

Can Fantasy be Myth?

Mythopoeia and The Lord of the Rings

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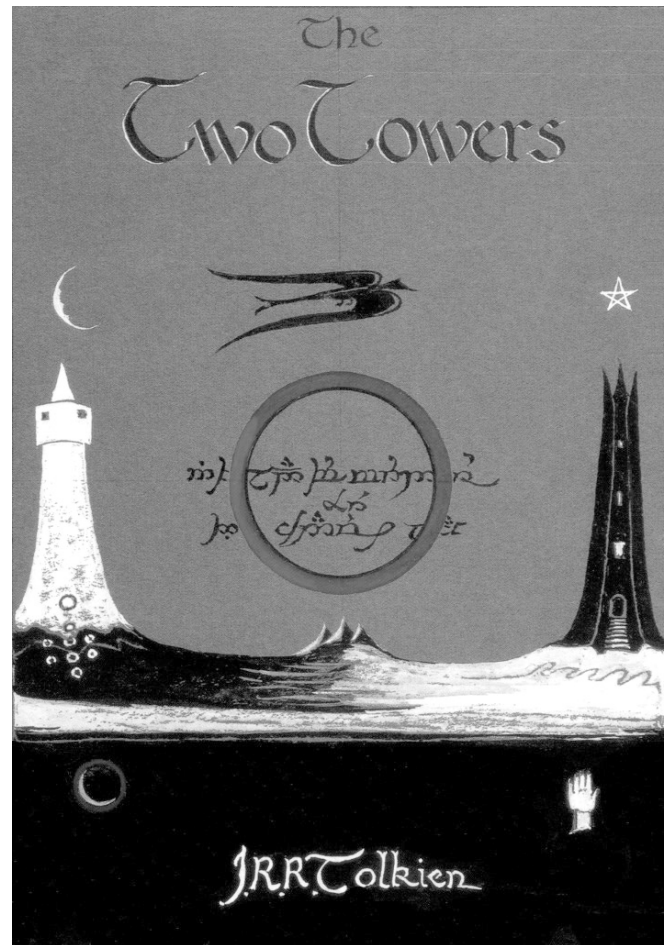
In June of 1999, I traveled in England for the first time. After a few days in London, my friend and I rented a car and toured around the countryside, visiting sites of mythological importance, like Stonehenge, Avebury, Glastonbury Tor, Cadbury, and Tintagel. For us, the history and mythic significance of these sites made the journey more than a vacation. It was a sort of pilgrimage. We approached them with a sense of awe and reverence.

Our last stop was Oxford. Our plan was to tour the colleges and the town, of course, and to spend some serious quality time in those fabulous bookstores. But for me, Oxford, or more specifically, an Oxford pub called the Eagle and Child, was also a place of pilgrimage. Why this particular pub? The Eagle and Child, affectionately known as the Bird and Baby, was where a group of Oxford scholars once met each week to talk and read from their works. The group was called the Inklings, and it included, among others, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and J.R.R. Tolkien. In that dark and time-stained pub, chapters from the *Narnia* stories, *The Lord of the Rings*, and *The Silmarillion* were read for the very first time ever.

No matter how charming the ambiance or how tasty the ale, it's hard to think of a tiny pub as having the same feeling of significance as a magnificent cathedral or a prehistoric stone monument. But in a strange way, the feeling was very nearly the same. *This is a place where something significant happened*, I remember thinking. *Something important was born here*. Quite unexpectedly, I found myself overcome with very nearly the same feeling of numinous reverence.

Chatting with the bartender, I learned that I wasn't the first. Indeed, he said, people from all walks of life from every corner of the globe regularly visit the Bird and Baby for much the same reason. Perhaps that is not surprising. Both the UK newspaper *The Guardian* and *Time* magazine called *The Lord of the Rings* the most-read novel in the world. Lewis's *Narnia* books have been perennial bestsellers in every single year since their original publication. For some reason, books like *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* and *The Lord of the Rings* touch readers on a level that seems, somehow, to transcend mere entertainment.

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Speaking for myself, it's not too much of an exaggeration to call reading *The Lord of the Rings* for the first time way back in the fifth grade a life-changing experience. Tolkien's trilogy led directly to my own life-long love of stories and mythology. I can't help wondering if, without that experience in my childhood, I would have written a novel of my own, or co-founded the Mythic Journeys conference (<http://www.mythicjourneys.org>).

In short, my experience of reading *The Lord of the Rings*, like that of so very many other readers through the past decades, was the kind that changes a person for all time, or at least inspires a life direction—and even a sort of pilgrimage. That's the sort of response that one usually has only to the most significant, the most sacred stories—the cultural heritage of truth disguised as narrative that serves as a guide through the dark forests of life. In short, myth. To me, and to so many others, Tolkien's works seem to carry significance greater than the (certainly considerable) merits of the work itself. To generations of readers growing up over the past half-century, and to new audiences discovering the tales after the release of the films, *The Lord of the Rings* has taken on the weight of myth.

Tolkien would no doubt have agreed. Indeed, he stated that the Middle Earth tales were a deliberate attempt to create a mythology for England. He might well have been quick to attribute the phenomenal success of the work to its mythic structure and archetypal elements. "I believe that legends and myth are largely made of truth," he wrote in one of his letters, "and in-

deed present aspects of it that can only be perceived in this mode; and long ago certain truths and modes of this kind were discovered and must always reappear.” Tolkien agreed that the significance of myth goes deeper than the skill of the artist. This is an idea that Joseph Campbell echoed when he declared in *The Power of Myth* that, “the people who can keep (myth) alive are the artists of one kind or another. The function of the artist is the mythologization of the environment and the world.”

The noted folklorist and author Alan Dundes disagrees, however. Dundes argues that *The Lord of the Rings* cannot be called myth, saying that the novel, this or any novel, cannot meet the cultural criteria of myth. A work or art, or artifice, cannot be said to be the narrative of a culture’s sacred tradition. While planning the Mythic Journeys conference, I talked to Dr. Dundes about Tolkien’s works. Although he admires Tolkien’s books, he told me that they are “at most, artificial myth.” If Dundes is right, what is it that resonates with such a vast audience on so profound a level?

The obvious answer, of course, is the quality of the work itself. In short, Tolkien wrote a ripping good yarn. The complexities of language and structure are perhaps rivaled only by Joyce in the canon of Western literature. It can be argued that the publication of *The Lord of the Rings* quite literally began a genre—counting the vast numbers of “epic fantasy” trilogies weighing down bookstore shelves, it’s hard to disagree. But hundreds, if not thousands, of books can claim to match or even surpass the literary quality of the work itself.

So why is *The Lord of the Rings*, like a very select few other works, a cultural phenomenon? Is there any way that these works can be considered myth?

I believe that Tolkien would have said yes, and (his natural modesty notwithstanding) that indeed the Middle Earth books are more than “artificial” or counterfeit myth. This declaration seems especially surprising given that Tolkien, and ultimately Lewis, were devout Christians. The answer is found in a concept that Tolkien and his fellow Inklings called “mythopoeia.”

In his book *The Inklings*, biographer Humphrey Carpenter recounts a significant conversation between Tolkien and a then-atheist C.S. Lewis. The two were walking among the colleges in Oxford on a September evening in 1931. Lewis had never underestimated the power of myth. One of his earliest loves had been the Norse myth of Balder, the dying god. All the same, Lewis did not in any way *believe* in the myths that so thrilled him. As he told Tolkien, “myths are lies, and therefore worthless, even though (they are) breathed through silver.”

“No,” Tolkien replied. “*They are not lies.*”

Tolkien went on to explain that early man, the creators of the great myth cycles, saw the world very differently. To them “the whole of creation was myth-woven and elf-patterned. Tolkien went on to argue that man is not ultimately a liar. He may pervert his ideas into lies, but he comes from God, and it is from God that he draws his ultimate ideas. Therefore, Tolkien argued, not only man’s abstract thoughts, but also his imaginative inventions, must in some way originate with God, and must in

consequence reflect something of eternal truth.

When creating a myth, a storyteller is engaging in what Tolkien called mythopoeia. Through the act of peopling an imaginary world with bright heroes and terrible monsters, the storyteller is in a way reflecting God’s own act of creation. Human beings are, according to Tolkien, expressing fragments of eternal truth. Tolkien believed that the poet or storyteller is, then, a sub-creator “capturing in myth reflections of what God creates using real men and actual history.” A storyteller, Tolkien believed, is actually fulfilling Divine purpose, because the story always contains something of a deeper truth. Myth is filtered through the artist’s culture, experiences, and talents, but it is drawn from a deeper well.

By Tolkien’s argument, all myth is a response, a reaction to the force of creation occurring all around us. A story *can* be myth. Indeed, Tolkien would argue, it could scarcely be anything else.

Tolkien would certainly have agreed that it is the myth, more than his own skill as a storyteller, that the unprecedented audiences were, and are still, responding to. In a letter, he wrote: “...myth is alive at once and in all its parts, and dies before it can be dissected. It is possible, I think, to be moved by the power of myth and yet to misunderstand the sensation, to ascribe it wholly to something else that is also present: to metrical art, style, or verbal skill.”

So is *The Lord of the Rings* myth? Indeed, can any fantasy, a deliberate construction designed to entertain, be myth? By Campbell’s definition, it certainly seems to have all the right ingredients. Dundes, however, would argue that those ingredients are all counterfeit, as much artifice as art. But a thing is more than the sum of its parts. In Lewis’ *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, Eustace, one of the children visiting the land beyond the wardrobe, reacts with surprise upon learning that another character was once a star in the Narnian sky, declaring, “a star is a huge ball of flaming gas.” He is told that, “even in your world... that is not what a star is, but only what it is made of.” Lewis reminds us that a thing can be more than the sum of its parts, even if those parts are artificial.

A star may be made of flaming gas, but it *is* more. It is a source of heat, light, and life. It is a thing of great and enduring beauty. It is a light in a dark sky and a guide in the night. It can even be a heavenly talisman for making wishes. Likewise, a story can be more than a diversion. Some stories reach deeper, into the most primal and profound truths. They mirror, in new and original ways, the Ur-myth, the act of creation itself.

Mythopoeia is sub-creation, the act of the artist reflecting the creation of the world—the very essence of myth—in art. Tolkien believed that England lacked a mythology of its own and very deliberately attempted to create one with *The Lord of the Rings* and, more obviously, *The Silmarillion*. Myth gives the works their ultimate power. At least in the hands of a master like Tolkien, fantasy is more than puerile escapism. It is, perhaps rather ironically, a means of expressing the deepest truths. Perhaps, then, it *is* the myth in the Middle Earth stories that audiences have responded to on such unexpectedly deep and profound levels for more than half a century ■