

TOLKIEN'S MIDDLE-EARTH STORIES: THINGS OF THE PAST FOR A PRESENT-DAY AUDIENCE?

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Abstract

Practically all of Tolkien's non-academic writings are in many ways "things of the past": They are set in a chronotope reminiscent of the middle ages; they reflect images of an idealized past that have roots in Romantic and late-nineteenth-century thought and literature; and they were conceived and developed during the first half of the last century. Nevertheless, they have remained immensely popular, over a period of more than sixty years that has seen enormous changes in technology, ideology, and lifestyle. This paper will attempt a short overview of the ways Tolkien's writings do reflect certain views typical of their own times – including attitudes towards class, race, and political systems that some critics of Tolkien have regarded as rather reprehensible. In addition it will address the question why Tolkien's stories have remained highly popular in spite of their apparent 'outmodedness'. In doing so, it will look briefly at the ways they have been transformed by present-day media like film and internet.

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It is no exaggeration to say that J.R.R. Tolkien has influenced the literary and cultural scene of the past sixty years to an extraordinary extent. In particular, his novels *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* have not only sold many millions of copies, been translated into all major languages of the earth and turned into highly popular films; they have indeed triggered the development of a whole new literary genre, *fantasy fiction*. In addition, all of his shorter fiction, plus an enormous amount of writings that were not published during his lifetime are today accessible in print. In its wake, various "interpretive communities" have

formed, and a veritable academic ‘Tolkien industry’ has developed, consisting of “mainstream literary scholars, Tolkien scholars, [and] Tolkien fans” (Drout, p. 15).

This essay will not attempt to present a complete view of this huge and highly complex phenomenon of the reception of Tolkien’s works. Instead, it will concentrate on one apparent paradox: that an imaginary world clearly rooted in the distant past, created by a man who began his writing a century ago and who himself was rooted in the past in many ways, should strike such a response in an audience that lives in a totally different, ‘(post-) modern’ world. Due to limited space, only the most popular of his works will be considered: *The Hobbit* and *Lord of the Rings*.

1. Tolkien’s ‘Medievalism’ in Its Historical Context

Though Middle-earth is in many ways a world of its own, it has a distinct middle-age flavour—so much so that we regard the hobbits’ and Gandalf’s tobacco-smoking as an amusing anachronism. It is equally well-known that this medieval flavour mirrors Tolkien’s profound interest in Old English language and literature, in Germanic mythology and in the cultural heritage of the Celtic and Finnish peoples.

Tolkien may seem unique in that respect, but he is really part of a cultural attitude towards the past that has a long history of its own, which in this place can only be hinted at. The idealization of the Middle Ages can in fact be traced back to the Middle Ages themselves: to the chivalric epics of writers like Chrétien de Troyes, Wolfram von Eschenbach, Gottfried von Straßburg and, most prominently in the English-speaking world, Thomas Malory. After a period when the Middle Ages were predominantly regarded as ‘dark’ and ‘barbaric’, interest in the Middle Ages was re-kindled by 18th-century antiquarians like Thomas Percy and James Macpherson, given an appealing note of depravity by the writers of Gothic fiction like Horace Walpole and Matthew Gregory (“Monk”) Lewis and brought to an apex by the Romantic movement that informed the whole of the 19th century. Indeed, this craze for the Middle Ages has left its traces in all fields of cultural life: not only in literature but also in the arts and architecture and in academic fields like history, literary studies, linguistics and folklore studies.

It is important to see in this context that all representations of the Middle Ages (whether in academic studies, literature, or the arts) are a response to the period when they were formed, often implying a criticism of that period—a sense of lack or loss—, as the German historian Valentin Groebner has convincingly argued. This is particularly evident when we look at the role of medievalism in the Romantic movement: “Mit den Romantikern wurde das

Mittelalter zur politischen Vorzukunft; zum verlorenen und deswegen unbedingt wiederherzustellenden Zustand gesteigerter Empfindsamkeit, gesteigerter Echtheit und unüberbietbarer Legitimität von Sprache, ‘Volk’ und politischen Institutionen” (p. 62).¹

Thus, the cult of the Middle Ages of the 19th century has a distinctly political-utopian flavour (especially, but not exclusively, in 19th-century Germany groping for the foundations of a national identity). There is widespread agreement among Tolkien scholars that Tolkien’s artistic interest in the Middle Ages is in its core ‘romantic’ in this sense, an impulse to re-create a ‘lost’ period, following the example of William Morris and his fellow Pre-Raphaelites.²

It is easy to see that the Middle Ages are still very much alive in our own times; in fact, they are continuously being re-created. Probably triggered by the extraordinary popularity of Tolkien’s Middle-earth novels, in the field of literature there has been a boom not only of fantasy fiction but also of historical fiction with a medieval setting. But this is not only a literary phenomenon. We are obviously having a ‘Middle-Age boom’ in all fields of cultural activity: film, television, comics, the visual arts, music (operas, musicals, performances of medieval music, both authentic and popularized), board games, video games, role-playing games, medieval markets and theme parks, re-constructions of historical battles, merchandising, and advertising.

Today’s picture of the Middle Ages may be more fragmented than that of the 19th century, as Groebner argues³; but I would claim that both—in fact, *all* representations of the Middle Ages, and especially those that openly eschew all claims of ‘realism’ – contain elements of criticism of the present and also, by various degrees, elements of utopian desire and of wishful fantasy.

2. The Charge of ‘Escapism’

As we know, Tolkien was keenly aware of the problems connected with his own extraordinary kind of day-dreaming. The place where he discusses them coherently and at the greatest length is, of course, his essay “On Fairy-Stories” (1939/1947) where he deals, among other things, with the accusation of

¹ “With the Romantics, the Middle Ages became a political pre-future; a lost (and therefore by all means to be reconstituted) state of heightened sensibility, heightened authenticity and unsurpassed legitimacy of language, ‘the people’, and political institutions” (my translation).

² For William Morris’s influence on Tolkien see, for instance, Mathews (2002), ch. 4, and Falconer (2014).

³ “Das Mittelalter als Fragmentierung, Alterität, als pittoreske Rekombination verschiedener Bilder”, Groebner, p. 136).

‘Escapism’ raised by mainstream critics against certain forms of literature, in particular against fairy stories. What Tolkien has to say in defence of “fairy-stories” applies equally to his own fantasy fiction (a term that was not yet in use when Tolkien wrote the essay) which in 1939, when he delivered his original paper, he had been busy creating for more than twenty years. The idea of ‘escapism’ has been at the core of the critique of Tolkien’s works—and of fantasy fiction in general—ever since and is therefore worthy of some closer inspection.

The term ‘escapism’, usually meant to be disparaging, implies the view that art (including literature) should always refer to the problems of the ‘real world’. But of course, the opposite view is equally possible. It is epitomized by the late 19th-century catchword of *l’art pour l’art* (art for art’s sake). Art, this position implies, is essentially a game that humans play for their own pleasure, and it has no obligations beyond that function. At first sight, the two positions may seem to be irreconcilable, but as it has been known at least since the days of Horace’s *De arte poetica*, in fact they exist side by side (“aut prodesse volunt aut delectare poetae”) and can easily be combined (“aut simul et iucunda et idonea dicere vitae”).⁴

Another thing worth noting is that the charge of ‘escapism’ often fails to distinguish between the creator of art (in literature, the writer) and the recipient, or consumer, of art (the reader). The motivation of writers may not necessarily be to say something “helpful to life”; but even if they “merely” want to delight, they will say something that is related to their own experience of life. Readers, in return, are free to make whatever use they like of a text—but they will enjoy it only if they find it meaningful; that is, related to *their* own experience of life.

In his essay “On Fairy-Stories”, Tolkien chooses a slightly different argument by pointing out that critics who condemn ‘escapist literature’ “are confusing [...] the Escape of the Prisoner with the Flight of the Deserter” (p. 56). The implications of these metaphors are worth considering for a moment. The Deserter, Tolkien seems to imply, is rightly condemned for abandoning his duty; but he does not say what this duty might be when applied to a writer or reader. Whatever it may be, for Tolkien it is certainly not facing the ‘realities of everyday contemporary life’: these, on the contrary, are what in Tolkien’s eyes constitutes the ‘Prison’ of “the Robot Age” (p. 56), worthy of “Disgust, Anger, Condemnation, and Revolt” (p. 56).

What is even more interesting than Tolkien’s disgust with the modern industrialized world is the ‘fairy-tale’ world he recommends to escape to: a world that in his view is ‘more real’ because it consists of “simple or fundamental things [...] such as stone, or wood, and iron; tree and grass; house

⁴ Horace 478, ll. 333-34. In Fairclough’s translation: “Poets aim either to benefit, or to amuse, or to utter words at once both pleasing and helpful to life” (Horace, p. 479).

and fire; bread and wine” (p. 55). Looking at these basic things, Tolkien argues, helps us regain “a clear view” (p. 53) —not in spite of the fact, but, paradoxically, *because* they are accompanied by imaginary beings: “We should meet the centaur and the dragon, and then perhaps suddenly behold, like the ancient shepherds, sheep, and dogs, and horses—and wolves” (p. 53).

Whether or not the “common reader” experiences this “Recovery” (p. 53) resulting from fantasy’s ‘alienation effect’ is impossible to say with certainty. In any case it seems likely that part of the attraction of fantasy fiction lies simply in the elements of imaginative wish-fulfilment it provides: We like to enter imaginary fantasy worlds because there the grass is greener, the sun brighter, men are nobler and more heroic, women more beautiful and more demure, villains more villainous, adventures more exciting than in our drab ‘real life’. This aspect seems to strengthen the charge of ‘escapism’; but Tolkien, again, turns it round by claiming that the wishes fairy tales satisfy imaginatively are deeply human and therefore legitimate (pp. 60-61).⁵

Tolkien’s point is certainly valid when applied to the ‘simple forms’ of fairy tales; but fantasy fictions like *The Lord of the Rings* contain a much higher amount of realistic details than folk tales. Inevitably, these details produce more complex links between the author’s perception of the world he lives in and his imaginative work and, at the same time, more complex opportunities for imaginative wish fulfilment.

3. ‘Allegory’: Traces of Tolkien’s World in His Middle-Earth Novels

3.1. Tolkien’s Rejection of ‘Allegory’

Exploring the links between the author as a person, his times, and the fictional world he has created has of course been a primary concern of Tolkien scholarship from its very beginning.⁶

Some of the observations frequently made are rather obvious and uncontentious. Thus it seems plausible, for instance, that Tolkien’s depiction of the hobbits and their lives in the Shire is a humorous reflection of his love of the simple country life (as he perceived it, or saw dwindling away during his lifetime) of his beloved Midlands. It is likewise clear that his *Legendarium* was

⁵ Tolkien mentions “the desire to converse with other living things” (p. 60) and “the Escape from Death” (p. 61), then takes this argument one step further by likening “the Consolation of the Happy Ending” – the “*Eucatastrophe*” (p. 62) that fairy-stories offer – to the Joy promised by the Gospels (pp. 64-66).

⁶ Consequently, it is far too large and diverse to be summarized here. For an overview, see Jay Ruud’s *Critical Companion to J.R.R. Tolkien* (2011) or Stuart D. Lee’s *Companion to J.R.R. Tolkien* (2014).

shaped by his studies of Germanic, Celtic, Finnish and (to a smaller degree) Classical literatures and mythologies, and that the various languages spoken by the inhabitants of Middle-earth owe their existence to Tolkien's extraordinary interest in languages, whether alive, dead, or imaginary.

Observations of this kind demonstrate that Tolkien's "sub-creation", though unique, is no creation *ex nihilo*. For one thing, he made lavish use of the existing heritage of Western narrative, mythology, and folklore, of what in his essay "On Fairy-Stories" he calls the "Cauldron of Story" (p. 31). But, as Tolkien hastens to add: "[...] if we speak of a Cauldron, we must not wholly forget the Cooks" (p. 31). Not only is it true that "their selection [of stories] is important" (p. 31); as they create their own stories, they inevitably bring in their own views, desires, concerns, anxieties etc. In *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien describes a world that to him is undoubtedly 'desirable'⁷—and, at the same time, in acute danger. It thus offers instances of wishful fantasy as well as powerful links to his own concerns and anxieties.

In that broad sense, it is 'allegorical', in spite of Tolkien's often-quoted avowal to the contrary that he made in his Foreword to *The Lord of the Rings*:

As for any inner meaning or 'message' it [*The Lord of the Rings*] has in the intention of the author none. It is neither allegorical nor topical. [...] I cordially dislike allegory in all its manifestations, and always have done so since I grew old and wary enough to detect its presence. (pp. 8-9)

Of course Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* is neither a religious/didactic allegory (like Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* or, indeed, C.S. Lewis's stories) nor a satirical one (like Orwell's *Animal Farm*); but, while it may not have a "message" in the narrow sense, it does have a meaning (or rather, many meanings). As Tolkien admits in the very next sentence, "an author cannot of course remain wholly unaffected by his experience" (p. 9). In the face of Tolkien's caveat, we may at least be certain that the period of his greatest literary creativity—roughly, from 1915 to 1965—was a time of tremendous upheaval: the Second Industrial Revolution, the cataclysmic Great War, the rise of mass production, mass culture, materialism and totalitarianism, the Second World War. There can be no doubt that Tolkien perceived these developments mainly as a threat. Small wonder, then, that Tolkien's Middle-earth in *The Lord of the Rings* is essentially a world struggling against forces that aim for change—which is always change for the worse and change that mirrors Tolkien's perception of developments in his own world.

⁷ Cf. Tolkien's account of his childhood reading of fairy stories that "were plainly not primarily concerned with possibility, but with desirability" (p. 39), culminating in his admittance, "I desired dragons with a profound desire" (p. 40).

While facing these concerns and anxieties, the medium of fantasy fiction allows—indeed, demands—a certain simplification of problems that in ‘real life’ are forbiddingly complex. In particular, Good and Evil are (in general) clearly distinguished and connected with single characters (like Sauron) or groups (like the Orcs). It seems likely that this simplification constitutes part of the attraction of fantasy fiction. Some critics may condemn this as an element of wish fulfilment; on the other hand, it allows a concentration on essentials, thus making fantasy fiction potentially more ‘philosophical’ than ‘realistic’ fiction.

3.2. Tolkien’s Treatment of Evil

As many critics have pointed out, one of the philosophical issues treated in *The Lord of the Rings*—indeed, the central one—is the nature of Evil. What is equally obvious is the fact that Tolkien’s treatment of this issue is closely connected with his own experience of war and totalitarianism.⁸ In particular, *The Lord of the Rings* offers a view of evil that is grounded in observation as well as in myth. Evil, as represented by Sauron, is in its essence the desire for absolute control—in political terms, Totalitarianism. But although Sauron may be regarded as the personification of this idea, he does not make an appearance as a person: he is, aptly enough, represented by an eye, the agent, or symbol, of surveillance. What Tolkien is specifically interested in is the temptation of power. Only very few of the characters—notably Sam and Bombadil—are immune against the allure of the Ring, while it is “the most powerful” who are particularly “susceptible to the Ring’s corruption” (Garbowski, p. 423).

The most striking example of those who succumb to the temptation of power is Saruman. Initially driven by his desire to improve conditions of life – thus an advocate of ‘Progress’, the concept that Tolkien and his Inkling friends were particularly suspicious of – he is susceptible to the allure of power. His actions mirror all the things Tolkien detested in the development of his own time, which makes him, as it were, an allegory of technocracy. Isengard exemplifies the worst aspects of industrialization: the ruthless exploitation of natural resources and the creation of a de-individualized mass of robot-like workers and soldiers—the Orcs.⁹

Even more ‘allegorical’ is Tolkien’s depiction of the hobbits’ Shire under the rule of “Sharkey” alias Saruman, “the place where Middle-earth comes

⁸ As are, for instance, the main works of his contemporaries T.H. White and George Orwell. Cf. Petzold, “Weltkatastrophe”.

⁹ Isengard is also the chief instance of Tolkien’s ecological commitment in his novels that has been frequently described (see, for instance, Campbell, 2014 and Kehr, 2011), and that I can only touch upon here, due to lack of space.

closest to twentieth-century life”, according to Shippey. What Tolkien describes is a land under the rule of technocrats and thought police: not “just [...] an allegory of England in the aftermath of war” but, more generally, “of a society suffering not only from political misrule, but from a strange and generalized crisis of confidence” (Shippey, p. 219). As the story proceeds, this “crisis of confidence” comes to an end when Merry blows his horn of Rohan and leads his compatriots to a revolt that ends both Saruman’s crippling influence and his life on earth. Arguably, this is the clearest instance of a ‘eucatastrophe’ Tolkien allows to happen in *The Lord of the Rings*; and, if we follow Shippey’s argument, the point where the novel does indeed convey a ‘message’ (the existence of which, we remember, Tolkien most resolutely denies in his Foreword): “If Tolkien were to choose a symbol for his story and its message, it would be, I think, the horn of Eorl. He would have liked to blow it in his own country, and disperse the cloud of post-war and post-faith disillusionment, depression, acquiescence, which so strangely (and twice in his lifetime) followed on victory” (Shippey, pp. 220-21).

As has been frequently noted, Eucatastrophe in *The Lord of the Rings* is muted; what prevails in the end is an elegiac tone, rather – the departure of the elves marking the end of an era and reminding us of the transience of all earthly matters. Still, another ‘message’ of the novel is that although it may be impossible to eradicate Evil completely, fighting it may not be in vain. In that sense, it does offer a kind of the “Consolation” Tolkien speaks of in his essay “On Fairy-Stories”.¹⁰

3.3. Instances of Tolkien’s ‘Indulgence in Wishful Fantasy’

As noted earlier, part of the charm of Tolkien’s stories—indeed, of all fantasy fiction—lies in their exposition of ideals: things the author, and presumably his audience, wishes for. Among these are, e.g., visions of unspoiled nature, descriptions of the cozy social life of the hobbits (whose shortcomings are so innocent that they can be treated with benign humour); characters like Bombadil and Goldberry who live in perfect harmony with nature; fantastic creatures like elves who inspire awe and reverence or ents who bridge the gap between humans and plants.

Other instances of narrative wish fulfilment are perhaps more profound—and more problematic, since they may not coincide with what in the age of ‘political correctness’ is deemed ‘desirable’. Among these is the tendency to see the whole population of Middle-earth as part of a hierarchic order that is

¹⁰ Of course, Tolkien’s treatment of Evil has also a theological aspect, most clearly so in *The Silmarillion*. For details cf., e.g., Garbowski (2014) and Pinsent (2014).

reminiscent of the medieval concept of the Great Chain of Being. Such a view is implied, for instance, in Treebeard's "lore of Living Creatures":

Learn now the lore of Living Creatures!
 First name the four, the free peoples:
 Eldest of all the elf-children;
 Dwarf the delver, dark are his houses;
 Ent the earthbound, old as mountains;
 Man the mortal, master of horses:

(*Two Towers*, p. 58)

Even though Treebeard remembers only parts of the list in which hobbits, moreover, do not appear,¹¹ it can serve as a good expression of a world view that describes (or, rather, creates) Order: each creature has its proper name, place and characteristic attribute.

We may note in passing that Tolkien's Chain of Being is richer, more tightly knit, and more continuous than what the medieval world picture envisioned since it encompasses creatures like Wargs, Ents, and Eagles that fill the space between humans, animals and plants. What is more important in our context is the observation that this idea of a hierarchic order is related to the accusations of racism Tolkien has been subjected to, as well as to his contradictory depiction of socio-political systems.

Both issues have been amply discussed by Tolkien critics. As for 'racism', I will restrict myself to one quote from Dimitra Fimi's exhaustive study, *Tolkien, Race, and Cultural History* (2009):

Tolkien's Middle-earth is definitely hierarchical, with divisions and subdivisions within different groups of beings. But, at the same time, it is not a consistent world. The 'races' of Middle-earth and their sub-groupings come from all the different strands of Tolkien's academic knowledge and awareness: philology and linguistics, anthropology and folklore. Tolkien's world combines stereotypical ideas straight out of Victorian anthropology like the differences in mental and physical abilities between the Three Houses of the Men in the First Age. There are also divisions based on spiritual concerns, like the sub-divisions of the Elves into those who wished to see the 'light' and those who refused to go to 'paradise'; and romantic interpretations of the 'primitive' and even the 'barbarian', shown in the portrayal of the peaceful, nature-loving Wild Men and in the vigour and strength of the Rohirrim. The blending of all these different strands make Middle-earth complex and unpredictable, a fantasy world that

¹¹ A lack for which Pippin suggests an impromptu amendment: "“Why not make a new line?” said Pippin. ‘*Half-grown hobbits, the hole dwellers.* Put us in amongst the four, next to Man (the Big People) and you’ve got it.’” (*Two Towers*, p. 58)

reproduces some of the concepts and prejudices of the ‘primary’ world, while at the same time questioning, challenging and transforming others. (p. 159)

We meet with similar complexities when we turn to the way social communities are organized in Middle-earth. First of all, we are surprised at the lack of detail: We get some glimpses of the daily life of Hobbits, but next to nothing about the communities of Elves, Dwarves, Humans or Orcs—except that they seem to have some kind of hierarchical social organization. Among humans, monarchy seems to be the natural form of state. Tolkien’s admiration of this kind of hierarchical social order finds its clearest expression in the description of Aragorn’s coronation. It is extended over several pages; this is just a short excerpt:

Then Faramir stood up and spoke in a clear voice: ‘Men of Gondor, hear now the Steward of this Realm! Behold! one has come to claim the kingship again at last. Here is Aragorn son of Arathorn, chieftain of the Dúnedain of Amor, Captain of the Host of the West, bearer of the Star of the North, wielder of the Sword Reforged, victorious in battle, whose hands bring healing, the Elfstone, Elessar of the line of Valandil, Isuldor’s son, Elendil’s son of Númenor. Shall he be king and enter into the City and dwell there?’

And all the host and all the people cried *yea* with one voice. (*Return*, p. 216)

The impression that what Tolkien is (re-)creating here is a nostalgic, 19th-century, idealized picture of medieval kingship is overwhelming. It is equally true, however, that this is balanced by the picture of failing kings like Théoden or Denethor, and by the hobbits’ engaging semi-anarchic community; which suggests that Tolkien was indeed aware of the dangers inherent in hereditary political leadership. On the one hand, it seems, his love belonged to the cozy rural-petit-bourgeois life of the hobbits; nevertheless, he also admired the idea of ‘Kingship’. After all, what he chose to be the title of the last volume of his *magnum opus* was “The Return of the King”.

We find a similar dividedness in his depiction of war. As has often been pointed out, traces of Tolkien’s experiences during WW I are ubiquitous in his fiction.¹² The horrors of war—the squalor, the demeaning stupidity of service, the pain, the fear of death, etc.—do find ample expression. Along with this goes the conviction that true heroism lies in the acceptance of duty and moral obligation. And yet there is also a certain admiration to be found in his writings

¹² For a comprehensive account of Tolkien’s experience of WW I and the traces it has left in his writings see, for instance, Garth (2003), and *Hither Shore* (2009), vol. 6; for a more succinct treatment, Croft; for a comparison of the presentation of war in Tolkien’s *Hobbit* and Lewis’s *Chronicles of Narnia*, Rahn (2014).

for the 19th-century glorification of heroism, a curious celebration of the ‘Glory of War’. This may indeed mirror the ‘exaltation of battle’ contemporaries of Tolkien’s like Charles Carrington and Ernst Jünger experienced in themselves and their comrades during the battles of WW I (cf. Garth, p. 299); at the same time, it harks back to the Germanic sense of tragic heroism Tolkien describes admiringly in his essay on *Beowulf*. Here is a small passage describing the Rohirrim riding out to battle:

His [Théoden ‘s] golden shield was uncovered, and lo! it shone like an image of the Sun, and the grass flamed into green about the white feet of his steed. For morning came, morning and a wind from the sea; and darkness was removed, and the hosts of Mordor wailed, and terror took them, and they fled, and died, and the hoofs of wrath rode over them. And then all the host of Rohan burst into song, and they sang as they slew, for the joy of battle was on them.

(*Return*, p. 100)

As Croft rightly notes, “many readers, pacifist or not, are uncomfortable with this passage” (p. 469), but of course it is also possible that others may find this exciting and inspiring.

At close inspection, Tolkien’s novels appear to be full of ‘contradictions’ of this kind; but they are usually not perceived as negative. Rather, they can be seen as indications of the complexity of his work, which is indeed characterized by an “interplay of rhetorics” that, according to Eaglestone, constitutes “one of Tolkien’s greatest strength” (p. 7)—and, one might add, is also one of the reasons for the popularity of his major works.

4. ‘Applicability’: the Contemporary ‘Tolkien Franchise’

It seems that the reasons for this popularity, and the various shapes it has assumed, are an equally complex matter. As Tolkien rightly pointed out, “history, true or feigned,” has a “varied applicability to the thought and experience of readers” which “resides in the freedom of the reader” (“Foreword”, p. 9); and in the course of the sixty years since the publication of *The Lord of the Rings*, His/Her Majesty the Reader has made ample use of this freedom.

One aspect of this reception is the enormous amount of secondary material Tolkien’s works have inspired. For one thing, there is academic and non-academic criticism (including the activities of ‘Tolkien Societies’ spread all over the world), which has not only demonstrated the ‘applicability’ of Tolkien’s Middle-earth to the political problems of the 21st century, in particular ‘Global Terrorism’ (cf. Gelder, 2006 and Kellner, 2006) but has in fact produced “polyvalent ideological interpretations which have, in part, ensured [the novel’s] popularity” (Eaglestone 9). Indeed, as Kehr has demonstrated, *The Lord of the*

Rings has been called upon for support and justification by widely different groups of political and religious activists and sects: from the ‘Hippie generation’ and various left-wing groups to the extreme right (in particular, in Italy, but also in Great Britain), from followers of G. K. Chesterton’s Distributionism to eco-activists and opponents of globalization, to underground fighters against autocratic rulers in Russia; by Catholics as well as by Protestants, but also by groups of Neo-Pagan and Neo-Germanic persuasion (cf. Kehr, pp. 156-170).

4.1. Literary Derivatives

Secondly, there are all kinds of ‘sub-sub-creations’. First of all, we are confronted with an immense field of literary fiction whose authors were inspired, more or less evidently, by Tolkien’s books. For convenience’ sake, this field may be sub-divided into various areas (whose borderlines are, not surprisingly, blurred). Thus we have, first of all, texts with more or less explicit references to Tolkien: parodies like *Bored of the Rings* by the Harvard students Henry N. Beard und Douglas C. Kenney, written as early as 1969 (to mention just one, and probably the best-known, example) and pastiches or imitations like *The Sword of Shannara* (1977) by Terry Brooks.¹³ Many more texts bear more or less obvious resemblances to *The Lord of the Rings*; indeed, it is possible to see Tolkien’s classic as the seed out of which a whole new genre has grown—or, at least, as the genre’s archetype, the center of the “fuzzy set” called fantasy fiction (cf. Attebery, ch. 1).

Finally, there is the vast area of fan fiction, which has grown to an enormous size thanks to the internet. While it is true that Tolkien is no longer the author who inspires the largest amount of fan fiction¹⁴, it still holds an impressive 3rd place, with, at present, 52,200 entries on *The Lord of the Rings*, 12,000 fan fictions on *The Hobbit* and 5,000 on *The Silmarillion* in www.fanfiction.net alone.

Generalizing about an output of that magnitude is a risky business at best. What can be said with some confidence is that apart from ambitious full-length novels (some of which deal very seriously, and critically, with Tolkien’s world view as expressed in his fiction, cf. Vink) and parodic texts¹⁵, most fan fictions (written almost exclusively by female authors) reflect their authors’ emotional involvement with single characters, thus giving them the ‘human touch’—specifically the ‘love interest’—that is felt to be missing in Tolkien’s

¹³ For a discussion of these and similar texts, cf. Petzold, “Reproduzierbarkeit”.

¹⁴ That honor goes at present to J.K. Rowling, with Stefanie Meyer’s *Twilight* series taking second place.

¹⁵ A particularly successful example are Cassandra Clair’s *Very Secret Diaries*, cf. Kroner (2010).

fiction (and in fantasy fiction in general). What these daydreams add to the fantasy world, even more specifically, is sexuality, including a surprising amount of homo-eroticism. The personal, wish-fulfilling character of these fan fictions is also highlighted by the large amount of “Mary Sue stories”, i.e. stories with a protagonist that is a thinly-veiled avatar of the author herself. Another interesting sub-genre is comprised of MET stories (for ‘middle-earth tourism’), i.e. portal fantasies describing how a person is unexpectedly transferred from his or her daily life into an exciting otherworld¹⁵—thus underlining the strong escape element we find also in LARPs, (i.e. Live Action Role Plays) and board games popular among Tolkien fans.

4.2. Other Fan Activities

There is no way of dealing with the immensely large and diffuse area of Tolkien fandom adequately here. In particular, I can just barely mention such forms of fandom as musical performances of songs from *The Lord of the Rings*, or drawings and paintings inspired by Tolkien’s Middle-earth. Nor can I explore here the vast field of live action, computer, board, and card games and suchlike activities.¹⁶ It seems safe to assume that it is mainly adolescents and young adults who feel drawn to such activities, and that the attraction of games, in particular, resides mainly in their ‘escape effect’—an escape from the frustrating demands of everyday life into a parallel universe that offers clear rules, opportunities for successful action, and, above all, the experience of a community of like-minded friends. That this world has a distinct ‘medieval’ taste is presumably of secondary importance, but it fits well into the mixture of adventure and security such games of make-believe provide. A look into related internet catalogues suggests that some fans are willing to spend not only a good deal of time but also a lot of money for their hobby and that there is an industry eager to supply them with all necessary paraphernalia (cf. Conrich 2006).

4.3. Peter Jackson’s Middle-Earth Films

The single most influential kind of ‘creative reception’ in recent times has of course been Peter Jackson’s series of Middle-earth films, beginning in 2001 with the release of *The Fellowship of the Rings* and ending (so far?) with the third part of the Hobbit trilogy, *The Battle of the Five Armies*, in 2014. Not

¹⁵ For an overview of Tolkien fan fiction, cf. Fleischhack (2010), Kroner (2010), and Brayton (2006).

¹⁶ Articles on the above mentioned forms of fan activity can be found in Stuart Lee’s *Companion to J.R.R. Tolkien*, in vol. 28 of the *Inklings Yearbook* (2014), and in vol. 10 of *Hither Shore* (2009).

surprisingly, this phenomenon has also been extensively examined and commented on. This is not the place for a comprehensive discussion of the reasons for the extraordinary success of these films. For our purposes, the following summary may suffice:

The *LotR* trilogy attempts to be attractive to the audience through modernised fantasy genre conventions; through the emotionalisation of love stories, personal development stories, and battle scenes; through editing according to the conventions of horror, splatter, and samurai films; and through the use of extraordinary special effects. (Mikos et al., p. 116)

In addition, mention must be made of two gigantic research projects initiated and masterminded by Martin Barker and Ernest Mathijs that focus, specifically, on the worldwide reception of *The Return of the King* (The Lord of the Rings Research Project, 2003/4) and of *The Battle of the Five Armies* (The World Hobbit Project, 2014/5).¹⁷ One of the things that are brought home by these projects is the realisation that the audience of the Tolkien films is highly diverse. Thus, leaving aside the differences between countries and of male and female viewers, one can distinguish, e.g., between “the group of ‘Computer Gamers’”, “the group ‘Literary Generation’” and “the group ‘Media Generation’” (Mikos et al., p. 116). Not surprisingly, the analysis of the viewers’ responses to the films shows that they are influenced not only by the film as an aesthetic complex but also by outside factors. “The prefigurative knowledge gained from the original literary work, the marketing, the film reviews, the Internet forums, and merchandizing articles play a part, as does membership in specific fan groups and certain generations” (Mikos et al., pp. 128-29)

5. Conclusion

What does all this add up to? It is a truism that the reception of a work of art is, on the one hand, a personal matter and, on the other, it is determined by its presentation within a social, political, and cultural context. The multiplicity of responses to the contemporary ‘Tolkien franchise’ mirrors the multiplicity of contemporary society; at the same time, it is the result of the complexity of Tolkien’s work. The allure of Tolkien’s quasi-medieval Middle-earth lies, paradoxically, both in its strangeness and its familiarity, its wish-fulfilling fantasy and its multiple ties to the ‘real world’ of the author as well as of his audience. In fact, these seeming contradictions are really just two sides of the same coin. One glance into the daily news is enough to convince us that, like Frodo and his author, we are still confronted, and puzzled, by the conundrum of

¹⁷ A similar research project conducted on a much smaller scale in Angers (France) is described by Birks (2013).

violence. Its difficulty is enough to make anyone despair. Yet it seems that we cannot exist without hope. Perhaps the secret of Tolkien's work is that it offers both—an analysis of evil, and the assurance that it can be defeated occasionally, if not permanently. In this sense it represents what makes us human: Wishful Thinking.

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