

Realism in fantasy: *The Lord of the Rings*

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Regarding J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, Tom Shippey said in 2003:

I think what he created, very powerfully, was a sense of realism. And realism comes from not knowing what's going on and not knowing what to do next. But he did things which a professional would not have dared to do. And of course they worked. Professionals don't know everything. Sometimes inspired amateurs know something¹.

In this quote Mr Shippey describes the psychological effect of Tolkien's splitting *LOTR* into plot strands. The beings on one strand do not know what's going on on other plot strands and, therefore, do not know for certain what to do next. In Book III there are four plot strands: Merry and Pippin with the orcs; Merry and Pippin with Treebeard and Quickbeam; Aragorn, Legolas and Gimli pursuing the Uruk Hai and Mordor orcs who have kidnapped the two young hobbits; and the return from the dead of Gandalf the White just in time to motivate Theoden and Treebeard to fight. Book IV recounts the perils of Sam and Frodo approaching Mordor together; then with Gollum. That's five or six plot strands. By not intercutting these plot strands, Tolkien left a nasty poser for Peter Jackson, who had to try to intercut the strands in the film *The Two Towers*.

Furthermore, in a war novel, which is what *LOTR* is, lack of communication between components of the fighting force on numerous plot strands creates tactical problems. For example, Aragorn laments how his tactical decisions have gone wrong. Aragorn tells Legolas and Gimli, who ask him to lead the chase to save Merry and Pippin from the Uruk-hai, "You give the choice to an ill chooser . . . Since we passed through the Argonath my choices have gone amiss." By creating Aragorn's tactical frustrations, Tolkien, the WWI Signals Officer, infused what Shippey called a strong "sense of realism" in a fantasy novel.

This paradox — realism in fantasy — hundreds of millions of readers have expressed. They wonder aloud how a fantasy book can feel more 'real' to them than this world. Fellow readers have said things like this to me since 1972, 40 years ago. In 2004, Tom Shippey adumbrated his idea on psychological realism in *LOTR*²: "One of the effects of the kind of strand-by-strand narration of *The Lord of the Rings* is that the characters on any one strand don't know what's going on on the other strand."

This quote of Shippey is indeed a description of psychological realism. And the text in *LOTR* seems realistic, although the setting is fantastic. During their journey to

and through Mordor, Sam and Frodo wonder aloud what is happening to their friends who are far away. Hundreds of miles away on his own plot strand, Merry upbraids himself for forgetting Frodo and Sam:

Then suddenly like a cold touch on his heart he thought of Frodo and Sam. "I am forgetting them!" he said to himself reproachfully. "And yet they are more important than all the rest of us. And I came to help them; but now they must be hundreds of miles away, if they are still alive." He shuddered.

In our real world we seldom know just what is going on in the lives of our friends. Thus one commonly hears "I had no idea he felt so-and-so" or "I was clueless that she was going to do such-and-such". Again, in a fantasy novel such realism is a paradox to which hundreds of millions of readers have responded.

Now Shippey did analyse such psychological realism in his *J. R. R. Tolkien: Author of the Century*. He writes:

As a general rule one may say that none of the five or six major strands of narrative in the central section of *The Lord of the Rings* ever matches neatly with any of the others in chronology: some are always being advanced, some retarded. Two major effects of this, naturally, are surprise and suspense . . . One might feel that a more experienced writer, one who wrote novels or fantasies professionally rather than passionately, would have known not to risk such finesses or trust so much to the ingenuity of his readers: but Tolkien knew no better than to try it. The main effect of his interlacing technique, however, does not lie in surprise and suspense. What it does is to create a profound sense of reality, of that being the way things are. There is a pattern in Tolkien's story, but his characters can never see it (naturally, because they are in it).

Almost as if thinking about Peter Jackson's need to intercut plot strands cinematically, Shippey used the term 'interlacing' — like the strands in rope. Both are metaphors based on the simple tool Sam Gamgee values so highly: rope. The paradox that the plot of a fantasy novel is realistic explains in part the ongoing popularity of *LOTR*.

Another type of realism set paradoxically in the Ur-fantasy novel, *The Lord of the Rings*, is Tolkien's use of three-dimensional minor characters. Too many fantasy novels deploy two-dimensional minor characters like pawns set to be sacrificed in a chess game. These place holders for certain themes or actions are somewhat analogous to characters in allegories from centuries ago. And we all know how much Tolkien "cordially dislike[d]" allegory. Some of the three-dimensional

minor characters in *LOTR* develop from the novel's beginning to its end. Some move the other direction, decaying rapidly while the War of the Ring is fought. While Fredegar Bolger and Lobelia Sackville-Baggins actually improve, Ted Sandyman and Bill Ferny both decay to the point of no return, seemingly. Ferny is, of course, not a Hobbit. He is one of the Big People from Bree, a man who has invaded the Shire and is bullying hobbits on Saruman's/Sharkey's orders. But most readers agree Bill Ferny, although not small in stature, is nevertheless a very minor character indeed.

At the beginning of *LOTR*, Lobelia, whose name means 'spider lady', is a liar, petty thief, and real-estate hoarder. But at novel's end, when she emerges from the Lockholes on Frodo's arm, she is suddenly "popular" for having stood up alone to the Chief's Big Men, almost before anybody. In the holograph drafts of *LOTR* at Marquette University, one reads that Tolkien made Lobelia blame herself out loud for her son's murder. "She never got over the news of poor Cosimo's murder and she said that was her fault³."

There are at least eight holograph drafts of the first page of 'The Grey Havens'. As the name Cosimo has not yet been changed to Lotho, this draft is quite early. Lobelia is finally redeemed morally by defying Sharkey's Ruffians with her umbrella — the same one she used to try to steal "several small (but rather valuable) articles" right after Bilbo had left the Shire for good. As for her having done hard time in the Lockholes, not only does she appear "very old and thin", but evidently she has had time to think about her greed and mendacity, to the extent that, in the drafts, she blames herself for her son's murder. Lobelia Sackville-Baggins dies at around 100 years of age, having given Bag End back to Frodo, and most of her fortune to help Hobbits displaced and despoiled by Sharkey's men's occupation of the Shire.

In contrast to the aged Lobelia, whose redemption and death give readers a sense of closure in her case, poor Fredegar or 'Fatty' Bolger is not let off so easily. Unlike Lobelia, he is not old, so he is not afforded the release she is by dying soon after Frodo's return. Fatty's two worst character flaws are gluttony and cowardice. On the first score, Fatty Bolger is not made the butt of as many fat jokes in *LOTR* as Bombur was in *The Hobbit*, but clearly one of his character flaws appears in his obesity. In Chapter 5, 'A Conspiracy Unmasked', Fatty eats heartily, especially the coveted bacon-and-mushroom dish prepared by Mrs Maggot, until "even Fatty Bolger heaved a sigh of content". Then he objects to the other four as they discuss their plans, "But you won't have any luck in the Old Forest . . . I am more afraid of the Old Forest than of anything I know about". Halting at the gate out of the Shire and into The Old Forest, Fatty declares: "Good-bye, Frodo! . . . I wish you were not going into the Forest. I only hope you will not need rescuing before the day is out. But good luck to you — today and every day!"

Each of Fatty's actions in Chapter 11, 'A Knife in the Dark' — fleeing the Black Riders, running through Buckland, raising the Horn Call — is humorous because of how fast he must move despite how portly he is. His flight is intelligent: posing as Frodo, indeed wearing Frodo's clothes, has

brought the forces of Mordor down on Fatty Bolger, first of all Hobbits! His terror is very real — and realistic.

Fatty Bolger opened the door cautiously and peered out. A feeling of fear had been growing on him all day, and he was unable to rest or go to bed: there was a brooding threat in the restless night-air. As he stared out into the gloom, a black shadow moved under the trees; the gate seemed to open of its own accord and close again without a sound. Terror seized him. He shrank back, and for a moment he stood trembling in the hall.

Obesity and cowardice appear in unexpected places in *LOTR*, not only in the comfortable Shire. In the Barrow, a grave mound, Frodo contemplates abandoning his friends in order to save the Ring. Tolkien wrote, "There is a seed of courage hidden (often deeply, it is true) in the heart of the *fattest* and *most timid* hobbit, waiting for some final and desperate danger to make it grow" (my emphasis). And Fatty's redemption from cowardice and overeating, indeed his weight-loss regimen, is revealed at the end of *LOTR*. He, too, emerges from the Lockholes as Lobelia did, but he must be carried on a litter, "Fatty no longer". He is emaciated from long imprisonment and from having led a band of rebels who have, evidently, functioned like Robin Hood and his merry men. They would come down out of the hills and harass the Chief's Big Men, probably stealing back food and drink that had already been stolen from the Hobbits by the Gatherers and Sharers.

Now here is the linchpin of this entire essay, drawn from the holographs at Marquette University. Although in all the many hand-written drafts of the first page of 'The Grey Havens' Fatty Bolger does not appear juxtaposed directly to Lobelia, he does appear on the first typescript. Tolkien wrote Fatty's emergence from the Lockholes by hand in pencil on the typescript. It is definitely Tolkien's pencil writing. All of this is to say, the juxtaposition of Lobelia S.-B. and Fatty Bolger's development as minor characters is purposely carried out, this late in the composition of *LOTR* — on the typescript⁴! Lobelia's lifelong pursuit of comfortable real-estate and great wealth changes to moral leadership and financial generosity; then, she dies. And Fredegar Bolger goes from being a fearful fat guy to a brave rebel leader who gets starved for his courageous defiance of the murderous bullies.

In Christopher Tolkien's *Sauron Defeated: The History of Middle Earth Volume IX* he writes:

From this point the text of A, rough but now fully legible, differs chiefly from the final form of the chapter not in what is actually told nor in how it is told but in the absence of several significant features and a good deal of detail that were added in later. For example, while the rescue of Lobelia Sackville-Baggins from the Lockholes in Michel Delving and the disposition of her property is told much as in RK, there is no mention of Fredegar Bolger.

So Christopher Tolkien notes the fact that at this earliest stage of his father's composition of *LOTR*, Fatty Bolger is absent from the first page of 'The Grey Havens', final chapter of the published *LOTR*.

Although the minor characters Lobelia Sackville-Baggins and Fredegar Bolger are redeemed, by the end of *LOTR* Bill Ferny and Ted Sandyman have decayed so far that ‘The Scouring of the Shire’ includes the disposal of them. Ferny is sent packing by Merry Brandybuck — but not before the other Bill, the pony, kicks him. “He went off with a yelp into the night and was never heard of again”. And in ‘Scouring’ Ted Sandyman has begun to speak the language of Mordor — orc talk in fact: “Garn!”

Both Ted Sandyman and Bill Ferny are lost souls. However, in *Sauron Defeated* Christopher Tolkien demonstrates that his father believed even the Ruffians could be redeemed. Christopher Tolkien deciphers for readers a very old, edited-out passage in which his father asserted just this belief:

It was some time before the last ruffians were hunted out. And oddly enough, little though the hobbits were inclined to believe it, quite a number turned out to be far from incurable.

No, the Hobbits of the Shire did not invite the former Ruffians who had honestly turned over a new leaf, to live with them, to settle down within the Shire. The Shire even in these earliest drafts did not feature coexistence and tolerance between Big and Little Folk as at Bree. Christopher Tolkien continues to decipher this passage:

If they gave themselves up they were kindly treated, and fed (for they were usually half-starved after hiding in the woods), and then shown to the borders. This sort were Dunlanders, not orcs/half breeds . . .

The initial Sharkey in these oldest drafts was not Saruman, but just such an orc-man, an Uruk-hai chieftan, whom the early-draft Frodo runs through with Sting. I found Christopher Tolkien’s deciphering these two holograph pages at Marquette in his *The History of Middle Earth*, to be indispensable.

Neither Sharkey the orc-man nor the redeemed Dunlanders (not yet Dunlendings) make it into the published *LOTR*. Ferny and Sandyman do, of course, but are never morally redeemed as far as we readers know. Sandyman spits, cusses like an orc, boasts of his reliance on (the now dead) Lotho, and winds a warning horn to alert the Chief’s Big Men — by that time also dead, captured or expelled — to the presence of four armed, dashing Hobbits. Merry Brandybuck scours the Shire in the case of Ted Sandyman, too. Merry counters Sandyman’s horn blowing.

‘Save your breath!’ laughed Merry. ‘I’ve a better.’ Then lifting up his silver horn he winded it, and its clear call rang over the Hill.

Then, Ted is never mentioned again in either ‘The Scouring of the Shire’ or ‘The Grey Havens’. Ted Sandyman does not even afford readers the closure given to the hopeless Bill Ferny in that stock line “He . . . was never heard of again.”

Sam, whose low-class origins have been much discussed, fittingly utters the last word on Ferny and Sandyman, beings

of both low class and low morals. “‘Neat work, Bill,’ said Sam, meaning the pony” after Bill the Pony kicks his former owner, Bill. And in regards to Ted Sandyman, Sam Gamgee’s antagonist, Sam declares “I shan’t call it the end, till we’ve cleaned up the mess”. This mess includes the horror that Bag End has become. But Sam also means the ecological mess made of the whole Shire by Saruman and his minions — which mess includes Ted’s worst crime against the Shire: its literal defoliation. Before blowing his horn, Ted taunts Sam for shedding tears over the wanton destruction of the Party Tree, and Ted has probably burned many of the most beautiful trees to feed the fires of Lotho’s Mill, a mechanical nightmare that is turning “the Shire into a desert”. Sandyman has unwittingly imitated his true master — Saruman, not Lotho. Saruman is guilty of war crimes, not only against the peoples of Rohan and the Shire, but against nature itself. We readers would do well never to forget what Quickbeam called Saruman: “the tree-killer”. Finally, the lack of a war crimes trial to deal with collaborators, implies the insignificance of Sandyman. He simply drops out of *LOTR*. So even at the bitter end, the Ur-fantasy novel, *The Lord of the Rings*, cannot report all characters redeemed. How, ahem, realistic!

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1. *The Two Towers* Special extended DVD edition, disc 3, ‘J.R.R. Tolkien: Origins of Middle Earth’, 9:39 to 10:20.
2. *The Return of the King* Special extended DVD edition, disc 3, ‘J.R.R. Tolkien: The Legacy of Middle Earth’, 17:09 to 17:19.
3. Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Lord of the Rings* holograph, Marquette University 3/8/18/23 (Series 3, Box 8, Folder 18, Page 23).
4. Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Lord of the Rings* typescript, Marquette University 3/8/34/1a

