Tolkien the storyteller

ROSS SMITH

The 20th century's most popular novelist? – the third of three articles

THE YEAR 2005 marks the 50th anniversary of the publication of J.R.R. Tolkien's prose epic *The Lord of the Rings*: voted 'the book of the century' in a poll conducted in 1997 by the UK book retailer Waterstones and 'the UK's best loved book' in a BBC survey carried out in 2003. *TLOTR* was adapted to the screen in 2001 by the New Zealand-based director Peter Jackson and released, to widespread acclaim, in three parts between 2001 and 2003. The present is the third of three linked discussions of Tolkien's work and the media through which it has been channelled (text and film), and of why it has been so phenomenally popular.

Introduction

Tolkien's affirmations concerning the fundamental importance of language in his work (and in his life as philologist, author, and devout Roman Catholic) reflect his deepest preferences or inclinations, but they do not account for his whole creative process. Equally important, certainly in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, are his story-telling skills: the capacity to create credible characters (human or otherwise) and cultures; skilful scene-setting; mastery of pace and timing, and power of imagination. It may be true that, as Tolkien himself asserted, having invented the languages, he needed characters to speak them and a setting in which to place them. But he would not have got far without his ability to describe those characters and settings in such a compelling way.

The cast of characters in *The Lord of the Rings* are not all squeaky-clean goodies or wicked baddies, as has sometimes been alleged[1]. If this were the case, it is unlikely that Tolkien's fiction would have endured so strongly for so many decades. The last century was full of imaginative novels which are a 'cracking good read', from Edwardian adventure stories (exemplified by Henry Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines*[2]) to science fiction (such as Isaac Asimov's *I Robot* and Frank Herbert's *Dune*), in which the exciting pace and continuous action, combined with ingenious plots, provide fine entertainment. Yet these books are essentially superficial: the action may be gripping, but the characters are shallow and one-sided, and in general are rapidly forgotten.

In Tolkien's leading roles, by contrast, virtue and vice are present in good measure. Gandalf the wizard is wise and brave, but also impatient and cantankerous; Boromir the warrior and Pippin the hobbit are morally correct but each succumbs to the temptation of evil, with devastating consequences; and Frodo the ring-bearer has a titanic struggle against temptation, and indeed gives in to it. On the other side, Saruman the good wizard who turned bad is malignant but also charming and intelligent, while the wretched half-starved Gollum is mostly treacherous but has moments of potential salvation. The use of 'virtue', 'evil', 'temptation', and 'salvation' here is no coinci-

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dence, as Christian ethics clearly and admittedly underlie Tolkien's fiction. Bilbo Baggins, the hero of *The Hobbit*, shows a broad range of traits from smug complacence to courageous self-sacrifice, as could hardly be otherwise for a self-satisfied member of the hobbit bourgeoisie turned reluctant adventurer and ultimately thief. Comparably, in *The Hobbit*, the dragon Smaug, despite his devastating power and cruelty, converses with the charm and wit (and accent, the reader infers) of a well-educated member of the British upper class.

These characters are carefully developed, subtle and convincing, and the fact that some are household names is no coincidence. Readers easily empathise with them: they suffer in the face of hardship, have to make difficult decisions implying sacrifice, occasionally become desperate and lose faith in their goals. Good ultimately triumphs, but not without a struggle.

Women

It is an oft-commented fact in Tolkienian criticism that his work has few women in leading roles, and those that there are tend to be stereotypes. This is primarily a result of the kind of literature from which Tolkien's fiction is drawn, namely the mediaeval heroic quest and ancient Norse and Anglo-Saxon legends and sagas. In such literature there is little place for women, who with few exceptions are no more than submissive spouses, rarely seen and never heard. Additionally, Tolkien seems to share Joseph Conrad's vague discomfort with the creation of leading female characters – perhaps due to his strong Roman Catholic upbringing in a traditional English setting, with male and female roles being clearly delimited, and in which trying to cross the divide produced some perplexity in the author. Nonetheless, there are two major exceptions to this in *The Lord of the Rings*.

The elven queen Galadriel is both kindly and forceful, showing sympathy for Frodo and his worn-out companions when they enter her domains, yet also quite ready to interrupt and correct her husband, himself an eminent Elf lord, at good length when she considers him mistaken. She enters the minds of Frodo's companions without warning to test their loyalty and courage, and is capable of presenting herself to Frodo as a potentially glorious and devastating ruler when he offers her the chance to take the Ring of Power for herself (which evidently she refuses). She is the most venerable and powerful of all the good characters, above even Elrond and Gandalf. The youthful Eowyn, for her part, is expected to stay at home looking after the elderly and young while the men ride off to war in Gondor. She refuses to accept this discriminatory treatment and rides off with them, disguised as a male warrior under a false name, and ends up playing a decisive role in the greatest battle of the story.

The low number of female protagonists, therefore, is compensated for somewhat by the enormous significance of those that there are. Coming back to Tolkien's problems with creating credible women characters, it is interesting to consider that Galadriel and Eowyn both possess the traditionally masculine traits of leadership, strength and endurance, with which Tolkien felt secure. This may help to explain why they are more convincingly drawn than, say, the chaste and lovely Arwen, Elrond's daughter, who barely merits a couple of lines in the entire book, despite being Aragorn's future wife – and in contrast to the film version, in which a whole new role is invented for her.

It is worth noting that, although most of the leading figures in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* are male, this has not been an obstacle to the works' popularity among both male and female readers: figures from the *Lord of the Rings Research Project*[3] show fans to be evenly divided between men and women.

Settings

Tolkien's characters move in landscapes which are described to us in marvellous detail. As the English poet W.H. Auden said, in his review of *The Fellowship of the Ring* for the New York Times in October 1954: 'Mr Tolkien is fortunate in possessing an amazing gift for naming and a wonderfully exact eye for description; by the time one has finished his book one knows the histories of Hobbits, Elves, Dwarves and the landscape they inhabit as well as one knows one's own childhood.'

This comment is echoed in Auden's 1956 review, for the same newspaper, of the trilogy's final volume, *The Return of the King*: 'By the time the reader has finished the trilogy, including the appendices to this last volume, he knows as much about Tolkien's Middle Earth, its landscape, its fauna and flora, its peoples, their languages, their history, their cultural

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habits, as, outside his special field, he knows about the actual world.' This can be illustrated by looking at the following paragraph from Book IV of *TLOTR*, when the hobbits Frodo and Sam enter the forests of Ithilien, close to the end of their journey:

> Many great trees grew there, planted long ago, falling into untended age amid a riot of careless descendants; and groves and thickets there were of tamarisk and pungent terebinth, of olive and bay; and there were junipers and myrtles; and thymes that grew in bushes, or with their woody creeping stems mantled in deep tapestries the hidden stones; sages of many kinds putting forth blue flowers, or red, or pale green; and marjorams and new-sprouting parsleys, and many herbs of forms and scents beyond the garden-lore of Sam [one of the hobbits]. The grots and rocky walls were already starred with saxifrages and stonecrops. Primeroles and anemones were awake in the filbert-brakes; and asphodel and many lily-flowers nodded their half-opened heads in the grass: deep green grass beside the pools, where falling streams halted in cool hollows on their journey down to Anduin.

Tolkien was a lover of plants, particularly trees, which helps to explain why seventeen plant species are here named in a single paragraph. We are again in the presence of the 'density' or 'depth' discussed in the preceding articles: the overwhelming volume of detail which heightens the illusion of reality. However, overwhelming detail on its own would be insufficient to maintain a loyal readership over so many years, and due credit must be given to Tolkien's narrative skill. As Auden said, Tolkien had an 'exact eye for description', the ability to choose the precise term, image or metaphor, as well as appropriate sentence structure and punctuation, to paint a scene in the reader's mind.

Take the following brief example, when the ring-bearing hero Frodo sights from a vantage point, at a great distance (thanks to powers of perception conferred by the Ring), the stronghold of Sauron, the Dark Lord, in the evil Land of Mordor:

> Then at last his gaze was held: wall upon wall, battlement upon battlement, black, immeasurably strong, mountain of iron, gate of steel, tower of adamant, he saw it: Barad-dûr, Fortress of Sauron. All hope left him.

The language does not give any great impression of complexity, though the syntax of the sentence is far from simple: an adverbial clause followed by the object and the verb, then a 22-word description and a further embedded subject-verb-object clause before we finally reach the subject and discover what Frodo's gaze was being held by. Tolkien achieves his purpose through repetition, suggesting one layer of huge fortification upon another, in appropriate monosyllabic Anglo-Saxon words: *wall*, *black*, *strong*, *iron*, *steel*, with the evocative name of the fortress itself, *Barad-dûr* ('dark tower' in Sindarin Elvish) kept to the end. Readers with no knowledge of Tolkienian languages but with some French will equate *dûr* with the French for 'hard': appropriate enough but accidental. There are just two adjectives in the sentence, yet the impression of fabulous strength is clearly conveyed.

These examples also illustrate the importance of punctuation in Tolkien's prose: how it is broken up into logical chunks that precisely reflect how the text would sound if spoken. Tolkien's prose is ideal for reading aloud, as three generations of parents will attest to, including the American fantasy writer Ursula LeGuin, who refers to this oral quality in her essay *Meditations on Middle Earth*:

> It's a wonderful book to read aloud or listen to. Even when the sentences are long, their flow is perfectly clear and follows the breath; punctuation comes just where you need to pause; the cadences are graceful and inevitable.[4]

This factor also helps to explain the continued popularity of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*: despite the lavish use of language, they are easy to read. The text flows freely, in our minds or ears, and it is typical for Tolkien-loving parents (who are usually book-loving parents) to keep the tradition going by reading the books to their children. This means of awakening enthusiasm for Tolkien's work has doubtless been superseded by the overwhelming success of the film versions, which provide children with a path into Tolkien's world that the omnipresence of television and video makes almost unavoidable – despite being supposedly for an adult audience. Yet stubborn purists will still try to instil a pre-eminent appreciation for the original written works. It may be said in passing that one positive factor of the film version of *The Lord of the Rings* is that many thousands of people have read the book after seeing it.

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Pace

As already mentioned in the first of these articles (on the film versions of *The Lord of the Rings,* in *ET*83, Jul 05) a unique feature of the book is its gradual build-up, a slow gathering of momentum as the action progresses, from the peaceful meadows of The Shire to the desolate wastelands of Mordor. This does not however mean that all the action is reserved for the later stages of the adventure, though it is certainly true that at the commencement of the story Tolkien takes his time. He knew that not all readers would have read *The Hobbit* and so some background information had to be supplied on Hobbits and other Middle Earth matters.

Tom Shippey, an authority on Tolkien's work, considers that this slow commencement is due to a certain apprehension on Tolkien's part when faced by the need to depart from the cosy confines of The Shire and venture into the wild world beyond, where the story really gets on its way. This could be true, although perhaps a simpler explanation is that Tolkien was in no hurry to get anywhere. In the Foreword to *TLOTR* (1966 edition) he mentions that he wished to fulfil the tale-teller's urge to try his hand at 'a really long story', without prior restrictions on time or length.

It is interesting to consider a parallel case from another great story teller, Alexandre Dumas, and his novel *The Count of Monte Cristo*. In *Mouse or Rat? – Translation as Negotiation* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson 2003), Umberto Eco discusses his experience translating this novel into Italian and refers to its great length and apparently excessive verbosity. Certain critics had put this down to the author's desire to draw the story out as much as he could in order to assure his earnings over a longer period, since it was originally published in episodes which were paid by the line. Eco ultimately dismisses this, however, asserting that Dumas needed all those pages (a thousand or so, depending on the edition) to relate properly what is virtually the entire adult life of the protagonist and all the adventures he went through. He could not tell the tale to his liking otherwise, and nor could Tolkien.

The initial chapters therefore take place among hobbits in the cosy atmosphere of The Shire, with little more action than a surprising disappearance by Bilbo Baggins and some snuffling and hissing from the sinister Black Riders. Even some of Tolkien's stoutest defenders are not wholly comfortable with the opening pages of the book, to say nothing of his more hostile critics, in relation to whom W.H. Auden pithily remarked: 'A few may have been put off by the first forty pages of the first chapter of the first volume in which the daily life of the hobbits is described; this is light comedy and light comedy is not Mr. Tolkien's forte'[5]. Once the story gets rolling, however, Tolkien moves into dramatic adventure narrative, which certainly is his forte, and suspense and uncertainty keep readers turning the pages to find out 'what happens next'.

As noted by Ursula LeGuin[6], the action in *TLOTR* has a marked peaks-and-troughs character. This is true from the moment the adventure starts: the Hobbits almost perish as soon as they venture out of The Shire into the Old Forest, and narrowly escape to enjoy a rest at their rescuer Tom Bombadil's abode. After setting off again they become trapped in ancient graves on the Barrow Downs and are almost beheaded, with Bombadil having to rescue them for a second time. Then they enjoy some comfort in the town of Bree before being dramatically attacked by the Black Riders in the Wilderness, receive solace in the elven sanctuary of Rivendell, return to high drama trying to pass through the tunnels of the Mines of Moria, escape from the orcs to another elven haven in Lothlorien, and so on. All the time the pitch of the action and excitement increases, and the effect is rather like a linear graph with peaks and valleys but which inexorably moves upwards towards the final confrontation at the gates of Mordor.

This is classic 'heroic quest' literature, as the hero moves ever-closer to his goal with a good number of adventures and deserved rests on the way. What sets Tolkien apart, among other things, is again his devotion to detail. Each stop along the way is a mini-novel. To take two examples, the 'rest' in Rivendell lasts a full 80 pages (1993 HarperCollins paperback edition), during which time the reader finds out all sorts of things about Rivendell, its master the elf-lord Elrond, the every-day life of the elves, elvish poetry, the history of The Rings of Power and the One Ring, who-is-who on the sides of Good and Evil, and much else.

The next respite for Frodo and company, after their perilous journey through the Misty Mountains, takes up a further 50 pages, when we discover the hidden wood of Lothlorien, realm of the elven Queen Galadriel, with its city

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in the treetops. Each of these pauses adds further substance to the 'density' discussed above.

Sustaining the excitement and readers' interest in the plot (while obliging us to bear with the characters through their periods of respite) is no small feat, but Tolkien manages it. In Auden's words again, 'The demands made on the writer's powers in an epic as long as *The Lord of the Rings* are enormous and increase as the tale proceeds – the battles have to get more spectacular, the situations more critical, the adventures more thrilling – but I can only say that Mr. Tolkien has proved equal to them.' Like Milton with *Paradise Lost*, or Beethoven with his Ninth Symphony, Tolkien had the courage and self-belief to try something really long, and the skill to bring it off. Few novels are good enough to justify having more than 250 pages, even fewer more than 500. *TLOTR* as a work of heroic adventure fiction is unique, and provides its readers with a uniquely rich and long-lasting literary experience.

Sacrifice

As must be the case in a powerful tale, this experience is not all positive. Would *TLOTR* have achieved such success if, as some critics have wished to make out, it were a childishly simple tale of good beating evil and everyone living happily ever after?[7] This seems unlikely. It may have enjoyed brief popularity, but it is difficult to imagine an over-blown fairy tale selling 100 million copies over 50 years. It is a tale of heroic deeds and victory against the odds, but it also has profoundly melancholy undertones. Victory without sacrifice is shallow; a deeper experience inevitably requires pain as well. As mentioned earlier, Tolkien, as a serious Catholic, considered humankind to be a fallen species, struggling through earthly existence from the original Fall towards a distant redemption: a generally painful process with occasional flashes of joy along the way. This embodied his Middle Earth fiction in particular through one people, the elves, and one character, Frodo.

In the book called *The Silmarillion* (later put together by his son Christopher and published posthumously, in 1977), Tolkien describes the early mythology of Middle Earth, explaining how the elves were given a safe land for themselves (Aman) but succumbed to pride and over-ambition, and were accordingly punished by the deities known as the Valar. Men were also provided by the Valar with a paradisiacal sanctuary (Westernesse) but, like the elves, overstepped the limits imposed on their freedom and were all but exterminated. Many centuries later, the Middle Earth of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* is inhabited by the descendants of these fallen peoples, or in the case of the elves, by some of the original 'exiles' themselves (such as Elrond and Galadriel) since elves do not die of old age. Both men and elves have fallen a long way since their days of glory, as is made repeatedly clear throughout the story. They had their opportunity but failed, and their power then gradually waned.

The elves that remain in Middle Earth are the minority that preferred to stay when the Valar offered them a second chance, though they can go back to their homeland 'over the sea' whenever they wish (but not return). Their capacity to keep their sanctuaries free from evil is largely bound up in the elvish Rings of Power held by Elrond and Galadriel, which are dependent for their power on the Great Ring; if *it* is destroyed, the elves will effectively lose their 'supernatural' attributes and will have to leave Middle Earth. They are therefore faced by what in modern jargon would be called a lose-lose situation: if the One Ring is not destroyed but is regained by the dark lord Sauron, he will annihilate the elves. If the One Ring is destroyed, the elves' Rings of Power will lose their potency and the elves will fade away.

This is a melancholic scenario, since the elves are generally likeable, kind and loyal. No matter what the outcome of the War of the Ring, they are condemned to depart from their home in Middle Earth back over the sea: a sad loss both for them and those others (men, dwarves and hobbits) that stay behind.

On an individual level, Frodo's tale is tragic. Its unhappy ending may to some extent be overlooked by many readers in the broader happiness of Aragorn's recovery of his kingdom and the hobbits' recovery of The Shire, yet his is a grim fate. As well as trying his hand at a long story, Tolkien wished to get certain messages across, particularly the concept of 'hope (or faith) without guarantees', which imbues the quest to destroy the ring, and 'no victory without sacrifice', which leads to Frodo's demise. His strength is slowly sapped and his will crushed by the weight of the burden he voluntarily carries. He manages to resist to the last moment, but then gives way. He is saved at the last, but is a mental and physical wreck.

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Even after recovering his strength and returning home to his hobbit-hole he is not happy or at peace. In the end he is allowed the honour of accompanying the departing elves on their journey over the sea, to a land like paradise for a mortal, but one which cannot be regarded with certainty as a last reward for his sacrifice, because Tolkien tells us that even in the elven homeland there is no assurance that he will be cured. Life can be cruel, and the elves' acceptance of their fate and Frodo's self-sacrifice lend a certain grandeur to the story as a whole.

Conclusion

Tolkien's is a curious case. His books have sold more copies than any other save the Bible and have generated a vast literature: thousands of articles, papers and books, as can be verified through Internet searches or consulting catalogues. And they were written by an Oxford professor of philology no less. Yet his fiction is still not regarded as 'serious' by the literary establishment, and may never be. It is simply too different, and too hard to classify. There is also the fact that Tolkien's fame and enduring popularity are principally due to his gifts as a storyteller, and storytellers are not particularly well liked by the literary intelligentsia.

In addition, everything about Tolkien seems enormous: the length of his *magnum opus*, the devotion or dislike he inspires, the volume of sales, and the amount of both critical literature and imitative writing. In these three articles, I have tried first to point out certain weaknesses in Peter Jackson's attempt to translate Tolkien's prose onto the screen, then to provide some clues to understanding why his work appeals to one generation of readers after another, worldwide, in translation as well as in the original. This commentary has been undertaken from a linguistic and literary viewpoint, without taking into account the sociological, religious and ecological aspects of his work, which have been explored by other writers. For those wishing to find out more on these and other matters, I am happy to end with the following recommendations from among the hundreds of available tomes and websites. ■

Notes

1 The best-known example is the review by Edwin Muir in *The Observer* in August 1954 when, among other things, he complains that '[Tolkien's] good people are consistently good, his evil figures immutably evil'.
2 Similarities between The Lord of the Rings and Edwardian adventure stories are explored in *The World of the Rings: Language, Religion, and Adventure in Tolkien* by Jared Lobdell, Open Court Publishing Company 2004.
3 The Lord of the Rings Research Project is an initiative undertaken by the University of Wales with funding from the UK Economic and Social Research Council <www.lordoftheringsresearch.net>.
4 Ursula K. LeGuin, *Rhythmic Patterning in The Lord of the Rings*, in *Meditations on Middle Earth*, ed. Karen Haber, St. Martin's Press, 2001.
5 W. H. Auden, *New York Times* 1956.
6 Ursula K. LeGuin, *op. cit.*
7 Aggressive criticism and accusations of infantile simplicity go back to very first reviews of *The Lord of the Rings* in the fifties. American writer and critic Edmund Wilson called it "juvenile trash", no less, though it is questionable whether he ever read more than the first chapter, while the celebrated literary critic Harold Bloom referred more delicately to "this quaint stuff". Tolkien has also been staunchly defended, with particular efficiency by Tom Shippey in *The Road to Middle Earth*, (see below) and *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century*, HarperCollins 2000, and by Patrick Curry in *Defending Middle Earth: Tolkien, Myth and Modernity* (see also below).

Books

Defending Middle Earth: Tolkien, Myth and Modernity, Patrick Curry, Houghton Mifflin, revised 2004: defends Tolkien against modernists and discusses his advocacy of of community, ecology, and spiritual values

The Road to Middle Earth by Tom Shippey, HarperCollins, revised edition 2005: the best book of Tolkien criticism, covering most subjects.

Splintered Light: Logos and Language in Tolkien's World, Verlyn Flieger, Kent State University Press, revised edition 2002: a fine study of Tolkien's Elven linguistics and ethics

Tolkien Studies Volumes I & II, West Virginia University Press 2004 & 2005: yearly collections of essays on a range of Tolkien-related matters by distinguished scholars

Websites

<www.elvish.org> Elvish linguistics

<www.lordotrings.com> general information on Tolkien and his work

<www.tuckborough.net> encyclopaedia of Middle-earth

<www.quicksilver899.com/Tolkien/Tolkien_Dictionary.html> on-line dictionary of terms in both *TLOTR* and *The Silmarillion*

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