

"LORD OF THE RINGS" AS TRAGEDY

CAROL JEFFS

"But the 'consolation' of fairy-tales has another aspect than the imaginative satisfaction of ancient desires. Far more important is the Consolation of the Happy Ending. Almost I would venture to assert that all complete fairy-stories must have it. At least I would say that Tragedy is the true form of Drama, its highest function; but the opposite is true of Fairy-story. Since we do not appear to possess a word that expresses this opposite - I will call it *Eucatastrophe*. The *eucatastrophic* tale is the true form of fairy-tale, and its highest function."¹



IT IS ARGUABLE THAT, ON THIS function of modern fairy-stories, as set down by Tolkien in *Tree and Leaf*, he has failed to live up to one of his own prerequisites in *The Lord of the Rings*. But, as Professor Joad would have said, 'It all depends what you mean by consolation'. Is the story itself consoling, and/or is the act of reading the story consoling? For the present writer, at least, the latter is true. *The Lord of the Rings* allows for an escape far beyond Tolkien's Secondary Belief; the characters are as real for one

as absent friends. In this sense, meeting old friends again, *The Lord of the Rings* is consoling; one has to take a break from normal routine to visit absent friends, therefore Recovery is guaranteed.

But the book as a story contains no *eucatastrophic* ending - or beginning or middle. Respite, although there, is only temporary and fleeting; even victory is defeat for its heroes. On first reading *The Lord of the Rings* one could almost anticipate the successful conclusion of the quest to destroy the One Ring, but not the havoc and change that destruction would bring, before the whole process of a new age could begin: more than likely the same story all over again but with different protagonists, and with each age giving way to less and less mighty foes (a tragedy in itself that the workers of 'miracles' should pass beyond the confines of Middle-earth). But the irony lies in the fact that it is precisely these workers of miracles who are

(1) J.R.R. Tolkien, 'On Fairy Stories', *Tree and Leaf* (and other stories), (Unwin Paperbacks, London, 1975, pp.67-68.

the prime movers of all the tragedies of Middle-earth, stemming primarily from its Creation and Eru himself. Eru may proclaim that the evil created by Melkor during the Creation of Middle-earth is "but a part of the whole and tributary to its glory" (QS p.17) but this can be no consolation when, thousands of years, thousands of unhappy lives, and three ages later, two very unsuspecting Hobbits get landed with the fate of a whole world. Granted, the Shire needed shaking out of its complacency, and needed to be made aware and responsible for its actions; but one feels that the experience of Sharkey was enough to do that without thrusting Sam and Frodo into Sauron's lap. Nevertheless, it was the naivety, the non-realisation of the danger of the task that enabled Frodo and Sam to succeed in their quest, where others mightier and more knowledgeable would have failed. In their quiet sheltered lives, the Hobbits could never have conceived of the evil they were facing, purely *because* of their quiet sheltered lives, wherein nothing more exciting had happened since the Fell Winter, the Battle of the Greenfields, and latterly Bilbo Baggins' wanderings and eventual startling disappearance. They could be brave sitting over a pint in the Green Dragon at Bywater, not knowing what fear was; whereas, the Gandalfs and the Elronds could quail, not from cowardice, but because they realised the full extent of the danger, and they also had the power to wield the Ring to the same devastating effect as Sauron. While Gollum possessed the Ring, he used it merely to survive by becoming invisible in order to kill his prey. Bilbo, not then knowing the full power of the Ring, only used it to escape unwanted visitors like the Sackville-Bagginses. Even when Sam held the Ring knowing its power, he merely dreamt of creating a beautiful garden with its help. "Did not Gandalf tell you that the rings give power according to the measure of each possessor?" (FotR p.381). What the Ring could have created when in the hands of the great is clearly shown when Frodo offers the Ring to Galadriel:

"And now at last it comes. You will give me the Ring freely! In place of the Dark Lord you will set up a Queen. And I shall not be dark but beautiful and terrible as the Morning and the Night! Fair as the Sea and the Sun upon the Mountain! Dreadful as the Storm and the Lightning! Stronger than the foundations of the Earth. All shall love me and despair!" (FotR p. 381)

Indeed, all the fallen had once been great and beautiful but the Promethean lust for power and knowledge approximating that possessed by Eru had

caused their present states of evil and ugliness. It could be argued that even the lowly Hobbit suffered in a small degree from the same malaise. After all, did not Bilbo consort with wizards, Elves and Dwarves, in a quiet way to begin with, and did not Frodo follow in his footsteps? And Sam Gamgee, who appears almost childishly enchanted with the idea of Elves:

"Lor bless me, sir, but I do love tales of that sort. And I believe them too . . . Elves, sir! I would dearly love to see *them*. Couldn't you take me to see Elves, sir, when you go?" (FotR p.73)

Did they not invite a doom upon themselves just as surely as Fëanor did in creating the Silmarils in the First Age; or Elves, Dwarves and Men by creating the rings in the Second?



But it was a tough doom nevertheless and shows the extent of the fortitude possessed by creatures who considered boating on the Brandywine to be the outer limits of bravery or stupidity. The Hobbits though had their saviour to die for them so that they could continue to live in their accustomed ways, a saviour who, though having done most of the donkey work to save the Shire up to its Scouring, was not to partake of the pleasures once the evil had been banished; nor was he to gain any recognition for his deeds in Wilderland. That saviour was, of course, Frodo.

It was all very homely and nice for Sam to muse on the delights of meeting Elves and for Frodo to consort with their like and Gandalf within the confines of the Shire. But both had to learn to accept the implications of such associations: Elves did not merely sing in merry fashion as they wandered through the Shire, and wizards had more up their sleeves than a gift for pyrotechnics. Frodo's first step towards growing into a tragic hero comes when he decides to renounce the Shire and to take the Ring at least as far as Rivendell where the matter can be decided further. But still his thoughts are mainly concerned with the Shire and it will take a long time before he realises the full implication of what he is doing. He has to encounter characters such as Galadriel, Elrond, the Nazgûl, in the rough world outside to realise their full significance and terror. In meeting such folk he also



learns that conflict is not only his prerogative; his concern for the Shire has to grow into a concern for the whole world, because once he accepts the task of Ring-bearer, the world's fate depends on him alone: which is a terrible responsibility for one neither born to nor expecting such hardships. Taking responsibility for his own actions commences at the very start of his journey when Gandalf does not show up as promised and Frodo has to decide which direction to take; he chooses the Old Forest, much to everyone's disinclination, the first of many unmapped journeys. But starting from that first decision, he is enabled eventually to take that crucial decision to go alone into Mordor. Without that decision to go through the Old Forest, the quest would have failed: not because probably the Nazgûl would have caught the Hobbits without the concealing protection of the Old Forest, but because Frodo would have proved too weak in his resolve had he decided not to go ahead without Gandalf. The quest eventually succeeds because Frodo has decided something for himself above and beyond his ordinary everyday life. Technically, he does not resume that responsibility for his own actions again until he does decide to go into Mordor alone - save taking on the quest of the Ring at Rivendell - but his experiences, the characters he meets, the stories he hears, and the terrain he traverses, all contribute towards his growth both as hero and suppliant.

From his insular concerns for the Shire, he eventually concerns himself with the world; and from that same period of insulation when he says to Gandalf: "I do not feel pity for Gollum . . . He deserves death" (*FoTR* p.69) Frodo develops to such an extent that when, on the point of trying to enter Mordor, he and Sam do eventually meet Gollum and he can say: "For now that I see him, I do pity him" (*TT* p.222). His experiences have made him merciful too.

"The quality of mercy is not strained;
 . . . it becomes
 The throned monarch better than his
 crown"²
 Mercy is a trait which even Aragorn is not too mighty to show.

Arguably, Frodo's tragedy lies in the fact (as stated previously) that, although he has battled against all the odds to save Middle-earth and has won through, when he returns to the Shire, he is not lauded as he has been in Minas Tirith, nor will he partake of the fruits of victory.

"I tried to save the Shire, and it

has been saved, but not for me. It must often be so, Sam, when things are in danger: some one has to give them up, lose them, so that others may keep them. But you are my heir; all that I had and might have had I leave to you . . ." (*RotK* p.309)

The attitude of most of the Hobbits is typified in a few words:

". . . the Cottons asked a few polite questions about their travels, but hardly listened to the answers: they were far more concerned with events in the Shire" (*RotK* p.291).

Therefore, it is only natural that when Merry and Pippin set about the Scouring of the Shire, it is they who will afterwards receive all the praise, while Frodo will always be considered, together with Bilbo, as a bit of a crank.



But although it is tragic that in Frodo's case he is a prophet "without honour in his own country"³, he has matured to such an extent that he can bear it and even encourages it. Although Frodo's strength has been sapped both by his ordeals and the insidious workings of the Ring, and decisions have hung around his neck like a dead weight, it is not the inability or disinclination to take any more decisions, or to fight further - the Scouring of the Shire would have been a simple matter compared with his experiences in Mordor. No! Two things contribute to his decision to leave this in other hands. Firstly, he is not the only one who has grown enough to cope with the situation obtaining in the Shire on their return. Although to a lesser degree, *all* the Hobbits, like "this tale, grew in the telling" (*FoTR* foreword). Both Merry and Pippin have gained enough experience on their travels to cope admirably with Sharkey & Co., so that when Merry says, "Now I've got a plan" very decisively, then "hurried off to give orders" (*RotK* p.289), Frodo can see his chance of slipping quietly into oblivion. For the second reason for acquiescing is the fact that he has reached that strange quietude, that acceptance that martyrs must have achieved, that stasis that enables Frodo to relinquish earthly glory to a new generation. If for no other reason, Frodo could not

(2) William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, Act 4, Scene 1, lines 180, 184, 185.

(3) *The Gospel According to Saint Luke*, chapter 4, verse 2.

have endured the recurring pain sustained in the injury by the Nazgûl knife during the fight on Weather-top; that would need spiritual healing that could not be found within the confines of Middle-earth. But Frodo's resignation was not caused by just one single incident; it was compounded. In one short year, Frodo has been heaped with troubles that the Elves have had three ages to assimilate and even they, who were used to the burden, find it difficult to cope with and constantly long for the Sea. Arwen knew what a gift of peace she was giving to Frodo when she took the 'choice of Lúthien'. Knowing and feeling all this, Frodo is ready for the West which can be seen even before they reached the Shire when Frodo replied to Sam's comment about having seen most things on their travels, "Yes, something of everything, Sam, except the Sea . . . Except the Sea" (*RotK* p.265). This is something which, at their parting, Sam cannot understand, but *not* understanding is not *never* understanding. After Rosie dies, Sam understands and follows.



Although Frodo's doom is probably the toughest in the book in that he was neither born to nor expected the burden that he eventually endured, the tragedy most personally and deeply felt is that of the Elves in general and Elrond and Galadriel in particular. To leave the confines of *The Lord of the Rings* for just a moment and to return to the First Age; it had been an original tragic mistake to place Elves, who were infinite (but still subject to the finite laws of Middle-earth whilst there), beside Men who were finite in a finite world. Death, the Gift of Men from Eru became the Doom of Men as both death in itself and in the fall of Númenor when Men sought the immortality of the West. It also contributed towards the tragedy of Sauron and the Ring-wraiths, this quest for the qualities belonging to Eru alone. The Elves who followed Fëanor to Middle-earth in search of the stolen Silmarils paid dear for their disobedience. As mentioned above, whilst in Middle-earth they became subject to its finite laws and could die of wounding or disease; they were compelled to endure this for three ages with only Galadriel surviving from the initial party of Elves, therefore being the only Elf left in Middle-earth who remembered the Undying Lands and Middle-earth beneath the Stars. During her long, long life she has seen all the

great names pass and most of the beautiful dwellings of the Eldar disappear under a tide of greed and battle, not always emanating from Mordor or Angmar, but from dissension within too. All that is left by the end of the Third Age is Lothlórien, and to a lesser degree, Rivendell.

Nevertheless, despite all the vanished glory of Middle-earth and the memory of the West, after three ages one could expect a very strong bond to have grown between Galadriel and the people and places of Middle-earth, especially for Lothlórien which she knew was created and preserved on the strength of artifice, the power of *Nenya*, the Ring of Adamant. Whilst in Rivendell you can hear stories and songs of the past, "a memory of ancient things; in Lórien the ancient things still lived on in the waking world" (*FotR* p.364). And the tragic dilemma facing Galadriel is this Ring. *Nenya*, together with *Vilya* and *Narya*, the two other Elven rings, was forged by the Elves under the aegis of a dissembling Sauron in conjunction with the One Ring, the Seven and the Nine, though was separate from them and because "they were not made as weapons of war or conquest . . . but [with] understanding, making and healing, to preserve all things unstained" (*FotR* p.287) they have remained true to their original purpose. But the fate of the Elven race is hinted at later in the same conversation, when Glóin asks what would happen if the Ruling Ring were destroyed:

"We do not know for certain . . . Some hope that the three Rings . . . would then become free, and their rulers might heal the hurts of the world that [Sauron] has wrought. But maybe when the One has gone, the Three will fail, and many fair things will fade and be forgotten. That is my belief" (*FotR* p.282).

Galadriel not only believes but *knows* that 'many fair things will fade', including her beloved Lórien, when the One Ring is destroyed:

". . . Verily it is in the land of Lórien . . . that one of the Three remains . . . and I am its keeper. . . . Do you not see now wherefore your coming is to us as the footsteps of Doom? For if you fail, then we are laid bare to the enemy. Yet if you succeed, then our power is diminished, and Lothlórien will fade . . . We must depart into the West, or dwindle to a rustic folk . . . slowly to forget and to be forgotten" (*FotR* p.380).

She faces several possibilities when the Ring comes within her reach; she can seize it from Frodo by force; she can get it from him by wiles; in the event Frodo *offers* her the Ring.

When Frodo sees Galadriel in her full glory, he realises just how great a matter it is and just how hard a decision she has to make when she relinquishes the Ring. Her doom is not only losing Lórien and Middle-earth whether she stays or goes; in either case she 'will diminish' which is by way of punishment - at least in part - for her disobedience towards the Valar during the First Age and for her Promethean act in endeavouring to create something of the Blessed Realm on Middle-earth. Her rewards are that she will be permitted to 'go into the West' and to 'remain Galadriel' (*FoTR* p.381). But even being eternal has its drawbacks. Together with all those who finally sail away from the Grey Havens at the end of the book, Galadriel will have an eternity to dwell on all the joys and sorrows, times and places, and the people they have known during their sojourn in Middle-earth.



Although Elrond shares the same dilemma as Galadriel concerning the Ring - and with Gandalf come to that - the emphasis of Elrond's tragedy is placed on the less lofty but more heart-rending aspect of his family, the tragedy of which lies in the mixing of blood between Mortal and Eldar. His lineage is impressive, combining three noble branches of Eru's creation - Maian, Elven and Mortal. For present purposes we can dismiss the Maian aspect of his lineage; it is the Elven and Mortal aspects that create the dilemma, the Choice, granted to those of mixed blood, to remain either Elven, thus potentially immortal and with the possibility of entering the Blessed Realm; or Mortal which means accepting the Doom of Men. Elrond has already seen his twin brother, Elros, go the way of all flesh, but by the time the Third Age arrives he is faced with the worst dilemma of all. Again, like Galadriel, he has it in his power to turn events in his favour and, also like Galadriel, he does the noble thing, but only after long years of deliberation and on a condition that only remotely has a chance of being fulfilled. His main dilemma is the love between Arwen, his daughter, and Aragorn, leader of the remainder of the Dúnedain and heir to the throne of Gondor:

"Therefore, though I love you, I say to you: Arwen Undómiel shall not diminish her life's grace for less cause. She shall not be the bride of any Man less than the King

of both Gondor and Arnor'" (*RotK* App. A, p.342)

Aragorn, as we know, fights through and wins, as the rest of Middle-earth, against all the odds. Not least, if the battle against evil had been lost, Elrond would probably have been taking all his family with him into the West, because his sons, Elladan and Elrohir, also decide to remain Mortal. But despite his obvious pride, Elrond is not that small-minded. His concern for Middle-earth while he dwelt there has been great - his own sons had ridden with the Dúnedain against evil - and Rivendell was ever the refuge for wanderers from the heir of Gondor to that once reluctant burglar, Bilbo Baggins. Still,

"None saw her last meeting with Elrond her father, for they went up into the hills and there spoke long together, and bitter was their parting that would endure beyond the ends of the world" (*RotK* p.256).

A child feels grief at the loss of a parent. Nature has seen fit to allow most parent to die before their children. But when the order is reversed, the grief is compounded. A child, although feeling attachment to a parent, does not realise the strength of the bond between parent and child until they themselves become parents. And Elrond has to endure the loss of all his children 'beyond the ends of the world'. "To me then even our victory can bring only sorrow and parting" (*RotK* App. A, p.342).

Was then the Gift of Men the Doom of Men, or vice versa? Certainly it was a hard doom for Elrond to endure his memories for an eternity but as he predicted, "I fear that to Arwen the Doom of Men may seem hard at the ending" (*RotK* App. A p.342).

For it is not until Aragorn decides to die that Arwen fully realises the implication of her Choice:

"As wicked fools I scorned them [Mortals who sought immortality], but I pity them at last. For if this is indeed, as the Eldar say, the gift of the One to Men, it is bitter to receive" (*RotK* App. A p.344).

This is a bit like Frodo's reactions to Gollum.

But as the rings 'give power according to the measure of each possessor', so too with the extent or gravity of the tragedy. In all cases there is a process of growth, from the Elves' rash decision to leave the Undying Lands for Middle-earth in their 'youth' to the point where their sufferings make them realise that all they really want is to go West-over-Sea; from the Hobbits who only want an adventure like Bilbo's to the point

where they can endure the worst of hardships; so too the Ents gain wisdom through their long sufferings, not only mutilation by orc axes, but more specifically at the loss of the Entwives.

The Ents are a beautiful creation which shows a deep love of trees and a very deep hatred of the encroachment of 'civilization', even more so than Tolkien's descriptions of the waste of Mordor or Sharkey's Shire. The poignancy of Treebeard's memories is felt more because the damage done is irreparable, whereas in time the Shire and Mordor can be remedied, but not that 'one wood' that 'once upon a time' ran 'from here to the Mountains of Lune':

"Those were the broad days! Time was when I could walk and sing all day and hear no more than the echo of my own voice in the hollow hills. The woods were like the woods of Lothlórien, only thicker, stronger, younger. And the smell of the air! I used to spend a week just breathing" (TT p.72).

Celeborn calls Treebeard "Eldest" (RotK p.259) and indeed the Ents and the Forest were in Middle-earth long before Men or even Elves. And the vastness of their kingdom as it once was far outshines the glories of Minas Tirith or Edoras. The Ents' memories go back before and forward beyond these kingdoms of Men. "Never is too long a word even for me . . . they will have to last long indeed to seem long to Ents" (RotK p.258). The magnitude of the vision of the Ents is far greater than that of Mortals, but their days, unlike the days of Men, are numbered, "For the time comes of the Dominion of Men" (RotK p.249), and the Ents have "lost the Entwives" (TT p.78).

In the folly of *their* youth the Ents behaved true to their physical natures. Despite the fact that they were young and supple, they behaved distinctly 'tree-ish', unbending and rooted to the spot. While the Entwives wanted to tame nature, until their respective desires for divergent things separated them beyond recall. It would seem that the Entwives' desire to cultivate and tame had been their utter downfall. While the Ents have suffered from orcs etc., at least in sticking together with the rest of the Forest, this seems to have preserved them from complete annihilation. And the dilemma facing the Ents is no less great to them than the choices facing Galadriel over the Ring, or those facing Elrond over Arwen. Although "For many years we used to go out every now and again and look for the Entwives" (TT p.80) and although "our sorrow was very great" when "nowhere that we went could we find them . . . Yet the wild wood called" (TT p.79-80).

"We believe that we may meet again in a time to come, and perhaps we shall find somewhere a land where we can live together and both be content. But it is foreboded that will only be when we have both lost all that we now have" (TT p.80).

So the follies of both the Ents and the Entwives, wanting *possession* of different things, and redemption only lies in the rejection of those things if they are to gain the most important possession of all which is love. Frodo cannot possess the Shire, nor Galadriel the Ring, nor Elrond Arwen. To gain peace, something has to be forfeited, the physical in favour of the spiritual. And all have to leave the peace of a united world. "It is sad that we should meet thus at the ending" (RotK p.259).

But perhaps the biggest tragedy of all and one felt very deeply by Tolkien himself, although not explicitly stated, is the fading of the miraculous from the world, the leaving of Middle-earth to Men who despoil nature and who have to make everything explicable. When Tolkien bemoans the departure of the Elves he bemoans the onset of an all too scientific age where machines and not Nature spirits are the gods. There is no room left in the imagination for elves or trolls or dragons. Tolkien "Desired dragons with a profound desire" (*Tree and Leaf* p.44) and in this twentieth century could only find them in his own imagination.



Bibliography

- J.R.R. Tolkien: *The Fellowship of the Ring* George Allen & Unwin, London 1966.
The Two Towers George Allen & Unwin, London, 1966.
The Return of the King George Allen & Unwin, 1966.
Tree and Leaf Unwin Paperbacks, London, 1975.
The Silmarillion George Allen & Unwin, London, 1977.

