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Abstract

Suggests Browning's poem as a source for Frodo's quest in *The Lord of the Rings*. Sees echoes of the former in both the main plot and many details of *The Lord of the Rings*.

Additional Keywords

Browning, Robert. "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came" (poem)—Influence on *The Lord of the Rings*;
Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings*—Sources

Frodo and Childe Roland

Robert Higbie & Joe E. Bryan, Jr.

Like such literary epics as *Paradise Lost*, *The Lord of the Rings* seems to be an attempt to gather up, emulate, and build upon the high culture of the past. As a result, Tolkien's literary romance-epic (as one might call it) is full of echoes of earlier works. One of the sources he evidently drew upon was Browning's "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came." Whether consciously or not, Tolkien seems to have had the Browning poem in mind in composing *The Lord of the Rings*. Indeed the main story of the ring books -- Frodo's quest -- almost seems like a retelling, vastly expanded, of Childe Roland's quest.

Frodo resembles Childe Roland in several ways. First of all, he is like a childe -- a youth seeking to earn his knighthood, going through an initiation in order to become worthy of the rank of hero. And like Roland, Frodo is engaged in a quest against seemingly insurmountable odds, a quest whose goal he cannot fully know but which he must keep seeking nevertheless. Neither hero can turn back. And both of them must travel through a kind of wasteland, coming at last to a "dark tower" -- the most striking similarity between the two stories. Roland's doubts and misgivings, like Frodo's seem caused by the dark tower he seeks; the tower in each case seems to represent something the hero must seek out and deal with, namely fear and despair in the face of death. In both works the tower is associated not only with death but with an apocalypse. The "Last Judgment's fire" (l. 65) in "Childe Roland" could describe the scene Frodo faces too. In both cases the situation seems hopeless, yet each hero is undaunted. Each seems to embody the courage or faith which enables a man to face death. In each work the images of a wasteland and of apocalypse represent the frightening aspects of death -- death seen as destructive. But each work says one must not give in to this view of death; even though one finds oneself in an apparently godless wasteland (earthly existence) one must not despair, one must continue to seek. Browning is not explicit about what Roland seeks or will find, but judging by "Prospect" the bravery he has in mind is based on confidence in an afterlife, so that one need not see death as negative. Frodo is similarly sustained by faith in a higher power, a power which Tolkien evidently sees as analogous to God. Both writers, however, concentrate not on what the hero attains but what he must resist. Roland must not give in to the fear and hopelessness, though he also has to resist the selfishness represented by the ring. In both works, then, heroism seems to be given a spiritual meaning, and the goal of each quest seems to be some form of belief in the face of death.

The Lord of the Rings echoes "Childe Roland" not only in its main plot but also in various details. Like Frodo, Roland started out as part of a "Band" (l. 39) but is now alone. Perhaps Browning's old man with a staff (l. 7) was in Tolkien's mind when he created Gandalf. Of course Gandalf is much more clearly good; but though Browning's old man seems sinister, he does guide Roland toward his goal as Gandalf does with Frodo. And Gandalf sometimes seems a bit sinister himself. Like Frodo, Roland tries to encourage himself with a "taste of old times" (l. 90), remembering past heroes, though he is less successful at this than



Frodo. And Roland, like Frodo, is in darkness (ll. 104-5). The place Roland come to resembles Mordor not only because of its tower but also because there are mountains all around it (l. 165). In detail too the landscape of Mordor resembles the "starved ignoble nature" (l. 56) Roland encounters. In Browning we find the "Dock's harsh swarth leaves" (l. 70), the "ragged thistle stalk" (l. 67) and the palsied oak" (l. 154). In Tolkien we are told "things still grew, harsh, twisted, bitter"; there are "low scrubby trees," "writting, tangled brambles," and "sullen shrivelled leaves" (243; pt. 6, ch. 2). And the "engine" Roland sees (l. 140) resembles the machinery in Mordor. Furthermore, the "sheet of flame" at the end of "Roland" (l. 201) resembles the eruption at the destruction of Mordor. And the horn which Roland blows at the end may have been in Tolkien's mind when he has Boromir blow a horn at his death.

There are two details in "Roland" whose similarity to *The Lord of the Rings* is so striking that we can be fairly certain Tolkien had the poem in mind. One is the "great black bird, Apollyon's bosom friend" (l. 160) which flies over Roland, much like the Nazgul (Sauron's bosom friends) which fly overhead in Tolkien. The other detail is the water Roland wades through: "how I feared/ To set my foot upon a dead man's cheek" (ll. 121-22). This is very like the marsh Frodo goes through, with "dead things, dead faces in the water" (295; pt. 4, ch. 4). In both cases the dead are warriors who have preceded the hero (though in "Roland" this is only hinted).

It seems likely, then, that memories of "Childe Roland" lay in Tolkien's mind somewhat like the memories Coleridge drew on and transformed in writing "Kubla Khan". Something in Tolkien responded to the situation and imagery in Browning's poem, and in his imagination these elements were developed, combined with many other ingredients, and transformed into a new whole.

Work Cited

Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings*. 3 vols. New York: Ballantine, 1965.