thy kinsfolk wander afar?  
Near is the hour when the Lost should come forth,  
And the Grey Company ride from the North.  
But dark is the path appointed for thee:  
The Dead watch the road that leads to the Sea.” (Tolkien 491)

Over the years many have tried to explain the enduring popularity of The Lord of the Rings in an effort to understand the profound and repeated effect it has upon our culture. In approaching the trilogy in this manner, we might be inclined to conclude that American readers, faced with evils and an uncertain future, merely escape into the fantasy realm of the books in order to get away from the frustrating ambiguities of the real world. Admittedly, most of the unfavorable criticism directed at the trilogy is Tolkien’s tendency to paint a world too black and white. Good and evil are clearly defined and distinctly delineated, lending a tone to the works that leaves little room for moral ambiguity or ethical complexity and, therefore, relevance to real issues. It would seem most logical that readers would flock to ambiguous texts that mirror what we face in real life, and shy away from that which on the surface might seem to offer answers and solutions too simple and convenient to be taken seriously in the harsh light of cultural realism.

Tolkien’s popularity proves this assumption false. Readers are not drawn to the trilogy to find an escape to another realm, for if this were the case, there are multitudes of worlds found in numerous novels which would seem far more suitable as a panacea to the world’s problems. After all, Tolkien’s themes are mostly of loss, of looking back wistfully and somewhat ruefully, to a time long past, a time never again attainable.

Magic, even though it makes timely appearances in The Lord of the Rings, has lost much of its power, and its arcane secrets are lost. At the trilogy's conclusion, the Undying Lands across the sea will be the destination of two of the most potent wielders of magic on the side of good in Middle-Earth, Gandalf and the Lady Galadriel. The great beasts of lore are only mentioned as whispered legends, favored mostly in songs carried forth by the bards of Tolkien's Middle-Earth, a facet which interestingly enough establishes yet another link between the author and his most cherished poem, *Beowulf*. Just as *Beowulf* was handed down through an oral tradition of song and storytelling, Tolkien's world is thick with "the backdrop of a vast and ancient cosmos alive with powers both visible and invisible, some known and some only evocatively suggested in the lore of the Wise" (Ellwood 49). Hence, the great dragon Smaug, who was the fearsome beast Bilbo confronted in The Hobbit, is but the stuff of legend, appearing only in the pages of Bilbo's extensive journal and notes.

The fact that Tolkien focuses so much attention upon the writings of Bilbo, and returns to these notes and tales quite frequently, lends another instance of the manner in which the lost past is an overriding theme within the trilogy. The characters of The Lord of the Rings often refer to their quest not as an adventure leading to, or as a salvation of, their future in Middle-Earth, but instead as their opportunity to become part of the living tradition and mythology of the realm, just as have their heroic predecessors.

The very ramifications of the conflict which Bilbo, and later Frodo, so carefully chronicled, and "the acknowledgement that nothing is gained without something lost, is the novel's overarching theme" (Bethune 49). The characters within the pages of The Lord of the Rings are not valiantly saving their world from the encroaching forces of evil

to return it to an idyllic former state and live happily ever after. The struggle for survival is instead one that accepts the loss of the old and traditional ways, and one of heroic efforts to sustain life so that when evil is defeated, a new realm of mankind may be built upon the ruins of the old. Within Tolkien's work, Elves make the greatest sacrifice, and thus endure the most loss, as they "would never die if they simply ignored Middle-Earth's peril" (49). The motif in both The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings in which a simple hobbit is wrenched from the safety of home by the call of responsibility and thrust out into a world unknown to him is emblematic of the theme of lost innocence which pervades the book as well.

Thus, if I tried to suggest that individuals within a culture during times of stress and uncertainty delve into Middle-Earth to find escape from the troubles oppressing them in the real world, how would I reconcile the darker themes of loss and sadness within The Lord of the Rings as any sort of viable cultural therapy? It is helpful to apply Sigmund Freud's definition of a defense mechanism that an individual will adopt during periods of great anxiety. Freud helps explain why readers embrace the themes of loss so prevalent within Tolkien's writing, when, in fact, they are trying to escape the very real probability of loss within their own lives. To Freud, a defense mechanism is

A manipulation of perception intended to protect the person from anxiety. The perception may be of internal events, such as one's feelings or impulses, or it may be of external events, such as the feelings of other people or the realities of the world. (qtd. in Kahn 123)

If we use The Lord of the Rings as a defense mechanism to escape "the realities of the world" (123), such use seems contradictory to the need and stated purpose of escaping.



To leave a realm, imperiled by evil, and enter another imaginary one, where the vanquishing of evil is the harbinger of a new age in which those who fought for good bid farewell to the world as they knew it seems counterproductive.

If The Lord of the Rings is not an escape mechanism for those who need comfort from the tribulations of the real world, then what are the cultural causes that influence readers to return to the texts at distinctly similar, and predictable, periods in history? To answer this question I again return to the aspects of the trilogy that serve as an escape for some readers. As outlined above, instead of fleeing the realities of existence and the evil that is lurking there, and entering The Lord of the Rings only to find more darkness and evil in the form of loss and sadness, we might perceive an effort to gain hope and reduce anxiety in the transcendent qualities of the texts. The escape might not be considered an escape from something, but more an escape to a brighter horizon (Wood), and perhaps even to the ultimate salvation offered through the voyage to the West. When the Elven sorceress Galadriel declares, “I pass the test . . . I will diminish, and go into the West, and remain Galadriel” (Tolkien 357), the reader does not get a sense that this is a time of death and despair, even though there is a distinct sense of loss underlying these passages. Instead, the emotion conveyed by Galadriel’s resistance to the evil influence of the ring, is one of purity and a cleansing of spirit, as if she has undergone a great catharsis by turning away the temptations of evil, so that she will “remain Galadriel” (357).

For those caught in communal anxiety, especially when there is a sense of powerlessness when confronted with terrorism, the primary feeling that individuals may cling to is hope. Hope for an end to uncertainty, hope for a deliverance from evil, hope for something better. For some readers hope also includes closure: that once our time in

this world has passed and we take our places in whatever lore fate has in store for us, that there will be something on the horizon, whether it be a voyage among friends across a vast sea to unknown lands, or an ascension to a place where the evil of the material realm cannot reach us. The closing passages of The Lord of the Rings hold such promise, as there is a sense of comfort, peace, and companionship present as the characters set sail from the Grey Havens for the unknown. Tolkien has interjected the tenets of his Catholic beliefs into the concluding passages of his epic and done so without conveying the sense of loss that has pervaded the rest of the trilogy. Even though the Shire has just undergone a destructive scouring by the fires of evil, the companions enjoy a renewed camaraderie that belies past strife, and suggests that they already are passing into a transcendent realm in which the only loss will be the loss of trouble and pain. The fact that Tolkien suggests all these things, without the slightest hint of actual death, seems to invite the willing reader to celebrate the enduring quality of the spirit with the author. Even when it is time to move on from their beloved world, a sense of hope is present in the verses that those departing sing:

Still round the corner there may wait

A new road or a secret gate;

And through it I oft have passed them by,

A day will come at last when I

Shall take the hidden paths that run

West of the Moon, East of the Sun. (Tolkien 1005)

Thus, if those within a society are faced with multitudinous forms of evil, and feel cold, alone and vulnerable, these lines by Tolkien at the conclusion of The Lord of the Rings

offer the one thing that is needed most: hope for the end of uncertainty, the end of pain, and the beginning of a better life after a tumultuous, but necessary, rite of passage. So cultures that embrace the trilogy in times of war or when social anxiety is high may be looking for hope within the text, for solace when their world is covered by clouds of sand and smoke, the detritus of exploding air planes, imploding buildings, and the conflagration of war, which drains the life from the land much like the creeping dark clouds of Mordor. Willing readers find a transcendent escape to something better at the conclusion of the final book of the trilogy, and perhaps this is why they are drawn so much, and so repeatedly, to the themes inherent in Tolkien's Middle-Earth. The common ground they share contains a distinct salvation at the end. Tolkien confirms reader's hopes that the same may be waiting for them as they withdraw from the real world.

This salvation that Tolkien offers at the end of The Lord of the Rings brings the characters together to travel to a better place, and leave the land for which they fought so hard to save. This land of Middle-Earth, complete with a rich history created by the author, exists as a living and perceptibly tangible existence for many readers, a facet that undoubtedly adds another link when finding personal relevance for those drawn to the books. In times of war or social unrest, when the sense of security and continuity that usually surrounds us seems to be degrading to the point of complete uncertainty, whether from the internal unrest that characterized the 1960s or from threats from outside America that are so prevalent today, a parallel exists between Middle-Earth during the time of the War of the Rings. In this period, Tolkien presents his world in a state of slow, but continual decay, so that a "negative entropy rules over everything; winding down to [ . . . ] doom" (Wood). When cultures are witnessing social upheaval and apparent decay in

moral or ethical values, perhaps readers find a connection to Tolkien's writing because there exists a certain familiarity with what they are currently experiencing. In this way, a shared "moment of encoding and decoding" (Hall 91) occurs, and this may be considered a "determinate moment" (91) in the relationship between reader and text. This determinate moment, when the work connects with the reader in an epiphany of meaning, creates a shared context in which what is written on the page suddenly becomes a mirrored version of the reader's world. When this occurs, the scope of the narrative extends tendrils of relevance into many more aspects of the reader's consciousness. At this point I cannot escape the temptation to consider much of the underlying social and cultural issues that are conveyed within The Lord of the Rings as an adaptive allegory, even though the author would cringe at such a suggestion. In fact, a Swedish translation of the text, one of the many languages the world of Middle-Earth has been transcribed into, suggests:

[The] novel was an allegory of contemporary world politics. In the depths of the Cold War thousands of readers saw Sauron's ring – too dangerous to use, too dangerous to yield up to the enemy – as a symbolic nuclear bomb. Others thought "Nazgûl," the name given Sauron's terrifying servant wraiths, derived from a combination of Nazi and ghou. (Bethune 47)

After he read these suggestions made in the foreword to the Swedish text, Tolkien scoffed and dismissed any such notions as "five pages of impertinent nonsense" (47). From that point on, whenever the issue of allegory would arise, Tolkien would immediately, but politely, express a "cordial dislike" (47) for the notion.

Nevertheless, no matter what terms are used, potential for meaning exists within the fantasy adventure that comprises The Lord of the Rings. We need only look at the reception and renewed legacy of the books to see that there is much more to discover in the story than the ostensibly simple tale of a hobbit's quest to destroy evil.

The entropy and sense of a decay in culture suggests a metaphorical death prior to a longed-for rebirth within the trilogy and an actual national, or perhaps international, rebirth hoped for by readers of the text. Tolkien creates this tone of despondency followed by hope within the work through a number of symbolic motifs. This process of the placement and interpretation of signified meaning within the text is described by Stuart Hall as follows:

The level of connotation of the visual sign, of its contextual reference and positioning in different discursive fields of meaning and association, is the point where *already coded* [Hall's emphasis] signs intersect with the deep semantic codes of a culture and take on additional, more active ideological dimensions. (Hall 97)

Tolkien's rich motifs can be read allegorically since there does exist a distinct set of signs within the narrative which intersect with significant semantic codes of American culture. Given this intersection, these signs take on active ideological dimensions.

In examining these motifs I might begin with the item that burdens Frodo and threatens the end of all existence if it were to fall into the wrong hands. Whether or not Tolkien intended, or wanted to admit, that the one ring could be an allegory for the destructive power of nuclear bombs, readers of the works cannot escape the striking similarities between the fantastical ring, and the all-too-real apocalyptic weapons of mass

destruction. A most frightening parallel can be drawn between the manner in which the one ring preys on the temptations of the weak and those who lust for power, without showing the consequences of such a dire acquisition. The ring offers limitless life to the wearer, without granting the wisdom with which to justly wield it (Wood). Sauron and other evil minions hunger for the absolute power which the ring would bestow, but when the ring begins to reach into the psyche of its bearer, Tolkien does not reveal the end result such an acquisition of power would produce. Not only Sauron desires the ring: Gandalf and Galadriel are tempted by it; Frodo begins to succumb to its insidious weight; and Boromir is overcome by its lure. The corrupting nature of power itself is suggested when even the characters who seem to want to use the ring to do good and subdue the forces of evil uncharacteristically crave the destructive power the ring would bestow upon them. It would not be long, however, before their moral character would be twisted by the corrupting nature of the ring's power, and the "peace" they might bring upon the world by their just actions would be as terrible in actuality as anything that would befall them if Sauron were the wielder. Tolkien allows the ring to lure the weak as well as the strong, tempting them with the promise of "material things" (Wood) such as may be gained from the application of its ruthless power. In Civilization and Its Discontents, Freud describes this lure of power and its residual effects as an "inclination to aggression [that] is an original, self-subsisting instinctual disposition of man [. . .] and constitutes the greatest impediment to civilization" (69). The cultural conflicts during the periods when The Lord of the Rings has risen in popularity contain the yearning for material gain and power, the ongoing fear of the use of weapons of mass destruction, and the ever-present concerns of global destruction. These plagues of our recent history and our present day

world, eerily, sadly, and strikingly parallel the potential destruction of Tolkien's Middle-Earth.

The insidious evil emanating from the ring, and its stealthy power to subjugate even the good creatures of Tolkien's world has been vibrantly and effectively translated in Peter Jackson's recent film. Part of Middle-Earth includes a shadow world, which Sauron inhabits along with the ringwraiths, whose corporeal bodies have been consumed by the negative energy emitted by the ring. The shadow world reflects the darkness that parallels the "natural" world of Middle-Earth. As Tolkien created the setting for the sense of a "natural" existence within his fantasy creation, and positioned it somewhat as a reflection of what is found in the real world, he set apart the shadow realm as a perceptible alternate dimension. This dimension holds darkness where there should be light, death where life should be found, and evil attempting to pervade all that is good. In this way it is a negative reflection of all that exists, a supernatural, or more precisely an "unnatural" parallel existence to the life present in Middle-Earth's "natural" world. It contains everything that is present in the "natural" world, but distorts and corrupts it to the extent that it becomes a deceiving shadow image (Wood) of the "natural," warped by the evil of the ring. Hence, the power of the ring and the ultimate dire consequences of its use, lack "any power to create or originate, only [an ability] to pervert the good" (Wood). The perverted mirror image of the fellowship of companions who start out the quest to destroy the ring in The Fellowship of the Ring, the first book in the trilogy, can be seen in the *nine* ringwraiths released from Barad-Dûr, which are the negative reflection of the *nine* companions setting off from Rivendell.

When Tolkien relates the tale of the inception of the plot to subvert Middle-Earth by using the evil influence of *nine* rings of power, he explains that most races have resisted the evil in the rings. The only ones to fall under the rings' lure were the *nine* rulers of the Human realms. Readers may consider it no accident that the only race whose leaders fell to the subjugation by the rings is the only one present in the books that actually exists in our real world. Tolkien ventures away from his more customary use of symbolism when dealing with this issue. Just prior to the meeting of the council which will decide the best course of action to remove forever the danger inherent in the ring, Gandalf and Elrond speak of human weakness. This refers to Isildur's failure to destroy the ring when he had the opportunity and of the slow degeneration and loss of unity that has befallen the Human kingdoms in the years since that moment of "human frailty." Freud lends insight here. He maintains that one of the most innate qualities of life itself is the struggle between maintaining a positive or moral bearing in culture, and the predilection to give into the baser instincts and embrace evil and death. On this issue he writes that the overall "purpose [of a successful culture] is to combine single human individuals, and after that families, then races, then peoples and nations, into one great unity; the unity of mankind" (Freud 69).

In Middle-Earth the machinations of evil oppose a "unity of mankind" (69). This struggle is present in Tolkien as well as in the present. Freud is again relevant when in Civilization and Its Discontents he argues that there is a duality to existence and a struggle between these dual forces: "as well as Eros there was an instinct of death. The phenomena of life could be explained from the concurrent or mutually opposing action of these two instincts" (66). In Middle-Earth and in reality, the death instinct is manifested



as the inclination towards destruction, whether from desire for the subversive power of evil, as in the One Ring, or in the overt and brutal use of such power in the case of a nuclear Armageddon. Hence, this nature of evil, which takes both physical and emotional form, is depicted in Tolkien and is experienced in the real world. Weakness of spirit and an uncertain resolve of Humanity to stay the course and do what is right threaten to “deconstruct” the very fabric of life that Eros attempts to maintain. It is from this mighty conflict that anxiety emerges within the individual, and repression occurs that subverts the instinct for destruction.

In Middle-Earth, the end result of the struggle between Eros/good and the baser instincts which lead to destruction and death may be seen in the manner in which those corrupted by the power of the ring lose not only their corporeal existence, but their spiritual one as well. No matter what desires motivated Sauron upon the creation of the nine rings of power, after the consumption of his physical form by the ring, and the subsequent descent into the shadow world by his spiritual one, he is engulfed completely by the lust for power (Wood). Gone are any considerations of how to regain whatever links to the natural world he might have had prior to becoming nothing more than a spirit, an omniscient lidless eye encased in a canopy of flame. Readers can readily witness evidence that supports Tolkien’s contention that his trilogy was primarily based in Christian doctrine. Sauron is an allegorical Satan. The author was a devout Catholic who remained true to his faith his entire life. He believed that the mythological realm of The Lord of the Rings was the best genre in which to convey “certain transcendent truths which are almost inexpressible within the factual confines of a ‘realistic’ novel” (Pearce).

By selecting the fantasy genre, Tolkien felt free to explore the underlying cultural and religious issues within his epic tale using irony. To present “realistic” social issues to his audience, he encased them in a realm quite apart from the real world, in one which magic and monsters exist. Tolkien’s paradoxical ability to make his readers interpret more about their real world through the meanings contained within a fantasy realm becomes a compelling reason to examine further the qualities of The Lord of the Rings which allow him to achieve this goal.

An examination of the enduring nature of evil and its effect on those tempted by it, and one that may exhibit the most relevance for the solitary reader who might feel lost and powerless in a world of strife, is the manner in which those on the side of good choose to wage their war against this evil. The Lord of the Rings is full of epic and accurately detailed battle sequences, because of the author’s first hand experiences during World War I as a second lieutenant (Stanton 4). Interestingly enough, it was during a brief respite from one of the horrible battles he endured, while he was recuperating in the hospital from a bout of trench fever in 1917, that he took pen and paper and wrote some material that would later become parts of the Silmarillion. This text, once completed and compiled, became a pre-history of Middle-Earth and its culture, effectively giving birth to “the first bud on the great tree of Middle-Earth” (4).

The manner in which Tolkien depicted his struggle between good and evil reflects the character of the author and even more about the trilogy’s meanings. Acknowledging the opinions Tolkien held about the value of privacy and the importance of the individual in a society, even if that individual was the smallest and least significant member, conclusions may be drawn that The Lord of the Rings may be read as a tale which

attempts to empower these lowest common denominators in a culture. Tolkien gives readers, who may feel oppressed by whatever power or evil exists in their world, hope through the evidence contained within the books when two small and nondescript personages, hobbits, overcome a great empire of evil alone. Paul Sullivan, who writes a newspaper column and produces television shows in Vancouver, Canada, encapsulates this element of Tolkien's work quite succinctly in a response to an interviewer's question:

First, it's little people against big people, the ordinary man doing his flawed best and in the end winning. Second, there's conflict, a real war, which will be won or lost and with crucial results. Finally, [the interplay of these elements creates] suspense, excitement, adventure, page after page. It never lets up. (qtd. in Byfield 49)

The books' sustained intensity and sense of wonder are invigorating. Of particular interest is Sullivan's mention of ordinary people overcoming times of strife even though every move they make may not be the perfect solution to a given problem. As anyone who has fumbled around in a near state of panic when trying to accomplish some task can attest, the task becomes even more difficult as the level of stress rises. The ability to rebound from mistakes instead of giving up is a prime example of the resolute attitude that leads to accomplishment. Within the pages of The Lord of the Rings, the companions repeatedly make small, and not so small, errors in judgment and tactics, but their focus on the crucial importance of their desired goal does not allow them to abandon the quest. This is especially evident as the ring begins to alter Frodo's personality, and Gollum is just biding his time in the wings for the transformation to become complete so he can

strike and regain his “precious.” During their travels toward the heart of Mordor, they are attacked by Shelob, captured by orcs, and in the end Frodo ultimately fails to destroy the ring on his own, as he perches on the precipice of the Crack of Doom. Only when greed and the desire to reclaim the ring force Gollum to bite off Frodo’s finger, and while caught in the delirium of triumph to fall off the edge into the lava below, is the quest finally complete. It is only through the wise foresight offered by Gandalf earlier in the quest, and the wisdom Frodo and Sam display in following this sage advice, that allows for a twist of fate to complete the task and end Sauron’s menace to Middle-Earth. The fact that Tolkien chose to show Frodo as flawed at this crucial time, a trait that is found all too often in humanity, completes yet another link in creating relevance for the reader, who may be struggling with his or her own crisis of social or ethical conscience. The fact that Tolkien chose to “[make] evil horribly addictive, breakable only by transcendent strength” (Wood), not only shows the powerful danger of evil’s reign upon an unsuspecting world, and perhaps a distinct warning from the author in this regard, but also illustrates the truth that evil can be vanquished by imperfect means, if only the individual shows enough strength of character to follow through with his or her purpose. If this purpose is achieved, transcendence awaits, with the plague of whatever evil has befallen us vanquished. For readers of The Lord of the Rings, drawn to the trilogy during times when hints of war are not whispered in the back of smoky taverns, as in Middle-Earth, but are trumpeted to the masses through millions of broadcasts, harbingers of doom and peril, the solace offered by the triumph of these simple creatures must give significant hope. No matter how insignificant we might seem, when faced with powers that are beyond our capacity to combat, if we maintain the hope of Samwise and the

unwavering resolve of Frodo Baggins, there remains the possibility of a more peaceful world.

Where do the resolute attitudes which lead to such displays of heroism, both public and private, overt and subtle, reside in those forced to act? Answers may lie within Tolkien's talent for depth of characterization in order to illustrate these traits. His ability to effectively cover a wide range of emotional states, and provide a sense of plausibility in how each reacts to a given situation, lends another relevant connection to the reader. Character can also explain why Tolkien's works reach such a broad range of demographic groups in different political, social, and cultural climates. The internal struggles of Tolkien's characters resonate in readers by giving them insight into their own lives and eliciting periods of introspection. Individuals can compare their value system to the template set within the pages of Tolkien's writing.

One such trait might be found in the hobbit's natural predilection to avoid anything which might carry them beyond the safe haven of the Shire. Eyeing the world outside their village with a wary suspicion, the hobbits, nonetheless, often wonder about what might lie beyond the hills or through the forest. When times of trouble arise and they are forced by the necessities of the situation to venture into the unknown, the hobbits do so with scant hesitation and only a slight bit of reservation. In this way, they overcome whatever fears they might have about what the future may hold, for their tendency to regard any situation with humor and a sense of fellowship overrides trepidation or cowardice. Tolkien creates his hobbits in this way, having them exhibit a certain "complacency, [so that] they can be trusted with large tasks because of their small ambitions, their modest satisfactions, [and] their capacity for loyalty and trust" (Wood).

While Wood favors the term “complacency” in this instance, other readers may prefer to interpret the lives and actions of the hobbits in the Shire as containing more of a sense of comfort and a restful satisfaction within the culture they have created. Suggesting complacency may hint at a certain lethargy, which would limit the hobbits’ ability and willingness to react, and judging by the evidence within the books, this is hardly the case. The song Bilbo sings upon departing the Shire lends credence to this approach to the hobbits’ truer nature:

The Road goes ever on and on  
Down from the door where it began,  
Now far ahead the Road has gone,  
And I must follow, if I can,  
Pursuing it with eager feet,  
Until it joins some larger way  
Where many paths and errands meet.  
And whither then? I cannot say. (Tolkien 35)

This willingness to depart from something to which we have grown accustomed, to venture into the unknown, to look beyond the well trodden path, so that those who follow may have an easier and happier existence due to our actions taken bravely, is the nature of true heroism. This trait is clearly inherent in the nature of the forces of good within the pages of The Lord of the Rings. The way Tolkien can depict this heroism so subtly, yet make it so apparent through action and deed, is a testament to the craft with which Tolkien creates Middle-Earth and its inhabitants.

This fantasy's concerns strike a tangible chord in the real life experiences of readers due to the realistic manner in which the characters react to times of strife. Even though the characters are sometimes flawed and fail, these qualities only strengthen the connection between the uncertain thoughts and feelings of readers, who live every day with the realization that they too are far from perfect. This admission is at the heart of much of the anxiety that exists in the individual during times of heightened tensions, and stems from a lack of confidence that creates a sense of fear. As Freud outlined, such fear emerges largely from the belief that a person will be inadequately equipped to deal with a certain situation, and cannot clearly define the origin or nature of these feelings of inadequacy (Kahn 16). To counteract these fears and doubts, Tolkien creates a powerful balance within his narrative, not only in delineating between good and evil, but also in the vulnerability he bestows upon his characters. Such vulnerability creates a distinct link to those who might feel threatened when war becomes more than just a rumor in a given society. Even Gandalf, who may be positioned as representing the most potent source of power on the side of good, is unable to prevent his companions from being beset with trouble during their time together. Ultimately he is unable to keep the fellowship from breaking apart, even though his apparent death at the fiery hands of the Balrog would seem the utmost unifying factor.

Finally, just as was apparent in some of the most dire times in our history, such as the Cuban missile crisis when the world came to the brink of annihilation, Tolkien's work displays a similar lesson for societies faced with such potentially cataclysmic events. The resolution and lesson he conveys may be the most compelling reason why The Lord of the Rings has been so thoroughly embraced by cultures faced with war or internal

conflict. Not only does Tolkien give hope for the defeat of evil, the War of the Ring also offers a clear object lesson on how victory may be achieved. As is characteristic of the author, his answer to times of strife for beleaguered cultures holds a noticeable absence of any bravado or massive force used to violently crush evil. Instead, Tolkien's characters exhibit a "willingness to surrender coercive power, [and] to die rather than use it, even for the achievement of good ends" (Wood). During the Reagan years in American history, this policy might have been seen as the threat of mutual annihilation as the best deterrent to war. But the message to be gained from Tolkien on this moral stance runs even deeper, becoming personally relevant for a culture that values peace and inalienable rights of its citizens. Tolkien repeatedly has his characters refuse to use the ring, and even those who try show a reawakening and great sense of remorse. Tolkien's enduring message to cultures in the real world who wield massive power is that any use of such power, even in the name of good, is actually the loss of self and submission to the lure of evil.



## CHAPTER THREE

### The Lord of the Rings and the 1960s.

My diary. My Unexpected Journey. There and Back Again.  
And What Happened After.

Adventures of Five Hobbits. The Tale of the Great Ring, compiled  
by Bilbo Baggins from his own observations and the accounts of  
his friends. What we did in the War of the Ring.  
(Bilbo Baggins qtd. in Tolkien 1004).

What a long, strange trip it's been. (The Grateful Dead)

The Lord of the Rings was largely unknown in America until the mid 1960s. The work had gained acclaim and a cult following in Britain, but not of the magnitude of the millions of fans who would embrace the book once it finally found its way to America. Awareness of the work was heightened in Britain when the BBC released a series of thirteen episodes on the radio, which in 1956 was still the dominant medium. This introduced and broadened the scope of Tolkien's popularity, as an entirely new fan base that might never have been drawn to the works became enthralled with Middle-Earth and the struggle between good and evil. The manner in which The Lord of the Rings began to enter the public psyche at this point is reflected in the process described by Stuart Hall in his essay "Encoding, Decoding," in which he writes that "before [a] message can have an 'effect' (however defined), satisfy a 'need' or be put to a 'use,' it must first be appropriated as a meaningful discourse and be meaningfully decoded" (Hall 93). The presentation of The Lord of the Rings on the radio where it would reach the most people at this time and spark their interest in the books placed it within the context of meaningful discourse. The reaction and subsequent popularity in the works would show that the translation of meaning, or decoding, to this broad new audience was successfully executed.

The introduction to the wonders held within Tolkien's creation took a different path in reaching the American public, a path appropriate for United States during this period. In the 1960s, social unrest was growing over the escalation of the war in Vietnam, and confusion paired with conflict became the prevalent tone in American culture. In the midst of this growing cloud of dissention, controversy, and sadness that would plague the nation well into the early years of the following decade, a pirated paperback copy of the trilogy found its way to America in 1965, and the reaction was immediate and compelling (Lord of the Rings-posters.com). Although no one is entirely certain of the path this book took to get to America, the appearance and proliferation of this edition spurred a controversy over publication rights. This dispute made headlines, which brought the book's cult status to light and raised curiosity among other potential readers. The fact that the pirated copy somehow found its way to a publishing house that reproduced the trilogy and distributed it at a very affordable price also aided in making the trilogy widely available and widely read. Almost instantly J. R. R. Tolkien became a familiar name in the literary and fantasy genres. It is an ironic twist that the books gained their popularity in this manner, by the time-honored practice of matching supply with demand and pricing accordingly so the books could reach as large an audience as possible. This enterprising approach subverted the antiestablishment doctrine of foregoing worldly goods for spiritual enlightenment, but in this case, due to the quality and relevance of Tolkien's work, a little bit of materialism was acceptable.

Although I might jest a bit in making this observation, there is little doubt that it was, indeed, the counter culture of the 1960s that first embraced the themes found within Tolkien's writing and elevated the book to legendary status during this era. The cultural

appeal of The Lord of the Rings for people caught within these turbulent times was diverse in nature but can be clearly defined when put in context with the foremost issues of the time. Existing as “social utopians were [the] neoromantics” (Ellwood 132), who tried to expand their consciousness and became known as the drug culture of America during this period. This social group was exploring all manner of things from transcendental meditation to the “creative” use of chemical substances in an effort to expand their consciousness. Drug use prior to this time was limited, and warranted little concern besides some public service announcements and the resurrection of bizarre 1936 documentary films such as Reefer Madness (Reefer-Madness-Movie.com). This all changed with the “hippie” culture of the 1960s:

A new generation of middle-class youth, characterized by relative affluence and the advantages of education, became passionately dedicated to forms of music and other types of popular art that expressed a turning away from much that had been accepted as the American Dream . . . [this also fostered] a distrust of their elders (“anyone over 30”), [and] 1960s youth indulged in so-called recreational drugs [. . . so that] drugs became an integral part of everyday life. (Axelrod 294)

Although the exact nature of the cause and effect chain between this expansion of the mind through drug use and the lure to let the mind wander freely through the wondrous lands of Tolkien’s creation is uncertain, there is little doubt that the counterculture of the 1960s found a definite link between the two. In fact, a great deal of the popularity bestowed upon The Lord of the Rings during this time emerged from its widespread acceptance by college students across the country. These students digested every page

with such fervor that it became fashionable to carry a copy everywhere, the more dog-eared pages and worn appearance the better, for any moment of reading or discussion that might arise. By the time the book had reached widespread appeal and drug use was a common practice in university life, Tolkien's "rabid following [. . .] of campus readers hailed his celebration of nature and some likened his books to an acid trip" (Jerome 118). Hence, the drug culture of the 60s, and especially those who found an escape from problems through the restful qualities obtained by smoking marijuana, found a shared interest within the inhabitants of Middle-Earth. Readers were delighted to find similar traits within the hobbits, who seem always to be cultivating a mysterious "weed" to fill their ever-present pipes, and enjoying their smoke while peacefully reclining under a shady tree. Perhaps this struck a chord within the youth culture, as even the wizened Gandalf was often found in deep meditation, puffing happily away on his long-stemmed pipe. When searching for reasons for the rise in popularity of The Lord of the Rings, the connections between a disaffected youth culture who yearned for something to free their minds from the frightening prospects of war, and the lush natural purity and quest for freedom from oppression depicted in Tolkien's work are impossible to ignore.

A great deal of the affinity for Tolkien's trilogy was due to the lushness of the natural world found in Middle-Earth. Its terrain of beautiful and unspoiled verdant fields is imperiled by the choking cloud of noxious filth that spreads across the land from Mordor. Fears of what will happen to places such as Rivendell, Lothloriën, and the Shire if Sauron's evil were to overcome these lands was mirrored in real world concerns over pressing environmental issues. As depicted in the pages of the final book in the trilogy, The Return of the King, Mordor appears as a land so corrupted that it is in constant

struggle with itself. The writhing and tortured natural formations that dot the scarred landscape are merely abominations of what they once were, twisted now by evil. Recalling Tolkien's love of nature, a reader may readily feel his revulsion when he describes Mordor's toxic nature, a wasteland oozing from the page in the following passage:

Upon its outer margins under the westward mountains Mordor was a dying land, but it was not yet dead. And here things still grew, harsh, twisted, bitter, struggling for life. In the glens of the Morgai on the other side of the valley low scrubby trees lurked and clung, coarse grey grass-tussocks fought with the stones, and withered mosses crawled on them; and everywhere great writhing, tangled brambles sprawled. Some had long stabbing thorns, some hooked barbs that rent like knives. The sullen shriveled leaves of a past year hung on them, grating and rattling in the sad airs, but their maggot-ridden buds were only just opening. Flies, dun or grey, or black, marked like orcs with a red eye-shaped blotch, buzzed and stung; and above the briar-thickets clouds of hungry midges danced and reeled. (Tolkien 900)

It is interesting to note, especially in regards to Tolkien's respect for nature and the 1960s' environmentalist movement's love for the "living" Earth, how the author portrays the features of this nightmare landscape with a certain sentience; an underlying life force within each suffers the torment inflicted upon it. This conveys a strong sense of a living, natural realm that though thoroughly degraded, must be cherished like any other life form.

Tolkien's naturalist's stance was welcomed by the burgeoning environmental movement of the 1960s who "saw in his wasteland of Mordor a strip-mined industrial dystopia" (Grossman 92). Concerns within the real world, especially among environmentalists, but also within the general populace, over pollution and the overall spoiling of our natural resources found expression within the trilogy. Sentiments such as those of Joni Mitchell, who wrote in *Big Yellow Taxi*, "don't it always seem to go/that you don't know what you've got/till its gone/they paved paradise/and put up a parking lot" (Joni Mitchell.com), echoed naturalist sentiments and became a rallying cry for the environmental movement. In this climate efforts to preserve nature instead of destroy it were pitted against an establishment whose blind adherence to progress and industrialization, no matter what the cost, was turning America into a reflection of the wastelands of Mordor. Youth culture and others who sought to protect nature found their reflection within the pages of The Lord of the Rings.

There is little question about the origin of Tolkien's theme of protecting nature and his aversion to all things mechanized that would endeavor to "pave paradise." The author had a distinct and deeply rooted distrust for modernization. He abhorred the rationalizations so often provided by industrialists trying to defend their actions as the only viable solutions to modern problems. In fact, the main link between Tolkien and the counterculture of the 1960s was "a common recoil from industrial civilization" (Bethune 47). It is no coincidence that the two primary villains of The Lord of the Rings display a penchant for destruction, especially of all things natural. Sauron, who has already despoiled the land of Mordor and tainted it to the point that it is the metaphorical manifestation of his dark and corrupted soul, is joined by Saruman, who was once

Gandalf's mentor. Saruman now uses all his power to destroy the lands around Isengard, turning them into a reflection of Mordor, much as he is becoming a mirror image of his dark master. Tolkien expresses his distaste for the philosophy and actions of Saruman in the harshest terms he can muster by having the powerful wizard refer to himself as "a realist," which is "a swear word to Tolkien [. . .] who [regards Saruman as one who] is willing to despoil nature for the sake of raw physical power" (Bethune 48).

Tolkien's critique is evident in Saruman's endeavors to create a great unholy army from the corruption he has wrought on the land. Saruman has been drawn to the lure of power and obeys the lidless eye of Sauron, which speaks to him through the palantir. These swirling opaque orbs are ageless mystical devices which not only allow for communication over great distances, they also peer into the user's soul. To create this army of fighting Uruk-Hai, Saruman orders his minions to tear down every tree, and build tunnels underground in which to spawn his creations, so that the living structure of Middle-Earth is infested by a parasitical horde, destroying the land from within. The fact that the eventual downfall of Saruman's tower at Isengard is brought about by the reawakening and combined effort of an awesome natural force, chronicled in the passages that describe the march of the ents, Tolkien's living race of trees, strikes a powerful chord in the heart of environmentalists who wish that nature could somehow fight back against brutal encroachment in the real world.

In examining this precipitous rise in popularity of The Lord of the Rings, I must also look at the manner in which the counterculture of America, completely disenchanting by what they saw as an unjust war in Vietnam and political corruption at home, found meaning and solace in Tolkien's depiction of a war with no ambiguity and an outcome in

which good triumphs over evil. As Lev Grossman aptly describes in his article in TIME magazine, America at this time was “a country drowning in the moral quicksand of Vietnam and Watergate [which] found comfort in the moral clarity of Tolkien’s epic story of a just, clear war. Good and evil are fixed stars in the skies of Middle-Earth even as they’re starting to look wobbly in ours” (92). Grossman concisely states why many may have flocked to Tolkien’s world and the depiction of a noble war within.

The 1960s were filled with many unanswered concerns about the state of the world, not the least of which was whether the path America was undertaking would make this world a better place or a worse one. On the surface was the government’s assertion of the importance of stopping the spread of communism abroad, before countries would fall one by one, and America would find itself isolated in the world. In this nightmarish scenario, America would then be waiting for communist forces to breach its boundaries much like the armies of Mordor stream forth from Barad-dûr, the “ancient fortress of Sauron’s might” (Tyler 39). The 60s generation may have been hungering for a sense of moral and ethical clarity, given the uncertainty about what America was pursuing militarily. Finding little in the news media or other reports from Vietnam that offered ethical truths, the nation at first appeared in a state of denial. The overall climate was one that resignedly admitted, “our experience of Vietnam is shaped by what we let ourselves say. Memory plays tricks – and to ward off horror, we make our memories play tricks” (McGeary 26). The populace simply did not know how to interpret the brutality of that war. Was it justified or was it outright imperialistic evil? Within the pages of The Lord of the Rings, readers found characters that gave insight, if not answers, to the pressing ethical questions of the day. As Robert Ellwood writes in his book Frodo’s Quest, which



is as much an introspective journey into a life profoundly affected by Tolkien as it is an examination of the trilogy, the 1960s counterculture found Frodo's struggles analogous to theirs:

The enemy . . . was just what many 1960s people saw as their foe in the era's social struggles: a tyrannical, inhuman, casually brutal technological order – the System, they would have called it. The Lord of the Rings set the regimented, robot-like slave society of Mordor against the heroic few who were friends of Elves and starlight – a magnificent metaphor for the way many in the 1960s saw themselves ranged against the machine. (132)

Thus, Tolkien's presentation of a completely unambiguous war, in which the opposing sides are so clearly delineated that critics would later complain that the books held too much of a black and white depiction of good and evil, appeared in America at the precise moment that he could give sustenance to a generation starved for moral truth and ethical certainty.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Fantasy in the 1980s and Ronald Reagan's War Against an "Evil Empire."

"Out of doubt, out of dark to the day's rising  
I came singing in the sun, sword unsheathing.  
To hope's end I rode and to heart's breaking:  
Now for wrath, now for ruin [. . .]" (Tolkien 829)

We have not inherited an easy world. If developments like the Industrial Revolution . . . and the gifts of science and technology have made life much easier for us, they have also made it more dangerous. (Ronald Reagan qtd. in Noonan 201)

At the close of the 1970s, America was undergoing a crisis: national pride was wavering, and economic stability was in jeopardy. These internal troubles led many Americans to believe that the country was somehow slipping in prestige in the eyes of the global community, a factor that was exacerbated by the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in the Middle East. Under the leadership of Jimmy Carter, whose calm demeanor and penchant for avoiding the rhetoric of war concerned many who perceived these traits as a sign of weakness, the United States seemed unable to act in its accustomed role as "guardian" of the free world. Perhaps this insecurity was also due to the trauma the nation had undergone during the Vietnam and Watergate era, which were still fresh in the minds of its citizens. As the energy crisis reached its peak mid-decade, many Americans began an exodus from the inner cities, which were plagued by urban decay and violence, causing a shift in population density that left many cities as crumbling ghost towns, effectively reducing them "to forbidding urban jungles" (Axelrod 308). Americans who were forced to remain within these decaying cities began to feel that their liberty was being stifled by the oppressiveness of their environs, and although the urban riots of the 1960s were not repeated, a palpable tension simmered within American's inner cities.

People began to feel trapped by their situation and surroundings, “the land of the free” rang hollow and the ensuing public ennui is analogous to Michel Foucault’s writing on liberty as a practice:

I do not think that there is anything that is functionally – by its very nature – absolutely liberating. Liberty is a *practice* [Foucault’s emphasis]. So there may be, in fact, always be a certain number of projects whose aim is to modify some constraints, to loosen, or even to break them, but none of these projects can simply by its nature, assure that people will have liberty automatically [ . . . ] The liberty of men is never assured by the institutions and laws that are intended to guarantee them . . . If one were to find a place, and perhaps there are some, where liberty is effectively exercised, one would find that this is not owing to the order of objects, but, once again, owing to the practice of liberty. Which is not to say that, after all, one may leave people in slums, thinking that they can simply exercise their rights there. (Foucault 162-63)

Due to the national climate, and shifting conditions within America, a considerable segment of the American people began to feel they were being denied the right to practice liberty.

As the 1970s came to a close, American nationalism and pride received two blows that sent the country reeling. One was the invasion of Afghanistan by Soviet forces, ostensibly signifying the latest domino to fall in the spread of communism. As the world watched to see what the reaction of the United States would be to this incursion, many who favored the hawk over the dove were appalled that the only move the Carter

administration made was a diplomatic, and ill suited one, to boycott the next Olympic games in Moscow. The second blow to American pride was far more serious, with ramifications that sent ripples through the world geo-political structure that are felt even today. Iranian fundamentalists led by the Ayatollah Khomeini seized power in Iran and took American citizens trapped there hostage, leading to an embarrassingly botched attempt at rescue by an American special forces unit (Axelrod 310). Despite reports that mechanical and human errors had doomed the mission, and no hostages were harmed in retaliation for the attempt, the lion's share of blame for the failure went to President Carter.

As the 1980 election drew near, the Republican candidate seized these issues and, using all of his strengths as “the great communicator,” made most voters believe that under his leadership America would regain its position as world leader. After a landslide victory, President Reagan allowed his policy of increased military spending and a firm stance against communism to set the course that would instill a militaristic fervor and a return to national pride within the American cultural climate. After the perceived weakness of Jimmy Carter, and “two decades of troubles – assassinations, urban riots, the agony of Vietnam, the disgrace of Watergate, energy crises, and double-digit inflation – the nation was ready for Reagan’s exhortation to ‘dream heroic dreams’” (Time-Life 22). A nation hungry for direction and eager for a strong leader to guide them bought wholeheartedly into Reagan’s image of a powerfully renewed America, and a new era was born.

In the early stages of Reagan’s administration, ostensible threats to domestic security were brought to light, giving the nation an outlet towards which to vent its pent

up frustrations. Publicity created for the President proudly stated, “It’s Morning in America [ . . . and] our country is stronger and prouder than ever” (Shogan 187). A brief war in Grenada, which might be more accurately classified as a military incursion than an actual full-scale war, served to boost the nation’s morale. In addition, much like Middle-Earth is menaced by the great, and easily definable evil of Sauron, America found readily apparent enemies in the form of Muamar Al-Khadafi of Libya, whose support of terrorism elicited an air strike from an enraged administration bent on eliminating terror cells. Reagan also focused a great deal of attention on the dangers posed to the free world by the encroaching spread of communism, angering Soviet diplomats by referring to the U.S.S.R. as “the locus of evil in the modern world” (Noonan 211).

Running parallel to this reawakening of a national pride was a concurrent rebirth in interest in the fantasy genre, appearing both in literature and film. Emerging as a resounding summer blockbuster in 1982, Robert E. Howard’s barbarian warrior/thief was brought to the big screen in John Milius’ *Conan the Barbarian* (Internet Movie Database). This spurred a marked resurgence in the production of fantasy films, including the sequel, *Conan the Destroyer*, in 1984. Rising steadily in popularity during this time was also Tolkien’s trilogy. Considering the cultural climate, I can examine again the cultural reasons why fantasy and The Lord of the Rings became even more embedded in the public consciousness. Just as in the 1960s, despite the dogmatic stance of a nation returning to power, there existed a perceptible anxiety within the culture. This was induced by concerns about a return to the problems of the previous decades, and focused toward more pressing issues such as rising poverty and an increase in the number of homeless Americans. The process of rebuilding public confidence and comfort was

fraught with instances of national crises that heightened anxiety in the general populace. While the nation was once more taking an aggressive stance that would lead to military action, lurking in the shadows was a hidden enemy more insidious than any it had ever faced.

The rise of terrorism during this time in American history grew like a pestilence infecting civilized society, and it continues into the present. As the nation became more and more anxious, people attempted to understand the nature of this new threat, which, unlike the relatively definable nature of war, could strike anyplace, killing even innocent civilians. Bombings rose sharply in the early stages of the decade, usually perpetrated in crowded urban centers where the most damage and loss of life, as well as notoriety to their “cause,” was assured. The most active, by far, of these shadow killers was the Libyan backed Abu Nidal association, responsible for such atrocities as the 1982 assault in which terrorists affiliated with Nidal “killed 6 and wounded 22 in a grenade and machinegun attack on a Parisian restaurant frequented by French Jews” (The Terrorism Research Center). Assassination attempts rose sharply during the early stages of the decade, as both John Lennon and President Reagan were victims of seemingly random acts of violence. Muslim radicals were responsible for the attempt on the life of Pope John Paul II and the successful assassination of Anwar Sadat. These stark violations to the unwritten “rules” of war, created an atmosphere in which no one was truly safe. Combating terrorism was difficult and frustrating, as the faceless armies would strike from, and then disappear back into, the shadows. The manner in which these attacks were carried out, by a seemingly incorporeal force, suggested to a worried nation a nefarious evil of the type found previously only in fantasy. In order to deal vicariously with the

nebulous and frightening aspects of this new threat, many individuals who no longer felt safe and protected turned to fantasy in an effort to define what was essentially indefinable within the real world. Hence, as the nation struggled to come to grips with this terrorism, the public turned once more to *Dungeons and Dragons* and The Lord of the Rings.

Within the pages of Tolkien's work, they undoubtedly found relevant parallels to the times in which they lived. Saruman's army shows such a capacity for evil that any horror, no matter how unimaginably brutal, becomes a source of pleasure in sating their thirst for blood, just as terrorists seemingly have no conscience and wantonly kill innocent children as evidenced in the bombing of passenger jets and gunfire on crowded city streets. In addition, the manner in which suicide bombers take their own lives by driving vehicles loaded with TNT into public buildings is mirrored in the fanaticism of Saruman's Uruk-Hai warriors. In one striking instance of this willingness to die to further the goals of the driving force of evil, an Uruk-Hai is depicted as being defiant when death is imminent at the hands of Aragorn, roaring in fury even as it impales itself on the future king's sword blade. This depiction of the rage that drives such unfeeling and emotionless warfare is at the heart of the fear instilled by menacing orc armies. Such fear accosted American travelers first abroad and then at home. When faced with terrorists who will stop at nothing to achieve destruction and death, it is not difficult to imagine why readers ventured into the pages of Tolkien's work. Combating an elusive foe is frustrating to the point where one might lose hope, but within The Lord of the Rings there exists a desirable vicarious resolution in the ultimate defeat of evil hordes with the annihilation of the crux of their driving power, Sauron and the One Ring.

By imaginatively combating an enemy who values fundamentalist principles over the needs and safety of individuals, the ultimate vanquishing of such a foe can provide at least a psychological panacea for those searching for answers where none seemingly exist. Vividly depicted is the moment when the heart of all evil within Mordor is defeated as Gollum tears the ring, and finger, from Frodo's hand and plunges with it into the fires of Mt. Doom. Those watching from afar see, rather than an apocalyptic end to Middle-Earth, a conflagration that signals the end of Sauron's power:

And as the Captains gazed south to the Land of Mordor, it seemed to them that, black against the pall of cloud, there rose a huge shape of shadow, impenetrable, lightning-crowned, filling all the sky. Enormous it reared above the world, and stretched out towards them a vast threatening hand, terrible but impotent; for even as it leaned over them a great wind took it, and it was all blown away, and passed; and then a hush fell. (Tolkien 928)

The manner in which the defeat of evil is so tangible, so satisfying, and so final might serve as a psychological form of transference, as the reader finds comfort in Sauron's defeat even though he/she cannot witness the certain defeat of penetrating evil in the real world. Tolkien grants what our world cannot: a central, controlling force that can be found and eliminated. The social implications of the draw felt by readers for this purpose is supported by Freud. The mind can temporarily and sometimes completely rectify the problems of one situation by dreaming or fantasizing of a resolution as it would exist in another realm: "a patient never forgets again what he has experienced in the form of transference; it carries a greater force of conviction than anything he can acquire in other ways" (Freud qtd. in Kahn 191).



In this manner, perhaps, readers who ventured into the pages of Tolkien's world during this time, those who played endless games of *Dungeons and Dragons*, and those who flocked in record numbers to the numerous fantasy films which emerged in the 1980s, were transferring their social anxieties and feelings of helplessness onto the able shoulders of barbarian warriors, powerful wizards, or simple hobbits. Witnessing these surrogate heroes engage and defeat their enemies might have proven cathartic for the culture of this era, and may have soothed the building frustration and helplessness we felt as we watched news reports of tragedies such as the bombing of American military barracks in Beirut. Domestic security seemed plagued by wanton acts of violence that heightened the public sense of sadness and uncertainty. During the scare created by the cyanide laced Tylenol capsules, the cultural climate shifted to a state of mass paranoia; many wondered if anything could be truly safe again? When Americans felt that their sacred liberty was being endangered from stifling domestic conditions as well as from the growing hatred terrorist factions held for America, the culture searched for means to transfer this social anxiety and purge its growing anger. We found a means for doing just that within the realm of fantasy. Michel Foucault has written that "men have dreamed of liberating machines. But there are no machines of freedom, by definition" (163). The resurgence of fantasy during these periods suggests, however, that members of society did find a metaphorical machine of freedom. If the liberating nature of fantasy, especially in the relevant aspects of The Lord of the Rings, allowed them to set their minds free from the oppressiveness of terror and fear, Tolkien's trilogy could be considered as just such a machine. Hence, the fantasy genre provided readers with both a sense of freedom, and of resolution. The security offered by The Lord of the Rings soothed a culture which

found that during these nebulous times there were, indeed, many tangible reasons for the desire to escape to the intangible and ethereal realm of fantasy.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### The “Evil Axis” and the Lure of Fantasy Once More.

“Over the land there lies a long shadow,  
westward reaching wings of darkness.  
The Tower trembles; to the tombs of kings  
doom approaches. The Dead awaken;  
for the hour is come for the oathbreakers [. . .]” (Tolkien 764)

Waves of anger and fear  
Circulate over the bright  
And darkened lands of the earth,  
Obsessing our private lives;  
The unmentionable odor of death  
Offends the September night. (W. H. Auden)

Given national uncertainty, stress, or outright conflict that has tested the will of the nation and its citizens, readers have turned to The Lord of the Rings and the fantasy realm to satisfy a deep cultural need “for fantasy distraction and for images of virtue prevailing triumphantly over evil” (Maasik 305). The 60s and the Reagan era parallel present day anxieties. An individual in today’s culture is bombarded by news reports of a growing Eastern evil empire. Our fears of nuclear attack, not felt since the end of the Cold War over a decade ago, return. The literal emergence of the figurative evil manifested by Sauron, is signaled by acts of terrorism and by threats of biological attacks by Saddam Hussein, the leader of Iraq who is under siege as I write. Eliminating the possibility for peaceful solutions, President Bush would speak only of war, and within his rhetoric, we can sense that revenge for past wrongs has been a primary motivator behind his unwavering stance. This goes well beyond fury over the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks, as Bush has threatened to destroy “the axis of evil . . . [with] the full force and fury of a reaction” (Miller 209).

The inflexibility of America's stance has been the cause of worry for many who might feel outright war against an elusive and heartless foe on foreign soil is acting in haste and is driven by vengeance, not ethics. Moral ambiguity sets in again. Some maintain that the President's insistence on outright war stems from reasons that might be considered too personal to enter into any reasoned and rational approach to the crisis in Iraq. Protests have arisen over the necessity of this war, much as they did in 1991 when George W. Bush's father was serving his term as President and led the attack to liberate Kuwait after Iraq's invasion. Do George W. Bush and his advisors feel they must make up for the father's inability to remove Hussein from office? Given these political and psychological issues, we might wonder if the son feels the need to vindicate the father by sending troops to finish the job. Whatever the case, sides have been taken, and much debate rages on the actual validity of the war, which the United Nations repeatedly refused to sanction. This confusion over the depth of evil in Hussein, and whether he still remains a palpable threat to American interests and safety abroad, is highly reminiscent of the Vietnam War, as uncertainties such as these began to sharply divide the nation. Hence, in present times, we witness once more a growing social anxiety and sense of moral ambiguity in relation to the course that our leader's policy has set. A socially aware individual needs to be able to place him or herself within his/her current historical context and adapt to the influences of that context. Such awareness can involve the imagination according to C. Wright Mills:

[The sociological imagination] is a quality of mind that will help [individuals] to use information and to develop reason in order to achieve lucid summations of what is going on in the world and of what may be

happening within themselves. (qtd. in Soja 138)

Mills suggests that United State's citizens will use their "sociological imaginations" (138) to lucidly perceive world events as they are affected and threatened by them.

Due to the prevailing "quality of mind," popular culture has again seen a rise in the awareness and consumption of Tolkien's writings, and public interest in The Lord of the Rings has leapt to an unprecedented level, in effect becoming the focus of what may be called a social mania. Social issues, the popular imagination, and cultural phenomenon have a distinct cause and effect relationship, as "popular culture is the most sensitive barometer we have for gauging shifts in the national mood, and it's registering a big one right now" (Grossman 89). In the previous decade the nation held a fascination with films such as *Star Wars* and *The Matrix*, which reflected a belief system that these objects of technology could and would create a better future for America. With the technological revolution still fresh in the collective conscious, and home computers and other gadgets of modern wizardry beginning to be accepted as the new, necessary, household appliances of the future, the American penchant for all things technological began to pervade all levels of popular culture. More recently, however, the nation has been moving towards fare that contains fewer and fewer cyborgs and mnemonic memory chips. Instead we favor knights wielding swords of virtue and sorceresses conjuring awe inspiring feats of magic. The reasons behind this shift may be related to the fact that "our fascination with science fiction reflected a deep collective faith that technology would lead us to a cyberutopia of robot butlers serving virtual mai tais" (Grossman 91). But American culture has quickly and clearly moved away from such illusions. This shift parallels the shift in the nation's attitude toward aggression, with a heightened focus within the media

on dangers to public safety from biological perils associated with terrorism. With anthrax in our mail system, the President recommending small pox vaccinations, and the requirement that our shoes be x-rayed before we fly, many are understandably trying to find ways to cope with the social anxiety that accompanies a heightened sense of vulnerability in present day America.

The manner in which many “escape” from the nagging awareness of impending peril, by embracing imaginative realms of fancy, “can be seen to signify a desire to be distracted by the images of a simpler, more innocent world” (Maasik 305). Such distraction allows people to move away from the realm of machines, whether they be airplanes or cruise missiles, because these are our modern day monsters. In fantasy there are still dragons to be vanquished, and in the case of The Lord of the Rings, Balrogs to be avoided at all costs. In the real world we might perceive the weapons of war, such as the guns that breathe fire into the sky and the lumbering tanks that crush all in their path, to be realistic embodiments of the monsters of lore. The shift back to fantasy has been called by Lev Grossman “the enchanting of America” (91). Culture has adopted, “a darker, more pessimistic attitude towards technology and the future [ . . . ] and the evidence is our new preoccupation with fantasy, a nostalgic, sentimental, magical vision, of a medieval age. The future just isn’t what it used to be – and the past seems to be gaining on us” (91).

In The Lord of the Rings, little room exists for the ambiguity and uncertainty that plagues real world decisions. Tolkien’s world contains as clear a dividing line between good and evil as could be possibly conveyed, with no thread of goodness present in the character of evil, and no evidence of moral corruption within those who represent good. I

might counter that observation, however, by noting the manner in which Frodo refuses to fulfill the quest when staring into the gaping maw of Mt. Doom. He declares, “I have come [ . . . ] but I do not choose now to do what I came to do. I will not do this deed. The Ring is mine!” (Tolkien 924). Is this an indication that the primary character of good within the novel has been morally corrupted by power? Perhaps, but it can also be argued that the only flaws that befall Frodo at this crucial stage are exhaustion, fear, and weakness. His momentary weakness of character does not approach even the most innocuous traits of Sauron’s true evil if levels of his evil may actually be considered to extend into the innocuous range. Frodo’s great failure to fulfill the quest is not corruption or moral failing on his part, but is the ultimate exertion of the power contained within the ring, now summoned at its point of creation, at the nexus of its strength. Frodo’s will is broken as the ring reaches its most powerful state, and for a moment Frodo’s will and the evil will of the One Ring become as one.

These passages of struggle and turmoil within The Lord of the Rings, both manifested by Frodo’s internal conflict of will and the external tempest raging outside of Mt. Doom, lend insight into character traits that many find admirable in times of anxiety. There is a perceptible way in which readers identify with Frodo on a personal level. Just as Frodo, as fallible and “human” a hobbit if there ever was one, stumbles and falters at his moment of crisis, readers admire the manner in which he persists through adversity, for we see ourselves in this simple hobbit. We know that we, too, are prone to temptation, weakness of the spirit, and fallibility, but witnessing Frodo’s ultimate triumph gives us hope that we may persevere during our moment of crisis.

While the nation searches for believable personifications of good within society, finding little within the real world to satisfy this need for comfort, it turns instead to fantasy, where there is no perceptible ambiguity in regards to moral character. When faced with the possibility of nuclear war with North Korea, and the now fierce conflict in Iraq, American society can only feel anxiety as we look toward an uncertain future with no heroes in sight. As much as our leaders would like to position themselves as the true bastion of good in an evil world, realities are far less certain. Hence, if we search for the Gandalf of our age, or the equivalent of the Elven warriors of Lórién, finding the incorruptible in such nebulous times proves a difficult quest. For, acknowledging the human fallibility that was such a primary tenet in Tolkien's writing, how are we to be sure that we are not misguided by leaders who have tasted the lure of the ring, the lure of power? Some resolution must and will be found, but people feel powerless to influence either the progression or conclusion of the process. In order to find some gratification and relief from the unanswerable questions of the present day, American culture returns to fantasy which offers "outlines [that] are nothing if not clear cut: they generally feature a virtuous hero, or set of heroes, fighting wickedness successfully" (Maasik 305). The complications of life are simplified for the reader or viewer, who, for a brief instant in time, may witness the imaginary conquest of evil that temporarily stands in for the terrors we face within our real world. As Sonia Massik accurately states, "life's messy enough as it is . . . let us have our distractions and consolations" (305).

Perhaps the most remarkable example of the manner in which society has made a conscious as well as a subconscious link between fantasy and catastrophic real world events may be found in the September 11<sup>th</sup> tragedy. The images of this horrific morning



are so embedded in our collective psyche, that the disaster has effectively become part of our everyday social milieu. This terrible event, which was “the first to spill American blood on American soil since the Civil War [heightened an already existing] cultural tension . . . [and] an aura of nationalism suffused with religiosity seemed to pervade the land” (Shogan 313-14). Beyond the obvious shock, the country felt a tremendous sense of violation when its own planes, loaded with innocent citizens, streaked across the sky and slammed into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center with the literal and figurative destructive power of missiles that had been fired in an act of war by an evil foreign power.

The depths to which this event has invaded the cultural subconscious, and relates to the manner in which the public has been drawn once again to fantasy, can be explicated by Freud’s theories concerning the relationship between the uncanny and repressed thoughts. Freud focuses on slips of the tongue; the ways one misspeaks lends insight into what is lurking in the subconscious. American society was traumatized on the morning of September 11<sup>th</sup>; the image of the collapsing towers was burned into the psyche of all who witnessed the conflagration. Freud’s exploration of the nature of the uncanny can be directly applied to the 9/11 tragedy. Freud states that, at its heart, the uncanny is “the mark of the return of the repressed” (Gray). The nation’s reaction to the horrific sights of a national landmark burning and then plummeting to the ground is an example of mass shock, which led to a widespread cultural epidemic of post traumatic stress disorder. The nation found itself faced with something that it was for the most part unequipped to psychologically process. The hurt and sense of loss was so great that in the panic and mourning that followed, much of the rippling psychological effect was

repressed and stored in the darkest confines of a society that had no capacity to exorcise this particular demon.

Hence, the effect of this trauma is carried within each member of our society and only finds expression through involuntary manifestations of the subconscious. In Freudian terms, the very real act that the nation witnessed on that fateful morning became so terrible in the minds of a traumatized public, that the memory was relegated to the same corners of the mind which hold, and attempt to understand, events unreal, supernatural, or fantastical. This repression, however, finds expression through instances in everyday existence when something draws forth these memories, whether by intent of the individual, or through some symbolic link that stirs the repressed out of the realm of the forgotten. 9/11 itself can be classified in Freudian terminology as characteristic of the uncanny, fulfilling the stated traits:

The uncanny is anything we experience in adulthood that reminds us of earlier psychic stages, of aspects of our unconscious life, or of the primitive experience of the human species [and] the uncanny arises as the recurrence of something long forgotten and repressed, something superceded in our psychic life = a reminder of our psychic past. (Freud qtd. by Gray)

So 9/11 reminds us of something in our past. It becomes lodged in our collective subconscious, and exists as a primitive experience of the human species that will defy repression.

The reemergence of these suppressed, and traumatic, memories are manifested through slips of the tongue. According to Freud, these slips “are a product of a local

opportunity from the particular circumstances, and of a struggle between two mental forces: some underlying need or wish, and the desire to keep it hidden” (Reason 610). These slips may tap into repressed memories and give expression to something that the mind has stored away. Certain trigger events within action or dialogue may bring forth these repressed memories, or the emotion relating to the repressed memory may be so powerful that the slip becomes a repeated facet of a given person’s speech – a commonplace. Freud writes:

In the course of our efforts to recover the name which has dropped out, other ones – substitute names – enter our consciousness; we recognize them at once as incorrect, but they keep returning and force themselves on us with great persistence...My hypothesis is that this displacement [of the target name] is not left to arbitrary psychical choice, but follows paths that can be predicted and which conform to laws. (Freud qtd. in Reason 611).

The slip of the tongue grows from a seed implanted within the psyche of the individual; some parallel event finds a connection in meaning, no matter how minute, that may or may not be perceived by the person, and this triggers the slip.

Evidence of this theory may be found in those Americans who were deeply affected by the events of 9/11, and who have been drawn to the escape offered by the pages of The Lord of the Rings. The coincidental release of the second film in the trilogy, The Two Towers, has sparked a perceptible connection between the fallen towers of the World Trade Center, often referred to as the Twin Towers, and the two towers within Tolkien’s lore, Orthanc and Barad-dûr. On more than one occasion, I have been in

conversation with someone on the topic of The Lord of the Rings films, and while attempting to make reference to the name of the second book in the trilogy, the person has said “The Twin Towers” instead of the correct term, The Two Towers. Conversely, on one occasion a person, who was engaged in a lengthy conversation with me on issues relating to Tolkien’s world, repeatedly referred to the towers of Isengard and Barad-dûr as “The Twin Towers.” Although these personal experiences, which give evidence supporting Freud’s theory, have been compelling, and underscore the relationship between the nation’s fascination with The Lord of the Rings and the concurrent horror in relation to the 9/11 tragedy, they are but a microcosm of much larger social issues at work. These larger concerns give form to a perceptible connection between pressing issues which face the nation and the nation’s emotional reinvestment in fantasy and particularly in the works of Tolkien.

Links between the real world and Tolkien’s created fantasy realm have never been so striking as during the events of the present day. Distinct parallels may be made between actual persons and events and apparent counterparts within Tolkien’s Middle-Earth, both on the side of good and evil as depicted within the trilogy. The existence of these shared motifs, and the relevance found by examining their relationship, may offer another reason for the widespread Tolkien mania. Again, as was the case in determining the parallels between The Lord of the Rings and the socio-political climate of earlier times, it is a testament to the subtle craftsmanship of the author that so many different time periods, faced with the concerns of war and aggression, have found cultural relevance within the pages of Tolkien’s masterpiece.

In a fascinating list of shared meaning that relates to the present day, however, I am taken aback by the almost eerie similarities between the real and the imagined, and I begin to wonder if The Lord of the Rings is, indeed, just high fantasy, or the literature of prophecy on the order of Nostradamus. Tolkien establishes the expected ultimate manifestation of evil in the form of Sauron, and obvious connections may be made to Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden, but what are we to make of the more understated links? One such subtext of fantasy and the real may be found in the nature of bin Laden's activities in guiding and supporting terror cells around the world, and Saruman's creation of fear and havoc as guided by the lidless eye of Sauron which spoke to him through the mystical palantir. To follow this thread even further, the minions of evil that Saruman creates under the orders of Sauron, and especially the dark lord's own loathsome Nazgûl, seem to exist to spread fear and dishearten the forces of good, much like terrorists operate largely through subversion in the efforts to attack America from within. The fear that the armies of evil create, as personified and given form in Middle-Earth by the black cloud that flows from Mordor and covers the sky with a veil of corruption, is analogous to the fear that pervades those who have felt terrorism's wraithlike touch. The moment when the cloud first spews forth, along with the unholy cry that heralds the beginning of Sauron's assault on Middle-Earth, and the accompanying rumbles from Mt. Doom that ominously warn that evil is stirring once more, may be compared to the perceived threats from abroad that threaten to descend without warning on innocent American society. As "orange alerts" loom over America like harbingers of more death and destruction, we can only think once more of the gnawing and insatiable hatred harbored by the Nazgûl against all that are other. Finally, we must focus with a mixture of fascination and

aversion on the most compelling parallel between the real and imagined: the similarities between the One Ring of Power and weapons of mass destruction. The lure of the ring is undeniable, with a power to corrupt that preys on the weaknesses of those who want it. It promises strength to those evil enough to use it, but in the end delivers only the utter destruction of one's moral foundations. Do not nuclear weapons offer similar temptations? Weapons of mass destruction of today hold much the same empty promise of power and glory, but also the same dangers as the One Ring. The world is assured of annihilation if either falls into the hands of the fanatical.

By examining the cultural climate of the present, and the resurgence of attention towards J. R. R. Tolkien and The Lord of the Rings, we must acknowledge that there is a certain structure that creates echoes that reverberate between both worlds. This structure gives form to the perceptible links that exist between the two, and aids in explaining the heightened relevance of Tolkien's fantasy in times which share markedly similar socio-political atmospheres. This process of discerning the nature of perceived connections by giving them form, and creating a structure to clarify what may, on the surface, appear nebulous, is defined by Foucault:

Structuralism, or at least that which is grouped under this slightly too general name, is the effort to establish, between elements that could have been connected on a temporal axis, an ensemble of relations that makes them appear as juxtaposed, set off against one another, in short, as a sort of configuration. Actually structuralism does not entail a denial of time; it does involve a certain manner of dealing with what we call time and what we call history. (Foucault qtd. in Soja 143)

By looking at the connections made between the present day and each time period which found itself faced with internal strife and/or war, and the concurrent rise in awareness and popularity of The Lord of the Rings, we can build a structure of shared meaning that, rather than denies the idiosyncrasies of time, allows us to transcend its bonds and link history by way of the power of Tolkien's profound imagination.

## CHAPTER SIX

### The Cultural Pervasiveness of The Lord of the Rings.

And the ship went out into the high sea and passed on into the West, until at last on a night of rain Frodo smelled a sweet fragrance on the air and heard the sound of singing that came over the water. And then it seemed to him that as in his dream in the house of Bombadil, 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.

–Voyage from the Grey Havens to the West. (Tolkien 1007)

Within the pages of this study, I have attempted to find underlying reasons for the rise in popularity in J. R. R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings trilogy during distinct periods of American history. These eras are clearly delineated due to their similar defining characteristics and illustrate the shifting tides of social trends within popular culture. One theme which seems to run consistently through the time periods surveyed is that, although it may be a common perception that trends in popular culture are subject largely to the whims of fate and the momentary favor of a fickle and capricious society, the evidence gathered from the cause and effect study of the politics of war and the popularity of Tolkien's work suggests that quite the opposite may be true.

In each of the periods of history examined, there existed and exists a palpable tone within society of a growing helplessness in the face of an impending conflict, social strife from within, or catastrophic event which traumatized the populace. Those who have been and are drawn to Tolkien's fantasy world do so for a variety of reasons, but at the heart of this cultural phenomenon lies the fact that when America finds itself enveloped by a cloud of uncertainty about the future, the clarity and steadfastness of spirit within the pages of The Lord of the Rings becomes a panacea for a concerned nation.



Hence, in times such as the ones covered in this study, and especially relating to the current cultural climate that exists in the United States, the need to embrace fantasy stems from several complementary factors. The fear of technology, and particularly the weapons of war, may drive the American public to look back wistfully to an illusory time long past when the world seemed somehow smaller, and concerns did not range globally but were confined to keeping stability in one's own feudal territory. Of course, even in these distant ages, there existed the prevailing climate of "might makes right," so that much of the dreaming of a simpler historical past is nostalgic, based more in the imaginary than in any true "utopian" realm which might have existed. Since history offers no locus of innocence, we shift our focus to fantasy worlds, in which truth and justice triumph over the forces of evil. In fantasy, structures exist that invite readers into a dream-like state as they endeavor to escape from the anxieties of modern times, even if for a moment.

The works of Tolkien have taken a place of prominence in the fantasy genre. In the struggle between good and evil within Middle-Earth, there is a sense of definition and clarity. As Grossman points out:

Tolkien, a veteran of the British nightmare at the Somme in World War I, is a poet of war, and we are a nation in need of a good, clear war story. At a time when Americans are wandering deeper into a nebulous conflict against a faceless enemy, Tolkien gives us the war we wish we were fighting – a struggle with a foe whose face we can see, who fights out in the open battlefield, far removed from innocent civilians. In Middle-Earth,

unlike the Middle East, you can tell an evildoer because he or she looks evil. (94)

Tolkien depicts a straightforward war between good and evil, a war that is waged between valiant heroes and inhuman monsters who were literally spawned from corruption and filth. This completely unambiguous nature feeds a need within societies that crave such clarity, and Tolkien's expertise on the horrors and realities of war allows him to vividly recreate such realities within his fantasy realm. However, Grossman is not quite correct when he refers to Tolkien's villains as an enemy who fights in the open, on battlefields away from innocent civilians. While this sets up a nice parallel with the shadowy and faceless nature of terrorism, and those who venture into Tolkien's realm do so from a wish to be able to see and define their enemies, the fact is that not all of the evil minions within Tolkien's work are out in the open. For example, the Nazgûl stealthily creep in the night, stalking their prey before breaking down the gates of Bree; furthermore, they kill many innocents before walking in and impaling their cursed swords into what they think are the sleeping forms of Frodo and his companions.

Even after the ring is destroyed, the scouring of the shire provides another example of a war that is waged outside battle lines and the siege engines of stalwart armies. Witnessed as prophecy in the mirror of Galadriel, and later realized when Saruman and his wretched assistant Wormtongue have sought both refuge and revenge in the Shire, many innocent inhabitants of Bag's End and Hobbiton are forced to suffer as the last tendrils of evil reach out in a hate-filled death spasm. Hence, although Tolkien does paint a world in which evil is black and white, there are some instances when the

forces of evil reach into the sanctity of home and hearth, and just as in the real world of today, an atmosphere that no one is truly safe exists in hushed tones within Middle-Earth.

This final confrontation with Saruman's desire for revenge within the realm of the Shire, where even there hobbits are never truly safe from the forces of evil, also creates a shared meaning within our own cities, towns, and villages where we too feel a tangible, but as yet unseen, threat. In this way, the relevance of The Lord of the Rings not only exists as an escape into an imaginary realm for a national psyche plagued by fear and doubt, but it also stirs that dormant spirit of resistance that is inherent in the nature of American culture. As director Peter Jackson, the imaginative force who has created the immensely popular films which are based on Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings so aptly states, "on some level most of the people watching these movies regard themselves as a peace-loving, gentle people who would rather stay out of trouble and who are forced to deal with situations that are out of their control" (Jackson qtd. in Grossman 94). Jackson's esteem for those of us who love the trilogy helps us find further insight into both the nature of the work and of America itself. In addition to the solace we take from the successful struggle against evil within the pages of Tolkien's work, perhaps the manner in which the war affects all of Middle-Earth, from living creatures like the huge ents to the very land on which the war is waged, strikes a chord within us. Stirring the ashes that rekindle the fires of righteous rage that once fueled a revolution to create our country, it may be said that Tolkien's trilogy "[tells] us less about who we are than who we wish we were" (Grossman 94). This array of emotion conveyed so vividly through the prose of J. R. R. Tolkien elicits within readers possibilities for transference to another world in which we may share in the glorious defeat of evil within this fantasy realm. Our

identification with Frodo, with Sam, with Aragorn, with Arwen and Éowyn speaks to and comforts our culture's psyche as we confront the terrors that lurk in the dark. Thus, as Galadriel bestowed the gift of Eärendil's star upon Frodo in the hopes that its shimmering radiance would guide him in times of trouble, perhaps for our culture Tolkien's trilogy is also "a light [for us] in dark places, when all other lights go out" (Tolkien 367).

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