The Tolkien Puzzle:[1] *J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biography* by Humphrey Carpenter, *Inquiry*, December 19, 1977, pp. 20-21

The success of J.R.R. Tolkien is a puzzle, for it is difficult to imagine a less contemporary writer. He was a Catholic, a conservative, and a scholar in a field-philology-that many of his readers had never heard of. The Lord of the Rings fitted no familiar category; its success virtually created the field of "adult fantasy." Yet it sold millions of copies, and there are tens, perhaps hundreds, of thousands of readers who find Middle Earth a more important part of their internal landscape than any other creation of human art, and who know the pages of *The Lord of the Rings* the way some Christians know the Bible.

Humphrey Carpenter's recent *Tolkien: A Biography*, published by Houghton Mifflin, is a careful study of Tolkien's life, including such parts of his internal life as are accessible to the biographer. His admirers will find it well worth reading. We learn details, for instance, of Tolkien's intense, even sensual love for language; by the time he entered Oxford, he knew not only French, German, Latin, and Greek, but Anglo-Saxon, Gothic and Old Norse. He began inventing languages for the sheer pleasure of it and when he found that a language requires a history and a people to speak it he began inventing them too. The language was Quenya, the people were the elves. And we learn, too, some of the sources of his intense pessimism, of his feeling that the struggle against evil is desperate and almost hopeless and all victories at best temporary.

Carpenter makes no attempt to explain his subject's popularity but he provides a few clues, the most interesting of which is Tolkien's statement of regret that the English had no mythology of their own and that at one time he had hoped to create one for them, a sort of English Kalevala. That attempt became T*he Silmarillion*, which was finally published this fall, three years after the author's death; its enormous sales confirm Tolkien's continuing popularity. One of the offshoots of *The Silmarillion* was *The Lord of the Rings.*

What is the hunger that Tolkien satisfies? George Orwell described the loss of religious belief as the amputation of the soul and suggested that the operation, while necessary, had turned out to be more than a simple surgical job. That comes close to the point, yet the hunger is not precisely for religion, although it is for something religion can provide. It is the hunger for a moral universe, a universe where, whether or not God exists, whether or not good triumphs over evil, good and evil are categories that make sense, that mean something. To the fundamental moral question "why should I do (or not do) something," two sorts of answers can be given. One answer is "the reason you feel you should do this thing is because your society has trained you (or your genes compel you) to feel that way." But that answers the wrong question. I do not want to know why I feel that I should do something; I want to know why (and whether) I should do it. Without an answer to that second question all action is meaningless. The intellectual synthesis in which most of us have been reared — liberalism, humanism, whatever one may call it — answers only the first question. It may perhaps give the right answer but it is the wrong question.

The Lord Of The Rings is a work of art, not a philosophical treatise; it offers, not a moral argument, but a world in which good and evil have a place, a world whose pattern affirms the existence of

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1: This is a very old article of mine that I found on the *Inquiry* Archive of the Unz Review. I have edited it lightly, mostly by the removal of surplus commas.

answers to that second question, answers that readers, like the inhabitants of that world, understand and accept. It satisfies the hunger for a moral pattern so successfully that the created world seems to many more real, more right, than the world about them.

Does this mean, as Tolkien's detractors have often said, that everything in his books is black and white? If so, then a great deal of literature, including all of Shakespeare, is black and white. Nobody in *Hamlet* doubts that poisoning your brother in order to steal his wife and throne is bad, not merely imprudent or antisocial. But the existence of black and white does not deny the existence of intermediate shades; gray can be created only if black and white exist to be mixed. Good and evil exist in Tolkien's work, but his characters are no more purely good or purely evil than are Shakespeare's.

One illustration of this, and one of the richnesses of The Lord of the Rings, is the variety of patterns of temptation and redemption woven through the book. The satanic enemy, Sauron, "was not always evil"; he is apparently, like Lucifer, a fallen angel. Gollum, a twisted being with a taste for anything (or anyone) he can sneak up behind, gradually develops into a character for whom the reader feels sympathy and even affection and comes within a hairbreadth of being redeemed. Boromir yields to the temptation of the ring, tries to take it by force, fails, repents, and dies bravely, fighting to protect his weaker companions. His father, Denethor, yields not to the desire for power but to despair, killing himself in the belief that the city over which he is Steward has lost its long struggle with Sauron, at the very instant when in fact the tide has turned. To balance him there is his ally Theoden, who rises from age and despair to fight and die, with honor and glory, outside the walls of the same city. Many more examples could be given; for all Tolkien's characters, human or nonhuman, diabolic or semidivine, free will is a constant reality and the potential for both good and evil always present.

Is *The Lord of the Rings* religious? Yes and no. There is a religious pattern but it is kept far in the background; there are no churches, no priests, no organized religion of any kind. So far as I can remember, the only direct reference to God is in the appendix. And while it is clear enough that certain characters are more than human, precisely what they are is left deliberately vague.

God, or the gods, cannot intervene often and openly in human affairs without being reduced, as in Homer, to being merely humans with supernatural powers or reducing the plot to a series of *dei ex machinis*. But there is a more fundamental reason why Tolkien does not clarify the "religious" background of his world. In "On Fairy Stories," an extraordinary essay written some years before *The Lord of the Rings* was published, Tolkien discussed the enchanted realm of Faery. If we understood entirely how the magic of Faery worked it would no longer be Faery but only a peculiar, perhaps imaginary, corner of our cold world. Tolkien's task is precisely the opposite. "Faery contains many things besides elves and fays, and besides dwarfs, witches, trolls, giants, or dragons: it holds the seas, the sun, the moon, the sky; and the earth, and all things that are in it: tree and bird, water and stone, wine and bread." By showing us the walking forest of Fangorn and the stars over Kirith Ungol, Tolkien seeks to give back to stars and trees some part of that beauty and mystery that is by right theirs.

Whatever its purpose for Tolkien, the remoteness of religion in *The Lord of the Rings* strengthens its effect for us. A story set in the Catholic world in which Tolkien undoubtedly believed would

not have moved us so deeply, although that world is as much a moral universe as Middle Earth. We all know that the Pope is not infallible, that priests have no supernatural powers, that Catholicism is a superstition of uneducated or self-deceiving people. These things may or may not be true, but we know them. Catholicism, indeed Christianity, is part of our world, and a part that has been, for most of us, debunked. Tolkien's friends and contemporaries, C. S. Lewis and Charles Williams, wrote stories set in the modern world as seen by a believing Christian; they seem more fantastic than Tolkien's and less believable.

I have now given at least a partial answer to the puzzle of Tolkien's success. We hunger for meaning, value, pattern, a universe that, morally speaking, makes sense. One of the functions of religion is to satisfy that hunger. For most of us, whatever church we do or do not attend, religion is dead and we are starving. We attempt to fill the void, often with patterns less sophisticated and less plausible than those we have abandoned — political crusades, environmental fanaticism, Hare Krishna. Tolkien gives us instead what we desperately want, in the form of an imaginative creation of great power and subtlety. Escape, as Tolkien has himself written, is not necessarily a bad thing; it depends on what you are escaping from. But he intended his work to be more than merely a fantasy within which one takes refuge from the real world. He intended it rather as a vehicle for what he called recovery, a way in which, through the imaginative creation, we could see the nature of the world in which we live, a world both beautiful and perilous. Tolkien did not, of course, believe that the accidents of the world he had created were literally true, despite the loving scholarship he lavished on them. Nor was he in any sense writing allegory. Rather he tried to create a world which was in its essence true, and through which we could see our own world, not as custom and stale familiarity taught us to see it, but as he believed it to be.