



Mythopoeic Society

mythLORE

A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis,
Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature

Volume 11
Number 1

Article 5

Summer 7-15-1984

The Tolkien Tradition

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Recommended Citation

Paxson, Diana (1984) "The Tolkien Tradition," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 11 : No. 1 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol11/iss1/5>

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Abstract

Analyzes what makes a fantasy “in the Tolkien tradition” and applies this definition to a number of contemporary fantasy authors, including Ursula Le Guin, Richard Adams, Lloyd Alexander, and Stephen R. Donaldson.

Additional Keywords

Fantasy—Characteristics; Fantasy literature—Influence of J.R.R. Tolkien; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Influence on fantasy literature

The Tolkien Tradition

Diana Paxson

"In the tradition of Tolkien. . ." is a phrase which has become increasingly common on bookcovers and dust-jackets in the past few years. And while the majority of readers may neither notice nor care, it has been a shock to some of us to buy a work so labeled and find a story of erotic adventure or something cute with talking animals inside. But before expressing too much indignation, it might be useful to consider what a literary tradition actually is, what elements in Tolkien's work might serve as the basis for a new one, what kind of fantasy is being written today, and what a genuine "Tolkien Tradition" should be.

LITERARY TRADITION

My old edition of the Britannica World Language Dictionary, 1956, defines "tradition" as:

6. In literature, the drama, and the fine arts, the accumulated knowledge, taste, and experience handed down from one generation of writers, actors, or artists to another; the historic conceptions and usages of a school, collectively, or any one such concept or usage.

A look at artistic history makes it clear that this handing down of information and technique refers to the transmission of forms, skills, subject matter and the like rather than imitation of one's predecessors. A usage common in academic circles implies that a series of works that form a tradition should represent an evolution or development of the ideas of techniques that characterize it.

Another popular way of using the term is in the sense of something handed down from past ages through generations of anonymous folk artists, being refined and developed as it goes, as in the designation "traditional" for folksongs or tales. Tolkien himself comments on this meaning when he discusses the origins of folk tales in his essay "On Fairy Stories."

Tolkien points out that archaic cultural elements commonly found embedded in fairy stories have been preserved because they have "a mythical or total (unanalysable) effect quite independent of the findings of Comparative Folklore... they open a door on Other Time..." He goes on to say that such old elements have been preserved or inserted "precisely because of this literary effect." The things that are retained in successive versions of a tale are there "because the oral narrators, instinctively or consciously, felt their literary 'significance.'"

Fantasy has always provided a refuge for those (both writers and readers) who have a craving for these ancient and powerful literary elements, as opposed to those whose taste is for the new, the experimental, and the "untraditional." A literary tradition within the genre of Fantasy ought therefore to consist of those works that draw upon the techniques and concepts used by their predecessors, perhaps refining the technique and developing the concepts, but always preserving the sense of something whose very antiquity precipitates a thrill of wonder.

TOLKIEN'S WORK AS A BASIS FOR TRADITION BUILDING

To define the Tolkien Tradition, it is first necessary to identify those elements in Tolkien's work which might serve as its foundation, while noting from the outset that for the most part Tolkien did not invent these elements, but was himself drawing from other traditions.

In the essay "On Fairy Stories" quoted above, Tolkien uses the metaphor of the Cauldron of Story to explain the relationship between mythology, history, and invention in the production of tales. An author's creativity lies not in the originality of his ingredients, but in the skill with which he combines them. One might extend the metaphor by saying that when a writer combines old ingredients into a new and tasty recipe, he or she may make available a flavor, a texture, or perhaps a vitamin that has been missing from the literary diet of his or her contemporaries.

Tolkien's work is not only the foundation of a new tradition but the culmination of several older ones. His greatness lies in the rare touch with which he has combined old or "traditional" ingredients as well as in the new elements that he has infused so harmoniously into the brew. But if Tolkien did not invent all of the elements he uses, most modern readers (including most of those writing fantasy today) have neither the scholarly skills nor the opportunity to encounter them in their original settings. Tolkien must therefore take credit for having made many archetypes, concepts, literary forms, and even details of archaic culture, accessible to the contemporary reader.

Despite the popularity of The Hobbit and Tolkien's other works, his reputation rests on The Lord of the Rings, and it is this work that must be examined as the source of the "Tolkien Tradition." What then are those characteristics--borrowed or original--that have served as the new tradition's foundation stones?

LENGTH

The first and most obvious characteristic of The Lord of the Rings is its size. This does not seem so remarkable today, but when the trilogy first appeared in the 1950's, and even in the mid-60's when it first came out in paperback, such length in contemporary popular fiction was a rarity. A work of fiction so long it must be brought out in three volumes was unknown, especially in a genre believed by publishers to appeal only to people wanting light entertainment. Science fiction and other genre novels at that time rarely topped 65,000 words.

Today, a look at any book rack will show that thousand page novels in all genres are common, as are trilogies. There have undoubtedly been other reasons for this change, but certainly the wild success of something the size of The Lord of the Rings must have helped change publishers' ideas about what sells.

EPIC SWEEP

If length alone qualified a work for the "Tolkien Tradition," books like John Jakes' American history series and Dhalgren would qualify. In The Lord of the

Rings the length allows another element to appear, which one might call an "epic" quality.

In modern literature, before Tolkien one found this quality occasionally in historical novels, but rarely elsewhere. The term comes, of course, from the form of literature characteristic of heroic cultures, distinguished by a large cast of characters, action extended over many lands, large scale military movements, and heroic protagonists. It also features villains who are sometimes equally heroic, numerous, and/or supernatural. At any rate they are opponents who require all of the protagonists' heroic qualities to defeat (and sometimes their lives as well).

As a noun, "epic" has been overused by movie PR departments. As an adjective it has been used by blurb writers to describe any book with action on a large scale, heroic or not. But Tolkien's work developed the epic in novel form, creating a sub-genre, the "epic fantasy." Any subsequent fantasy work featuring many epic characteristics may be considered for inclusion in the Tolkien Tradition.

HERSITY AND MYTHOLOGY

One element that contributes most powerfully to the realism of Middle-earth is its legendary substructure. It is this background that opens the door on "other time" in LoTR. The Silmarillion makes the nature of this background even clearer, and bears much the same relationship to The Lord of the Rings as the Elder Edda does to a work such as Njalssaga. But before Tolkien, no writer of fantasy, not even James Branch Cabell, had ever developed quite so elaborate a backdrop for his action.

Just how elaborate this background was did not become apparent until the publication of The Silmarillion, Unfinished Tales, etc., although the references and appendices in LoTR, not to mention the quotations in several invented languages had already gone far to add verisimilitude to what was already a rather convincing narrative. The Silmarillion of course clarifies the identity, origin and function of figures such as Elbereth who appear only as intimations of the numinous and focii for the protagonists' beliefs in LoTR.

In addition to gods and languages, not only do Middle-earth major families and nations have backgrounds, but Middle-earth itself has an extensive history. This background is not presented explicitly. It appears chiefly through the poetry quoted by the characters, accounts of ruins and other scenic spots, and those are occasions when Gandalf or someone else finds time to provide explanations for the hobbits. As with the mythology, the history of Middle-earth is presented fully only in the other works.

Having developed his background so thoroughly, Tolkien was able to use the technique of an historical novel in which imaginary actions take place in a real setting. The effect of this is to give the reader a subjective belief in the "reality" of Middle-earth, as reflected in the "Visit Middle-earth" travel posters so popular a few years ago.

ARCHETYPAL CHARACTERS AND MOTIFS

One of the more alarming productions of contemporary scholarship is the Motif Index developed by Folklorists. This device attempts to classify in terms of basic Types not only major plots and characters, but even artifacts and incidents found in folk and fairy tales. The fact that tales can be so

analyzed demonstrates that it is not the content, but the way in which content is handled, that makes a story memorable. Part of Tolkien's effectiveness comes from his deft handling of figures and motifs which have through the ages acquired an incalculable weight of meaning. These motifs include archetypal figures, sentient species, tallsmans, and traditional plots.

FIGURES

Major archetypal figures in LoTR include the Wizard (Gandalf), the Destined King (Aragorn), the Lady of Power (Galadriel), the Battle-Maiden (Eowyn), and the Evil Sorcerer (Saruman and to a greater extent Sauron himself).

SENTIENT SPECIES

Refers to those beings (or kindreds) that in Faerie or Middle-earth share intelligence with man. Is the persistence of such creatures in folklore due to man's age-old desire for companionship, or perhaps to a memory of a time when interspecies communication was a reality?

The major species appearing in Tolkien's works are: elves, dwarves, tree people, hobbits, goblins and demons, and talking animals (both good and evil). Elves had made regular appearances in fantasy before The Hobbit, though it took Tolkien to restore them to their medieval eminence. Dwarves are common in folktales in all Indo-European languages. Tolkien's and Disney's concepts of them seemed to have been formed at roughly the same time, and came out remarkably similar, except that Disney's dwarves have a head-start on cuteness. The Ents, on the other hand, though they may be descended from dryads, are unique to Tolkien, while hobbits have no analogs at all.

On the darker side of the catalogue there are orcs, which are not only developed from goblins but in The Hobbit at least are synonymous with them. Trolls and wargs are well known to European folklore, as are Dragons, though Tolkien has stamped all of them as his own. Balrogs, however, spring from the mythology of The Silmarillion, and if they have any literary relations one might look for them in Milton's Hell.

TALISMANS

Tolkien has drawn from the storehouse of European legend a variety of artifacts or accessories of considerable lineage and significance. Foremost among these is the Ring itself. Of all the magic rings in folklore and fantasy, the best known to anyone born in the 19th century, as Tolkien was, would be the Ring of the Nibelungs, unearthed and burnished anew by William Morris and Richard Wagner. Wagner in particular ascribes to the Ring a significance nearly as great as that with which it is invested by Tolkien.

A second prop that The Lord of the Rings shares with Wagner's Ring Cycle is the Broken Sword or the Sword Reforged. In both cases, the remaking of the sword signals the readiness of a new generation to take up an ancient battle. In Tolkien several other magic blades are also mentioned, whose histories are almost as interesting as that of Anduril. Other artifacts include staves, jewels, and mirrors. The Sorcerer's Tower (The Dark Tower of Childe Roland was familiar to English literature long before Barad-dur) and magic steeds are also traditional, although the Nazgul represent a development that could only have occurred after the discovery of dinosaurs.

PLOT MOTIFS

In the history of folklore certain plot motifs occur again and again. Tolkien has woven a number of these traditional motifs together with great effect. The basic structure of LoTR is of course the Quest, although in this case they go to lose something, not to find it. Within this basic framework are placed the stories of the prince who wins princess and kingdom, the tale of the humble fellow who saves the day, and other plots, such as the good versus the wicked brother, the downfall of the evil counselor, the tragedy of pride, and others.

Tolkien develops each motif fully, yet weaves it into the total fabric of the story. By reworking "traditional" materials, he is able to draw on their accumulated power in a way that will reach the contemporary reader.

THE ETHICAL DIMENSION

What distinguishes The Lord of the Rings most markedly from other fantasies that had been published up to that time was its serious quality, in spite of--or sometimes because of--its humor. Not only does Tolkien ask the reader to take his world seriously, but the development of the plot depends consistently on the resolution of ethical issues. Each character must choose at least once between conflicting loyalties or desires, between courage and cowardice, pride and necessity, and above all, between self-love and self-sacrifice. For some the choice must be made over and over with higher stakes each time.

The circumstances may be both imaginary and exciting, as adventures always are for those not involved in them-- but the ethical questions are both real and permanent. In addition to the ethical implications of the actions for the characters as individuals, a moral struggle is also occurring on a global scale. Gandalf, Galadriel and the rest are not merely interested in buying safety for their own time, or even in defeating Sauron. They must defeat him for all time, and without becoming like him. In Tolkien's ethos, the end does not justify the means.

Tolkien's heroes get little supernatural help in their struggles. The cast and chorus of gods and demi-gods (the Valar and the High Elves) who sustained the earlier phases of the combat with evil are scarcely more than references in The Lord of the Rings. The most they will do is to occasionally give fate a nudge (as when Bilbo "finds" the Ring), and even Gandalf/Olorin seems to forget his divine origins until his metamorphosis in Moria.

Whatever the reality of their gods (or ours), like most of us, the characters in The Lord of the Rings have no direct perception of the supernatural. The Valar cannot be harmed, but they do not help much either. The fate of Middle-earth is placed firmly in the hands of Frodo and company, and there is no comfortable assurance that they are all going to live happily ever after. They could fail. . .

And yet, for all its moral intensity, The Lord of the Rings is not a "moral tale." If it holds a lesson for its readers, it may be that the fate of the world does indeed depend on the actions of each individual who lives in it.

CONTEMPORARY FANTASY

In the years since the paperback publications of The Lord of the Rings Fantasy has become an established part of the literary scene. Tolkien

proved that Fantasy, at least his type of fantasy, sells. As a result, publishers are not only buying more fantasy, but more books that show the influence of the Master of Middle-earth. The chart that follows lists some of the more notable fantasy novels or series that have appeared during the last twenty years and roughly indicates which of those elements I have identified as being characteristic of Tolkien's work are apparent in each.

However, the fact that a given book shows what may be Tolkien's influence does not necessarily place it in the Tolkien tradition. As defined at the beginning of this essay, a work within a tradition not only uses but develops the features inherited from its predecessors. As the chart shows, there are a number of authors whose work echoes Tolkien's sufficiently to be worth considering.

C.S. LEWIS

Lewis was fond of stating that Tolkien could not be influenced by anyone, but he himself was, if not influenced, at least highly appreciative of Tolkien's work. His books were actually published before LoTR saw print, but of course he had heard much of it in manuscript form. Although the fantasies of Lewis have a very different atmosphere and form from that of Tolkien, his space trilogy in particular features certain elements that he may have picked up from his friend.

These include a well-developed mythological background, complete with invented language; use of archetypal figures (though different ones from those used by Tolkien); cooperation among diverse species, and a race of beings (the eldila) who seem to be close relatives of the Valar; re-working of traditional plot motifs (again, not the same ones used by Tolkien); and above all, a fundamental ethical system in which the fate of his world depends on the actions of the protagonists. There is also the reference to Numenor in That Hideous Strength. One has the impression that Lewis considered his and Tolkien's mythologies to be different translations of the same basic system.

URSULA K. LEGUIN

Like the worlds Lewis portrays, LeGuin's Earthsea has a distinctive atmosphere-- one would never mistake it for Middle-earth or any land in our world. Her work is highly focused, confined in scale, and her style has a classical economy that is very different from that of Tolkien. Yet she uses some of the same tools to build her world. Certainly she is just as concerned with the relationship between language and culture as he is, and perhaps even more concerned with the link between words and one's perceptions of reality.

LeGuin reinterprets familiar archetypes, specifically those of the wizard and the disinherited prince, and (in The Farthest Shore) uses the quest motif as well. Particularly in the second book, power is tied to use of a magic ornament. Finally, her characters are burdened by choices that can unmake their world (and there are no Valar waiting in the wings to create it anew.)

Above all, Ursula LeGuin has desired dragons with a desire even more profound than that of Tolkien. Smaug and Chrysofylax would scuttle for their holes at one word from the Dragon of Pendor.

RICHARD ADAMS

Watership Down provides an excellent example of

how two books can share many structural elements and evoke a similar atmosphere while exhibiting almost no similarities in content.

Like Tolkien, Adams wanted to see what could be done with a really large-scale fantasy using unheroic protagonists. One must admit that rabbits are even less likely candidates for the hero's portion than hobbits are. . . And as in *LotR*, the journey is the basic structure of *Watership Down*. Here again we find the band of companions whose heroic qualities develop as they fight their way through various dangers. Within this group one finds a number of traditional characters--the warrior--the bard, the prophet, and the leader who slowly discovers his own potential and destiny.

What makes *Watership Down* unique among "animal books" is the inclusion of a lapine language and mythology so consistent and richly detailed that by the end of the book one needs no translation. The legendary cycle of El Ahrairah and the Black Rabbit of Inle serves the same purpose for the rabbits that tales of Numenor and Eldamar do for the Fellowship of the Ring--to inform, to encourage, and to entertain. It also creates the necessary sense of underlying antiquity and heroic context, and in the end, provides a transcendent reality.

Like the characters in *LotR*, the rabbits on the down are required to make a succession of choices on which the fate of their own world depends. The dangers they face are no more familiar to us than orcs or balrogs, but the moral issues raised by their struggles are universal.

LOYD ALEXANDER

Alexander's Prydain series is written more at the level of *The Hobbit* than at that of *LotR*--understandably, since both are specifically aimed at children. However Alexander may be considered one of the first of the new generation of writers over whom Tolkien's shadow unmistakably falls.

The basic situation, repeated in all five books, involves a small group of oddly assorted companions in the quest or confrontation with some kind of magical object. Rather than inventing a new system, the author draws on the mythology of Wales, but many familiar characters show themselves.

They include the testy wizard (perhaps descended from T.H. White's Merlin as much as from Gandalf); dwarves; lords and princes (including one who, like Boromir, redeems his evil by self-sacrifice); Gurgi -- a creature of uncertain nature and origins who comes across as a Gollum who lacks not virtue but wits. The protagonists, Taran Pigkeeper, combines the figures of the humble hero who saves the day with that of the destined king. At the end of the series the demi-gods depart for the west, leaving earth to ordinary men.

However, although the Prydain books are high fantasy, they are anti-heroic and moral, rather than ethical, in focus. Only after all Taran's dreams of glory have been tarnished does he learn that he is to be a king. Everything that happens to him has a lesson to it, which rather takes the fun out of it for me. We may not be able to live on the heights, but it is nice to know they are really there!

TERRY BROOKS

Perhaps the noisiest literary debut in years was

made by Terry Brooks' work, *The Sword of Shannara*. Lester Del Rey bought it because it resembled *LotR*, and used that fact to publicize it with all his considerable expertise, including hiring the artists who did the Tolkien calendar to illustrate it. It is pointless to indicate the aspects of the book that show Tolkien's influence-- setting, characters, plot etc. are as closely modeled on *LotR* as could be managed without actually committing plagiarism. Where imitation is impossible-- as in the choice of a talisman-- some equally well-worn archetype is employed.

We are told that the second half of the book was written ten years after the first part, which may explain its (relatively) greater degree of originality. However, blatant derivation is not the same thing as developing a tradition. It will be interesting (?) to see what the projected sequel to *Sword* proves to be.

NELHANCOCK

Another recent candidate for Tolkien's mantle is a four book series called *The Circle of Light*. Its blurb declares that it is for "all those who love Tolkien," but the general effect is more like a combination of *LotR* and *The Wind in the Willows*.

The books feature some familiar elements-- a wizard named Greyfax Grimwald, plus a young hero (junior wizard) who is in love with the daughter of the Lady of Power figure, Lorini; a fellowship of diverse characters including a bear, an otter, and a dwarf who bears the talisman everyone is after. The latter are told more than once that even the humble and obscure have their part to play, and may succeed where the Wise would fail. Enemies include orkish creatures called Gorgolacs, but for a change the dark lord has been replaced by a dark lady-- Lorini's alter ego, Dorini. The book also features large scale action, the clash of armies, and a great deal of travelling.

Unfortunately the plot is diffuse and sometimes confusing, and it is hard to understand the significance of the actions of any individual, especially since everything turns out to be part of the Most High's great plan.

SEAMUS CULLEN

Astra and *Flondrix* was advertised as "an erotic Tolkien"-- surely one of the more mind-boggling statements a bookjacket has ever borne. Alas-- it is neither like Tolkien nor particularly erotic.

The hero is half mortal and half elf (which may put the book in the "tradition" of Terry Brooks). With his lover, the elven princess; a wizard who talks like Gandalf; an elf; and the obligatory dwarf, the hero eventually defeats the efforts of Krans, the Magician to break through into the Sacred Glade of the elves. In this case, the "talisman" comes permanently attached to the hero.

The story features large numbers of elves, dwarfs, kings and armies, witches, demons, and physiological anomalies. . .

NANCY SPRINGER

The Book of Suns focuses on the story of a destined king (two of them, in this case), and gets along without either talisman or quest. Its major relationship to Tolkien is in the characterization of

its elves, whose names and legends suggest that they are a sub-group of the Eldar who got sidetracked into Welas .

The end of the wars that constitute the major action of the book signals the beginning of a new age of men. The elves depart across the western sea for Elwestrand, leaving the fairest of their daughters to marry a king and found a new line of rulers. The book is primarily concerned with the growth and relationship of the protagonists. Military victory is almost secondary to their moral development.

STEPHEN DONALDSON

The *Chronicles of Thomas Covenant, The Unbeliever*, were published, unbelievably, by the same people who bought *Sword of Shannara*. One might describe Donaldson's work as "Joseph Conrad meets J.R.R. Tolkien," but that would be both misleading and inadequate. In my opinion, this trilogy is the best

qualified of any recent fantasy for the label "in the Tolkien tradition."

Except for its scope and some of the names, the explicit similarities between the *Chronicles* and *LotR* are less than in many other works. It is a "framed" story, in which someone from our world enters a fantasy universe, and the protagonist is by no means humble and meek. What Donaldson seems to have done is to consider what functions were served by the elements in Tolkien, and to have found other ways of fulfilling them. For instance, in *The Land*, the ecological niches occupied by dwarves and elves in Middle-earth are filled by the people of Mithil Stonedown and those of Woodhelven, respectively. The plains are inhabited by a people who serve horses rather than riding them.

More significantly, Donaldson takes some of the premises that were implicit in Tolkien and makes them explicit, developing them in terms of the concerns of

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Elements in the "Tolkien Tradition"

Contemporary Fantasies	Elements in the "Tolkien Tradition"						
	Epic Scope	Legendary background	Archetypal figures	Diverse Species	Talismans	Plot Motifs	Ethical Emphasis Allusions
Author, Title or Series							
R. Adams: WATERSHIP DOWN SHARDIK	**	**	*	*		**	**
L. Alexander: PRYDAIN series		**	**	**	**	**	*
J. Chant: RED MOON, BLACK MOUNTAIN		*	**	**	**		*
S. Cooper: DARK IS RISING etc.		*	**		**		
S. Cullen: FLONDRIX & ASTRA	**	*	**	**	**	**	**
S. Donaldson: CHRONICLES OF THOMAS COVENANT	**	**	**	**	**	**	*
A. Garner: Alderley Edge series		**	**	**	**		
N. Hancock: CIRCLE OF LIGHT	**	**	**	**	**	*	**
K. Kurtz: DERYNI series		*		*			
U. K. LeGuin: EARTHSEA trilogy		**	**	*	**	*	**
C. S. Lewis: Space trilogy		**	**	*		**	**
P. McKillip: RIDDLE OF STARS trilogy		**	*		*	**	
A. Norton: WITCHWORLD series				**	**	*	
N. Springer: BOOK OF SUNS		**	**	**		*	**

key: * element present
 ** element has major significance

Professor Tolkien's professional studies as a medievalist are little known to his fandom of the Ring Trilogy and Middle-earth works but they played a strong influence in the characterization of the mythic culture he created. regrettably, whether it was his translation/editing of the Ancrene Wisse or his views of 14th century Middle English literature, his writing tends to be turgid, over-stuffy, and hard to grasp in its importance to later writings. This will prove no exception.

Scholars acknowledge his contribution to the field of Anglo-Saxon studies (language and literature) and here we have his views on the fifth century A.D. northern heroes, Finn and Hengest, about whom little is reliably known. For more than a century researchers in the field have argued interminably over the story of these two warrior heroes as found in the Old English epics, Beowulf and The Flight at Finnesburg. (8th century A.D.) The problem is that the story is told in an highly obscure and allusive manner, little direct information being given.

In his last years Tolkien desired that his work on Finn and Hengest be prepared for publication by Alan Bliss, a good scholar, who studied under him from 1946-48 at Oxford. Professor Bliss does quite a thorough and competent job here, bringing together in Tolkien's own words three separate sets of lecture notes, dating from c. 1930 - c. 1960, and even after. Really designed for scholars and teachers of Old English and the history of Nordic Europe (northern Germany by the North Sea, the Scandinavian areas and Anglo-Saxon England), ordinary students and fans will only marginally benefit.

Tolkien was always fascinated by the "Northern thing" -- Germanic culture and its heritage of honor and tragedy. Tolkien looks at this dawn of the medieval era in the 400s and sees not the decaying Roman Empire, but the division of Celt and Teuton with rival loyalties and increasing bitterness of blood-feud and murder -- followed by the never-ending curse of vengeance. Honor is a peculiar thing with Tolkien. He is attracted by the figure of Hengest, the "hero" like his later Turin Turambar, whose betrayal in a British court led him in bloody revenge to inspire the first Anglo-Saxon invasion of Celtic Christian Britain in c. 450 A.D. The bits of the lost chronicle of events here take place just before (and explain) that tragic holocaust (the Saxons destroyed nearly all of the civilization the Roman-Celts tried to build up).

This is a specialised study, not for everyone. But it has some interest for LOTR/Silmarillion lovers in that it points out parallels to the curse of possessiveness and false pride that echoes all through Middle-earth's tragic struggles.

Thomas M. Egan

THE TOLKIEN TRADITION continued from page 27 the seventies. Throughout LotR, the destruction of nature indicates the presence of evil. Saruman's orcs fell Fangorn's trees and later he and his gang cut down the Party Tree and pollute the river in the Shire. Mordor is a waste of slag heaps and noxious fumes. One of the unstated assumptions is that if Sauron wins this blight will cover Middle-earth.

In Donaldson, part of The Land has been destroyed by a past cataclysm caused by misuse of power in fighting the eternal enemy. As a result, the people

have evolved an ethic in which nothing, not even racial survival, will justify jeopardizing the environment in such a way again. In The Land, as in Middle-earth, the ends do not justify the means.

The fact that the protagonist is a most unwilling hero who does not even believe in the reality of this world severely complicates the question of choice and responsibility. It is not until the final conflict (in which Donaldson dares to bring the antagonist on stage, and carries it off) that Covenant is able to reconcile his inner conflicts and save the Land as well as his own soul.

THE TRADITION AND THE FUTURE

What then is the Tolkien Tradition? What works qualify for inclusion? In what ways should such a tradition evolve?

At present, the marketing personnel at publishing houses use "Tolkien" as a synonym for adult fantasy, since they (perhaps correctly) assume that Tolkien is the only fantasy writer of whom everyone has heard. As long as they continue to do so, buyers will continue to buy, and sometimes to be surprised by what they get.

However I hope, that as The Lord of the Rings becomes absorbed into the literary canon, a genuine Tolkien Tradition will evolve, consisting of books which, like Donaldson's, do not imitate Tolkien but focus on elements implicit in his work in order to reinterpret them for themselves and their times.

[Editors Note: This paper was given at the 1979 Mythopoeic Conference]

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