cock & bull about epic fantasy

by MADAWC WILLIAMS

ichael Moorcock has a well-established reputation as a writer of fiction. In _Wizardry and Wild Romance_ he enters a different field; trying to set himself up as a literary critic. For the most part, he seeks to lay down the law about what is and is not good literature in a field which he labels "epic fantasy". _The Lord of the Rings_ is included in this category, but evidently fails to match Mr. Moorcock's criteria for good literature. In fact he denounces it fiercely.

I do not regard _LotR_ as above criticism. I do regard it as a major work deserving of serious and well-informed criticism. And Moorcock has simply sneered at Tolkien without knowing what he is talking about. He is one of those people who approach every subject with an open mouth!

WWR is in fact a shallow work; the ramblings of a light-weight thinker with a fairly average knowledge of literature. But Moorcock's popularity as a writer will undoubtedly make it influential; widely known and widely quoted. This article can only do a little to undo the damage that Moorcock's foolishness will undoubtedly do. But even that little is surely worthwhile.

Defining the Terms

Firstly, does "epic fantasy" actually exist as a single body of literature that can usefully be considered in isolation? It seems to me a completely artificial category. Modern fantasy and modern science-fiction have never been two sharply distinct traditions - at least not in English-speaking countries. Even H.G. Wells strayed across the boundaries, in short stories like _The Man Who Could Work Miracles_ and _The Magic Shop_. Telepathy and paranormal powers occupy a broad border country between the two.

Is science-fiction necessarily more realistic than fantasy? Some basic science-fiction concepts, such as faster-than-light spaceships or time travel, are flatly against all accepted laws of physics. "Death rays" are a concept that existed long before the laser was invented; and in real-life lasers are not in fact very much like death rays, even though this aspect has caught the public imagination. Anti-gravity, a nineteenth-century notion, is not remotely possible according to current ideas about physics; the "fifth force", if it exists at all, is far too weak to be significant.

Moreover, the _social_ context of science-fiction is often highly unlikely, and has less to do with real life than the better sort of fantasy story. Galactic wars between barbarians in spaceships strike me as a much more improbable concept than Tolkien's Elves. Likewise far-off and strange civilisations where everyone behaves like a 20th century American.

Then again, some works generally recognised as great literature contain elements that

CORRIGENDA

Please accept my apologies for forgetting to number the notes to John Ellison's article. Here is the numbering, for you to write down in the relevant spaces:

1   Page 17, line 3, between 'diary' and the full stop.
2   Same page, par. 2, l. 4, between 'issue' and the comma.
3   Page 19, 1st column, par. 2, l. 4, between '1934' and the comma.
4   Same page, same column, par. 3, l. 3, between 'kind' and the full stop.
5   Same paragraph, l. 17, between 'Tolkien's' and the full stop.
6   Page 18, 2nd column, par. 2, l. 16, between 'suicide' and 'in'.
7   Same paragraph, following line, between 'Catholic' and the full stop.
8   Page 20, 1st column, par. 2, l. 11, between 'book' and 'he'.
9   Same column, par. 3, l. 12, between 'says' and the comma.
10 Same page, 2nd column, after the text's last word.

By this time you should have noticed that <u>**pp. 18 and 19 have been reversed**</u>. So please read the right hand page before the left hand one.

Further apologies are made to John Ellison whose article has been the victim of these mistakes on both occasions.

The Editor.

would be regarded as typical fantasy in other contexts. In both Hamlet and Wuthering Heights a ghost is central to the plot. Magic and spirits are crucial to The Tempest. In Macbeth, there are witches, a ghost and two "fairy-tale" conditions that have to be fulfilled before Macbeth can be killed. A Midsummer-night's Dream is almost pure fairy-tale, concentrating on the relationship between mortals and immortal yet imperfect spirits. Likewise one has The Merry Wives of Windsor, in which someone says "I smell a man of middle earth", (though the "magic" in this case is deceptive, not real).

To take a wider view, Nietzsche's Thus Spake Zarathustra is normally to be found among works of philosophy. But you could equally call it a novel with a strong philosophical content. Or you could place it as a work of science-fiction or fantasy or imaginative literature. You find quite a lot of similar works under these categories - though generally without any hint of Nietzsche's depths of vision and imagination.

The various categories - mainstream, science-fiction, fantasy, historical fiction, thrillers, detective novels, westerns, horrors, love stories, ghost stories, etc. - have meaning only in so far as the publishers believe them to be real, and in so far as the public will accept them. The marketing of books is much easier if they can be sold under one general label or another.

But writers tend to cut across these categories, in so far as commercial pressures will allow. For instance, Robert E. Howard wrote historical romances as well as the "fantasy" Conan stories, and also one western. These various works resemble each other far more than they do other works in their respective marketing categories. Many science-fiction writers also write fantasy and other sorts of novels.

Some "mainstream" writers have also got in on the act. Doris Lessing made her reputation in the mainstream, but her Shikasta series is basically science-fiction, with overtones of fantasy. (Zone One and Two of Shikasta seem to be inhabited by dwarves and elves).

It is notable that Doris Lessing seems to have ignored all the "sophisticated" or "literary" science-fiction. Instead she has picked up and developed the crudest sort of space-opera, as well as some silly UFO and Atlantis mythology.

In my view, her Shikasta books are an interesting mixture of the sublime and the ridiculous. And the good bits are miles ahead of anything Moorcock and his ilk can come up with.

A serious study of any sort of literature should look at what actually exists, instead of what the critic thinks ought to exist. Critics, of course, may try to play down works that seem not to fit - or else to re-interpret them so that they do fit. Moorcock's great weakness is that he seldom even does this much. Facts that don't fit are simply ignored.

Hundreds of thousand of books get written. A few dozen in each century may in time come to be regarded as great literature; a few hundred more as good or serious literature. It is easy to concentrate on the good or great works, a huge and tedious task to look at the typical book of any particular era. Yet it is the typical books that create the actual literary environment in which good or great books get written.

Defining the Undefinable

Critics may draw up categories and draft complex definitions. But actual literature has a totally anarchic character - people write what they are inspired to write. In so far as one work of fiction inspires another, the inspiration is as likely to cut across categories as to be within them. Science-fiction and fantasy is only a real category because large numbers of people choose to define themselves as being part of it (or not, as the case may be). But Tolkien, though he has been highly influential on the science-fiction/fantasy world, does not seem to have been much influenced by it. He was certainly not a part of its social structure, unlike many other writers whose works usually get lumped with his.

In point of fact, Moorcock fails to fully define "epic fantasy". He does say

"I am referring specifically to that body of prose fiction distinguished from myth, legend and folktale by its definite authorship and because it does not genuinely purport to be a true account of historical or religious events. Therefore the Nibelungenlied, La Chanson de Roland, Le Morte d'Arthur by Malory or Le Cid by Corneille are

not fantasy fiction."[1]

Moorcock does not say why each particular work is excluded. Both La Chanson de Roland and the Nibelungenlied are epic poems - though most of us will know the latter only in translation. In point of fact, Moorcock does mention various poetic works later on, ignoring his own criterion of prose fiction.

Definite authorship is also a problem. The original edition of Le Morte d'Arthur, (which is prose), gives its author as "Syr Thomas Maleore knyght". It is generally accepted that this individual was indeed Sir Thomas Malory, as we would put it in modern spelling. Records of the period do mention a Sir Thomas Malory of Newbold Revell; a rather unruly knight who was at various times charged with crimes such as attempted murder and breaking into a Cistercian Abbey. This individual was specifically excluded from the General Pardons of 1468 and 1470; and if he was the man, he was a much more colourful character than most authors.

Then again, it could have been another man of the same name. A future literary critic could get very confused by identifying William Morris, the author of News from Nowhere, with William Morris the Founder of Morris Motors.

In any case, Malory was working with older material. For parts of the work, he draws heavily on French verse versions of the tales; he is halfway between being a translator and an original author. And no one can have any idea whether he viewed his work as fiction, history or something in between. He certainly made his own changes and interpretations of the ancient tales.

To pretend to give an account of actual events is a common enough literary device. For instance, Tolkien treats LotR as a literary creation in his Foreword and as an historic account in his Prologue. In my opinion the Foreword gives his true view - but a good argument against this could be made on the basis of some of his other writings, (The Lost Road, for instance).

An even more complex case are Norse legends. Our main source is the works of Snorri Sturluson, who wrote centuries after Iceland had accepted Christianity, and who very probably did not believe in the literal existence of the Aesir and Vanir. But he makes use of the work of earlier authors, some of whom probably did regard the gods as real and the legends as essentially true. Others may have been using myth as a basis for their storytelling - as authors today may retell or adapt a Greek myth. The line between myth, legend, folktale and fantastical fiction is in practice impossible to draw. Tolkien's concept of "the Pot of Soup, the Cauldron of Story" comes much closer to describing the reality.

Moorcock tries to separate "fantasy" from myth, legend and folktale. In fact all of these things are intimately connected. As for the distinctions between epic fantasy and the remaining (non-epic?) forms, one is left guessing as to just what Moorcock has in mind. One might have thought that epic fantasy ought to have included fairy-tales like Jack the Giant-Killer. But these are not included.

Moorcock's Confusion

Moorcock ends up declaring that the term "epic fantasy" is meaningless.[2] But, he says, we know roughly what is described by it. Indeed we do - but that does not make it a useful category. Works by authors with names beginning with M is a real and definite category, but also a blatantly artificial one. "Epic fantasy" is just plausible enough to be misleading. It cuts modern fantasy off from science-fiction, and then arbitrarily divides "epic" fantasy from other closely connected forms. It tries to link the literature of a great many separate times, but excludes the substratum of myth that is the strongest real connection between them.

A proper study of the various works and schools of writings considered would be vastly more complex than Moorcock's work. It would have to recognise that there are at least as many connections with mythology, religion, philosophy, historic fiction, adventure stories, serious literature, poetry, etc. as there are between the works he chooses to lump together.

"Fantasy" writings may have many diverse and unexpected connections. Elements that went into Tolkien's work include World War One, Welsh, a Dutch doll, flying dinosaurs, a picture postcard of a mountain spirit, the French revolutionary calendar, the rise of Hitler, Finnish and a spider that bit Tolkien when he was a young child. But it is not only the category that is false.

Moorcock is a good writer, and one might have hoped that he would give some insights into what it is that makes a good story work. Or perhaps he would provide some fresh and original insight into some well-known tales. Unfortunately, he does very little of this. He gives you opinions, but not reasons. The logic behind his likes and dislikes is far from apparent - though he does have a fondness for shallow fantasy-world imitations of one type of mainstream literature.

Moorcock ignores the possibility that fantasy and science-fiction could have their own logic, quite different from the aims and purposes of the mainstream novel. Stained glass does not follow the same rules as oil-on-canvas paintings; bronze statues have a form and logic that is different from that of stone statues. Moorcock has picked up a rag-bag of notions from one or two types of mainstream literary criticism. He applies them mindlessly to a very different area.

Moorcock is fierce in his denunciations. Thus William Morris is "naïve and silly but essentially good-hearted"[3] for instance. And Gore Vidal is a "provincial American literary snob".[4] Don't ask me what Gore Vidal is doing in a book about epic fantasy. His A Search for the King could quite reasonably be regarded as sophisticated sword-and-sorcery, though I have never seen it marketed as anything other than a "mainstream" novel. But there is no indication that Moorcock is familiar with this work. Gore Vidal simply pops up, and is denounced, for no reason that I could follow. Another of Gore Vidal's work, Messiah, is usually classed as Science-Fiction. But it is definitely not a work of Epic Fantasy.

Mr. Moorcock seems to have great confidence in his own knowledge, taste and judgement. So let us look in detail at some of his attempts at analysis.

Robin Hood and the Hobbits

Moorcock says:

"The appeal of the shire has certain similarities with the appeal of the "Greenwood" which is, unquestionably, rooted in most of us ....There is no happy ending to the Romance of Robin Hood, however, whereas Tolkien, going against the grain of his subject matter, forces one on us - as a matter of policy:

'And lastly there is the oldest and deepest desire, the Great Escape: the Escape from Death. Fairy stories provide many examples and modes of this ....But the "consolation" of fairy-tales has another aspect than the imaginative satisfaction of ancient desires. For more important is the Consolation of the Happy Ending' (J.R. R. Tolkien, 'On Fairy Stories')

The great epics dignified death but they did not ignore it, and it is one of the reasons why they are superior to the artificial romances, of which Lord of the Rings is merely one of the most recent."[5]

I can't really see why Moorcock sees the appeal of placid hobbits in their tidy Shire as being similar to that of Robin Hood and his tough and dangerous outlaws in the depths of the untamed forest. But let it pass. The central point is that Tolkien's essay On Fairy Stories is just that; a description of the fairy-tale tradition as it actually existed, and not an attempt to lay down the law for imaginative literature in general. Tolkien draws a careful distinction between fairy-stories and such things as beast-fables, for instance.

Now it is a fact that most fairy stories do have a happy ending. Tolkien felt that there was a fundamental difference between Little Red Riding Hood as we have it and Perrault's story in which the wolf eats her. The fairy story derives from Perrault, but needed such a change before it could succeed as a fairy story.

On Fairy Stories is a serious analysis of a complex matter. Moorcock's criticism is ill-informed and completely misses the point of what Tolkien was saying. He takes a description of what fairy stories actually were and treats it as if it were intended as a general rule for "epic fantasy", a category that Tolkien never used and would probably not have accepted. Moorcock then notes that some great epics (which no sensible person would ever class as fairy-tales) do not follow Tolkien's rule. That's about as sensible as refuting the Highway Code by pointing out that drivers in France drive on the

right!

What Tolkien says about fairy stories is valid for fairy stories. And it is worth noting that even Shakespeare seems to have followed "fairy-tale" rules in those cases where fantastical material is central to a play. Both The Tempest and A Midsummer Night's Dream have entirely conventional happy endings. In a sense, so does Macbeth. It's not happy for Macbeth, of course - but then neither fairy-tale rules nor the rules of tragedy would allow it to be. But the bold hero MacDuff gets his revenge, the good prince Malcolm wins back his father's throne, and the wicked usurper Macbeth is duly punished. Remarkably enough, the play works equally well if you view it as a tragedy or a dramatised fairy-tale.

(Tolkien, of course, did not think much of Macbeth. That's a matter of taste - and on this point I do not agree with him.)

Robin Hood is not a fairy-tale. it can't even be classed as a fantasy, in the normal sense of the word. The various tales about him are fairly realistic. They take place in real geographic locations - Sherwood Forest and Barnsdale. The social setting of outlaws, sheriffs, monks and knights existed as an historic reality. Allowing for some dramatic exaggeration, the deeds are all perfectly possible. There are a scattering of historical records that may have been references to Robin Hood the outlaw, though both "Hood" and "Robin" were very common names. He may very well have lived and done at least some of the deeds he is credited with. If not, men very much like him lived similar lives during the period the stories are set in. The familiar elements of a fairy-tale are absent in the oldest versions known.

What Moorcock calls "the Romance of Robin Hood" was realistic at the time the stories were first composed; at least as realistic as a modern James Bond story. (And like the Bond tales, one can find similarities to myth and legend, as a sub-structure below the realistic details of the setting.)

It was also a collection of tales. It grew over the centuries, from an original core which did not include either Maid Marian or Friar Tuck. Most of the "core" tales are to be found in the "Geste of Robin Hood", which is thought to have been composed using separate works by earlier authors. There is also a 14th c. reference to "rhymes of Robin Hood" in Piers Ploughman, where they are implicitly denounced in much the same terms as modern adventure tales are often condemned by modern moralists. What we read are particular versions of a very old tradition.

What one has is not a single story but a cycle of stories. Most individual tales of Robin Hood do indeed have a happy ending - though that does not make them fairy-tales, since they include no magic and no fabulous beasts or places.

The "Geste" ends with his death, of course. Such an ending is normal with the tales of mortal men. In fact, it ends with Robin being betrayed and killed by treachery. So, indeed, do most tales about heroic outlaws. It seems to be a part of a standard pattern, though whether the legend of Robin Hood created it, defined it or simply conformed to it is a moot point.

Tragedy and the "Happy Ending"

"The great epics dignified death, but they did not ignore it", says Moorcock. Indeed they did - and one of the best we have is Beowulf, of which Tolkien had a very high opinion. His tastes included both fairy stories and tragic epics, and elements of both found their way into his writings. The Hobbit is not exactly a fairy-tale; it has a predominantly happy ending, but it also includes the tragic and heroic death of Thorin Oakenshield. The Silmarillion is predominantly tragic. Morgoth is defeated in the end, but only after most of the brave elves and men are dead. The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son is even more gloomy; the plundering Vikings slay him and his followers and get clean away.

LotR has a subtler mixture of tragedy and happy ending. Sauron is overthrown, but the High Elves have to leave Middle-earth. So does Frodo, who is wounded beyond any normal cure. Gollum, who might have been saved, is not. Even the tale of Arwen and Aragorn ends in death and tragic parting.

Clearly, though Tolkien made use of the fairy-tale tradition, he did not allow it to confine him.

Also, does a fairy-tale happy ending really ignore death?

What Tolkien actually says in <u>On Fairy Stories is</u>:

The consolation of fairy-stories, the joy of the happy ending ....is not essentially 'escapist', nor 'fugitive' in its fairy-tale - or otherworld - setting, it is a sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur. It does not deny the existence of dyscatastrophe, of sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance; it denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat..."[6]

Only a fool would have failed to notice that the greedy and powerful often do win out. But there is a basic moral sense in most people that makes one <u>want</u> to see them lose. Songs are sung about the man <u>who</u> broke the bank at Monte Carlo; the bank that broke the man is too familiar and does not deserve celebration.

Moorcock, of course, tends to admire those writers who assume that "universal final defeat" is inevitable, and then moan about it in a fairly pointless way. Some of these writers are well worth reading, indeed. But Moorcock seems to think that any other view of the world must be based on naïve ignorance.

Moorcock is a rather narrow-minded character, in fact, even though his narrow-mindedness centers round an unconventional set of beliefs. He seems to have decided to be a literary pessimist while still a teenager. <u>The Golden Barge</u>, published in 1958, expresses this view in quite a sophisticated form. His hero follows a golden barge down a river, having various adventures on the way. The golden barge represents some sort of higher truth. When it reaches the sea, and it seems dangerous to follow it further, he give up.

Moorcock was one of those people who was ready for the transformations of the 1960's before they started happening in society at large. Or rather, he had acquired a pattern of thinking that was marginal at the time he acquired it," but was later to become widespread and powerful.

For most people the sixties were a time of transition. Most of those who went through it have since transformed into something else. Into a great variety of different things - Yuppies, hard-line Leninists, pacifists, Bennites, Kinnockites, right-wing Libertarians, mystics, Greenpeace activists, etc.

Moorcock, however, has hardly changed at all. He remains essentially the same man he was in the late 1950's. Society at large moved close to his viewpoint in the 1960's, and then moved on. Like the clock that is right twice a day, he was in tune with a large section of society at that time, but not before and not after. (Except that societies, unlike clocks, never really repeat themselves.)

For many people, the direction of the changes since the 1960's have been tragic. Not for Moorcock. He has always been a pessimist, regardless of what might be happening in the world at large. Whatever had happened, he would have found reasons for moaning about it. He had decided in advance that there was no point in hoping for a better world. It is hardly surprising that his magazine <u>NEW WORLDS</u> failed in the long run - Moorcock was already prepared for defeat even before the battle had begun.

Tolkien and Tragedy

When Tolkien spoke of tragedy, he knew what he was talking about. Life gave him a very rough ride during his early years. His father died when he was four. When he was eight, his mother was rejected by most of her relatives after her conversion to Catholicism. (In those days there was a bitter cold war between Protestants and Catholics. Each side was likely to view the other side as doomed to damnation and hell). Then when he was only twelve, his mother died, leaving him orphaned.

As a teenager he fell in love, but his guardian, Father Francis Morgan, disapproved and forbade him even to communicate with his beloved until he was twenty-one. He did as he was told, and in the interim gained admission to Oxford University. At twenty-one he resumed contact with the woman he loved. The following year they were betrothed. Unfortunately, the year in question was 1914.

The effect of World War One was utterly shattering on all those who were caught up in it. Not only was it horrific in itself - for most of those who fought in it, it was also utterly unexpected. Many people had

been expecting a war, but not the sort of slow static mechanical butchery that actually developed. And the young men who went through it were far less prepared for it than anyone could be today, when most of us have grown up with graphic and hideous pictures of war, and with the ever-present prospect of a nuclear holocaust.

(Moorcock, of course, has written about the way the world of the early 20th c. was disrupted by the war. But it doesn't seem to occur to him to make the connection between this and Tolkien's work.)

Tolkien completed his degree course and then joined the army, as did most young men of his generation. And most of them perished. Tolkien survived - mainly because he had the relatively good fortune to catch "trench fever" after taking part in the Battle of the Somme. But his closest friends from school all died.

A sense of tragedy was always a part of his make-up. But he refused to surrender to it.

"Superb Countryside"

Tolkien, like a great many other writers, protested against the way in which industrial society had created ugliness on a massive scale. Moorcock takes great exception to this.

"Since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, at least, people have been yearning for an ideal rural world they believe to have vanished - yearning for a mythical state of innocence (as Morris did) ....this refusal to face or derive any pleasure from the realities of urban industrial life ....is a fundamental theme in popular English literature. Novels set in the countryside probably always outsell novels set in the city."[7]

19th c. writers regarded the new cities created by the Industrial Revolution as ugly, polluted and unhealthy. Factual accounts and statistics indicate exactly the same thing. 19th c. Britain contained slums quite as bad as the worst slums of the cities of the present-day Third World. The countryside was no bed of roses, but the 19th c. cities were a recognisable step down. Literature tended to reflect this.

I'm far from sure that it's true that "Novels set in the countryside probably always outsell novels set in the city." He could be right, but he offers no facts to back up his assertion. The 19th c. novels that are still in print today have survived because they were good novels. Some were not at all popular in their own time, and they are a very tiny sample of what people in those days actually read.[8]

Nor do "novels set in the countryside" always have the faults that Moorcock notes. (The faults that writers and critics have been noting for more than a century.) One might cite the works of Thomas Hardy, for instance, which were popular in his own time and remain popular today. Moreover Hardy's work often extended a little beyond the true countryside; into country towns and into cities like Oxford ("Christminster"). There are a great many novels that are neither definitely "city" nor definitely "country", as well as a larger number set in some foreign country, or in some real or imagined past.

The most common attitude to cities in the 19th c. was that you went there to make 'a living, and with luck to grow prosperous. Those who did grow prosperous almost always chose to return to the countryside, or to live in the country and work in the city. If Mr. Moorcock is not aware of this he might do well to study the works of Dickens. Dickens was well able to face "the realities of urban industrial life", he'd grown up with them, and was well aware of both the pleasures and the all-too-frequent miseries.

"If I find this nostalgia for a "vanished" landscape a bit strange it is probably because as I write I can look from my window over twenty miles of superb countryside to the sea and a sparsely populated coast."[9]

Which is very nice for him, no doubt. Myself, as I write I'm looking at a wall made of breezeblocks. But I'd count myself as a fairly fortunate person. As well as living in a reasonably nice part of London, I am able from time to time to visit the superb countryside of the Black Mountains in South Wales. This part of the world is also sparsely populated - because a large part of the population, including my father, had to go

elsewhere to get jobs. It has remained superb countryside because there was no coal or iron under it. Unlike the mining valleys further south, where the landscape has been ruined and the mines are now being closed.

Mr. Moorcock doesn't give the location of the "superb countryside" that he's been enjoying, though a later remark indicates that it is in Northumberland. He seems to think that because he himself is able both to enjoy it and to earn a nice living as a professional writer, all must be well.

"This country, like many others, has seemingly limitless landscapes of great beauty and variety, unspoiled by excessive tourism or the uglier forms of industry."[10]

Well, it isn't in fact limitless. It would be quite possible for industrial society to destroy all the remaining wild places and places of great natural beauty. If this is unlikely to actually happen, it is only because a continuous battle has been fought to preserve such landscape, by people who did not share Mr. Moorcock's smugness about the matter. And even so, a great deal has been lost, and is still being lost, that could and should have been saved.

If someone were to propose destroying the works of Mervyn Peake, on the grounds that there is a seemingly limitless supply of well-written books by good authors, I dare say that Michael Moorcock and others would protest very loudly. But each individual landscape, each place within a landscape, is just as unique and irreplaceable as an author. Perhaps more so.

Beauty and Ugliness

Now let's look at what Tolkien actually said about the ugliness of industrial society.

"In Faërie one can indeed conceive of an ogre who possesses a castle hideous as a nightmare (for the evil of the ogre wills it so), but one cannot conceive of a house built with good purpose - an inn, a hostel for travellers, the hall of a virtuous and noble king - that is yet sickeningly ugly. At the present day it would be rash to hope to see one that was not - unless it was built before our time....Many stories out of the past have only become 'escapist' in their appeal through surviving from a time when men were as a rule delighted with the work of their hands into our time, when many men feel disgust with man-made things."[11]

Tolkien protested against the unnecessary ugliness that industrial society had created. You could take him to be rejecting industrial society in general, though this is less clear. He did not reject advanced technology as such - he was quick to see the merits of the tape recorder, for example.

In any case Tolkien was a philologist and a writer, not a politician or a propagandist. Unlike C.S. Lewis, he did not publicly express his feelings on wider social matters. The basic feeling - that useful things should not be ugly, and that beautiful things should not be destroyed - is a fairly general one, compatible with a great range of social and political views. (Moorcock himself mentions William Morris, who was one of the pioneers of socialism in Britain, and who is claimed as a forerunner by most of the different varieties of anarchism, socialism and communism that exist today.)

A fondness for Tolkien need not imply a rejection of progress - it may or it may not, depending on each individual's viewpoint. Tolkien fans range all across the political spectrum, with varying degrees of interest or indifference to current events.

An appreciation of LotR is certainly quite compatible with an ability to cope with the modern world, and to enjoy it where possible. As it happens, Tolkien is remarkably popular among people working in the computer industry, the most modern and dynamic part of present-day industrial society. I heard of a case where some people were setting up their own computer company, and wanted to use a Tolkienian name. The first 30 they thought of were already in use!

One final point. In the passages I quoted, Moorcock sounds broadly progressive - indeed, progressive in a rather naïve and panglossian way. But in some of his other writings - Byzantium Endures, for instance, or The Golden Barge - he seems to take a very different view, regarding progress as something to be sneered

at. Don't ask me to explain this contradiction. I get the feeling that a great variety of incompatible notions are able to co-exist happily within his brain!

Elric Pooh

"Fiction about kings and queens is not necessarily royalist fiction any more than fiction about anarchists is likely to be libertarian fiction. As a writer I have produced a good many fantastic romances in which kings and queens, lords and ladies, figure largely - yet I am a avowed anti-monarchist."[12]

Thus speaks Moorcock, in Starship Stormtroopers , another attempt at literary criticism. This work covers much of the same ground as Epic Pooh, the relevant chapter in WWR.[13]

Now it is indeed true that fiction about anarchists is not necessarily libertarian fiction. But it can be expected to reveal something of the author's view of anarchists. Anyone reading Dostoyevski's The Possessed might quite reasonably guess that Dostoyevski did not either like them or agree with them.

Joseph Conrad's The Secret Agent is not so hostile - indeed, the author says, that while writing it, he sometimes saw the world from an anarchist point of view. Yet it is not a work that could have been written by a convinced anarchist any more than Chesterton's The Man Who Was Thursday could have been. On the other hand, Ursula Le Guin's The Dispossessed is clearly sympathetic to a variety of anarchist ideas. (I'd be interested to know if the title was intended as a reference and reply to Dostoyevski).

Rulers and Governments

And what about writing about kings and queens, princes and nobles? Many traditional fairy stories are actually about social mobility (though without any threat to the established order). For instance, Cinderella is about an ordinary girl who marries a prince. In many other tales, the youngest son of a poor peasant sets off and ends up marrying a princess and inheriting a kingdom. These, of course, were tales told by and for the lower orders. At court and among the nobility, the heroes and heroines were much more likely to be given a long and impeccable noble pedigree.

Modern authors have varied in their attitudes. One strong viewpoint is expressed in Brecht's The Caucasian Chalk Circle, in which the nobles and hereditary rulers are mostly contemptible. Then again, in Robert E. Howard's Conan stories, the hero is the son of a barbarian blacksmith, and yet is far superior to any of the hereditary nobles and royalty he has dealings with. He usurps a throne, displacing an unworthy but legitimate predecessor. From their different viewpoints - German Communist and American Individualist - they both condemned hereditary aristocracy.

And what was Tolkien's attitude? He seems to blend and combine a number of different elements. The Hobbits have something in common with the heroic peasants who set off and do great deeds. But the hereditary and legitimate element is also present - Aragorn, descendant of Beren and Lúthien, Tuor and Idril, in an enormously long and unbroken line of descent; and Gandalf, an emissary from beyond Middle-earth.

Forms of government also vary. The Shire has a mixed government: the elected Mayor and Shirriffs, together with hereditary leaders like the Thain of the Tooks and the Master of Buckland. Bree seems to have no hereditary ruler; possibly it manages without any ruler at all.

Yet another pattern is seen among the Ents, who have a basic and structureless democracy; an assembly in which everyone has an equal voice. Treebeard as the eldest Ent can do no more than suggest what could and should be done.

Even in the kingdoms of Rohan and Gondor, custom is superior to the will of the ruler. And, for all we know, these kingdoms might include a large number of basically self-governing democratic communities. Bree and The Shire are included in the restored Kingdom of Arnor, without having any hereditary rulers selected or imposed upon them. The same thing could be true elsewhere. It is only in places like Mordor that everyone is regulated and regimented.

In The Hobbit there is an even more interesting case. Lake-Town has a non-hereditary master.

" 'In the Lake-Town we have always elected

masters from among the old and wise.' "[14]

In fact the Master of Lake-Town at the time of Smaug's assault proves to be cowardly and corrupt. Bard the Bowman gets the chance to overthrow this system and set himself as king. He refuses, and instead becomes king of Dale, to which he has a hereditary right. And Lake-Town chooses for itself a new and more worthy Master.

This is significantly different from C.S. Lewis' approach. In The Voyage of the Dawn Treader, the bad rule of the Governor of the Lonely Isles is replaced by an hereditary dukedom. Tolkien and Lewis influenced each other, but their views were by no means always the same.

Class and Kingship

In point of fact, Tolkien is close to the reality of medieval and pre-medieval kingship than most writers who have touched upon the subject. It is usually assumed - even by left-wing writers - that a dominant hereditary monarchy is the norm. But in fact, the Swiss Cantons and the various free or semi-free cities were just as much a part of the medieval European world as kings and nobles.

Nor was there any fixed rule about how kingship was passed on. There were a mixture of notions - that a king was in some way chosen by the people, or was appointed by the chief men of the realm - as Harold Godwinson was - or was selected by the previous king.

Primogeniture - kingship passing automatically to the eldest son of the king - took a long time to get established. It might seem just as logical that a younger brother of the king should take over. This was the earliest system in some countries - and Tolkien uses it for the Elven High Kingship in The Silmarillion.

Tolkien was well aware that kings and nobles could not exist without a lower class or peasantry. He recognised the social realities - though he saw nothing inherently wrong with such a system.

Moorcock has no such awareness. His view of history is one in which the common people do not even exist - or at best are part of the scenery. His heroes are all of ancient aristocratic stock - often, indeed, of a different and superior race! When he writes about kings and nobles, he seems to forget that there are other types of people in the world, apart from a few criminals, servants and hangers-on!

Authors and Politics

Most people can and do enjoy works by authors whose politics they do not agree with. For instance, I dare say that many of those who like the poems of Milton would not agree with his support for Cromwell, his arguments for divorce or his justification of the execution of Charles the First. And Karl Marx liked the works of Balzac, who was on the far right of the politics of his day.

But what is offensive is writers who fly false colours, who proclaim principles that they do not try to live up to. Moorcock has pretensions to be an anarchist. Personally I think that these are no more than pretensions, because he shows no sign of trying to present anarchism as a reasonable or attractive alternative to the present social system. To summarise his view, one might adapt a remark by Karl Marx and say "The point is not to change the world, but simply to moan about it in various ways." Sometimes the moans sound left-wing, sometimes not. But there never seems to be any serious purpose behind them!

Pore Literary Methods

Not only does Moorcock admire aristocrats - particularly sleezy and selfish aristocrats. He also sneers at "the lower order", in a way that does not square with his claim to be a left-wing anarchist. Thus in Byzantium Endures, he has the following:

'I wispered in English to Mrs. Cornelius. "Why do they shoot them so mercilessly?"...She said seriously "They're bloody shit-scared, Ivan. Leo an' the ovvers... They carn't get ther stopper back in..." She screamed with laughter all of a sudden. "Pore buggers!" ...
She sighed. "Well, it woz fun while it lasted...." '[15]

In a book that poses as Moorcock's rendering of

a multilingual journal by a Russian exile, why is it only the speech of a Cockney woman than is rendered phonetically, that is full of "comic" mispronunciations?

Just imagine writing something like this:

He switched on the radio and listened to the BBC announcer reading the news:
"Gud mawning. Hear iz thi nuze.
"tu wimmin hu whur trapt on an i'land faw neerli ait 'owers wer brawt tu safti bie thi ayr si reskew servis juzd a fhew minits agow. Wun ov them iz sed to bi suffering from expozure, bud bawth ar sayf.
"In the Hawse of Comuns yestaday, the Chansellor ov the Exchecker sed he thawt that the reasent bugit had pruved to be a grate suksess. But sum ekonomists hav carst dawt on hiz fawcasts of a stedi drop in the numba awt ov wurk.
Meenwile, thi Bridish Pryme Minizter and thi Eyrish TeaShark hav had furtha tawks in Lundon abowt thi Anglow-Eyrish Agriiment. And tu boms explowded owtside a Polees Stashun in Newri."

The rest of the news did not interest him. He began to cook supper.

No one does this to BBC English, of course. It is only ever done to dialects of English, and then only as a way of mocking and sneering at such dialects. Usually, it is done against poor people or against some sorts of foreigner.

This method has been widely criticised in recent years. Its basic absurdity has been pointed out many times, especially by people on the political left. Most writers have now stopped doing it. But not Mr. Moorcock, despite his radical pretensions.

And in fact, his rendering of Cockney isn't even really based on specific East End pronunciations. Everybody pronounces "was" as "woz". And "poor" and "pore" are pretty much the same word, when spoken with a standard English accent.

Orcs United?

'...but once again I saw all the old arguments being aired: Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Frank Herbert, Isaac Asimov and the rest, bourgeois reactionaries to a man, Christian apologists, crypto-Stalinists, were being praised in IT, FRENZ, and OZ and everywhere else...I started writing about what I thought was the implicit authoritarianism of these authors and as often as not found myself being accused of being reactionary, elitist or at very best a spoilsport...'.[16]
'...Sauron and his henchmen are the old bourgeois bugaboo, the Mob - mindless football supporters throwing their beer-bottles over the fence...'.[17]
'...there is Tolkien and that group of middle-class Christian fantasists... whose villains are thinly disguised working class agitators'.[18]
'Tolkien...sees the petite bourgeoisie, the honest artisnas and peasants, as the bulwark agaainst Chaos...solid good sense opposed to a perverted intellectualism'.[19]

Moorcock has evidently picked up the style of one variety of left-wing literary criticism. The style, but not the substance. The words and phrases he uses are expressions of a definite view of the world. But Moorcock's own view of the world is indefinite and ever-shifting.

Moorcock is not a leftist. He is parasitic upon the left; picking up phrases and stray ideas, but giving nothing back. He neither accepts nor rejects the standard left-wing view of the world; he simply messes about with it and makes it totally incoherent.

Would it be pedantic to point out that football hooligans, trade union militants and perverted intellectuals are three essentially separate groups of people? Or that the Orcs do not greatly resemble any of these, being largely based on the traditional image of brigands, bandits or evil goblins?

In point of fact, while Lewis and Tolkien were indeed, Christian, (though not of the same denomination), Asimov is Jewish, and Herbert has a personal faith that owes more to Islam and Zen Buddhism than Christianity.[20]

For that matter, how can anyone be a "bourgeois reactionary" when "reactionary" indicates a desire to return to an earlier form of social order, and Britain and America remain bourgeois, in the normal sense of the term?

Nor can I see why any of those he mentions should

be be regarded as Stalinists, "Crypto-" or otherwise. To the best of my knowledge, none of them have ever claimed to be Marxists of any variety. Nor has anyone ever described them as such.

Perhaps Mr. Moorcock is applying Humpty Dumpty logic: he does not like Stalinists; he does not like these authors; therefore these authors are Stalinists! Q.E.D.

Faceless Men

To be fair, one must also mention one place where Moorcock shows some insight about Tolkien. Speaking of an evil character in a Gothic novel, he says:

'Throughout this long book Melmoth can also be seen as the Faceless Man of our dreams, the unknown aspect of ourselves which is symbolised as well in the figure of the cowled monk or the shadowy, omniscient spectre. He appears in many modern fantasy tales - Leiber's Sheelba of the Eyeless Face in the "Gray Mouser" stories, Tolkien's faceless villain in The Lord of the Rings, Paul Anderson's Odin in The Broken Sword...There is a link, too, perhaps, between the unknown aspect and the "evil" aspect of ourselves in that we sense the presence of the unknown aspect and fear it, judging it evil. Robert Louis Stevenson might have experienced such a process... in Dr.Jekyll and Mr.Hyde.'[21]

Now this is quite perceptive. Had Moorcock only developed this line of thought, one might be willing to forgive him a great deal (incuding anglicising Poul Anderson's names).[22] The "faceless villain" in The Lord of the Rings might be a reference to Sauron, to the Witch-King or to one of the other black riders, but I would judge it to be a valid comment in any case.[23]

Ursula K. Le Guin says somewhere that Sam, Frodo and Gollum are, in a sense, different aspects of a single individvidual. It had occurred to me even before I read Moorcock's remarks that perhaps Sauron was also part of the process. Frodo sees the danger of becoming like Gollum; he is also tempted by the thought of becoming like Sauron. I was surprised to find the same notion in Moorcock's book, in a broader and better-developed form. Doubly surprised that Moorcock could see so much in one chapter, and so little in the passages that I quoted earlier. It's as if the Moorcock who wrote about faceless men never talks to the Moorcock who wrote Epic Pooh.

A Sideways Look at Lovecraft

Moorcock is a muddled writer, who can have a good insight at one point and then forget about it elsewhere. The concept of the "unseen self" might also seem highly applicable to Lovecraft's Mythos. But Moorcock does not see it this way. In WWR he sneers at Lovecraft, and in Starship Stormtroopers he says:

'In a writer like Lovecraft a terror of sex often combines (or is confused for) a terror of the masses, the "ugly" crowd. But this is so common to so much 'horror' fiction that it's hardly worth discussing...Lovecraft appeals to us primarily when we are ourselves morbid. Apart from his offensively awful writing and a resultant inability to describe his horrors (leaving us to do the work - the secret of his success - we're all better writers than he is!...)'[24]

If Lovecraft were not a good writer, how is it that he has survived and remained popular when most of his contemporaries are out of print and forgotten? As Moorcock says, sexual fear has a part in a great many horror stories.

Moorcock speaks of "terror of the masses". He does not say quite what he means by this. He could be referring to the theory that Frankenstein's Monster is rooted in a fear of the "lower orders". But the same analysis makes Count Dracula a representative of the ruling classes and exploiters.

Accepting that a class analysis is valid for some monsters, that does not make it valid for Lovecraft. Stretching a point, one could see the Shoggoth as a sort of unpleasant arcane proletariat. But the class basis of Cthulhu, the Mi-Go or Yog-Sothoth is by no means clear to me.

Moorcock mentions the obvious faults in Lovecraft, and misses the interesting fact that Lovecraft does successfully create a sense of cosmic horror; creatures that seem to have a real existence beyond the scope of the human imagination.

I would not claim to know how Lovecraft does it. It's hard to see how a writer can ignore so many of the basic rules of good writing, and yet produce a sense of unease for a high proportion of those who read him. But it is undeniable that this is the case.

Actually, Moorcock's own remarks about the "faceless man" give a clue. Part of the trick must lie in letting the reader attach his or her own fears onto the horrors that Lovecraft hints at. But if that were the whole of the method, then any hack writer could write stories as enduring and popular as Lovecraft's.

Lovecraft is clearly not to Mr. Moorcock's taste - not even in his morbid moods. But Mr. Moorcock's personal feelings are not a reliable definition of universal truths. No writer is so great as to be admired by everyone, or even by all persons of good taste. For instance, Tolstoï argued that Shakespeare was actually a bad and worthless writer, but most people continue to have a high opinion of both Tolstoï and Shakespeare.

Literary criticism is plagued by theorists who develop a theory to explain why certain well-admired works of literature are good, and then use this theory to argue that other well-admired works of literature are bad. Not everyone does this. Some are wise enough to see that a theory that offers deep and genuine insights into some works may not work at all for other works that are equally good. But far too many writers and critics confuse partial truths with absolute truth.

Moorcock follows this tradition - but he simplifies it. He does not develop a theory: he simply makes assertions. He does not like Lovecraft's works: therefore Lovecraft is a worthless writer; therefore all those who find something singular and disturbingly powerful in Lovecraft's works are fools!

Damning Dunsany

Moorcock also sneers at Dunsany. He accuses him of prose inspired by railway journeys and composes a poem to emphasise the point:

"Up from the platform and onto the train
Got Welleran, Rollory and young Iraine.
Forgetful of sex and income tax
Were Sooranard, Mammolek, Akanax:
And in their dreams Dunsany's lord
Mislaid the communication cord."[25]

The names have a rhythm; railways also have a rhythm. It is doubtful that there is any deeper connection. Most poetry has a rhythm, though rhythm and rhyme are out of favour with some modern poets. (As indeed is reason).

It is easy to play the same games with Moorcock's own creations:

A trip along the railway
With torturer and sleezy fey
(Past peasants full of resignation
And no ideas above their station);
With Jerry, full of gloom and ire,
Gloriana's unholy Quire;
Un-grey Dorian, Corum true,
Erekose, Elric - Elric too?
To Tanelorn, where shadows leak
(For Melniboné, change Mervyn Peake)
Being a single person
They can get a cheap excursion!

Dunsany was a pioneer. It is easy to compare him unfavourably with later writers in a field that he helped open up. Moorcock stamps round well-trodden ground. There is little in his work that was not already present in the works of James Branch Cabell, for instance. Except that Cabell knew a great deal more, and was much less pretentious.

Who Dares, Whispers

Moorcock seems to have a strange hang-up about Winnie-the-Pooh. He really hates the Pooh stories. One might have thought that the Pooh books are fine for the young children who read them. If children start off with stuff like Pooh, there are more likely to read the world's great literature later on. The stories are limited, of course, and somewhat soft. But after all, what sort of literature is likely to be enjoyed by small children? Would you read them Dostoyevski, maybe?

Moorcock sees a similarity between Pooh and the Hobbits. The similarity is a very minor one. Both draw on the English fairy-tale tradition, but they use it in

very different ways. Tolkien used it to create the Hobbits' Shire, which served as a useful stepping stone to the stranger and more epic-heroic events of the War of the Ring.

Moorcock says:

'The humour is often unconscious because, as with Tolkien*, the authors take words seriously but without pleasure:

"One summer's evening an astonishing piece of news reached the Ivy Bush and Green Dragon. Giants and other portents on the borders of the Shire were forgotten for more important matters: Mr. Frodo was selling Bag End...Just why Mr. Frodo was selling his beautiful hole was even more debatable than the price..." '.[26]

Unconscious humour, Mr. Moorcock? If you can't see that the author is well aware of the comic absurdity of much of what the Hobbits do, then you have understood very little. And do you suppose a writer who took no pleasure in words could come up with a name like Sackville-Baggins? "Sackville" is of course a pseudo-French rendering of Baggins.[27]

Or what about the Proudfoot family? In his farewell party speech, Bilbo refers to then, quite correctly, as Proudfoots. But one of them shouts out that it should be "Proudfeet". This is a moderately good joke; it also points out the complexity of English plurals. (Myself, I have always wondered why we have mice infesting houses, rather than mouses infecting hice.).

Perhaps Tolkien's humour is too subtle for Michael Moorcock to follow. Moorcock's own writings tend to run to weird extremes. He has a talent for the wildly improbable and extra-ordinary, but very little for the sort of not-quite-real settings that Tolkien used so well.

Mr. Moorcock adds the note that:

"The Silmarillion (1977) is, of course, the finest proof of his argument."[28]

This would be surprising, to anyone who hadn't worked out that any bit of evidence will be treated as proof by Mr. Moorcock, once he has made up his mind on a matter.

In fact, we know from The Silmarillion that Tolkien began with tragic and epic-heroic works, staring with The Fall of Gondolin. But he found that most people failed to understand them; in those days, myths and stories based on myths were much less familiar than they are today. Tolkien's works were too far away from the normal world, and from fictional writing as it existed then. He worked on The Silmarillion as a labour of love, with little hope that it could ever be published (let alone bring him fame).

The Hobbits provided a bridge between the familiar world and the world of The Silmarillion. Tolkien was not at first sure that the two were connected. He did not set out to write stories of little people in an almost -familiar world having adventures in some grand remnant of the epic wars between Morgoth and the High Elves. That's just how it came out; The Hobbit has an echo of the world of The Silmarillion, and LotR developed as a hybrid of the epic and the children's story.

Nowadays, any writer can leap right into an epic -heroic world, with some hope that the reader will accept this and not get completely confused. Partly, this is because of all the stories in this vein that have been written since The Hobbit:not just the superior ones we can still read today, but also the well-forgotten trash. The idea of an epic-heroic world is now almost commonplace.

Even so, part of the strength of The Hobbit and LotR comes from the very fact that we start off among the Hobbits, who are perhaps just one step away from ourselves. The tale leads us another step, and then another, into less and less familiar territory. And because the journey is gradual, we are less inclined to view Elves and Orcs and the like as unreal. Tolkien has made for us a road to Middle-earth!

Moorcock the Pretender

Moorcock says:

'The little hills and woods of that Surrey of the mind, the Shire, are 'safe', but the wild landscape everywhere beyond the Shire is 'dangerous'. Experience of life itself is

dangerous. The Lord of the Rings is a pernicious confirmation of the values of a morally bankrupt middle-class.'[29]

Firstly, the Shire and the surrounding lands are based on real landscapes in and around Oxforshire, which was where Tolkien lived much of his life. Moorcock should know this; enough people have pointed it out. Surrey - much less rural, and on the other side of London - is something completely different.

Secondly, wild or semi-wild landscapes are dangerous. Any countryside can be dangerous. Even simple activities like hill-walking or pony-trekking require that you treat the land with some respect - if you want to come back alive, that is. Even soldiers on training exercises, fit young men with a knowledge of survival techniques, will sometimes get themselves killed by not treating a wild or semi-wild environment with as much respect as it deserves.

For that matter, experience of life is also dangerous. If you leave the settled and conventional ways, you may see strange and wonderful things, but you will also pay a price. You may think that the journey was well worth the price - as does Bilbo when he returns to Bag-End. But to suppose that experience of life will not be dangerous is sheer deception.

It was with good reason that Nietzsche said "Live Dangerously". Moorcock pretends to be someone who lives dangerously. But I don't think he is, really. He presents himself as a bit of a radical, which is perfectly acceptable in conventional literary circles. To be a substantial radical might make you impopular. To be a serious conservative might also make you unpopular. But to play trivial games with radical or reactionary ideas, as Moorcock does - that's fine. And it's about as dangerous as swatting flies!

To speak of one group of people as "morally bankrupt" implies that there are other groups who are morally sound. But there is no sign that Moorcock sees anyone or any group as being sound or hopeful. Once again, he is using bits of simplistic Left-wing jargon, without in fact accepting the beliefs that lie behind the jargon.

As for serious Marxist or radical analysis of literature - that seems to be quite outside his range. Given the hash he has made of the simple stuff, this is probably just as well.

High Art and Low Art

There have been various attempts to make science-fiction and fantasy conform to what are regarded as good literary standards. Moorcock follows this trend, as well as he can. But even when it is done with real learning and scholarship, I would regard it as a doubtful practice.

Even the best literary criticism can only describe what has already happened. Most of it concerns literary forms that have been fully analysed, digested and assimilated. Works of fantasy and science-fiction tend not to conform to these norms. Sometimes because they are low-grade and crude, other times because they are developing in interesting new directions. And both these things may be true at the same time.

In the Elizabethan age, high art was poetry. Drama was seen as vulgar. And indeed, a lot of it was vulgar, and trivial, and of interest only because of its connection with more substantial works. It was the vulgar drama that created the environment in which Shakespeare could develop. Educated opinion at the time rather looked down on plays; and in many cases had rules for proper drama that Shakespeare quite often broke. What he was praised for were his narrative poems Venus and Adonis and Hero and Leander; works that hardly anyone bothers to read today. There is nothing wrong with them as poems, but nothing particularly interesting about them either. They lack the human insights of the plays.

Shakespeare himself seems not to have viewed his plays as anything very important. He took no steps to preserve them for future generations. We have as much as we have, because some of his friends had the First Folio published. It is generally agreed that not everything in it is by Shakespeare. And it may not include the full text of all the plays that Shakespeare wrote. For instance, it has been argued that a substantial chunk of Macbeth was left out, and is now lost for ever.

When plants grow, they tend to produce a lot of dull roots, stems and leaves before they ever put forth

a flower or a fruit. Likewise with new cultural forms.

When the modern novel was developing, educated people knew that it was not to be compared to the essay, the _serious_ literary form. And indeed, a lot of early novels were so bad that no one nowadays reads those books except to get an insight into how the Novel developed.

Cinema was low art in its early days; it was only later that people realised that it could be used for serious drama that would go well beyond the limits set by live theatre. Television began as a vulgar younger brother to the cinema; it was only later that people realised that it was an art-form in its own right.

I suspect that a similar process of evolution is happening with computer adventure games. At present most of them are crude and repetitive: full of orc-slaying and dungeon-searching. But some of the possibilities have been explored by Douglas Adams (author of The Hitch-hiker's Guide to the Galaxy, itself now adapted as a computer game). I doubt if he will be the Shakespeare of the computer game - but he may help clear the ground for some such development. Over the next two or three decades - who knows what will happen?

While I was working on this article, it suddenly occurred to me that some of Moorcock's early works - in particular the Jerry Cornelius novels, which I actually never much liked - could be seen as straining against the limits imposed by the conventional book; and as needing a form like the computer adventure to enable them to be properly expressed. But as far as I know, Moorcock has never tried anything along these lines. Indeed, his more recent works no longer strain against the limits. He has mostly gone back to methods of writing that were well established in the 19th c., with a single narrator and a single narrative thread.

Gollum as Stream-of-consciousness

Stream-of-consciousness is a 20th c. term for a method that had in fact been used in earlier times, an attempt to represent something of the process of thinking, instead of setting it out in neat and tidy forms. Thus instead of saying:

'John went to the market square to meet Mary. He was a little worried not to find her there. To pass the time he had a cup of tea. After an hour he was very worried indeed.',

one might say:

'Going along to the market square; Mary must be there; hell she isn't; wait about for a bit; where is she? have a cup of tea, rotten tea, overpriced tea but does it matter where is she; it's been an hour now where is she?'

Now consider Gollum. His thinking, like that of other characters in The Hobbit and LotR, is described in fairly conventional terms. But his speech, his endless monologue, does have some of the elements of stream-of-consciousness. I'm far from sure whether Tolkien did this deliberately. It could be that he was poking fun at more fashionable forms of literature - as Lewis did in his interesting short story The Shoddy World. Or it could be that he would have denied any such connection, had someone suggested it. It's hard to know.

What I would say is that Tolkien could probably not have created Gollum's odd monologue unless he had come across "stream-of-consciousness". It is Gollum's mode of speech which defines him and makes him the most memorable character in both The Hobbit and LotR. That is perhaps more important than Tolkien's attitude to the literary method (which can make a normal story more or less unintelligible if it is used with too much enthusiasm).

Home Movies of the Soul

Moorcock says:

'Epic fantasy can offer a world of metaphor in which to explore the rich, hidden territories deep within us. And this, of course, is why epic romances, romantic poetry, grotesques, fascinated painters and illustrators for centuries, just as fabulous and mythological subjects have always inspired them, as representations of this inner world.'[30]

There is only one use of fantasy, and not necessarily the most serious or productive one. People usually find their own "inner world" fascinating. Others may not share this feeling - at least unless it ties into some aspect of their own "inner world".

Orson Welles in Citizen Kane builds the whole film

around an enigma. The man had said "rosebud" just before he died; what did he mean by it?

Within the framework of the film, the investigators can not resolve the matter. "Rosebud" could be a reference to hundreds of different things; they cannot deduce what it meant in Kane's personal symbolism. The audience would be equally baffled, except that the solution is suddenly given at the very end of the film. A very unexpected solution - it is in fact the name of a toboggan. But it is not trivial; in a way that I won't try to summarise here, it 'ties together the disparate elements of the film and illuminates the complex character of Kane.

These days you get a lot of books and films that leave out the essential explanation, that never bother to fill out the meaning behind their personal symbols. They expect the audience to know. But symbols do not have a single meaning. A picture of a glass of red wine might suggest Holy Communion to one person, a nice meal in a restaurant to another, drunkenness and oblivion to a third. If the film-maker in fact intended it as a reference to the wine-adulteration scandals that happened a few years back, the audience is likely to get very confused!

Explorations of inner worlds tend to become baffling, trivial and subjective; home movies of the soul. There are few things more fascinating than one's own home movies; few things more dull and boring than other people's home movies.

At the risk of sounding rude, I quite find that writers who set out to "explore the rich, hidden territories deep within..." seem totally self-obsessed, eventually vanishing up their own back passages. It is their right to do this, of course. But pardon me if I am reluctant to follow them there!

This sort of thing is in any case hardly new. Mainstream literature has done it already, at least as well and probably much better. "New Wave" Science-Fiction was a borrowing of some very old waves from other parts of literature and the arts. For instance Robert Graves once said of the poetry of his times: "By the Forties, Nature had gone out; the inner recesses of the soul took her place. Revelations of these tended to be dull, one soul recess much like another - as you may also say about coal-cellars".[31]

The Role of the Artist

The simplest link between the "inner worlds" of two different individuals is via the "external world", which everyone has access to. And there will be a stronger link if the experience is of the same parts of the "external world". The thoughts of a doubting Catholic are most likely to be of interest to another Catholic, or to an ex-Catholic. Likewise the thoughts of a doubting Communist are most likely to be of interest to another Communist, or to an ex-Communist. Meditations upon the validity of transubstantiation (or of the dialectic) will mean little to a reader who barely knows what transubstantiation (or the dialectic) is supposed to be about. It will probably not interest a reader who is indifferent to such questions.

On the other hand, fantasy writing can and does work for people whose "inner world" is quite different from that of the author. Kafka's work, for instance, is without doubt rooted in his experience of being Czech and of being Jewish. It may also owe something to his having suffered tuberculosis: a fatal illness in that era. Fellow sufferers who read The Trial reckoned that this was its true meaning. But it is nevertheless a fact that Kafka's writings can be appreciated by readers who are not Czechs, who are not Jewish and who do not have tuberculosis.

I think that a concept from Tolkien's On Fairy Stories gives the answer. The writer creates a secondary world. This secondary world owes something to the primary world or "external world", and something to the writer's own "inner world". But it is not the same as either.

Now a secondary world is real in its own terms. It may correspond closely to something in the primary world. Kafka's The Burrow is at one level coherent enough for one to get a good picture of the narrator-creature, something like a badger, perhaps. This does not detract from the stories' role as an exploration of a state of mind. Rather, it enhances it; makes it less specific to any human place or time.

Secondary worlds may be quite different from the world of our own experience. Orcs, elves and dragons seem to be absent from our own world. But similar patterns of behaviour are not.

Equally, in the world of the <u>Star Wars</u> films, sound seems able to propagate through a vacuum. This is nonsensical in terms of the laws of physics, but necessary for dramatic effect. For the Death Star to detonate in total silence would seem a terrible anti-climax, and might sharply remind us that what we are actually witnessing is the destruction of a small special-effects·model.

Secondary worlds work because they are both more comprehensible and more generally valid than slices of the writer's own "inner world". Done properly, they are shared between the author and the reader. And the author has a responsibility not to be rude or inconsiderate; to remember that the reader also has a stake in the "secondary world".

Secondary worlds can also have interesting connections with the outside world. <u>LotR</u> is in part derived from Tolkien's own experience in World War One. It is also a commentary on both world wars. Thus, it ties into major events in the "external world" (which will thus be a part of everyone's "inner world", in one form or another). But equally, the derivation is not simple or straight-forward. <u>LotR</u> can be enjoyed by a range of people with very different views of the matter.

Had Tolkien simply given us a slice of his own "inner world", it would mostly be of interest to people whose views and backgrounds were similar to his own. In fact, the secondary world of his writings is appreciated by a great diversity of people. Tolkien was very popular among hippies - a human type that did not exist at the time he conceived <u>LotR</u>. And he was - and still is - no less popular among people who are not at all like hippies, or who have a definite lack of fondness for hippies. This is the strength of good writing; of writing that goes beyond the author's immediate experience and creates a secondary world that has a wider meaning.

Moorcock describes only half of the process. And his own writing, though at times very good, is limited by his inability to step beyond his own familiar environment. No matter how strange or alien the setting, his characters have a strong resemblance to sixties' hippies play-acting in fancy dress. What he thinks very superior is actually no more than half-baked!

Inner Worlds and External Worlds

The reader may have noticed that I have been using the terms "inner world" and "external world" without trying to define exactly what I mean. This is unavoidable; it ties up with the most complex, controversial and fundamental questions in philosophy. Rather than get diverted too far onto these matters, I will say simply that I assume that there is an "external world" that is by and large independent of our own immediate will, and an "inner world" in each person which is compounded of their own experience of the world, their perception of that experience, and of what they <u>wish</u> to do (which will often be frustrated in the "external world").

I do not want to get involved in the respective merits of the strictly materialist view (in any of its versions), of the Kantian thing-in-itself, or of the views of Bishop Berkeley (who held that the world does not exist at all, but is simply an illusion that God maintains for our benefit). These are complex matters, and not really relevant to a discussion of Tolkien and Moorcock.

I simply want to say that, for all ordinary purposes, the world has an existence independent of our view of it. This <u>is</u> relevant, since a lot of Moorcock's thinking seems to be rooted in a confused notion that one can somehow change the world by changing one's view of it.

Lots of people favour some version of this view, although they tend to shrink back from its full implications. It would mean, for instance, that tyrants who killed the messengers who brought them bad news were acting on sound philosophical principles; the news could be seen as having been created by the message, rather than existing as a separate and unalterable fact.

Quantum mechanics is sometimes cited in support of this view. It does seem to imply that the behaviour of an electron can be influenced by the observer's view of it. On the other hand, no physicist supposes that an electron's <u>charge</u> can be influenced by the observer's perception of it. Nor can the speed of light, or many other basic physical constants. And for everything from a dust-mote up to a galaxy, normal rules of cause-and-effect apply.

I would prefer the view of Omar Khayyam:

The moving finger writes; and, having writ

It is notable that we often discover things in the material world that are both more complex and more wonderful than anything we had expected. The moons of the outer planets turn out to be far more remarkable and diverse than even the science-fiction writers had imagined. The rings of Saturn had been perceived as several large rings and they unexpectedly turned out to be a huge number of very much smaller rings, and quite against expectations, the other outer planets also turned out to have rings. At the time of writing, Neptune has not yet been reached: I suspect that it also will surprise us.

To take another example: it is possible to grab hold of a hairy black spider, mistaking it for a blackberry. But the spider will assert its identity as a spider, even though you perceived it as a blackberry. Your own will and perception can not turn it into a blackberry.

This is not to say that perception or view of the world is unimportant. Once you have grabbed the spider, and discovered that it is in fact a spider, your actions will depend very much on your perception of spiders. You may drop it with a scream of horror, crush it in your fingers, drop it and stamp on it, flick it away, study it as an interesting specimen or put it gently back where you found it. This all depends on how you perceive the spider: as unclean, dangerous, unimportant, interesting or a creature with its own right to life. Your perception will determine its future; whether it remains alive or becomes a crushed and dead spider. (And there are even people who would eat it, perceiving the spider as just as edible as a blackberry!)

To link back to Tolkien. Tolkien had a fear of spiders, probably because of the poisonous spider which bit him when he was young. In his "inner world", spiders had a significance which other people might not agree with. But in the secondary world that he created, his feelings about spiders were actualised in monsters like Ungoliant and Shelob. These work fine as monsters, even for readers who do not share Tolkien's feelings about spiders in the primary world.

Tolkien created secondary worlds. Moorcock's creations are muddled mixtures, half-formed secondary worlds combined with lumps that derive directly from his own "inner world". And Moorcock is now looking more dated than Tolkien, as the world continues to change. I suspect that it is Tolkien's vision that will prove the longer lasting.

Fantasy - Origins and Categories

Earlier, I objected to Moorcock's attempts to define "epic fantasy". I am suspicious of all such attempts. This is not say that all categories are wholly unreal. There can be whole groups of stories that are strongly influenced by each other, and not much influenced by anything else. Fairy stories were a fixed tradition which lasted for several generations, became bogged down by clichés, and has largely been abandoned. There are very few modern fairy-tales, though there are many works that owe something to the fairy-tale tradition.

Other traditions are still alive and active. Sword and Sorcery, for instance. Or westerns, which mostly include exactly the same distortions of the actual way of life of the 19th c. American Midwest, But "epic fantasy" is an absurdly broad term, which includes several quite separate traditions and a great many works that belong to no single or definite tradition.

The distinction between <u>fantasy</u>, <u>science-fiction</u>, and <u>mainstream fiction</u> is basically arbitrary. The <u>romance</u> in the broad sense of the term, tales of adventure long ago and/or far away, is a far older form; a form common to a great many highly diverse cultures.

The modern novel represented a break with this tradition. Novels tended to be contemporary, indigenous and socially extended. That is to say, they were about the present or the fairly recent past; and were about places and people familiar to their readers. This went along with the developments of new methods of writing, a vast increase in the amount that was written and the creation of some outstandingly good literary works (together with a much greater number of lesser works, and enormous amounts of worthless and forgotten trash). Our current idea of the mainstream derives from this. But the "mainstream" has always included a few works that used the <u>methods</u> of the novel for the wider <u>subject-matter</u> of the romance.