

## *The Lord of the Rings* and the Quest for a Meaningful Context

Ever since the publication of *The Lord of the Rings*, the critical approaches to Tolkien's masterpiece have been very varied, and over the years they have become more and more specialized. Apart from a multitude of papers, published in academic journals<sup>1</sup> and critical anthologies, the *corpus* of book-length studies dedicated to Tolkien's work has steadily grown and includes themes as diverse as descriptive grammars of Tolkien's invented languages, guidebooks to the places Tolkien visited and that supposedly inspired different aspects of Middle-earth, critical works attempting to disclose how the intellectual circles he frequented in Oxford influenced his linguistic philosophy, the presence of Christian aspects in his work, studies of how his experiences in the Great War triggered the development of his particular literary vision, narratological analysis<sup>2</sup>, etc. The list could be made much longer and even include other areas of knowledge and fields of art.

When contemplating this overwhelming amount of approaches, it would seem difficult, at least at a first glance, to outline something like a common ground in Tolkien criticism. However, I believe that it is possible to discern three main branches. In the first place we have the analytical approach based on the disclosure of literary and, sometimes, remotely historical sources for different aspects of the work.<sup>3</sup> In the second place, the studies attempting to reveal the applicability of the story to the historical and cultural conditions of the 20th century.<sup>4</sup> Finally we have the critical works centered on more technical aspects of the narrative, such as the descriptive grammars, metrical and structural analysis, etc.

---

1 Some of the publications that have most frequently included articles on Tolkien are *Inklings: Jahrbuch für Literatur und Ästhetik*; *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*; *Mythlore*; *Mallorn: Studies in Medievalism*, among others.

2 Recent examples of these approaches include, respectively: González (1999), Lyons (2004), Flieger (2003), Wood (2003), Garth (2004), and Segura (2004).

3 See Chance and Day (1991); Clark and Timmons (ed.) (2000), and Day (2003).

4 See Veldman (1994), Curry (1998), Flieger (1997), Shippey (2002).

Roughly, the main part of this bibliography is made up of the first two groups. The problem is that these fields of research are often put in frank opposition: while the first group tends to emphasise the importance of the work as a catalyst for (mostly) medieval literary traditions, in the studies belonging to the second it is considered relevant insofar as it implicitly addresses the predominant political and cultural issues of the 20th century, such as the need for a stronger ecological commitment, or the dangers of totalitarianism.

Another question which has generated much debate and that involves all three branches, deals with literary genre – what type of literature is this? Most critics consider that it is not possible to attribute a single definition to the work, since such an approach would only refrain the reader from getting the full picture.<sup>5</sup> While the fact that many different genres are at work is beyond doubt, from my point of view, no Tolkien scholar has so far succeeded (or even attempted) in explaining the particularity of genre *interaction* in *The Lord of the Rings*; that is, how the dialogue between different literary traditions conditions both the writing and the reading of the story.

The main aim of the present study is to discover a common ground in Tolkien criticism, or at least to show one of the possible roads that may take us there. For this reason, my critical approach should be able to reconcile the two stances represented by the first two groups in Tolkien criticism, as outlined above. Both fields of research, viewed separately, are of course valuable and useful for the disclosure of certain implicit fields of meaning present in the text, but they are at the same time seriously (and necessarily) limited, and sometimes even *limiting*, as conductors towards a wider understanding of the work. A critical formula capable of combining and integrating both stances would neutralise many of the contradictions and incoherencies generated by their inherent academic provincialism.

The same formula should also be able to produce a new approach to the question of genre in Tolkien's work, without excluding any of the reasonably justified proposals previously made. In order to do so, I wish to verify the originality of the work as derived from its capacity to put a great number of different

---

<sup>5</sup> The most influential critical work that represents this stance is Shippey's *The Road to Middle-earth* (2003, first published 1982). See also Segura (2004).

literary traditions in smooth dialogue, but within a concrete literary context, much closer to modernism than to the pseudomedieval romances of William Morris, or, for that matter, the misleadingly denominated ‘fantasy’ literature by writers such as C.S. Lewis or Ursula K. Le Guin. Hence, I consider that it is possible to defend the apparently paradoxical opinion that *The Lord of the Rings* is *sui generis* within a concrete literary context.

Apart from providing us with a foundation for the explanation of the dialogue between different literary traditions within Tolkien’s masterpiece, this approach would also help us to legitimate its importance in the English – and universal – literary context of the twentieth century. This, in turn, would hopefully clear the way for a removal of much prejudice on behalf of mainstream literary criticism, which is often motivated by the apparent lack of a literary context in which to situate this work.

In the third place, our critical formula should disclose *how* the different narrative traditions interact in *The Lord of the Rings*. If we are able to analyse the different levels of generic interaction, we might also be able to explain a number of apparent contradictions regarding characters, descriptions of physical space, action, and focalisation, which may (or may not) depend on the *limits* of different traditions in dialogue with others.

The starting point for the present study was found in Shippey’s (2003:210-211) discussion of genre in *The Lord of the Rings*. Here, Shippey highlights the work’s capacity to express five of the literary modes, as outlined by Frye (1971) in his influential critical study *Anatomy of Criticism* – myth, romance, high mimesis, low mimesis and the ironic mode. I was struck by the fact that Shippey left out the mode of ironic myth, proper to the 20th century and the next phase in the cycle described by Frye, because in many of its expressions, this literature is characterised by an exhaustive incorporation of different literary traditions of the past on a simultaneous level. The exhaustive corpus of source-hunting studies on Tolkien’s best-known work seemed to confirm that *The Lord of the Rings* fulfilled the criteria of this mode, too.

However, in many of these studies, references to different genres often become quite loose in context. What does it really mean to say that the War of the

Ring is epic, that Lothlórien is indebted to romance, or that Sam is a novelistic character? As soon as any given genre is mentioned in relation to an episode, or to a character, or to a physical space, I get the impression that something is lacking. From my point of view, there is no such thing as pure paradigms in this 'tale' (to use Tolkien's own, perhaps deliberately vague definition of what it was he had written), and I believe that this is so mainly because of the insistent, ever-present intertraditional dialogue that permeates all levels of the narrative. Hence, I consider that there is a real need in Tolkien criticism to find a formula that may fruitfully account for this.

In order to be able to confirm the presence of one genre or another, I will present the main characteristics of what I perceive as the four great Western narrative traditions in the following chapter with some rigour. These four paradigms are myth, epic, romance and the novel. This chapter will be used as a point of reference for the later comparison between the different branches of each of these traditions and *The Lord of the Rings*, which will be an important part of the analysis in the fourth chapter.

In the third chapter I will discuss the similarities and differences between Tolkien's work and some of the representatives, both war poets and modernists, of what Frye terms ironic myth, while the fourth chapter will be devoted to an application of the conclusions to a textual analysis of the dynamics of the intertraditional literary dialogue in *The Lord of the Rings*.

Apart from the selective use I will make of Frye and Bakhtin, I will consequently ignore the approaches of mainstream literary criticism, since none of the established methodologies has proved capable of providing me with relevant tools for the analysis. The need to design a unique methodology is an inevitable response to the work's particular characteristics, as I have had to analyse literary aspects previously unexplored by genre criticism in the context of comparative literature. This white spot on the official map (as drawn by critics who have, so to speak, tried to avoid the monsters) is probably due to the (to many) 'monstrous' originality of the work and the scarce appreciation of *The Lord of the Rings* on behalf of the scholars dedicated to this branch of criticism (the latter effect being potentially derived from the huge popular success the work has enjoyed).

In other words, the problem is largely the same as that which Tolkien outlined in his famous essay on the Old English epic *Beowulf* – the work is usually not considered a masterpiece by mainstream literary criticism due to a general refusal to accept the centrality of monsters. Tolkien's work is very clearly, and not only chronologically, at the centre of twentieth-century literature, in spite of its fantastic setting, as we shall see. That *Beowulf* was a source of inspiration for Tolkien is likewise beyond doubt, but the roots of *Beowulf* go back further than the feats of a Geat in Denmark, and the branches of the epic tradition reach all the way to twentieth-century modernism. *The Lord of the Rings* does so, too. In the following chapter we shall see what happened to European story-telling once Ulysses returned from Troy, and how the roots, stem and branches of Tolkien's best-known narrative all belong to one vast, fascinating tree of many hues and fibres.