

Realistic Fantasy: The example of J. R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*

The *Lord of the Rings*, John Ronald Reuel Tolkien's best known work, was published in three volumes between 1954 and 1955. The effect was surprising. It became the first fantasy book to record such popularity. As Humphrey Carpenter reports¹, it became part of the sixties movement, with badges bearing slogans such as 'Come to Middle-earth' appearing on lapels. The appeal the book had and still has to the public is a phenomenon which raises several questions. What is the quality that keeps the readers' interest stimulated through eleven hundred pages? And, mainly, how can Tolkien's fantasy world harmonise with the minds of so many readers around the world? The answer is partially given by the author himself in his essay *On Fairy-Stories* which was first published in 1947. In this essay Tolkien explains his innovative theory about fantasy stories. He proposes that the writer should create a "secondary world which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is 'true'. It accords with the laws of that world"². The world of *The Lord of the Rings* is based on this very principle.

Tolkien included some other relevant ideas in his essay. According to him, a fantasy story can be successful only if it convinces the reader about its truthfulness, creating thus in him a kind of "secondary belief"³. As a result, he concludes, "The keener and the clearer is reason, the better fantasy it will make"⁴. For Tolkien fantasy worlds must have an "inner consistency of reality"⁵, without which Art cannot be produced. For fantasy is a form of "sub-creative art"⁶, which means the creation of mythical images which accord to internal laws and thus seem credible. Tolkien has used in *The Lord of the Rings* various techniques which make his own fantasy world, Middle-earth, exceptionally convincing and realistic. It is precisely this aspect of the book that many readers find so appealing. First of all, *The Lord of the*

Nikolaos Koravos

Rings was a revolutionary fantasy text in that it included no excuse of dreaming or travelling in order to account for the occurrence of the events related in the story. The narrator treats the reader as an inhabitant of Middle-earth, not of the real, primary world. As explained in the Prologue of the book, the narrative is based on archives that survived in the libraries of The Shire and other realms of Middle-earth, and the main source is the Red Book which was written by Bilbo and Frodo himself⁷. Thus, the fantasy world is treated as having an entirely autonomous existence, unlike previous travel, dream or timeslip tales. As David Bratman puts it, "*The Lord of the Rings* marked the end of apology"⁸. Even though in the past there had been writers like Lord Dunsany that created partially autonomous fantasy worlds, it was Tolkien who first developed a coherent theory on that matter and also applied it in his own stories. Middle-earth is, in many respects, unique in fantasy literature. Its sense of reality is not the result of simply refusing to use dreaming or similar devices. Its most important element is that it is an almost "fully imagined secondary world"⁹ described in amazingly great detail. The geography of Middle-earth, for example, contributes significantly to the realism of the fantasy world. The maps which accompany *The Lord of the Rings* are very elaborate. Without them it is very difficult to follow the events. Apart from the general map of Middle-earth¹⁰, there is a detailed map of The Shire¹¹, and also one of Rohan, Gondor and Mordor, the region where most of the action takes place¹². These maps do not simply show the divisions between political or physical unities, but also give information on such details as paths, mountain passes, river crossings, bridges and hills. The maps resemble landscapes. Forests, for instance, are represented by miniature

trees. The purpose of this kind of representation is to make the landscape of the imaginary world as alive and real as possible. Furthermore, as Lee D. Rossi¹³ observes, there is on the maps "an abundance of strange place names", which breathe life into the geographical regions by giving them historical, political and natural significance. As the members of the fellowship of the Ring travel throughout Middle-earth, the reader is better acquainted with these places as he is provided with further, elaborate information.

Place descriptions occupy a large part of *The Lord of the Rings*. Their role in the story is to convey to the reader the sense that these places are real. Tolkien's descriptions are detailed and given with an emotion that creates the impression he has actually been there. One of the best examples is the description of the approaches to the Morannon, the desolation that lay before Mordor:¹⁴

Here nothing lived, not even the leprous growths that feed on rottenness. The gasping pools were choked with ash and crawling muds, sickly white and grey, as if the mountains had vomited the filth of their entrails upon the lands about. High mounds of crushed and powdered rock, great cones of earth fire-blasted and poison-stained, stood like an obscene graveyard in endless rows, slowly revealed in the reluctant light.

It is important that the landscapes of Middle-earth, even though they belong to an imaginary world, do not appear alien to the reader. The desolation before Mordor resembles places on Earth which have been devastated by industrialism or warfare. Tolkien himself wrote that the description of the approaches to the Morannon may "owe something to Northern France after the battle of the Somme"¹⁵ where he had fought in 1916. Beautiful

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landscapes do not appear alien either. In the earthly paradise of Lothlorien "the shapes seemed at once clear cut, as they had been first conceived" but still Frodo realises that he "saw no colour but those he knew, gold and white and blue and green"¹⁶. The plants and animals of Middle-earth are the same that exist in the real world, only they are enriched and sometimes elevated. Tolkien had supported in his essay *On Fairy-Stories* the idea that fantasy holds more realism than the modern world, and wrote characteristically: "The notion that motor-cars ... are more real than, say, horses, is pathetically absurd"¹⁷. Tolkien's fantasy stories are concerned with horses, trees and high mountains to a far greater extent than the modern world is. Thus, it is not surprising that Bratman¹⁸ finds Middle-earth "more real than our own reality, and brighter". The realism of Tolkien's world is strengthened by the historical information contained both in the narrative itself and in the appendices. There are several parts of the story where the reader is provided with details concerning the history of Middle-earth. Faramir, in his talk with Frodo and Sam, gives an account of the origins of the states of Rohan and Gondor¹⁹. There is also a great amount of historical information given in the council of Elrond, concerning the first war with Sauron and other more recent events²⁰. In the appendices, there is further information on such matters as the Kings of Gondor and Rohan or the wars between Orcs and Dwarves, and there is also a chart which puts the various events of the Second and the Third Ages of Middle-earth into chronological order²¹. An examination of the history of the secondary world shows that its sense of reality is not only a matter of its being detailed. The historical events are described in an almost scientific manner. The races of Middle-earth have endured wars, famine and disease, and have often been forced to migrate in order to escape these and other calamities. Barbarian tribes have invaded their lands, alliances have been forged and traitors have appeared. In general, the history of the secondary world is based on reason, taking into account all the

factors that influence it, such as the need for survival or the desire for power. Above all, the history of Middle-earth has been marked by the struggle between two conflicting forces, Good and Evil. One of the most important qualities of *The Lord of the Rings* is that it has the sense of being a part of this ancient struggle. The present story is simply a continuation of a larger story that is often referred to in the text but is never fully related. As T.A Shippey puts it, the book has a "Beowulfian impression of depth, created as in the old epic by songs and digressions like Aragorn's Lay of Tinuviel²², Sam Gamgee's allusions to the Silmaril and the Iron Crown²³... and dozens more"²⁴. The story of the Ring is presented as another part of the everlasting struggle of the 'good' races of Middle-earth against Evil, a struggle which is as ancient as the beginning of time, when in the First Age, Morgoth, the first Dark Lord, "of whom Sauron of Mordor was but a servant, dwelt in Angband in the North"²⁵. By making allusions to a remote, almost mythological past, Tolkien creates the impression that his "story is not in the air"²⁶. Thus, the secondary world becomes even more convincing, creating a vast scale of time.

A fully imagined fantasy world must have its own imaginary languages. In *The Lord of the Rings*, the peoples of Middle-earth use various languages, from the Black Speech of Mordor to the Elvish *Quenya*. These languages are not simply random strings of sounds, but are based on specific phonological patterns. Tolkien used his own linguistic knowledge in order to design his invented languages. Two of them, the *Sindarin* and the *Quenya*, had "reached a fairly high degree of organisation"²⁷. What makes Tolkien's invented languages even more convincing is that each has its own distinctive sounds. Rossi points out that the Black Speech of Mordor, "with its concatenation of low and back vowels and plosive and sibilant consonants" seems to be "the very language of hell"²⁸. Truly, the inscription of the Ring, which is in Mordorian, sounds very unpleasant: "*Ash nazg durbatuluk, ash nazg gimbatul, ash nazg thrakatuluk agh burzum-ishi*

krimpatul"²⁹. The Elvish speech, on the other hand, is highly musical: "Elen sila lúmenñ' omentielvo"³⁰. The languages of Middle-earth seem to fit perfectly its races, good and evil. Thus, they become as convincing as possible. Tolkien invented also two alphabets, the *Tengwar* and the *Cirth*, which appear in the story³¹, and are explained in the appendices³². The different races of Middle-earth communicate with the *Westron*, the Common Speech. Tolkien explains that the text is actually an English translation of the Common Speech, and gives an account of how he translated names and which linguistic patterns he used for this purpose³³. In general, the languages of Middle-earth are described in detail and make the secondary world even more credible. The races of Tolkien's world, apart from having their respective languages, have also their respective social structures. The Shire society is pastoral and conservative. Its inhabitants are simple, rural folk, with strong family ties. There is no government, but the Hobbits are peaceful and lawful by nature³⁴. The Elven societies are also simple, but they do have some kind of authority, though not absolute. In Lothlórien, for example, there is Lord Celeborn and Lady Galadriel. Elves worship Nature and their role in the world is the preservation of natural life. Human societies resemble medieval Europe. They have many feudal domains which are ruled by a monarch who is supposed to be the representative of the people, responsible for their welfare. Most of the societies of Middle-earth are patriarchal, especially the dwarven, where males constitute the two thirds of the population. The Orcs are described as brutal, evil creatures, "hating even their own kind"³⁵, the natural servants of Sauron. Tolkien gives many details concerning the habits of his races, such as the Hobbit custom of giving presents on their birthday, the dwarf's love for stone and their subtle craftsmanship, and the Elven practice of baking the waybread *lembas*. Thus, the peoples of Middle-earth are not mere bodies but social beings, with their own culture. Their description is detailed, based on reason, and therefore realistic and credible.

* "One Ring to rule them all, One Ring to find them, One Ring to bring them all and in the darkness bind them".

** "A star shines on the hour of our meeting".

Realistic fantasy ...

Failure to understand that Tolkien's world has its own social structures may be the reason that led certain critics to make some rather unfair judgements. J. W Lambert commented that *The Lord of the Rings* has "to all intentions and purposes no women"³⁶, and Catharine Stimpson found Tolkien "blandly, traditionally masculine", and his women "the most hackneyed of stereotypes". Even though both comments are not entirely fair, it is true that there are few female characters in the story, and only one, Eowyn, is active. The story was written by a man and, naturally, it is seen from a male point of view. Still, what for Stimpson is 'traditionally masculine', for Tolkien is mere necessity. His world is patriarchal, as the real world has been in the past. In such a world it would not be credible if in the journey to Mordor Frodo was accompanied by women, or if women participated in the battles he describes. Eowyn, the niece of King Théoden, is the only active female character, as she rides in disguise with the army of Rohan and slays the Nazgûl Lord in the battle of Pelennor. In order to achieve this she had to conceal her female identity, because women were simply not expected to participate in fighting. Her own words to Aragorn reveal the social status of women in Rohan: "All your words are but to say: you are a woman, and your part is in the house"³⁷. Even Lady Galadriel of Lothlórien, though infinitely wiser than Lord Celeborn, says that "the Lord of the Galadhrim is accounted the wisest of Middle-earth"³⁸, acknowledging in this way his authority. Thus, Tolkien stresses

that his world is patriarchal, but Galadriel's superiority is also shown when she corrects her husband's description of Gandalf's choices as "folly": "He would be rash indeed who would say that thing"³⁸. The case of Galadriel, by far the most elevated character in the story, shows clearly that the existence of few female characters in *The Lord of the Rings* is simply due to the social structures of Middle-earth and the theme of the novel, and the reason is definitely not sexism. Above all, Tolkien's invented

racess are 'real', social beings, not politically correct ones.

The races of Middle-earth are not only social, but also 'natural' beings. They seem to be united with the places of Middle-earth they inhabit, and Middle-earth appears to "breathe with the lives of its inhabitants"³⁹. Tolkien's secondary world is, in many ways, 'liveable'. Elves, for example, live in complete harmony with Nature, and so do Hobbits. Most races do not appear alien, as they are humanoid. Yet, the liveability of Middle-earth and its



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inhabitants is apparent even in the case of the tree-like race of the Ents. The Ents are the shepherds of the trees, the guardians of the forests. They have the shapes of trees themselves, and at times they are "growing sleepy, going tree-ish"⁴⁰. After some time they may awake, becoming Ents once again. Ents do not simply live in the forest, they are part of its life. They represent the power of Nature. In the war against Saruman and his Orcs, they attack Isengard and destroy it, taking their revenge for the cutting of the trees of Fangorn forest. At the Hornburg, Fangorn forest marches to battle, surrounding Saruman's Orcish troops. From the shadow of the trees "none ever came again". If one considers the results of the destruction of woodlands in the real world, it is easier to understand the symbolism of the Ents and of Fangorn, and thus the forest's revenge seems an entirely natural event. Life in *The Lord of the Rings* is connected with Nature, and in this way the story becomes credible and the secondary world liveable. With the use of the Ents and other inventions, such as the connection of Evil to the destruction of landscapes, Tolkien manages to give an ecological tone to his novel, strengthening its realism in the process.

By the use of all these means, Tolkien makes his fantasy world convincing and gives the reader no excuse to discredit it. Still, it is also important to convince the reader about the truthfulness of the story's characters, situations and themes. As far as characters are concerned, *The Lord of the Rings* appears in many respects credible. In Tolkien's work "the ordinary and the marvellous ... inhabit the same overarching reality"⁴¹. This is very important for the credibility of the story's characters. Among them one can find a comic Pippin Took, a tragic Gollum, a divine Galadriel, a naive Sam Gamgee, a mad Lord Denethor, brutal Orcs, a treacherous Saruman, and many others. It is a story that has every kind of colour and movement, covering a large variety of characters and situations. Language reflects the different personalities of the heroes and the seriousness of the situations. Hobbits, especially Merry and Pippin, talk "lightly in hobbit-fashion"⁴². Lord

Denethor of Gondor, on the other hand, uses an archaic language. "Didst thou think that the eyes of the White Tower were blind? Nay, I have seen more than thou knowest, Grey Fool"⁴³. Language style also depends on the situational context. Bilbo's birthday party is narrated in a comic manner, whereas in the siege of Gondor the language is elevated and the style epic. Tolkien seems to cover in the text a great variety of different aspects of life experience. In this respect, his characters and situations do appear credible. The credibility of the characters of *The Lord of the Rings* has, however, been questioned. Edwin Muir commented in *The Observer* that the story's "good people are consistently good" and its "evil figures immutably evil". Of course, this comment is not entirely true. Gollum is a villain who nearly repented, and Saruman, who was originally good, betrayed the White Council and sided with Evil. Yet, it is true that most characters are consistently either good or evil throughout the novel. This may not appear credible compared to modern reality, but Tolkien's story does not take place in the modern world. If it was, as Tolkien wrote in the foreword to *The Lord of the Rings*, "then certainly the Ring would have been seized and used against Sauron"⁴⁴, not entrusted to Frodo. The story's good characters, in particular, conform not with modern reality but with a kind of Christian or humanitarian morality which does exist in the real world as a belief. Yet, Frodo's failure to throw the Ring into the Fire shows that even the simple Hobbits cannot remain totally unaffected by the power of Evil. It is really a matter of one's own moral expectations whether he will believe Tolkien's characters or not. One could also argue that situations in *The Lord of the Rings* are not always realistic. Given the circumstances, the defeat of Sauron seems impossible, yet it happens. Though this may not seem realistic, the reader finds it credible for two reasons. First, the possibility of a victory over Sauron, however small, did exist. Second, its being so small made it even more desirable so that the reader is ready to accept it.

The existence of the Ultimate Evil creates further complexities. W.H. Auden had once "asked Tolkien if the

notion of the Orcs, an entire race that was irredeemably wicked, was not heretical"⁴⁵. The answer is that the Orcs were not originally evil, but were corrupted by the Dark Lord in the remote past. "The Shadow that bred them can only mock ... it only ruined them and twisted them"⁴⁶. The existence of the Ultimate Evil personified in Sauron and the inability to use the Ring other than for evil purposes is another matter. The problem can be solved if one considers Sauron and his Ring not unrealistic but 'unnatural'. Tolkien connected the Ring and its Magic to the Machine. "The Machine is our more obvious modern form ... related to Magic"⁴⁷. Sauron and his Ring convey to the reader a "sense of wrongness"⁴⁸. They are the unnatural, brutal force which threatens to destroy the natural world, in the same way that in the modern world the Machine, in all its degenerate forms, threatens the life of the planet. This may be one of the reasons why Sauron and the Ring seem so frightening. In the light of this view, Tolkien's notion of Evil appears if not natural, at least credible within the fantasy world.

The realism of *The Lord of the Rings* is connected in many ways to its thematic concerns. The problems of the secondary world are caused by the same human weaknesses that create 'real world' problems. Rossi⁴⁹ saw the Ring as "the ultimate extension of the human will", the symbol of "the dangers and ambiguities which Tolkien sees in the wielding of temporal power". The destruction of Middle-earth, the wars and the betrayals, as well as the subsequent resistance of the 'good' races to Evil, are the result of the desire for power which transforms the weak into Gollums and the great into Saurons and Sarumans. Yet, power is not the only theme of the story. Malcolm Page⁵⁰ describes the book as "many-faceted: fairy story and history, magical and realistic, pessimistic about society yet hopeful about individuals, escapist fantasy-romance and aware of human truths". *The Lord of the Rings*, with its ecological aspect and the fear of violent change it implies has managed to become "one of the best expressions of a whole generation's dismay at the modern world" (Rossi⁵¹). Readers find the story convincing

because it manages to express their own fears and desires for their world.

The story is also connected to reality in another way, which was first mentioned by W.H. Auden. Auden, who reviewed *The Lord of the Rings*, responded⁵² to the Quest theme: "Life ... is primarily a continuous succession of choices between alternatives ... Mr Tolkien has succeeded more than any previous writer in this genre in using the traditional properties of the Quest". Auden's praise may have been influenced by his personal enthusiasm for the book, but it is true that in the Quest of the Ring the characters must take difficult decisions, political or personal. Gandalf and the Elf-Lords decide not to use the Ring. Frodo, the Ring-bearer, takes the decision not to go to Minas Tirith but to travel to Mordor alone, in order for the Ring to work no more evil. Then he trusts Gollum as a guide to the Land of the Enemy. Samwise Gamgee decides to save Frodo's body from the Orcs even though he thought he was dead, instead of finishing the Quest alone. In general, the characters of the story choose the most difficult roads and are finally rewarded with the fall of Sauron and the destruction of the Ring. Once again, Tolkien's characters appear to conform with human morality rather than human reality. Still, it is unfair to reject their realism. They have fears and weaknesses, they struggle with themselves, and within a fantasy environment their taking the morally right decisions is easier to believe.

What adds considerably to the realism of *The Lord of the Rings* is that even though it concerns itself with

themes which link the story to reality, the distinction between the fantasy world and the primary world is also made clear. The story is by no means a direct allegory. To interpret "Sauron as Hitler, or the Ring as nuclear weapons"⁵³, is a trivial and false reading of the text. The seat of the Evil in the East is a mere geographical convention and is not meant to refer to Nazi Germany or Soviet Russia. With regard to nuclear weapons, when Tolkien began the novel in 1936, they had not yet been discovered. Likewise, Saruman's attempts to create a new breed of Orcs may resemble Nazi genetical experiments in concentration camps, but Tolkien wrote this part of the story before any news of Nazi atrocities had reached Britain. The best comment on the question of allegory in *The Lord of the Rings* is probably that made by C.S Lewis:⁵⁴ "These things were not devised to reflect any particular situation in the real world. It was the other way round; real events began, horribly, to conform to the pattern he had freely invented". Tolkien wrote in the forward to *The Lord of the Rings* that he disliked allegory and preferred "history, true or feigned, with its varied applicability to the thought and experience of readers". Thus, his imaginary world is completely autonomous and the events he relates are treated as history. The story is simply aware of human truths, not dependent on real world situations. The resemblance with historical events, if any, shows only how realistic Tolkien's story is. *The Lord of the Rings* is not of course real history, but an invented myth. Yet, with the use of

credible and difficult to distinguish from history or reality. Tolkien filters the narration through the eyes of the Hobbits, who act as mediators between the contemporary reader and the wonders of Middle-earth. As Rossi⁵⁵ observes, Hobbits "might have been [Tolkien's] own acquaintances". There is something very familiar in their characters, especially those of Sam, Merry and Pippin. In the beginning of the story, they are as ignorant of the wonders of the fantasy world as the reader. Ted Sandyman, when talking to Sam Gamgee in the Green Dragon Inn, questions the existence of Dragons, Elves and giants: "fireside-tales and children's stories". As the narrative unfolds, the reader travels with the simple Shire-folk, meeting new places and people. Tolkien, with the use of Hobbits, manages to retain the mythical aspect of his story without spoiling the sense of reality which he spent so much effort to build. The ordinary and the marvellous co-exist in *The Lord of the Rings*, which is both a mythological and a realistic story.

The Lord of the Rings is a unique fantasy text. Its sense of reality is very strong. Its success in convincing the reader is not simply a matter of applying specific techniques. The book conveys the feeling not of invention, but of discovery. The best explanation that can be found for its credibility is given by Tolkien.⁵⁶ who wrote in one of his letters: "[The stories] arose in my mind as 'given' things, and as they came, separately, so too the links grew ... I had the sense of recording what was already there, somewhere: not of inventing".

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