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Abstract

Examines *The Lord of the Rings* as a reflection of its historical and social context and seeks Tolkien's intent in inventing and describing the various societies of Middle-earth.

Additional Keywords

Tolkien, J.R.R. The Lord of the Rings

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Middle-earth: The Real World of J. R. R. Tolkien

Brian N. Weidner

IN THE world of fantasy fiction, perhaps no other writings have found such fame as J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and its companion books *The Hobbit* and *The Silmarillion*. They have also been the subject of much controversy as the "true" meaning of them has been endlessly disputed. They have been evaluated numerous times as a stand against the status quo, as shown by countercultural declarations of "Frodo Lives" in the subways of New York in the 1970s. The question raised following the original publication of the books was what exactly was Tolkien trying to express through *The Lord of the Rings?* In response to these inquiries, Tolkien published the following statement in the Foreword to the second edition of *The Lord of the Rings:*

> As for any inner meaning or 'message', it has in the intention of the author none. It is neither allegorical nor topical. As the story grew it put down roots (into the past) and threw out unexpected branches; but its main theme was settled from the outset by the inevitable choice of the Ring as the link between it and *The Hobbit*. [. . .]
>
> The real war [World War II] does not resemble the legendary war in its process or its conclusion. [. . .]
>
> Other arrangements could be devised according to the tastes or views of those who like allegory or topical reference. But I cordially dislike allegory in all its manifestations, and always have done so since I grew old and wary enough to detect its presence. I much prefer history, true or feigned, with its varied applicability to the thought and experience of the readers. (*Fellowship* 10-11)

This declaration appears to have quelled these inquisitive voices, for since 1965 relatively little criticism has commented extensively on the hidden implications of *The Lord of the Rings*.

Still, whether intentional or not, the elements that caused this initial question of intent continue to exist within the text of this revered novel. Middle-earth in many ways still parallels the world that existed in the late 1940s when the book was being completed. The vying powers within his created world still support the political ideologies that Tolkien advocated in life. The underlying motivations of the principal characters still echo traditional Christianity. Tolkien claims that in writing *The Lord of the Rings,* he was attempting to create an apolitical mythology

for the English language, isolated from the time and place in which it was written. He is quoted as saying, *The Lord of the Rings* "is not 'about' anything but itself. Certainly it has no allegorical intentions general, particular or topical; moral, religious or political" (qtd. in Glover 39). Upon closer analysis though, it is impossible to deny the presence of allegorical elements. "Despite Tolkien's well-known distaste for allegory," David Critchett avers, "a point he makes clear in the Foreword to *The Lord of the Rings,* such a work as the trilogy cannot help but be susceptible to some kind of legitimate allegorical interpretation" (46). Despite his anti-allegorical intentions, *The Lord of the Rings* is a British epic documenting, analyzing, and criticizing the Western, Christian experience of the early 1900s as seen through the eyes of J. R. R. Tolkien.

The Shire as Rural England, 1900

To begin to see *The Lord of the Rings* as an allegory of the world at large, it is perhaps best to begin with the land which is most familiar and the hobbits' home, The Shire. Tolkien admitted that much of the model for The Shire is derived from his impressions of rural England (Curry 37). These similarities run deeper than basic superficialities; the landscape, the people, and the customs presented parallel traditional, rural, British stereotypes. In the Prologue, Tolkien describes The Shire as "a well-ordered and well-farmed countryside" (*Fellowship* 19). The pastoral images of gently rolling hills and stone-fenced fields of England immediately come to mind as the hobbits travel throughout The Shire. Bag End—Bilbo and (later) Frodo's comfortable hobbit hole "with panelled walls, and floors tiled and carpeted, provided with polished chairs and lots and lots of pegs for hats and coats" (*Hobbit* 1)—is reminiscent of the inviting country estates of the gentry of late Victorian England. The Shire mirrors the English countryside.

Likewise, the hobbits mirror the stereotypical British gentry. In his introductions to hobbits in the opening pages of *The Hobbit* and the Prologue to *The Lord of the Rings,* Tolkien stylizes hobbits as reserved, clear-thinking beings who are rarely in a hurry and are dedicated to decorum and formality. Tradition, order, and society play strong roles in The Shire and the lives of the hobbits, particularly in regards to visits and meals, and they are pained when forced to give those amenities up. At the beginning of the journeys of both Bilbo and Frodo, the hobbits express disgust in the abandoning of tradition and the loss of formality in life. This dedication to pomp, tradition, and formality is typical of both hobbits and stereotypical rural Englishmen.

The history of The Shire follows England's history. The Shire is isolated from the rest of Middle-earth by the nearly uncrossable Brandywine River, just as England is separated from mainland Europe by the Channel. In both societies, the top official does little more than act as a figurehead for the government. Just as the English monarchy holds little official power aside from ceremonial duties, the principal task of the Mayor of The Shire is to preside over banquets (*Return* 340). Legal matters are based highly in tradition and are dealt with locally if possible. Militarily, each country has twice had to defend the homeland against foreign enemies in significant battles. For England, they were the Battle of Hastings (which established Norman rule) and the Battle of Britain (which maintained England's independence from the Axis powers); for The Shire, these were the Battle of Greenfield, which gave hobbits autonomous control of The Shire (*Fellowship* 24), and the Battle of Bywater, which maintained hobbit independence from the dictatorship of Saruman. In matters of government and history, The Shire and England are paired closely.

In a way, hobbits are nothing more than misplaced Englishmen. The kinship of The Shire and the hobbits to England and its people is undeniable in *The Lord of the Rings* due to the glaring similarities in geography, culture, history, and politics. Regardless of his intentions, Tolkien imposed the culture he knew upon the one he created.

The War of the Ring as World War I

If the assumption is made that The Shire is England, the logical extension is that Middle-earth represents Europe, Asia, and Africa. In looking beyond The Shire, Tolkien imposes his beliefs and those of British imperialism upon Eastern cultures of both the real world and Middle-earth. The structuring of Middle-earth and its people seems to parallel common Western beliefs of the world and its cultures and quite possibly suggests Tolkien's unconscious incorporations of European biases upon a foreign world.

Again, as in The Shire-England parallels, Middle-earth and the Eurasian continent seem to share many commonalities. Mountains cut the center of western Middle-earth in half, much as the Alps do in Europe. Deserts, mountains, and inhospitable land exist on the eastern edge of the West, similar to central Russia and the Middle East. South of Gondor and the unified West can be found a sparsely inhabited land of roaming tribes, and dark skinned people. The South is

made up of deserts and is home to the Oliphaunts which are large, gray animals used for war. And those fleeing the war sail across the sea to a land separated from the pain and suffering of war-torn Middle-earth. This land serves a similar role as America did during the World Wars. The descriptions of the geography and people keep with the imperialistic beliefs of early twentieth-century Western Europe and work to show the East as a lesser civilization, both in the real and created world.

Early in its existence, many critics analyzed *The Lord of the Rings* as analogous to World War II, which had ended ten years prior to the novel's publication. While denying the connection of the War of the Ring with World War II, Tolkien acknowledges in the revised Foreword of The *Lord of the Rings* that images of World War I, which he served in, may have influenced his writing by presenting a realistic image of war. One of his intentional parallels is Frodo's servant, Sam, about whom Tolkien stated: "My Sam Gamgee [. . .] is a reflexion of the English soldier, of the privates and batmen I knew in the 1914 war, and recognized as so far superior to myself" (qtd. in Friedman 129). But beyond basic character constructs, he denies that the War of the Ring in any way imitates the Great War (Brogan 354). Yet, the similarities between the two wars seem too extensive to be nothing more than coincidences.

The alliances formed among Middle-earth's people are reminiscent of World War I's divisions. Sauron's Mordor allies itself with the turncoat Saruman, whose domain at Isengard divides the West in half. It also grants Sauron the use of Saruman' s orcs who were renowned for their prowess in battle. This is reminiscent of World War I where Austria-Hungary involved a militaristic Germany which stood between the Allies of Western Europe and Russia. Where the Central Powers alliances caused the Allies to unite together in order to avoid being totally overrun, the West of Middle-earth united together to defend its interests. The initial threat of attack on Gondor spurred a wide alliance system to be implemented which first drew in the Rohirrim and later the Rangers of the North. These alliances expanded a small, regional war between Mordor and Gondor out to include all of Middle-earth in much the same way that a small, Eastern European feud developed into a world-encompassing War.

Images of World War I battles are very evident in Tolkien's war descriptions. For example, the Battle of the Somme, where Tolkien fought, had numerous reports of decapitated heads floating in the pools. One account from Siegfried Sassoon's *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* describes one such pool: "Floating on the surface of the flooded trench [. . .]the mask of a human face [. . .] detached

[. . .] from the skull" (qtd. in Friedman 351). Frodo and Sam encounter similar heads in the Dead Marshes near Mordor: "They lie in all the pools, pale faces, deep deep under the dark water. I saw them: grim faces and evil, and noble faces and sad. Many faces proud and fair, and weeds in their silver hair. But all foul, all rotting, all dead" (Tolkien, *Towers* 277). Another Somme image comes with the fall of Sauron after the destruction of the Ring. The elimination of Sauron's shadow closely resembles the clouds from shell ammunition when they explode and then blow away in the wind: "[B]lack against the pall of cloud, there rose a huge shape of shadow, impenetrable, lightning-crowned, filling all the sky" (*Return* 252). This may be compared to Sassoon' s description of a shell-burst at close range: "Against the clear morning sky a cloud of dark smoke expands and drifts away. Slowly its dingy wrestling vapours take the form of a hooded giant with clumsy expostulating arms" (qtd. in Brogan 353). These sorts of images of World War I echo throughout the War of the Ring, making the influences of reality on fiction undeniable.

Perhaps the most poignant example of World War I reflected in *The Lord of the Rings* is Frodo and Sam's return to The Shire to find devastation at the hands of Saruman. Under his totalitarian regime, he has destroyed the hobbit life and imprisoned many of the outstanding hobbits that the travelers looked forward to returning to. Even in his anti-allegory Foreword, Tolkien discusses the shock of returning home from war to find England drastically changed:

> One has indeed personally to come under the shadow of war to feel fully its oppression; but as the years go by it seems now often forgotten that to be caught in youth by 1914 was no less hideous an experience than to be involved in 1939 and the following years. By 1918 all but one of my close friends were dead. (*Fellowship* 11)

Also reinforcing this comparison are the years in which the hobbits' and the British soldiers' returns took place. The Hobbits returned in 1419 S.R. (Shire Reckoning), a date which is quite similar to the return of British soldiers in 1918-1919. The hobbits' shocking return to a changed world tells the tale of Tolkien's own return from World War I to a country unlike that he left.

A question arises in response to the recognition of blatant references to real life in *The Lord of the Rings,* despite Tolkien's denial of their existence. Why did Tolkien not see them also and either change the nature of the novel or alter his beliefs about the book as myth without basis in modernity? Brogan offers this argument: "the Great War lay like a cloud on the consciousness of the English until it was eclipsed by the coming of an even greater conflict" (352). Tolkien

wrote about the War in a fantasy setting, because he could not ignore it, even if he refused to acknowledge it. For Tolkien, writing about the War "was therapy for a mind wounded in war, and before that by deep sorrow in childhood and young manhood" (358). Instead of writing specifically about the War as did so many other authors, he chose to create an English mythology in which "the references to English history and geography were gradually dropped" (357). Brogan suggests that, subconsciously, Tolkien was writing about World War I all along through *The Lord of the Rings.* Disguising it in the form of mythology was merely his way of escaping a painful truth and easing his suffering and loss.

In addition to subconsciously incorporating The Great War, Tolkien also includes, apparently unintentionally due to his claimed apolitical stance, the Western sociological convention of equating the West with good and the East with bad. All evil in this book comes out of the East. Mordor in *The Lord of the Rings* and Smaug in *The Hobbit* lie to the East and both are sinister. These are evils which corrupt others, as seen with the Ring which was made in Mount Doom in the center of Mordor and is able to corrupt even those who are from the West and are good, such as Boromir and Frodo.

Tolkien also creates these anti-oriental notions through language. The orcs are used throughout the story as the footmen of Sauron. Being a foremost linguist, Tolkien was most definitely aware that the Orcish language he created paralleled the real world's Middle Eastern languages closely. The Orcish words have, even to the uneducated reader, a Middle Eastern sound to them. To those versed in Eastern philology and mythology, even stronger relations between the East and evil are created. The Uruk-hai, the strongest breed of orc, derive their names from the Sumerian city of Uruk, while Sauron's henchmen, the Nazgul, are named using the Arabic word for a "grave-robbing, corpse eating spirit" (Ryan 44). Saruman's name originates from Arabic-derived Latin meaning "one of the Eastern people" (44). His character is also quite similar to an ancient Assyrian leader by the name of Suruman who, like Saruman, took advantage of his ruling lord and planned to act against him (44). Saruman is, in essence, the poster child for the evil East. Equating the physical world's Eastern languages and mythology with evil further exemplifies Tolkien's hidden, anti-Eastern message. Regardless of intent, Tolkien's imperialist British upbringing becomes evident in the subtext beneath *The Lord of the Rings.*

Middle-earth Beliefs as Christian Dogma

Tolkien is quoted as saying in regards to *The Lord of the Rings*: "It is not 'about' anything but itself. Certainly it has *no* allegorical intentions general, particular or topical; moral religious or political. [. . .] It is a monotheistic world of 'natural theology'. [. . .] I am in any case myself a Christian; but the 'Third Age' was not a Christian world" (Glover 39). While acknowledging Middle-earth as having religion, Tolkien denied that the "natural theology" is in fact Judeo-Christian. Multiple critics have recognized *The Lord of the Rings* as being very distinctly "based on a Christian experience" (Griffin 116) and that Tolkien's "myth-making intention in *The Lord of the Rings* is at war with the Catholicism which he subtly, but nonetheless deliberately, promotes in the trilogy" (Critchett 36). Despite the absence of a physical church or theological lecture, *The Lord of the Rings* exemplifies a sort of religion that is clearly Christian. Again, in his attempts to avoid being allegorical, Tolkien allowed his Christian beliefs to enter into his mythology.

On the most basic level, there are two unseen forces, both of which are referred to regularly. Evil is evident throughout the mythology, directed by the unseen Melkor/Morgoth from *The Silmarillion* and is represented in Middle-earth by the oft mentioned but seldom seen Sauron. The wizards, most notably Gandalf and Saruman, prior to his falling into evil, are Sauron's counterpart, and are guided by *The Silmarillion's* Valar. These two distinct groups are the equivalents to Satan (Melkor/Morgoth) and his followers (Sauron), and the archangels (Valar) and lesser angels (Gandalf).

Tolkien also insinuates Christian morality into *The Lord of the Rings,* though again without labeling it as religious doctrine: "The attitude toward sin, repentance, and redemption cannot in the pre-Christian world of the Third Age be fully developed in a Christian sense [. . .] it is nevertheless profoundly Biblical and Christian" (Glover 52). Among these virtues, Tolkien mentions forgiveness and salvation again and again. Frodo forgives Gollum for his thieving and evil ways after Gollum accidentally sacrifices himself and destroys the Ring (Tolkien, *Return* 249-50). Frodo forbids killing Saruman at the Battle of Bywater, because "he is fallen and his cure is beyond us; but I would still spare him, in hope that he may find it" (333). These statements are not the thoughts of a society that is atheistic or has only regard for a "natural theology." Sauron is allowed to perish, because he is the embodiment of evil, but for everyone and everything else, salvation is possible. Elrond acts in *The Lord of the Rings* as a papal figure, who interprets the past and preaches this religion's morality. He is the one to whom all others turn for guidance as unveiled through ancient story and myth. Before sending the Fellowship of the

Ring out from Rivendell, he reminds them, "For nothing is evil in the beginning. Even Sauron was not so" (*Fellowship* 321). Those who seek greed and power at the expense of others, such as Sauron and Gollum, perish in the flames of Mount Doom, Middle-earth's hell. Those who pursue goodness and truth, such as Frodo, Bilbo, and Gandalf, are rewarded with passage over the Sea. Christian idealism is maintained throughout the entire story, and those who are shown to be compassionate and forgiving are granted wonderful returns in the end.

One Ring to Rule Them All

So in the end, the question remains: if *The Lord of the Rings* is allegorical of something larger, and not just a mythological tale as Tolkien claims, what exactly does the Ring represent? Tolkien would have us believe that the Ring was a power of total evil which, by mandate, would corrupt goodness and make it become evil. As with the rest of the story, it could be easily seen that he intended the Ring to be a realization of good versus evil. But in view of points already discussed, it becomes clear that the Ring means subconsciously much more than just black and white morality.

Bearing in mind Tolkien's peaceful anarchist political stance (Curry 48), the Ring solidifies his theory that absolute power corrupts. Whether the person wearing the Ring intends to use it for good or not, they are still advocating the suppression of others' rights in favor of their own. In his Foreword, Tolkien likens himself to Frodo and Bilbo as "a simple-minded hobbit" (*Fellowship* 12). While merely a passing reference, the fact that he envisions himself to be of the same mind as Frodo and Bilbo dictates the action he advocates. Frodo set out on his journey to destroy the Ring, a representation of the corruption brought on by absolute, totalitarian power. The Ring needed to be destroyed to keep anyone from gaining that power. The act of destroying this Ring is Tolkien's advocacy of non-violent revolt against oppression, a message understood by the painters of "Frodo Lives!"

Tolkien created The Shire as an illustration of what this non-authoritarian society might look like. The Shire approaches his image of a perfect society as closely as any community can, as the authority held by the Mayor and the Sheriffs is minimal, pertaining almost solely to the hosting of Banquets. Tolkien acknowledges that there are limits to a free society and demonstrates what sort of control is needed for abuses not to occur. But Frodo and Bilbo (and Tolkien for that matter) still view any control as too much and find themselves in constant

search for a perfect, free utopia. Therefore they leave for the land across the Water where there are no authorities and no outside control.

The Ring therefore represents all that is corruptible which Sauron has control over. These include totalitarian control, war, technology, loss of identity, and many others. Tolkien's message, though he may not intend it, is one advocating a release from society and its trappings and a return to self-control. Despite his efforts to not discuss "the moral, religious, or political" (Glover 39), Tolkien creates an extremely poignant analysis of the world of his time through a world separated from reality. This criticism looks at the facets of British, Christian culture and thought and evaluates them frankly, despite their dislocation in place, time, and culture.

In his desire to create a uniquely English mythology to compare with those of Mediterranean and Germanic cultures, Tolkien forced himself to ignore that he was writing from within a social construct about which it was impossible for him not to comment. He denied the existence of his personal norms, biases, beliefs, and politics so as to legitimize the existence of a powerful and moving work. Rather than view *The Lord of the Rings* and its companion books *The Hobbit* and *The Silmarillion* as mythological creations produced apart from society, future criticism needs to acknowledge them as mythology created as part of a culture and herald them for the revelations and insights they provide into contemporary culture and the universal experience. "You see," Thompson avers, "*The Lord of the Rings* is the *real* history of this planet. [. . .] It's not the same old gang of souls on earth anymore. Anyway, Tolkien gets by the grownups as a fantasy, and even some of the kids take it in that way, but once it's inside, the unconscious takes off the fantasy wrapper and knows its [sic] the real story" (22).

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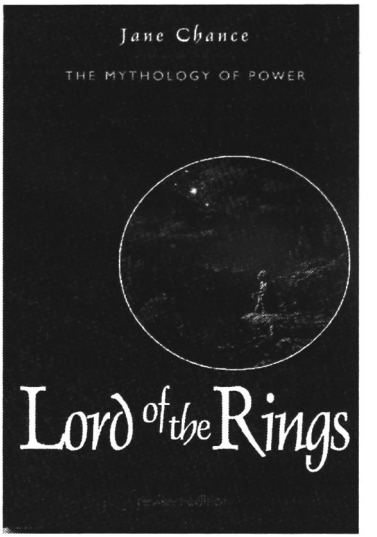

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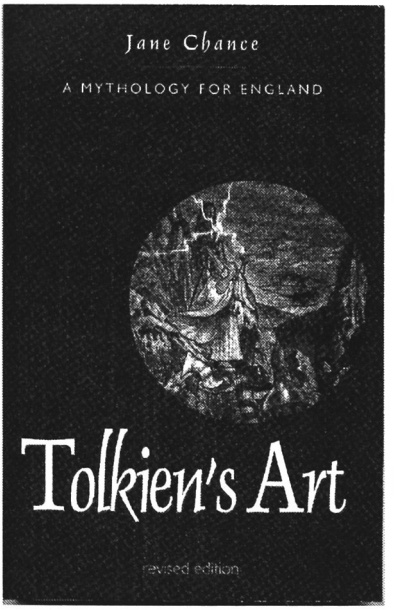

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