

# THE USE AND MISUSE OF FANTASY



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*here* is nothing wrong with fantasy, provided it is not confused with fact and is not used in propaganda or in any other form of teaching. Confused with fact it can be very harmful, and used in teaching, whether factual, moral, religious or ideological, it can be positively dangerous.

Nonetheless, fantasy, in its place, has definite educational value. It stimulates the powers of imagery and appeals to the emotions, inspiring self-expression in the visual arts, in fictional writing, in poetry, in music and in drama. Tolkien's works have, without doubt, proved their worth in these respects. But fantasy should be solely for recreation.

Recreation is not a waste of time. It is necessary for the well-being of everyone. Complete relaxation, even if apparently unproductive, is what we all need at times, and incidentally may prove productive for, in relaxation, inspiration often comes unawares. Moreover the reading of fantasy may even provide food for thought and discussion. *The Lord of the Rings* is thought-provoking. In schools, its place is in the library. It should be read at leisure.

Professor Tolkien was quite right to say that *The Lord of the Rings* was unsuitable for children (as distinct from adolescents). In addition to its being horrific and distressing, in spite of some comic relief, its ethical standards are often questionable. It is best regarded as an original legend, remarkably realistic, intended to reflect the ideas and beliefs of the period portrayed. It is more suitable for adolescents, but Tolkien quite rightly did not wish it to be a "set book".

Teaching religion and morality by means of fantasy can be self-defeating as well as dangerous. Sooner or later may come the realisation that it is fantasy, not fact. This may result in the total rejection of what has been taught, with nothing to put in its place. This is a very real danger in modern society. On the other hand, the pupil may cling to a faith which is an unsound basis for good ethical standards, unsound because it has not been based on reality, but on make-believe, or fantasy. Even in the case of Professor Tolkien, we have a devout Catholic eventually wondering whether his religion was "a trap" (Letter 306), and clinging to his faith because "there was nowhere else to go" (ibid). One can feel a drowning sensation when, metaphorically, the ground thus seems to be giving way under the feet, and those of us who have experienced this terrible sensation can sympathise. From time to time throughout his life the Professor must have felt thus insecure, for his Letters reveal a fluctuation between self-contradictory principles and opinions. No doubt he clung to his faith through loyalty.

Like all orthodox Christians, Tolkien had been taught religion through fantasy, and incredible as it may seem today, evidently he really believed that God was male and that Jesus of Nazareth was his incarnation. He wrote that although he had introduced God as Ilúvatar, he had not given him physical form, and that "the incarnation of God is an infinitely greater thing than anything I would dare to write." (Letter 181). He dare not produce a Christ.



But in *The Lord of the Rings*, that is just what he began to do and regretted before he had finished. Right up to the end of Book II, Frodo, as a character, resembled Jesus of Nazareth. He was, in a sense, of lowly and obscure birth, being a 'halfling' of the Shire, whereas Jesus was a poor workman in a Galilean village. He began life as an ordinary boy, gaining knowledge and wisdom as he grew up. As an adult he enjoyed himself in convivial company (though his conjuring tricks were not so well received as those of Jesus at a party!) Then he progressed to outstanding heroism, alone on Amon Hen, his Gethsemane, 'sweating blood' in an agony of fighting his fear, resolving finally to sacrifice himself for his fellows and his cause. From then on, nobody could deter him from the course he had determined to pursue. Tolkien wrote to his son Christopher (Letter 71) that he had become absorbed in Frodo. Later, however, he seemed to become uneasy. Was he afraid he was producing a little Christ? He abandoned him throughout almost the whole of Book III. But he could not abandon him altogether, for he was central to the story. Returning to him at last, he punished the hapless Hobbit (for his presumption?) with the most insupportable tortures, and finally resolved, after much deliberation, that he must not be allowed to triumph (as was indeed his due) either in life or in death. He must neither succeed in his quest nor be brought to final crucifixion, or the equivalent. He must fade "out of the picture" (Letter 246), as, in fact, he never will. He will remain Tolkien's most popular character. Indeed he is almost the only character among lay figures. Lay figures more readily abandon 'free will' and play the role assigned them by their manipulators. But "FRODO LIVES".

So, regrettably, the story of *The Lord of the Rings* fizzles out. But the author's fears of committing sacrilege or blasphemy were ill-founded; for Jesus, hero that he was, was not unique. Thousands upon thousands have followed in his wake, tortured to death for refusing to abandon a cause, and many more must have preceded him. Jesus might say, as poignantly expressed by John Masfield:

*"I have been scourged, blinded and crucified,  
My blood runs on the stones of every street,  
In every town, wherever people meet  
I have been hounded down, in anguish died."*

This is the voice of legions of martyrs, many of them 'despised and rejected of men'. Indeed, many honest Marxists, along with liberal dissenters, were battered to death by Nazi storm-troops. Mao-Tse-Tung's first wife, Kai-hui, was beheaded in Changsha in 1928, in Chiang Kai-shek's butchery of communists, along with a multitude of lesser known martyrs, who like her refused to renounce their principles. Many such were garrotted in Franco's Spain. Thousands have 'disappeared' in Pinochet's Chile, in Galtieri's Argentina. One could go on and on. Their names are legion, though they are mostly unsung. Jesus was a political extremist of his time and his propaganda was subversive. He preached against the status quo (Luke VI, 24 etc.) and for this he was crucified, on the insistence of the wealthy Jews. His popularity as a martyr took root and spread among the slaves of the Roman Empire. But the Pharisee Saul, or Paul, of Tarsus, one of that 'generation of vipers' against whom John the Baptist had warned (Matthew,

III,') changed Jesus' message to one which, while assuming the name of Christianity, would be acceptable to the ruling class. He thought that 'the powers that be are ordained of God... and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation.' (Romans XIII, 1-2)— the direct opposite of Jesus' teaching.

Jesus' method of teaching by means of parables was good because, whether fact or fiction, they were not fantasy. They were based on ordinary, everyday occurrences, containing nothing of magic or the supernatural. In 'modern dress' some can still be used in good, moral teaching. The response he received in answer to the question he asked on concluding his story of the 'Good Samaritan' showed that he was a splendid teacher as well as an internationalist, for the people replied that the traditional 'enemy', in the story, had proved the good neighbour. (This point seems to be generally missed today!)

The fantasy of the personal God, of which we atheists have no concept, appears to be one of the root causes of alienation between women and men. For belief in God as a person is bound to cause some difficulty as to sex. Many, perhaps most, ministers of the Christian religion now concede that God has no sex or gender. Yet they continue to speak of God as 'he'. Most people have been taught from early childhood to pray to God as 'Our Father', and thus have formed the idea that Father is the head of the family and Mother a lesser light. Even some women have grown up believing that woman's 'natural role' is to be submissive to man! This idea is not natural, but implanted and cultivated. A human being knows mother before father and turns primarily to mother for sustenance and help. Even an adult, female or male, in extremis naturally calls upon Mother rather than Father. There is every indication that the earliest concept of a universal parent was a Mother, and that a universal Father (originally her Son) was deliberately invented to replace her, to keep women in subjection to men. Matriarchy preceded patriarchy, and it is quite probable that the first recognisable human being, constantly and vainly sought, was female. The ascendancy of men over women appears to have been part of the Fall, which took place as humankind changed from a hunter-gatherer economy to an agricultural economy. When all were hunters and gatherers, there was little or no private property and there was human equality. But with agriculture, private property became all-important, and a woman became a man's possession, along with his house, his ox and his ass. This concept of the Fall is a theory based not on fantasy, but on evidence. Now it is our task to win back that human equality, as brothers and sisters in one family, that existed before we fell. (Collected works of Marx and Engels, also research by Kate Millett and Elaine Morgan).

Jesus had remarkable understanding of women and sympathy with them in the ancient world of the 'Middle East' in which he lived. He preferred to talk and discuss with them rather than to be served by them (as illustrated by the story of Mary and Martha). But a man brought up as an orthodox Christian rarely has much empathy with a woman. Professor Tolkien himself believed that the 'friendship' that should be possible between all human

beings is virtually impossible between a man and a woman (Letter 43). He puts this down to the Fall (probably correctly). He thought that marriages were always a mistake, "even happy ones" (ibid). He did not regard women as equals, but was anxious to treat them with kindness and consideration (as we feel a duty and an affection towards children and animals). It is noteworthy that in his stories, women, with very few exceptions, are nonentities. There is no female equivalent to Iluvatar. There are, apparently, no female Istari, or healers, or orcs, or ringwraiths, or any inhabitants of Mordor. Among "Big Folk" they were submissive, with the single exception of Eowyn. Among the Hobbits they were silly, without exception; for the only one with any spirit, Lobelia, was represented as a ridiculous figure, brandishing an umbrella. This shortsighted anti-feminism results from the Father-God fantasy.

People involved in too much fantasy tend in time to believe it true. Signs of this confusion between fact and fiction appear in the Tolkien Society and even in Tolkien himself. For example he wrote (Letter 78): "There are no Uruks. No human being could be that bad." But if they were inhuman monsters, how were Frodo and Sam able to don their clothes and be mistaken for them? Was Tolkien beginning to believe that these imaginary monsters were real and human? Moreover, in another letter he writes that, in modern human society "some Orc" might seize the Ring. Dictatorship, however, is never seized by an Orc in the real world, but by a human being, possibly with good intentions, whatever the outcome of the dictator's endeavours might prove to be. Tolkien appears to have created a fantasy and then believed it to be true. There are no Orcs in Deutschland, Nippon or anywhere else in the world. Even Hitler was not an Orc. Tolkien described him as "a vulgar and ignorant little cad", (Letter 81), and so he may well have been, though if he had been a tall, gentlemanly scholar his regime would have been just as evil. Lady Mitford, who took tea with the Führer, found him very charming. Others said that he was liable to chew the carpet. He evidently went mad. So did Robespierre. So did Stalin, who, Russians said, suffered from 'occupational disease' (being a dictator). Indeed it must be well nigh impossible for a dictator to remain sane. But that does not make them Orcs. No human being but a psychopath could resemble Sauron, for he cannot be seen ever to have had any good intentions.

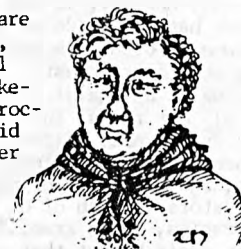
Politically Tolkien appears lost in a maze from which it seems impossible to extricate him. The anarchy which he advocates in Letter 52 would allow the exploitation of the less fortunate by the more fortunate. This very 'laissez-faire' philosophy formed the ideological basis of the modern permissive, capitalist society now dominant throughout the world. It has resulted in deprivation, even starvation, alongside bloated affluence, the acquisition of wealth by almost any means being encouraged or condoned. The chief danger today is the maintenance of the status quo of this gross inequality by means of dictatorship. Curiously, and with characteristic self-contradiction, Tolkien, an anarchist, advocates "unconstitutional monarchy" (ibid), a potential dictatorship, while at the same times a capable monarch could ally himself with the peasantry against tyrannical feudal overlords and thus actually protect the weak from

the strong, while at the same time strengthening his own position against rival aristocracy. The situation is different today. But in politics, Tolkien is lost in a fantasy of the Middle Ages.

Tolkien's fantasies, like most medieval legends tend to glamourise violence, with a class bias, and though this may be intended only to reflect the prevalent ideas of the time, it is very bad for the young in mind, of whatever age, unless counteracted by the teaching of realities. In medieval times the aristocracy and the gentry habitually carried swords, and even the mild little Bilbo's hand strayed to his sword in an altercation with Gandalf! Swords are so beautiful, especially when dripping with human blood? (Why are they never thus depicted in fantasy artwork?) The less fortunate classes could resort only to less glamorous weapons when angered. Frodo, by accident of birth, belonged to the master class and was thus entitled, indeed expected to wear a sword. But, "wise by experience", he did so unwillingly and for ceremony only (Book VI, Chap. 4).



If the young in mind are to read of warfare at all, they should learn the full implication of it. To Shakespeare's credit, in his atrocious play, "Henry V", he did point out that, among other atrocities, the enemy would see "their naked babies spitted upon pikes." This was realism, not fantasy. This method of warfare has been carried out by men, even on "our side", bayonets being used instead of pikes. In addition, babies are blown to pieces by bombs.



BILBO.

It must have been too much fantasy which caused the appalling piece of arrogant jingoism appearing in the article "In Defence of Fantasy", (Malloren 21). Who are "we" who "occasionally go to war"? Not Jessica or I, and I would not align myself with any power having such intentions. With regard to nuclear weapons, as Lord Louis Mountbatten has pointed out, they cannot be used in warfare. They can only cause a holocaust. The nuclear bomb is not more difficult to handle than the Ring. It is extremely simple. But all bombing from the air is simple. It is only necessary to press a button to cause a massacre, so easily done, especially in response to anti-aircraft fire. "By their deeds shall we know them", writes Jessica. By what deeds are we to know the babies torn apart by bombs or spitted upon bayonets? I would suggest that, on the subject of war, Jessica is lost in fantasy and is not facing reality.

In war each side thinks it is right. Who is to be judge? God? But all sides may claim God. In World War I, the following little verse achieved

some popularity: —

"The warring nations sing and shout:  
'Gott Strafe England' and 'God Save the King',  
'God this, God that and God the other thing'.  
'Good God', said God, 'I've got my work cut out.' "

It is presumptuous and arrogant to take for granted that 'our' side is bound to be right and the other side wrong. There are different points of view to any question. International affairs are not so simple, and we no longer see Gil-Galad or Aragorn setting out, clad in glittering elven mail and brandishing beautiful ornamented swords, against a dark, sinister enemy.

Too much fantasy and too little logic results in Orwellian "Doublethink". This is "the power of holding two contradictory beliefs in one's mind simultaneously and accepting both of them." For example, Tolkien wrote (Letter 183) that it is better to be on the "right" side, which might perpetrate evil deeds, than on the "wrong" side which might do good ones. How does this square out with his statement in letter 81: "You can't fight the Enemy with his own weapons without turning into an enemy"? It does not. It is a clear case of Doublethink in an Orwellian nightmare. The wrong means cannot produce the right, and "by their deeds shall we know them".

It seems natural for people to take some interest, and if possible some pride, in their 'roots'. On pariahs, however, it has probably been impressed that they have no pride of ancestry. In the western world some unfortunates have spent much money in seeking out their ancestry and have spent yet more in hushing it up again! But how sure can any of us be of all our roots? Inborn characteristics are derived from genes, which are herited equally from both parents, who each inherit equally from both parents, and so on ad infinitum. The numbers of the ancestors of each of us runs into millions. Aristocracies, it is true, became shockingly inbred, in their belief that their own stock must be superior to all others, until the dangers of too much inbreeding were discovered. But among us plebeian folk it is impossible to know all our multitudes of ancestors. The exaggerated importance given to the male of our species has placed a ridiculous emphasis on the patronymic or father's name, which exists to the present day. A person may be described as 'a Smith' or 'a Jones', sometimes on account of physical appearance (!) though the patronymic obviously applies to only a very small proportion of a person's ancestry. In *The Lord of the Rings*, a Hobbit is represented as having physical and psychological traits according to whether his name is Brandybuck or Baggins or Took, which is absurd. The Hobbit gentry were so inbred that it is surprising how anyone could tell "t'other from which" anyway.

Pride of 'roots' is too frequently not based on true merit. Professor Tolkien was justly proud of his mother as a Catholic martyr, for indeed she was, enduring poverty and rejection by her family in refusing to renounce her faith, and she was also a steadfast rebel against her former indoctrination. But the merit of more remote ancestors may be open to question. He was proud of Viking descent, according to his biographer, but the terrorised population of English coastal towns prayed daily in their churches: "From the plague

of the Northmen, Good Lord deliver us." The Vikings appear to have invented the art of the 'blood-stained eagle', produced by tearing the heart and lungs intact from the living body, an art taught to their descendants in Central America many centuries ago. There is little evidence of that "noble Northern spirit" in its "supreme contribution to Europe"; the methods of achieving supremacy were far from commendable. It must be remembered that most, if not all, human groups all over the world must have similar pride in their own 'roots', in their own folklore and heroic legends, some probably no less horrible than the Vikings!

Too much preoccupation with pride of 'roots' can cause friction, rivalry, even hatred between rival groups. It is far more important to remember that humankind is one family, or in Biblical language: "Of one family created he them."

For this reason, the Scouring of the Shire is one of the most distressing events in *The Lord of the Rings*. Some sympathy is due to the unfortunate immigrants. In their closed agricultural community the Hobbits have no other perspective. Even Hobbits from different parts of the Shire were a "rum lot" to each other. An influx of immigrants who were Big Folk and also alien ("rum") in appearance must have been very alarming. Were they suffering from malnutrition or endemic eye weakness, producing sallow skin and a squint, or were they racially somewhat yellow-skinned, with fraenated eyes? In either case it was not their fault. 'A chap can't help his ugly mug', which, after all, may only appear ugly through unfamiliarity. (It is unexplained why Bill Ferny had the same physical traits, which, in reality, does not necessarily indicate wickedness). Possibly they had emigrated from a less favoured, even starving land in search of livelihood and were exploited by Lotho in his capitalist enterprise, taken over by Sharkey as dictator. Most dictators do not set out with the sole object of causing general misery, though this may be the result of their endeavours. The export of food from the Shire suggests that people elsewhere were starving, while the Shire was comparatively prosperous. The trouble was that the Hobbits were not consulted in any way. The Wise by Experience (Letter 168, giving the meaning of 'Frodo') thought the situation could be settled peaceably and was unwilling for any "ruffians" (immigrants) to be killed, unless necessary to save Hobbit lives. But his 'trigger-happy' cousin, Meriadoc, exceptionally tall for a Hobbit (nearly as tall as Mussolini) and splendidly arrayed, appointed himself dictator and brushed aside this wise counsel, brandishing his gleaming sword and ordering the shooting of anyone who stepped out of line. This was so much more spectacular than a peaceful solution that it pleased the Hobbit population. A battle is more exciting, even if it does cost lives and the unconsolable grief of mothers. The insufferable little Took, who at the very onset ought to have been spanked and sent to his mother, rode to his Great Smials, from the fastness of which his illustrious family had been sniping at the unfortunate "ruffians", prowling around in the hope of begging or stealing food, and from there he returned at the head of his forces, triumphant over his less glamorous and evidently less aristocratic cousin Frodo, so that a battle royal could begin. All Frodo could do was to prevent the slaughter of prisoners and those who surrendered. Much

more could have been made, had the author chosen, of Saruman's inability to pierce Frodo's elven mail. This could have impressed Hobbits and "ruffians" alike enough to make a peaceful settlement possible, with the banishment of Saruman, if past redemption. But Tolkien could not allow this, for it would have meant, after all, a Christ-like triumph for Frodo, the central hero. Instead, he must retire, defeated and broken, ailing and suffering until released by death. Even the King, alleged to be his friend, to whom he owed his throne, never apparently set foot in the Shire to put in a good word for him.

Had their history continued, Hobbits of the next generation would themselves probably be obliged to emigrate to other lands. For the population explosion that occurred after the Scouring must have strained the resources of this little agricultural community very seriously. They might not have been welcome as immigrants in other lands, even though golden-haired and, therefore (?) beautiful. (This Nordic ideal is somewhat disturbing). The Half-Wise (Samwise) and his silly Rosie might possibly have done better than to fill Bag End with their offspring when other Hobbits must have lacked house-room. But in those days it was probably the greater belief that the greater joy consisted in producing the greatest number of children; a belief, unfortunately, still prevalent in some deprived parts of the world, thus adding to the deprivation caused by international exploitation and climatic disaster.

Humankind is one family and it is obviously an evil thing that members of a family should be treated unequally. Wealth should fairly be shared. Jesus was very strong on this point, but until quite recently, Christians had turned a blind eye to the problem, sometimes regarding it as "God's will". The elderly can remember being taught, in childhood, to be "content in that station in life to which it has pleased God to call them." But, even in my childhood, "grace before meat" was revolting to me and still is. Are people thanking God for food when others have none? What kind of parent would thus distribute food among a family?

People have been heard to say: "Well, thank God we're not like those poor devils." Is the wickedness of such a prayer not obvious? In the New Testament the Pharisees are described as "those who thank God they are not as other Men are." Jesus had a word for them (Luke XI, 43-4; XII, 1). This injustice of unequal sharing is a man-made evil which must be removed by human means. Perhaps God is a scapegoat.

Tolkien wrote in Letter 86: "*I fancy that Our Lord is actually more pained by offences we commit against one another than those we commit against himself....*" Now we are on common ground — "*where many paths and errands meet.*" It is very disappointing that he should leave it later, with his condonation of atrocities committed by the "right" side. The only just cause is the cause of humanity.

It has been suggested to us that "God" really means "Good", but unfortunately this appears to have no etymological foundation. Otherwise this explanation would be acceptable to most humanists. We should find it impossible however, to conceive a personification, owing to difficulty of "race" and sex. But a composite power of good existing among human beings is a faith to which many of us cling, and there is so much evidence of good in humankind that this faith cannot be based on sheer fantasy.

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