

ISSN 0910-500X

英文學思潮

THOUGHT CURRENTS IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

VOLUME XC

2017

THE ENGLISH LITERARY SOCIETY
OF
AOYAMA GAKUIN UNIVERSITY

青山学院大学英文学会

Tolkien's Themes of *The Lord of the Rings*

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The Lord of the Rings trilogy is one of the most acclaimed works in the English language, having sold over 150 million copies worldwide^{1 2}. Written by John Ronald Reuel (JRR) Tolkien, these books bring readers into a fantasy world that seems as realistic as the characters, struggles and circumstances of any written work. This trilogy includes: *The Fellowship of the Ring*, *The Two Towers* and *The Return of the King*. Tolkien did not wish his work to be taken as an allegory by any means and he stated such in his letters³. Nevertheless, he does present a variety of themes to the reader in the context of his legendarium, which were important to him. Five of these themes to be noted here are: [1] important blood lineages, [2] physical and mental damage may not always heal naturally, [3] the power and importance of nature, [4] mercy and [5] humble beings accomplishing great things.

Tolkien indeed was concerned with family lines. He gives a number of these in the various Appendices included with *The Lord of the Rings*. No fewer than ten family lines are described here: six of hobbits⁴, four of men and even some commentary on the line of Dwarves⁵. Other works of Tolkien, such as the *Silmarillion*⁶ give a number of other family lines of Men and Elves, but those will not be detailed here. The Hobbits that lived in the Shire of Eriador in Middle Earth elected a mayor to serve them rather than a king as with most races of men. Among most of the kingdoms of men, kingship followed bloodlines. In addition, Tolkien felt it important to detail other family lines are well noted in his legendarium. In the case of the kingdoms of Arnor and Gondor, the lines came from the great island realm of Númenor.

The lines of men of Númenor in the Second Age, continuing with their descendants in the Third, are a major emphasis of Tolkien's works. An

important factor was that these men have Elven blood from human-elf unions in the First Age. Those who had Elven blood in their background had longer lifespans than those (despite not being immortal like Elves). The men of Númenor were a noble people with great longevity, especially during the Second Age. Elros, Tar-Minyatur, the first of the kings lived for about 500 years. Though life spans were shorter as the Second and Third Ages progressed, the descendants still lived longer than men from other lands. Those with the blood of men and Elves had a special calling. Tolkien emphasized that the kings of Gondor and Arnor the Second and Third Ages were destined to come from this line.

Another theme is the suffering from terrible harm in the trilogy--damage which cannot be healed again by normal means. Injury which was both physical and psychological. Frodo perhaps suffers the most of all of the major characters, in the *Lord of the Rings*. He was stabbed by a Morgul-blade of the undead Nazgûl. Although he was healed physically, the injury still caused him pain every year. Frodo suffered mental trauma as well. "Alas! there are some wounds that cannot be wholly cured", said Gandalf⁷. Frodo adds, "There is no going back? There are some things that time cannot mend. Some hurts that go to deep."⁸ To truly heal from this Frodo eventually left Middle Earth, heading into the West, outside of the physical confines of Arda. In the land of Valinor, he found that spiritual and magical healing.

There are other incidents of enduring pain besides Frodo's. Elrond's wife, Celebrían, is mentioned by Tolkien in his Appendix B. Many years before the events of the *Lord of the Rings*, she was "waylaid in the Redhorn Pass" on her way to her parents in Lórien. She received a poisoned wound and was tortured. Although she was healed of any life threatening effects, she did not fully heal mentally from this tragedy. The next year she left Middle Earth for good, heading west to Valinor^{9 10}.

The wonder of nature is a major theme of the *Lord of the Rings*. Nature is beautiful yet powerful, even taking vengeance against those wishing to harm it. In *Fellowship of the Ring* the Hobbits encounter the enigmatic Tom Bombadil. Tolkien scholars have been unable to unanimously agree who or

what this character is exactly and he is the one character in the Lord of the Rings trilogy that seems completely unaffected by the One Ring. One major theory is that Bombadil is the embodiment of nature itself¹¹. Together with his wife Goldberry, he tends the Old Forest and protects it. He also protected our heroes who pass through, from the dangers of the ill-tempered Old Man Willow. This tree itself is a mystery, but appeared to embody the retaliation of nature against those who would cause harm.

Elves, the most glorious of the races of Middle Earth, were shown living closely with nature. Tolkien depicted the Elven realms of Rivendell (Elrond's), and Lothlorien (Galadriel's) as co-existing with nature. The intricate stone dwellings of Rivendell were located among beautiful waterfalls and greenery. In the case of the later realm, the Elves lived in beautiful, detailed dwellings in great trees.

In *The Two Towers*, Tolkien reveals the race of Ents to readers. These treelike beings were created by the Vala, Yavanna Kementári¹² in the years before the First Age. Ents protected the trees in the Forest of Fangorn from harm in the Third Age and in previous ages. The Ents are slow to decide something act, but when angered by great destruction of their forest, they attack with a vengeance. Those who foolishly angered Ents by cutting down hundreds of valued trees were all but destroyed. Sauruman and his forces found this out too late after having cut down numerous trees in the forest near Isengard. The Ents gathered and attacked, killing many of orcs and laying waste to Isengard¹³.

Mercy is an even more significant element in Tolkien's trilogy. Frodo, a Hobbit, shows mercy on the trouble-making Gollum, during his quest to destroy the One Ring. He and Samwise captured Gollum during their quest, however Frodo went against his companion's urging to slay Gollum early on. Later Gollum entered the hidden and forbidden refuge of Henneth Annûn, held by scouts of Gondor. Faramir was about to order Gollum to be killed, when Frodo petitioned Faramir's men not to shoot Gollum with arrows. So at least on two occasions, Frodo showed great mercy.

Other cases of mercy exist in the *Lord of the Rings* as well. Gandalf the

wizard also showed mercy on another wizard, Sauruman the White, who had betrayed him and the free peoples of Middle Earth. Sauruman declared war on the people of Rohan and caused the deaths of many. Sauruman was later defeated by the Ents and trapped in his tower known as the Orthanc. Again even during this time, Gandalf gave Sauruman a chance to repent and use his great talents for good, despite all the evil he had done¹³.

Humble beings having the potential to do great things is another strongly emphasized theme in Tolkien's works¹⁴. The Hobbits are a simple, humble race. Among Ents, Men, Elves, and even Dwarves, Hobbits have the shortest stature as well as being least appreciated or even known. Yet it is a Hobbit to whom the greatest task is entrusted, which is to destroy Sauron's One Ring. Elrond notes, "This quest may be attempted by the weak with as much hope as the strong." This task is to destroy the malevolent One Ring. So Frodo was charged to bring the ring to the one place it could be destroyed, the volcano of Mount Doom in Mordor. Getting to Mordor was a suicidal task not to mention throwing the One Ring into the fires of Mt. Doom.

This relic had great power yet was able to negatively influence almost every being in Tolkien's Middle Earth, including Elves or Maiar. The known Maiar in Middle Earth included the Istari (wizards) such as Gandalf and Sauruman. Although powerful beings who used the Ring would gain great power, they would still be corrupted by it. There eventually was a temptation to use the One Ring, which Gandalf (a wizard) and Galadriel (an Elven queen) fortunately resisted. Other beings could use the ring to become invisible and gain other powers, but in the end it would corrupt them as well or even cause them to hand it over to Sauron. The powerful wizard, Sauruman, was fell under the enticement trying to obtain the One Ring, and would have used it if he could have. However, Frodo was able to keep the Ring for a time, without yielding much to its temptation. He brought it as far as Mt. Doom in Mordor, where it had to be destroyed. Sam, his loyal gardener and companion, plays a critical support role rescuing Frodo from dangerous orcs and helping Frodo in many other ways.

Meriadoc Brandybuck, better known as Merry, was another Hobbit who

made a difference in the history of Middle Earth. Deemed too small at first to be of much help in the Battle of Pelanor Fields, he rode along with Eowyn. Later during this battle the two went up against one of the greatest foes serving Sauron, the Witch King of Angmar, head of the Nazgûl. Merry was able to get in a solid attack from behind with his Morgul-blade, which allows Eowyn to deliver a destroying blow with her sword. Without Merry's help, Eowyn and many others would have perished on that day. Hobbits have done a number of great things by the end of the Trilogy.

These five themes of Tolkien are wonderfully revealed in his *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. The greatest three are: humble beings accomplishing great things, upholding mercy and the importance of nature. Tolkien held all of these concepts dear and was likely influenced by his own life experiences growing up in rural South Africa and then in industrial Birmingham in Britain¹⁵. There are other themes of course which have been noted as well by Tolkien readers.

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