

Tolkien's Fatherly Advice to His Son on Sex

J.R.R. Tolkien is known today for best-selling novels in [The Lord of the Rings trilogy](#) and [The Hobbit](#).

But all of Tolkien's time was not spent dreaming up tales of Middle-Earth. In fact, he was creating a more realistic story through the life he lived with his wife and four children: John, Michael, Christopher, and Priscilla.

Part of that realistic story played out in the advice he gave to his children through letters, and in a [1941 letter](#) addressed to his 20-year-old son Michael, that advice turned to the subjects of sex, love, and marriage. This advice might be broken down into the seven following statements:

1. True Love is about More than Sex

Sex, Tolkien noted, is the element which brings life and vitality to love. But the true lover is one who brings more than sex to the table:

"A 'lover' [is one who is] "engaging and blending all his affections and powers of mind and body in a complex emotion powerfully coloured and energized by 'sex'."

2. Friendship with the Opposite Sex is Impossible

According to Tolkien, our life in a "fallen world" is what prevents deep, platonic friendships between male and female persons. The desire may be there, but it always seems to go awry:

"To ordinary folk it can only rarely occur: two minds that have really a primarily mental and spiritual affinity may by accident reside in a male and a female body, and yet may

desire and achieve a 'friendship' quite independent of sex. But no one can count on it. The other partner will let him (or her) down, and almost certainly, by 'falling in love'. But a young man does not really (as a rule) want 'friendship', even if he says he does. ... He wants love: innocent, and yet irresponsible perhaps."

3. Chivalric Love is Dangerous

While most women find the idea of chivalric knights and fair maidens quite romantic, Tolkien believed the concept detrimental to women because it places them at the center of the relationship. This sets them up as a god-like figure and only leads to future disappointment and disillusionment:

"[Chivalric love] takes, or at any rate has in the past taken, the young man's eye off women as they are, as companions in shipwreck not guiding stars. (One result is for observation of the actual to make the young man turn cynical.) To forget their desires, needs and temptations. It inculcates exaggerated notions of 'true love', as a fire from without, a permanent exaltation, unrelated to age, childbearing, and plain life, and unrelated to will and purpose."

4. Women are More Practical than Men When it Comes to Love

Tolkien explains that women are much more prone to desire the practical elements of love – such as building a home and family – than they are the romantic parts. As a result, the female heart is more easily damaged if the male was simply toying with her affections:

"A man has a life-work, a career, (and male friends), all of which could (and do where he has any guts) survive the shipwreck of 'love'. A young woman, even one 'economically independent', as they say now (it usually really means

economic subservience to male commercial employers instead of to a father or a family), begins to think of the 'bottom drawer' and dream of a home, almost at once. If she really falls in love, the shipwreck may really end on the rocks."

5. Marriage Does Not Cure Sexual Desires

According to Tolkien, those who believe marriage will enable them to live in effortless purity in regards to sexuality are dead wrong. It is possible – and a state to be sought earnestly – but it takes great “grace,” “self-denial,” and “mortification” to achieve it:

“No man, however truly he loved his betrothed and bride as a young man, has lived faithful to her as a wife in mind and body without deliberate conscious exercise of the will, without self-denial. Too few are told that – even those brought up ‘in the Church’.”

6. Marriage is Not about Soulmates

The quest for a soulmate, Tolkien implies, can go on for a lifetime. Tolkien infers that the idea of the soulmate is at the root of the divorce culture:

“When the glamour wears off, or merely works a bit thin, they think they have made a mistake, and that the real soul-mate is still to find. The real soul-mate too often proves to be the next sexually attractive person that comes along.”

The way to break this cycle is to recognize the following:

“But the ‘real soul-mate’ is the one you are actually married to. You really do very little choosing: life and circumstance do most of it (though if there is a God these must be His instruments, or His appearances).”

7. Happy Marriages Incorporate Parents in Mate Selection

“It is a notorious that in fact happy marriages are more common where the ‘choosing’ by the young persons is even more limited, by parental or family authority, as long as there is a social ethic of plain unromantic responsibility and conjugal fidelity. But even in countries where the romantic tradition has so far affected social arrangements as to make people believe that the choosing of a mate is solely the concern of the young, only the rarest good fortune brings together the man and woman who are really as it were ‘destined’ for one another, and capable of a very great and splendid love.”

Times have obviously changed since Tolkien wrote this advice nearly 80 years ago, but do you think his wisdom is still sound? Would today's society have a much healthier view of sex, love, and marriage if they took Tolkien's advice to heart?

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