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February 4-5, 2022 (Friday evening, Saturday all day)

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## Online Winter Seminar



### Online Winter Seminar

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February 4-5, 2022 (Friday evening, Saturday all day)

Via Zoom and Discord

## Mythcon 52: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien

Albuquerque, New Mexico; July 29 - August 1, 2022

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### Abstract

Finds commonality between people who search for monsters such as the Loch Ness monster and those who read fantasy. Both appeal to a psychological need to redress the balance in a culture which focuses too much on rational, right-brain consciousness (based on the theories of Ornstein).

### Additional Keywords

Fantasy—Psychological aspects; Loch Ness monster; Ornstein, Robert E. The Psychology of Consciousness; Tolkien, J.R.R. The Lord of the Rings—Psychological aspects

# The Elusive Appeal of the Fantastic

by Daniel T. Kobil

At first glance there appears to be little connection between the search for the Loch Ness Monster and J. R. R. Tolkien's exquisite fantasy trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings*. After all, many Tolkien enthusiasts surely view the monster hunt as little better than the fruitless pursuit of that proverbial wild-fowl. And those who whole-heartedly embrace the search for "Nessie" do not of necessity find the Trilogy especially appealing. Still, it is difficult to look at these two subjects and not acknowledge the intuitive perception that they are somehow generically related. The problem is with isolating a specific rational connection between the monster and Middle Earth. On closer inspection, at least two come to mind.

In his "Essay on Fairy Stories" J. R. R. Tolkien writes, "I desired dragons with a profound desire."<sup>1</sup> Obviously, one of the functions of Tolkien's fantasy is fulfillment of the desire to experience dragons. This is most apparent in *The Hobbit*, though allusions to dragons aren't uncommon in *The Lord of the Rings* and will quite probably be included in *The Silmarillion*. The seekers of "Nessie" on the other hand do not believe that dragons are confined solely to the realm of Faerie. The theory that captures the imagination of nearly all monster hunters hypothesizes that Loch Ness is inhabited by a viable population of Plesiosaurs. These are a supposedly extinct suborder of Mesozoic marine reptiles anywhere from 20 to 40 feet in length. In other words, the investigators seek the world's last surviving dragons. Thus, it is clear that the fantasy of Tolkien and the search for the Loch Ness monster are different approaches to a common need, namely, the wish to experience dragons. The general reaction of the public ignorant of these subjects is another aspect where their similarity is apparent.

Anyone who has ever attempted to discuss their belief in the existence of a large, unknown creature in Loch Ness is all too familiar with the smug, patronizing response this usually elicits from a person totally unacquainted with the controversy. Normally open-minded people presume themselves capable of pronouncing judgment on the matter when their knowledge consists of little more than awareness of the three words, "Loch Ness Monster." Likewise, most students of Tolkien's work are aware of the prejudice that condescendingly classifies Fantasy as something less than respectable -- not "real literature." A prime example of this prejudice is the review by Edmund Wilson titled "Oo Those Awful Orcs!" which appeared in the April 14, 1956 issue of *The Nation*. Wilson states that *The Lord of the Rings* "is essentially a children's book, which has somehow gotten out of hand . . . The author has indulged himself in developing the fantasy for its own sake." It seems that some people are greatly concerned with affirming their status as "adults" even if this involves defining "adults" as creatively impoverished beings with atrophied imaginations. Both the Loch Ness Monster and Tolkien's Fantasy are innocent victims of such close minded intolerance. Since these subjects address themselves to a common need and suffer from the same prejudices it is perhaps not surprising that, despite the obstacles, fairy tales and monsters have both attracted a loyal following of very responsible people.

A number of respected critics have spoken very highly of the trilogy, not only as exemplary fantasy, but also as superior literature. Robley

Evans of Connecticut College states in a critical analysis of Tolkien, "*The Lord of the Rings* is a major work of 20th century fiction with serious implications for life as we know it."<sup>2</sup> Other critics such as Paul J. Kocher, C. S. Lewis, and Randel Helms share a similar high regard for the trilogy. Tolkien himself was a distinguished Oxford critic and scholar. Nor is the monster without responsible supporters. Tim Dinsdale, the author of several books on the monster, is an aeronautical engineer and expert photographer who has given up his job as well as time with his family in order to serve as photographic director of the Loch Ness Investigation Bureau. Much sophisticated sonar and photographic equipment has been employed in the search for the monster. A miniature submarine was even transported to the loch. The Investigation Bureau is financed primarily by grants from such respectable organizations as World Book Encyclopedia and others of similar stature. Their efforts to find the monster have attracted the attention of scientists from all over the world.<sup>3</sup> In light of our culture's sweeping rejection of the irrational, it seems strange that literary critics should think so much of Tolkien's fairytale and that the Loch Ness Monster should have the strong support of aeronautical engineers, naturalists, and scientists. In this intellectually oriented society, why has my own imagination, as well as the imaginations of so many others, been captured by Tolkien and Loch Ness?

Actually, extra-rational subjects in general are enjoying more popularity now than they have at any other time in recent history. There is tremendous interest in all unexplained phenomena such as extra sensory perception, the occult, witchcraft, Eastern mysticism, and unidentified flying objects. This trend has attracted the interest of a number of psychologists. One in particular, Dr. Robert E. Ornstein, has developed a theory of consciousness that attempts to explain why the mystical has grown so popular in our scientific culture. The basic concepts presented in his book, *The Psychology of Consciousness*, provide an intriguing framework for considering the enchanting power of Tolkien and the Monster.

*The Psychology of Consciousness* is an attempt to integrate two basic approaches to knowledge, the rational and the intuitive. Up till now these two methods have been treated as if each is totally exclusive of the other. Ornstein proposes that this has occurred because of the bifunctional nature of the human brain. In the left hemisphere of most human brains seem to be placed the functions of language, rational cognition, and time sense. It is the right hemisphere, in most cases, that seems responsible for nonverbal thinking such as intuition, spatial relationships, and the direction of many bodily activities. Ornstein sees the main current of Western thought as being "left hemisphere dominated," oriented toward verbal and mathematical rationality. This can be seen by the manner in which our society values what is rationally explainable, and tends to ignore anything which is not. In comparison with all the effort that is made to develop the intellectual capacities of the left brain, the right half of our brain is virtually ignored.

It seems to me that the trend towards the mystical, the arational, and the intuitive is an attempt to partially rectify the tremendous imbalance that has resulted from an overdevelopment of the

rational. What acceptable outlets do we have for many of the intuitions and feelings of the right brain? Often times we do not even acknowledge our intuitive capabilities, let alone develop and express them. For the most part, we approach life with only half of the faculties that are naturally available to us. Such an artificially created imbalance in our thinking can only result in dissatisfaction with much of our knowledge. There are many questions that cannot be answered rationally. These must be looked at from another angle in order to be understood. Instead, we are told to accept answers that are logically sound, even though they do not satisfy our intuitive feelings. Dr. Ornstein tells us what can befall a logic-oriented culture such as ours. He states that "the development of purely logical, rational science, unbalanced by a perspective born of intuition, can proceed, if unchecked, close to the point of self destruction. This lack of an overall perspective can lead to a certain sterility . . . in the content of scientific inquiry."<sup>4</sup> Though Ornstein does not say so, it can also lead to sterility in the content of life, as well as to stagnation of the imagination. Imagination is stimulated by the unknown. In a world where everything is logically explained, there is nothing left to wonder about, or more importantly, to wonder at. I think that such things as Tolkien's fantasy and the monster of Loch Ness fulfill a basic need of the intuitive part of the brain for stimulation. They also stimulate our imaginative powers and enable us to once again wonder at the world around us. This can be seen more clearly when we consider some of the reasons that people give to account for their attraction to the monster and Middle-earth.

Daniel Cohen, in his book *A Modern Look at Monsters*, proposes several reasons why people are so fascinated by monsters. He states that "the dangerous unknown on the earth has shrunk almost to the vanishing point. We are beginning to miss it. Without it, a good deal of the flavor and excitement has gone out of life. So we grasp at every hint that there is really something large and strong lurking out there beneath the surface."<sup>5</sup> Later on, Cohen makes some comments about the hairy monster of the mountains that really apply to all unknown creatures: "Its very existence is an affront to science, indeed to civilization itself. To everyone who resents the rigid rules of science and civilization (and in some ways, who doesn't) the hairy monster has enormous appeal. He is also a shining goal for the frustrated adventurer." (Cohen, p. 170) There is also the eloquent statement of a young monster hunter named Dave who is quoted by Tim Dinsdale.

Someone recently asked me why we hunt these creatures. It is easy to answer, but difficult to explain. We believe in them — not only the individuals but what they in the large sense represent. They are a not-so-impossible dream and an enigma almost answered. On this world bound by technological complexities, they are a return to nature, and a subtle reminder to man that he is not a master of all creation. It is a quixotic search for truth in a scornful world — a tedious search which someday must have its end. And when we do place the final piece of the puzzle in position perhaps men will stop to gaze at inscrutable nature and wonder about the deeper natural truths...<sup>6</sup>

Common to these reasons is a dissatisfaction with the rigid, rational pronouncements of an all too logical society. What is left in this world to amaze and surprise us? We are told that, at least in the way of large animals, there is nothing new to be found. Despite the fact that countless people have observed the Loch Ness Monster since the first recorded sightings many hundreds of years ago, science holds that the creature does not exist because it has not been captured, killed, labeled, and logically explained by a capable scientist. Because its boundaries are so confining, rational certainty renders us incapable of perceiving the "flavor and excitement" implicit in life. The predictable world takes on a blandly boring aspect that stifles the imagination and

dulls the creative mind. The Loch Ness Monster gives us hope that there really might be wondrous things in nature that logical science cannot account for. It is a welcome alternative to the barren, stagnant world that many would have us inhabiting.

In *The Lord of the Rings*, J. R. R. Tolkien combats the same sort of hopelessness that has been previously discussed. Using the literary medium, he creates a world that has proven to be both inspirational and satisfying to those of us who find little that is inspiring in the narrow view of reality prevalent today. Robley Evans tells us, "Contemporary literature often seems only to reflect the uncertainty, alienation, and despair of its readers and to suggest that there are few or no ultimate truths to be affirmed. Man is alone, helpless, and basically passive in a meaningless universe; there is nothing to be done to alter his condition . . . Samuel Beckett's characters circle grimly around one another 'waiting for Godot' who never comes" (Evans, p. 23). This despair stems from the same blind affirmation of the rational that was discussed in the last paragraph. Astronauts voyage into outer space and proclaim that there is no God out there. The only logical conclusion is that man is the product of a chance combination of molecules multiplied by billions of years of evolution. There is no purpose to our lives and therefore no meaning to our actions. Tolkien's tale, on the other hand, asserts exactly the opposite. Dr. Evans says:

Tolkien is a Renaissance man whose essentially Christian vision of the universe finds it ordered and purposive with places for all created beings whose relationships in the community of being provide their lives with moral and spiritual meaning. In this vision such ideas as individual responsibility, exercise of human will in choosing between good and evil, fellow-feeling for other creatures, have a positive function. And exactly because Tolkien can define the world as one organized by laws and purposes, he can show that action, too, is possible; men can choose to do good or evil and to make gestures which shape events and the lives of others, for better or worse.

(Evans, pp. 23-24)

This is just what I find most satisfying in Tolkien. The trilogy reaffirms an ethical view of life that we all intuitively yearn for. Nearly all religions of the world tell us that our lives and actions do have meaning. We seem to need to believe this is true in spite of all the scientific arguments otherwise. Tolkien's narrative artistry temporarily frees our minds from the shackles of skepticism and allows us to live for a while in a world of meaningful actions. This is escape of an admirable nature. Tolkien tells us that most critics of fantasy fail to make any distinction between "the escape of the Prisoner and the flight of the Deserter."<sup>7</sup> He goes on to say, "It is part of the essential malady of such days -- producing the desire to escape not indeed from life but from our present time and self made misery -- that we are acutely conscious both of the ugliness of our works, and of their evil." (*Tree and Leaf*, pp. 64-65) Middle-earth is a vision of life that, deep down inside, we know is real. But this is not the only reason that the trilogy succeeds so admirably.

Dr. Ornstein's theory about the nature of consciousness is very helpful in explaining Tolkien's widespread popularity. Fantasy, as Tolkien approaches the subject, would be tremendously attractive to the neglected right half of our brain. It fulfills desires and confirms a reality that logic can't even discuss. Indeed, Tolkien himself recognized the existence of the same sort of intuitive needs that Ornstein has hinted at. Tolkien states on page 13 of *Tree and Leaf*, "The magic of Faerie is not an end in itself, its virtue is in its operations; among these are the satisfaction of certain primordial human desires." Some of these desires that Tolkien recognizes are "to survey the depths of space and time. Another is . . . to hold communion with other living things." We

also wish to explore "strange languages, and glimpses of an archaic mode of life, and above all, forests" (*Tree and Leaf*, pp. 40-41). As we enter Tolkien's world of Middle-earth, these desires are realized. Here it is possible to communicate with animals, to talk to Nature itself (as embodied by Tom Bombadil and Goldberry), to learn of the events of forgotten ages, and to travel in vast, wonderful forests. I find that reading the trilogy produces in me a satisfied feeling of contentment that is seldom present when I read other books. Thus, for me at least, Tolkien's interpretation of the magic of Faerie works. Judging by the trilogy's popularity, I think that he has hit the mark for other people as well. Other critics offer more rational explanations for this power common to mythology and good fantasy. Tolkien replies to these saying, "It is possible, I think, to be moved by the power of myth and yet to misunderstand the sensation, to ascribe it wholly to something else that is also present: to metrical art, style, and verbal skill."<sup>8</sup>

In terms of Ornstein's theory of consciousness, we could interpret Tolkien as saying that fantasy and myth have power primarily because of their appeal to the intuitive desires of the right brain. This sort of appeal is extremely elusive simply because, by its very nature, it is impossible to analyze. Compare that thought with Tolkien's idea that myth is man's one imaginative act "capable . . . of becoming largely significant -- as a whole, accepted unanalyzed." (*Monsters and the Critics*, p. 63) Even Tolkien's thoughts on the functions of fantasy seem to echo what Ornstein has said about the importance of a "perspective born of intuition." One of the functions of fantasy is Recovery. "Recovery (which includes return and renewal of health) is a regaining -- regaining of a clear view . . . We need, in any case, to clean our windows; so that the things seen clearly may be freed from the drab blur of triteness or familiarity." (*Tree and Leaf*, p. 44) Fantasy, as it is written by such authors as Tolkien, allows us to look at the world through new windows. As Blake puts it "we see through, not with the eye." By doing this we learn once more to wonder at the world we live in.

It remains to be seen whether Robert Ornstein's theory about the nature of consciousness will be verified through psychological research. Whether the theory is substantiated or not is not vital to this paper. Ornstein's hypothesis is one way of partially accounting for the power that fantasy and monsters have over peoples' imaginations. There are doubtlessly other ways to explain this phenomenon. However, even if the explanations fail, the phenomenon still remains. There seems to be a void present in many people that reading Tolkien, or searching for the Loch Ness Monster, is able to fill. I have speculated in this paper about the nature of the void and what has caused it. Most of all though, I think it is important that people realize the worth of monsters and fantasy to intelligent, responsible adults. I do not think that our world becomes less wonderful as we reach adulthood. The earth is still as awe-inspiring as it was when we were children. J. R. R. Tolkien and the secretive inhabitant of Loch Ness are valuable because they help us to remember this.

#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> J. R. R. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), p. 41. Hereafter, all parenthetical page numbers in the text preceded by "T. L." refer to this edition.

<sup>1</sup> Robley Evans, *Writers for the Seventies: J. R. R. Tolkien* (New York: Warner Paperback Library Edition, 1972), p. 21. Hereafter, all parenthetical page numbers in the text preceded by "Evans" refer to this edition.

<sup>3</sup> This information was obtained from an interview I had with Tim Dinsdale at the camp of The Loch Ness Investigation Bureau in April of 1972.

<sup>4</sup> Robert E. Ornstein, *The Psychology of Consciousness* (San Francisco: W. H. Freeman and Company, 1972), p. 99.

<sup>5</sup> Daniel Cohen, *A Modern Look at Monsters* (New York: Dodd Mead and Col, 1970), p. 125. Hereafter, all parenthetical page numbers preceded by "Cohen" refer to this edition.

<sup>6</sup> Tim Dinsdale, *Monster Hunt* (Washington, D.C.: Colortone Press Creative Graphics Inc., 1972), p. 238.

<sup>7</sup> J. R. R. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), p. 60. Hereafter, all parenthetical page numbers in the text preceded by "*Tree and Leaf*" refer to this edition.

<sup>8</sup> J. R. R. Tolkien, "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics," *An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism*, ed. Lewis E. Nicholson, p. 64. Hereafter, all parenthetical page numbers in the text preceded by "Monsters and the Critics" refer to this edition.

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#### SAVING THE APPEARANCES

When Heaven first exclaimed, Let there be Light!  
 The word threw forth a pure and potent ray,  
 Then they proclaimed to man the gift of sight  
 And Content sensibly flew into Day;  
 The eye of man cojoined the mind of God,  
 The grass grew green, the moon grew truly white;  
 The novel body touched, the novel footsteps trod  
 And novel cool, rough, fluid, firm and bright  
 Rose into earthly consciousness and fact,  
 Behold this life, as dark as single earth,  
 Change my potentiality to act,  
 Bestow an adjective to abstract worth;  
 Come with your grace, O watcher, look on me  
 And touch my hand that I may breathe and be.

— Michael Dahl

(Written after reading Mr. Owen Barfield's book of the same name)