

AlbertMohler.com

# Rediscovering J. R. R. Tolkien and 'The Lord of the Rings'

*What can explain the fact that millions of Americans—grown-up Americans—have flocked to see a movie version of what its own author called a fairy tale? The Return of the King remains at the top spot in box office sales, and this third and final entry in The Lord of the Rings trilogy deserves top billing.*

**Monday, January 5, 2004**

What can explain the fact that millions of Americans—grown-up Americans—have flocked to see a movie version of what its own author called a fairy tale? The Return of the King remains at the top spot in box office sales, and this third and final entry in The Lord of the Rings trilogy deserves top billing.

Behind the movie's success stands the enduring popularity of author J. R. R. Tolkien and his fantasy world of Middle-earth. Those who consider themselves too sophisticated for these fairy tales reveal a tragic lack of moral imagination—and Christian imagination.

J. R. R. Tolkien [1892-1973] was one of the twentieth century's greatest scholars of language and the culture of pre-Christian England. His invented worlds were drawn from knowledge gained during his extensive career teaching at the University of Leeds and Oxford University. He was one of the "Inklings," a famed group of writers and literary figures that included his friend C. S. Lewis.

I read The Lord of the Rings as an adolescent because I thought it was the thing to do. I read the books almost out of a sense of obligation—encouraged by teenage Christian friends who claimed that the books changed their lives. My life remained unchanged by my obligatory reading. I was fascinated by Tolkien's imaginative world of Middle-earth, and often lost myself in the wonder of the work's intricate plot structures and Tolkien's incredible power of description. Nevertheless, I was deathly afraid of becoming a "Hobbitologist" or Tolkien fanatic. I much preferred to read realistic novels, historical biographies, and non-fiction. Looking back, I am now struck by what I failed to see.

The release of Peter Jackson's magnificent The Lord of the Rings trilogy prompted me to rediscover Tolkien and his greatest work. These remarkable movies accomplish what many Tolkien fans were certain could never be done—they bring these epic tales to life and, in the main, get the story right.

Moviegoers who have never read the books will find the films to be among the most imaginative and powerful dramas ever brought to the big screen. Tolkien's faithful readers—most are fanatics by some definition—will find artistic departures from the books to be grating, but will revel in the battle scenes, the beauty of Jackson's vision of Middle-earth, and the sheer gigantism of the settings. Those Tolkien purists who despise the movies lack the capacity to allow their reservations to take a nap while their imaginations are taken for a ride.

The Lord of the Rings represents one of the greatest literary achievements of the last century. Tom Shippey, Tolkien's successor at Oxford University, names Tolkien "author of the century," a claim that does not sit well with the literary establishment. During his lifetime, Tolkien's work was routinely disparaged by the academic establishment and the literary elite. They dismissed the whole category of fantasy and fairy tales, considering such works to be of interest only to children. Now, as then, ideologues have attacked Tolkien's work as anti-feminist, fascist, and escapist. Tolkien was undeterred, and remained certain that the world of myth and fairy stories was absolutely necessary for an understanding of the "real" world—a world of which he was only too aware.

In his essay, "On Fairy-Stories," Tolkien argued that the association of fairy-stories and children "is an accident of our

domestic history.” Children, he suggested, are not best equipped for understanding the tales and their meaning. “Fairy-stories have in the modern lettered world been relegated to the ‘nursery,’ as shabby or old-fashioned furniture is relegated to the play-room, primarily because the adults do not want it, and do not mind if it is misused.” Fairy-stories are too important to be relegated to the nursery, Tolkien argued, because this form of story enables adults to understand the very real crises of the very real world.

Tolkien denied that reading fantasy was a form of escapism at all. To the contrary, the story-teller creates a “Secondary World” that helps to explain the “Primary World” we know as reality. In Tolkien’s own words: “What really happens is that the story-maker proves a successful ‘sub-creator.’ He makes a Secondary World which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is ‘true:’ it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside. The moment disbelief arises, the spell is broken; the magic, or rather art, has failed. You are out in the Primary World again, looking at the little abortive Secondary World from outside.”

Tom Shippey goes so far as to argue that literary fantasy has been “the dominant literary mode of the twentieth century.” He claims George Orwell, William Golding, H. G. Wells, Kurt Vonnegut, and Thomas Pynchon as others who wrote in a fantastic style and genre, using such stories to reveal the darkness that stood at the heart of the century’s moral crises. “Those authors of the twentieth century who have spoken most powerfully to and for their contemporaries have for some reason found it necessary to use the metaphoric mode of fantasy, to write about worlds and creatures which we know do not exist, whether Tolkien’s ‘Middle-earth,’ Orwell’s ‘Ingsoc,’ the remote islands of Golding and Wells, or the Martians and Tralfamadarians who burst into peaceful English or American suburbia in Wells and Vonnegut.” Seen in this light, the enduring appeal of Tolkien’s works rests on the fact that he presented “a deeply serious response to what will be seen in the end as the major issues of his century.”

The Secondary World of Middle-earth is the setting for Tolkien’s epic of the Ring—a story that carries far more moral and theological weight than most moviegoers will ever understand. This is an epic story of heroism and deep evil, of fellowship and betrayal, of love and honor and war. The Lord of the Rings is, most essentially, a Christian story.

J. R. R. Tolkien was a deeply Christian man whose literary vision and fantastic tales were intended to point to eternal realities. A fervent Roman Catholic, Tolkien was influenced by John Henry Cardinal Newman, in whose oratory Tolkien and his brother received early education. Like Newman, Tolkien was deeply suspicious of modernity. The modern age brought technological progress, but moral degeneration.

In Tolkien and the Great War, John Garth traced the great tragedy of World War I on Tolkien and his generation. That war—a conflict that still scars the European conscience—took the lives of Britain’s young men by the millions. The war introduced gas attacks, trench warfare, and murderous stalemate to the modern world. Tolkien’s short service as an officer on the battlefield introduced him to the horrors of war—and influenced the intense battle scenes of *The Lord of the Rings*. More personally, it cost Tolkien his friends. “By 1918,” Tolkien later wrote, “all but one of my close friends were dead.”

The Lord of the Rings is not an allegory of the Christian Gospel as found, for example, in the *Chronicles of Narnia* written by his friend C. S. Lewis. Tolkien acknowledged his “cordial dislike” of direct allegory, and instead pointed more indirectly to the Christian truth behind and beyond his tales. As Ralph Wood of Baylor University explains, “Tolkien’s work is all the more deeply Christian for not being overtly Christian. He would have violated the integrity of his art—and thus the faithfulness of his witness—if he had written a 1,200-page novel to illustrate a set of ideas that he could have expressed apart from the story itself.”

Taken together with *The Silmarillion*, *The Lord of the Rings* includes and illustrates the Christian themes of truth, creation, redemption, vocation, sin, love, and longing. The Christian Gospel is the great Fairy-story that—different from all others—is true. He coined the word *eucatastrophe* to refer to the great turning point in a story from despair to hope. Writing to his son, Christopher, Tolkien advised that the Resurrection of Christ “was the greatest ‘eucatastrophe’ possible in the greatest Fairy-story—and produces that essential emotion: Christian joy which produces tears because it is qualitatively so much like sorrow, because it comes from those places where Joy and Sorrow are at one, reconciled, as selfishness and altruism are lost in love.”

Tolkien took the pagan inheritance and pointed it toward the Christian vision and reality. *The Lord of the Rings* is a fundamentally Christian and inescapably theocentric classic.

“The Incarnation of God is an infinitely greater thing than anything I would dare to write,” Tolkien once confessed. The Christian Gospel—the true story of Christ’s incarnation, death, and resurrection—is God’s story. As Tolkien understood, “To reject it leads either to sadness or to wrath.”

Millions of viewers will enjoy The Return of the King without ever understanding the great story beyond the story. To see and to understand the Gospel of Jesus Christ is to experience eucatastrophe—life out of death. To miss it, on the other hand, is not just tragic—it is nothing less than the catastrophe of all catastrophes.

---

Content Copyright © 2002-2010, R. Albert Mohler, Jr.