

Tolkien's magic diminished

Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King, directed by Peter Jackson

Margaret Rees
23 January 2004

The Return of the King, the third movie in director Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, has been released worldwide and established new records at the box office. Very few of its audiences would be new to the saga—the two previous films having won many enthusiastic adherents, particularly among the younger generation, adding to the millions of supporters of J.R.R. Tolkien's epic fantasy.

Tolkien's life-long work was to weave a vast tapestry of an imaginary world, of which *The Lord of the Rings* was only a part. His artistry was mediated through his academic training as an expert in ancient languages—including Middle English and Icelandic—and the tales of antiquity.

His entire imaginative project made up for a deficiency he felt was manifested in English tradition. In this sense he was seeking to consciously elaborate a complete history, to enable him to seed the past at will with a more satisfying alternative—in his opinion English society had gone wrong from the time of the Norman Conquest in 1066. And it was through the stalwart efforts of his main characters, the hobbits and their fellowship, that Tolkien spun his fantastic notions of regenerating the present by recourse to a mythical past (see "Tolkien and the flight from modern life").

The Return of the King focuses on how the loyalty and camaraderie between the four hobbits is put to the test in the war mounted by the evil armies of Sauron. Frodo and Sam Gamgee are pursuing the quest to reach Mt Doom, and Sam's devotion is under so much strain that he is beset with self-doubt before the final triumph at the mountain.

Meanwhile, Merri and Pippin are separated and subjected to a series of trials and tribulations. During their different journeys, they undertake an oath of loyalty to an important leader among men. Pippin

swears an oath to Denethor, the Lord Steward or regent of Gondor, out of gratitude for Denethor's son Boromir having given his life to save the two hobbits. Merri pledges his loyalty to Theoden, king of the nation of Rohan.

These oath-takings are critical to Tolkien's mythologising of the past because they reproduce the feudal bonds that a vassal pays to his liege lord. In fact, both Merri and Pippin have effectively chosen to become medieval squires. In this they serve to underline Sam's relationship to Frodo, the bearer of the terrible ring.

Moreover, Tolkien's story also establishes that this relationship is bound up with the hereditary principle on which royalty rests. Through the fortunes of war, the other two hobbits transfer their loyalty to the younger generation when the old leaders die—Pippin to Boromir's brother Faramir, and Merri to the Lady Eowyn, Theoden's brave daughter who has enabled him to participate in the battle. In the book, Aragorn then demonstrates his worthiness to become king when he cures Eowyn and Merri and others with his healing touch, which only the true king possesses.

Tolkien made the fantasy fiction genre extraordinarily elastic—he could demand from his audience the childish suspension of disbelief in magical swords, amulets, the ring itself and fairy races, and then suddenly return to the minutiae of his characters' everyday existence. For example, after Sam farewells Frodo and the immortals forever, he goes home to tea with his wife and little daughter. Tolkien had found the form that enabled him to switch between lyrical prose and the tones of ordinary common sense.

Writing as he did after World War I, Tolkien transposed the mechanised horrors of twentieth century warfare back onto a slave society of antiquity. The

Nazgûl—the pterodactyl-like flying riders, which provided Sauron with a terrible air force—reflected the airborne horror Tolkien witnessed from the trenches in World War I. Thus he expressed his loathing and disdain for what he regarded as the spiritual decay of modern civilisation and technology.

Tolkien's yearning for a non-existent romanticised past was fuelled by his hope for a return to the certainties of old. His longing for England to have a different and more stable destiny emerged with the decline of the British Empire. He spent the rest of his life creating a mythical past to fill the void.

Jackson's *The Return of the King* pays lip service to the horrors of war, with a few shots of attractive children huddling to their mothers in terror, but overall, the film, and the rest of the trilogy, glorifies and sanitises war. Modern war and all its horrors repulsed Tolkien. Jackson on the other hand is preoccupied with the choreography of war and bloodshed, mainly interested in exploring its kinetic and visual values.

The director lovingly zooms his camera across the computer-generated evil hordes of Sauron, and then sweeps back to the far smaller forces of heroes, hammering away incessantly in a courageous fight against impossible odds. Deaths are balletic and usually only befall the villains. Unlike Tolkien's version of the same conflict, there is little place in Jackson's synthesised war for convalescence. Tolkien's House of Healing, reminiscent of the field hospitals for the wounded in World War I, never appears in the movie.

This is at odds with Tolkien's conceptions, which he explained in a letter dealing with the book's underlying themes: "I do not think that Power and Domination is the real centre of my story. It provides the theme of a war, about something dark and threatening enough to seem at that time of supreme importance. But that is mainly a 'setting' for the characters to show themselves. The real theme for me is about something much more permanent and difficult: Death and Immortality...."

Jackson's movie trilogy, by contrast, has war as its central theme, with all else subordinated to it. Moreover, in translating Tolkien's Middle Earth wars to twenty-first century audiences, Jackson equates belief in a righteous cause with the extermination of enemies, who are as ugly as visually possible. Tolkien's mythologised past also gives Jackson a

historical licence to create battle scenes in such a way to encourage mindless stereotypes about war and its social causes. This approach, whether intentional or not, dovetails with the contemporary media barrage of evil terrorists and a disinfected version of imperialist war.

What is it that today's audiences are seeking from *The Return of the King*? This is contradictory and no doubt bound up with the disorientation of contemporary life, which can either encourage an escape into some mythologised past or a striving to grapple with modern day horrors and their cause. For its part, Hollywood works to stifle any progressive stirrings in the population.

Jackson's fame has climbed over the last two years, with the release of each new stage of the movie and the growth of a Lord of the Rings nostalgia industry, including travel packages to New Zealand, where the movies were shot. The first two films grossed over \$600 million in cinemas while the third has passed \$310 million after only a few weeks. With videos, DVDs and computer games, the whole phenomenon has already earned \$3.5 billion globally and is expected to hit \$5 billion. These figures have been used to magnify Jackson's talent out of all proportion and the critics, for whom size and turnover matter, have dutifully declared *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy as one of the great works of cinema.

Unsurprisingly, all this has swept up Jackson himself. In one interview he brazenly stated: "My secret hope is, in 20 years from now, there will be films made by young directors who say 'I saw the *Lord of the Rings* when I was seven and it inspired me.'" This merely demonstrates that the director knows little about cinema or historical development. When measured against Tolkien's artistry, Jackson's efforts are rather pale conformist works, which denigrate the restless and complex artistry of the author's original work.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact