

"J.R.R. TOLKIEN" BY CATHERINE R. STIMPSON (Columbia Essays on
Modern Writers, Columbia University Press)

Reviewed by Belladonna Took

One thing this book can do for all Hobbit friends is to help them through the winter-- for, read it on a cold day, and it's guaranteed to make your blood boil.

Why the Columbia University Press should have chosen Miss Stimpson (Asst Professor of English at Barnard College) to deal with Tolkien must remain a mystery, seeing that she does not like him at all. Fair comment is always allowable, even if unfavourable, but a writer who actively dislikes his subject, and that subject's background, is unlikely to produce a good literary appraisal. Likening Tolkien's reputation to a soaring balloon, she says "Some return to earth to join those who have never flown. If you wish join me among the groundlings".

Painstakingly and conscientiously Miss Stimpson surveys all of Tolkien's work, even the most minor, as if in the hope of finding, say, in "Turner Cakes of Ham" or "Beorhtmoth" some clue to what eludes her. After indicating the sources, Anglo-Saxon, Icelandic etc, of many of his words, names, ideas, in the manner of one explaining a conjuring trick, or still more exposing a fraudulent medium, she comes to the conclusion that Tolkien is "bogus, sentimental and morally disquieting."

Bogus? But to be bogus there must be intent to deceive. Real as Tolkien's 'secondary creation' may be, he is nowhere attempting to deceive anyone-- he is not doing a Chatterton or a Macpherson. If he wanted to, I am quite sure he could very successfully. But nothing could be further from his mind. He created for the best of all reasons - for his own pleasure and that of his children and friends. His friends 'the Inklings' get summary treatment from Miss S: "a brilliant but condescending and oddly silly group." It is strange how often Miss S uses the word "condescending" when she herself condescends so often: to C.S. Lewis and to Charles Williams, whom she has to explain as if they had never been heard of before --- perhaps in America they haven't. Incidentally she labels George MacDonald "a sweet Scots minister". Obviously she dislikes the Christian background of the 'Inklings', and the Oxford atmosphere, particularly that of the 1930's, is quite foreign to her, as is also the English environment of the hobbits and such things as the acceptance of monarchy as a safeguard both to law and to liberty.

Her rather shrill feminism comes out when she deals with Tolkien's avoidance on the whole of female characters and love interests. She regards with a certain horror the episode of Shelob, seeing in it evidence of a "subtle contempt and hostility towards women", and is greatly troubled by the fact that he does not attempt to write much about women at all. "When Tolkien does sidle up to genuine romantic love, sensuality and sexuality his style becomes coy and infantile. Unlike many very good modern writers he is no homosexual" (oh, thank you, Miss S) "Rather he simply seems a little childish, a little nasty and evasive." I may be dense, but whereas I admit that Tolkien does

not write easily about women and makes the only love episode in the book rather wooden, I am altogether puzzled as to what could be found 'nasty' in it. He was, let it be remembered, writing for his own children (whose growth is mirrored in the books from "The Hobbit" onwards) and not at all for sophisticated literary American women, who obviously prefer different books.

While admitting that "many find Tolkien's moral vision serious and impeccable", Miss S proceeds to demolish it on the grounds of being "simplistic", that is, too sure of what is good and what is evil. But why not? If you want doubts and equivocal searchings of heart and gropings in the twilight, try elsewhere. This is the story of a quest, and you cannot set out on a quest without certain premises, such as that your objective is good and those who would stop you are bad -- the interest of the book may include many surprises, seeming foe turning friend or friend turning foe - but always you must feel the guidelines, or else it becomes a different kind of book. Again, let it be said, Tolkien was writing from a Christian background for others who thought as he did. Those who quarrel with this are welcome to quarrel with the whole Christian ethic, in its largest sense.

So the symbolism Tolkien uses does not please Miss S either -- it is far too simple she thinks, that "a star always means hope, enchantment, wonder; an ash heap always means despair, enslavement, waste." (Could you life your heart to be a beautiful ash heap?) The identification of character by speech and voices strikes her as snobbish, e.g. the Cockney of the early Trolls -- "Recently of course she says, "musical groups have shown us the wit and poetry of working-class English speech" (Gorblinney!)

Still more exasperating is her final objection: "What does it mean that Tolkien so blandly, so complacently uses the symbol of light and of white to signify the good and the symbol of dark and of black to signify evil?" She dilates on the moral and political devastation wrought by this idea. Well--- with all due regard to my friends of many races, isn't it going to be rather awkward if from now we must say 'Simon Legree was a white-hearted villain, and Eliza's virtue was as brown as the purest cocoa'? -- Miss S insists: "Men, dependent on the day, nervous of the night, necessarily welcomed sunrise and mourned sunset. Today, however, we do have electric lights." So all our solar-myth language is to be revised? Ah yes -- but what, Miss S, if your little electric battery runs out and leaves you with the Mewlips? Will you not, like Goethe and many another, cry out for light?

This book is short enough to read at a sitting- and small enough to throw across the room without doing much damage.

