

Poetry in Prose: The Genius of J.R.R. Tolkien

Young John Ronald Reuel Tolkien curled up with his favorite book, reading the tale of Sigurd who slew the dragon Fafnir. Schooled at home, Tolkien's widowed mother taught him Latin and French and grammar, explaining that "green great dragon" was incorrect—it should be "great green dragon."

Tolkien wanted to know why. Language fascinated him.

After his studies were over each day, he wandered in the land of storybooks. He also delighted in nature, especially trees, and incurred the wrath of a nearby farmer for stealing mushrooms. He labeled the farmer The Black Ogre, and years later, writing *The Lord of the Rings*, the hobbits come upon a certain Farmer Maggot.

Maggot says a terrifying Black Rider has been asking after "Baggins," but Frodo is also wary of the farmer:

I have avoided his farm for years and years [he explains later]. He caught me several times trespassing after mushrooms, when I was a youngster at Brandy Hall. On the last occasion he beat me, and then took me and showed me to his dogs. "See, lads," he said, "next time this young varmint sets foot on my land, you can eat him. Now see him off!" They chased me all the way to the Ferry. I have never got over the fright.

When Tolkien described hobbits, he was describing himself and the West Midlands countryside where he spent his childhood. His aunt lived on a property sometimes called "Bag End."

He continued his studies, served as a soldier in WWI, wrote stories, and obtained a position as professor at Oxford,

opening to students the richness of the sagas of the West. The great poem *Beowulf* he taught in dramatic fashion. His fellow writer and close friend C.S. Lewis said of him that he could get “inside language.” His prose is lovely, and the trilogy contains poetry as well, sometimes in Tolkien’s made-up languages!

The stories he began during the War recovering in a hospital from “trench fever” coalesced into an entire universe: the world of Middle-earth, complete with peoples, languages, and history. But fantasy for Tolkien was a mirror reflecting the Truth. Tolkien loved the cultures of Britain, and he was a Christian, and these twin themes form the bedrock of his stories.

The Lord of the Rings is not an allegory. The Riders of Rohan do not symbolize the Vikings—but every reader can see the similarities if you swap out horses for longboats. Sauron is not the devil—and yet, the picture of a great war between Good and Evil is very Christian.

“Work of the Enemy!” said Gandalf. “Such deeds he loves: friend at war with friend; loyalty divided in confusion of hearts.”

If the evil Sauron obtains the One Ring, he can control the world. Humble Frodo Baggins offers to destroy it. But the only way to do so is to drop it into Mount Doom. Like a world war, it is life and death on a colossal scale, with a hobbit an unlikely hero, willing to sacrifice himself.

Frodo says: “It must often be so, Sam, when things are in danger: someone has to give them up, lose them, so that others may keep them.”

Like *Narnia’s* Aslan, we spot reminders of Christ: Aragorn the prophesied king is introduced as a humble, shadowy figure in a tavern, later revealed by the healing in his hands. Gandalf the wizard perishes in the Mines of Moria, but he is

resurrected as Gandalf the White, in a scene that brings to mind the Christ of Revelation.

Some have objected to the magic in the story. Both Tolkien and C.S. Lewis use magic in their tales as shorthand for the greater realities of the spiritual realm, a symbolism we can all understand.

Perhaps G. K. Chesterton said it best: "Fairy tales do not tell children the dragons exist. Children already know that dragons exist. Fairy tales tell children the dragons can be killed."

The Lord of the Rings is a "fairy tale" that teaches hope in the midst of darkness.

Frodo has a companion, Samwise, who is the true protagonist, the ordinary guy. With each setback, he plunges on, ever faithful, and it is his faithfulness that causes the journey to succeed.

At one point Sam loses hope. Then he looks up, and peeking through the darkness is a tiny white star. This is Tolkien's message. Above the present evil there is Light, and Goodness, and Hope.

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