Tolkien and the flight from modern life

The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring directed by Peter Jackson

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The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring is the first part of the trilogy adapted from J.R.R. Tolkien's fantasy epic. It concerns an imaginary world in which unlikely heroes undertake a quest against the powers of Sauron, the personification of evil and darkness, by destroying the ring which he first created and then lost in the mists of time.

The movie has now won the British Academy of Film and Television Arts best picture of the year award, and will probably do well at the Oscars. More importantly, it is touching the minds of young people and winning a new generation of readers for Tolkien, whose books have been read by tens of millions over the last 60 years. This very large audience of enthusiasts alone would have indicated the film would be a reasonable financial prospect. But on top of that, the movie has been able to capitalise on a mood, a sentiment that is definitely in the air, that humanity is embarking on perilous times.

The noble quest to destroy the ring is undertaken by its present bearer, Frodo Baggins, one of the race of little beings known as hobbits. Hobbits are not human. Since human beings have an equivocal history, having proved susceptible to the power of the ring and its evil, a human would not have been a suitable hero. The uncompromised race of hobbits is an idealisation of the English peasantry, in feudal or semi-feudal times. Rooted in the soil, hobbits migrated long ago to their peaceful land, the Shire, just as Germanic tribes had once migrated to England.

Frodo is advised by the wizard Gandalf and realises that the ring imposes special obligations on him. This is borne home as Sauron's emissaries are now out searching for the ring, and ominous riders have been seen around the Shire. With his most loyal companion, Sam Gamgee and two others, Frodo sets off on what he senses is to become a long and arduous journey.

Tolkien's Frodo is a thoughtful, self-sacrificing leader, who muses on the yawning future that he confronts in the world outside the Shire: "[I]t is one thing to take my young friends walking over the Shire with me, until we are hungry and weary, and food and bed are sweet. To take them into exile, where hunger and weariness may have no cure, is quite another—even if they are willing to come..."

The three hobbits back him up and once they reach the elvish land of Rivendell a fellowship comprising the elf Legolas, Gimli the dwarf, and two humans—Strider/Aragorn and Boromir of Gondor—is established. The group undergoes many trials in the course of their journey. Several of the company are destroyed on the way, and at the end of this first part of the story, their respective paths diverge.

The nature of the ring becomes increasingly clear—it is a horrible snare that endows its bearer with a lust for power and evil. Its wearer can put it on and become invisible. Peter Jackson's film manages to convey the sinister lure of the ring, by means of a skeletal visage appearing in place of the features of those close to Frodo who try to get the ring from him. Some come to their senses and pull back, but Boromir, being human, does not.

The film lavishly depicts the corruption and evil of Sauron's minions. But Jackson has no grasp of a principle of artistry well understood by Tolkien—that in depicting horror and violence, understatement often has a sharper impact than literalism or heavy emphasis. The battle scenes, for all the brilliant special effects unleashed, become repetitive and tedious.

The symbolism of the ring raises interesting issues. Everything about its creation is bound up with manufactured metal, forged and made by men. The development of industry therefore necessarily means corruption. Only when the world is rid of industrial might and reverts to a natural state will tranquility return.

All of *The Lord of the Rings* is an elegy for the past, suffused with longing for the return to a better time, a golden age from which history is moving ever further away. As the elf Legolas laments: "Alas for us all! And for all that walk the world in these after-days." In every sense the fantasy is a dirge looking backwards from the afterdays, that is, from the time after mankind's fall from grace.

Tolkien's outlook was bound up with rejecting the possibility of the progress of civilisation. Attacking such conceptions, according to his children, he would firmly say: "Progress to *what*?"

This scepticism towards progress was bound up with his own strong religious faith and belief in original Sin. Artistically he translated this into a bucolic rural utopia in the Shire, the antipode to modern industrialised society, where Frodo longs to return. "He lay down again and passed into an uneasy dream, in which he walked on the grass in his garden in the Shire, but it seemed faint and dim, less clear than the tall black shadows that stood looking over the hedge."

The film's depiction of the Shire, however, is a humourless failure, peopled by a pack of homogenised munchkins. There is none of Tolkien's sideswipe at the pretentious snobs related distantly to Frodo—the Sackville-Baggins side of the family. Some critics have praised the film as a faithful rendition of Tolkien's original, but they are over anxious to be pleased.

Tolkien's sense of a simpler past being trampled upon by modern changes was not only strongly felt, it was informed by profound erudition. He fashioned an entire multi-layered world, with complete languages, another history, and a parallel to the fall of man. Professionally, he was renowned among scholars as the author of the most sensitive commentary on the intriguing old English poem *Beowulf*. He was not only expert in the translation of ancient languages, but he spun his own delicate freewheeling languages together with their own grammar, and their own canon of writings.

Although he wrote *The Lord of the Rings* during World War II and it was published in 1954, it had his genesis in his imagination much earlier in the century. He originally began writing parts of what was to become his immense chronicle of Middle Earth— *The Silmarillion* —as early as 1913.

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The evil and horror unleashed by Sauron was partly prompted by Tolkien's personal experiences in the Battle of the Somme during World War I, where over a million men died on both sides in a matter of months. He admitted this in the foreword to the second edition of *The Lord of the Rings* when he refuted the notion it was an allegory for nuclear war:

"One has indeed personally to come under the shadow of war to feel fully its oppression; but as the years go by it seems now often forgotten that to be caught in youth in 1914 was no less hideous experience than to be involved in 1939 and the following years. By 1918 all but one of my close friends were dead."

As Frodo looks out alone across the landscape that he is to traverse, he sees a panorama that is the culmination of all the evils of industrialisation: "Everywhere he looked he saw the signs of war. The Misty Mountains were crawling like anthills: orcs were issuing out of a thousand holes. Under the boughs of Mirkwood there was a deadly strife of Elves and Men and fell beasts. The land of the Beornings was aflame; cloud was over Moria; smoke rose on the borders of Lorien."

"Horsemen were galloping on the grass of Rohan; wolves poured from Isengard. From the havens of Harad ships of war put out to sea; and out of the East men were moving endlessly: swordsmen, spearmen, bowmen upon horses, chariots of chieftains and laden wains. All the power of the Dark Lord was in motion."

That Tolkien's pessimism and scepticism was bound up with the spiritual collapse of the entire old order in Europe, became clear in his creation of the key character Sam Gamgee, the hobbit who stayed by Frodo through thick and thin. Tolkien admitted, "My 'Sam Gamgee' is indeed a reflexion of the English soldier, of the privates and batmen I knew in the 1914 war, and recognised as so far superior to myself."

A batman is an officer's servant or runner, his "man." The role is a feudal remnant in the British army, akin to the survival of the monarchy and the House of Lords. Tolkien glorified the deference shown by Sam to his "Mr Frodo", even though their relationship far transcended that of servant and master. It was an updated version of the medieval social ties given Christian blessing in ceremonies of fealty. As the embodiment of these ties, Sam Gamgee expressed Tolkien's futile yearning to return to an England of sturdy peasants, independent craftsmen and small-scale merchants.

As well as its underpinnings in the scholarly investigation of myth and legend, Tolkien's artistic achievement was part of a wider European tradition going back to the 19th century. His fantasy was directly in line with a Romantic reaction against progress that developed in the wake of the defeat of the revolutionary movements of 1848. The most consummate artistic expression of the ensuing disillusionment with progressive change was found in the operas of Richard Wagner. There is a remarkable similarity between Tolkien's symbolism and that of the German composer, deriving from their common search through Nordic mythology from the Dark Ages for source material that stimulated their imagination and creativity.

The parallels between *The Lord of the Rings* and the libretto of Wagner's *Ring of the Nibelung* are striking. In the latter, the Rhine treasure is stolen by a dwarf Alberich in order to forge the gold into a ring that allows its owner to rule the world, at the cost of emotional desolation. He uses it to set up a dictatorship over the Nibelung dwarves, who become his slaves, mining ceaselessly for more gold. His brother makes him a gold cap that renders him invisible. The fire god steals the ring from him and in retaliation he puts a terrible curse on its wearer, and this curse determines the entire *Ring* cycle of operas. This curse takes effect almost immediately as one giant murders his brother to obtain the ring.

There is a fine line when the artist's yearning for the past shades into apologetics for backwardness, when the creation of a spiritual realm becomes a repudiation of reality. Both these masters sailed extremely close to this line, and were prepared to risk a descent into mysticism and irrationality, in the pursuit of their art. Tolkien was personally very sensitive to criticism of his work that labelled it "escapism." He felt this was a pejorative use of the word, equating the escape of the prisoner with the flight of a deserter.

Like Wagner, Tolkien aspired to create heroes and heroic monsters in his work. In a famous 1936 lecture on *Beowulf* he defended this aim. "Even today (despite the critics) you may find men not ignorant of tragic legend and history, who have heard of heroes and indeed seen them, who have yet been caught by the fascination of the worm [i.e. monsters]." But he could only achieve the necessary epic heights by using the traditional genre of children's fiction as a springboard to push the stylistic boundaries of fantasy fiction.

Tolkien himself sensed this, saying, "It is a curse having the epic temperament in an overcrowded age, devoted to the snappy bits." It is not just a question of length. It is impossible for a modern author to create the necessary tone for an epic without lapsing into irony, because the material conditions preclude the creation of new myths.

Karl Marx brilliantly explained Tolkien's dilemma: "Is the conception of nature and of social relations which underlies Greek imagination and Greek [art] possible when there are self-acting mules, railways, locomotives and electric telegraphs? What is a Vulcan compared with Roberts and Co., Jupiter compared with the lightning conductor and Hermes compared with the *Crédit mobilier*? All mythology subdues, controls and fashions the forces of nature in the imagination and through imagination, it disappears therefore when real control over these forces is established" (*A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Introduction, page 216).

This indicates much about the question of Tolkien's relation to the 20th century and his relevance to the troubled beginning of the 21st. He set himself a Herculean task and attempted it with a masterful sweep, even if his aspiration was beset with contradictions.

Peter Jackson's film introduces Tolkien's work to a new generation of readers. This in itself is worthwhile. Unfortunately, despite having an array of accomplished actors at his disposal, including Elijah Wood (Frodo), Ian McKellen (Gandalf) and Cate Blanchett (Galadriel), Jackson reduces Tolkien's artistic conceptions to the level of banality. He proved simply unable to create anything but a shadow of the original undertaking. His direction achieves little of Tolkien's lyricism, or rather translates it into shallow visual images, such as the beautiful elf Galadriel emitting white light, with all the subtlety of a mound of sugar.

Jackson made his name in New Zealand with animation comedy and horror films (*Bad Taste* [1987], *Meet the Feebles* [1989] and *Braindead* [1992]). In 1994 he caught the attention of Hollywood for *Heavenly Creatures*, which used special effects to explore the fantasy world of two New Zealand teenagers who committed a murder in the 1950s and followed this with *The Frighteners*, a big budget comedy starring Michael J. Fox, and a mock documentary *Forgotten Silver*. His version of *The Lord of the Rings* expresses all the limitations of what passes for culture today imposed on Tolkien's story.

The movie contains all the elements required for a Hollywood blockbuster. It exudes smugness and complacency. Nothing is left to the imagination or nuanced. The movie is replete with the requisite amount of action, love, mystery and suspense, which are all reduced to formulaic certainties. While Tolkien's imaginary world provided the backdrop for myriad complexities, Jackson's film is monochromatic and pedestrian. It holds out little artistic hope for its sequels.

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