A MORALITY FOR MODERN MAN:

THE CONCEPT AND PORTRAYAL OF GOOD AND EVIL

IN THE MAJOR WORKS OF J.R.R. TOLKIEN

Robert James Smith

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INTRODUCTION

Mythology is founded upon words, and the history of words, therefore, must explain it.¹

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The fictional works of J.R.R. Tolkien have had wide success, beginning with the publication of The Hobbit in 1937. Yet in this phenomenon there is an enigma, for works which are fundamentally moral and religious in a medieval sense have been avidly read and even given cult status by a world in the process of rejecting or significantly discounting traditional Western religious and cultural values. It would seem that Tolkien's created myths have served some of the deeper needs of modern man. It is possible that much of this success is due to the projection of an overpowering sense of evil which is capable of being relieved through 'Eucatastrophe'². The evil has an almost palpable existence and has vastly more power than that possessed by the few good heroes. Overall evil appears insuperable, for never is its power fully unleashed; always in the background there is a greater evil. Confronting these demonic manifestations the narrative focuses on engaging rustic folk with their simple goodness. This dichotomy continues throughout the texts, and normally such resistance as can be summoned up appears futile.

A dualistic view of good and evil seems to satisfy a deep human need. It is as though one is helped to actualize one's own potential for goodness through belief in the proposition of an independently evil person or force. For example, the Fall of Satan and the Angels is not Scriptural, but has exercised such an influence that popularly it is believed to be so. Dualistic constructions of evil continually emerge throughout history, often ill-defined but usually ascribing vast power to evil. Yet this demonology is in opposition to the Christian belief in evil being merely the absence of goodness, a negation rather than an independent force. It is therefore surprising that Tolkien, the devout Catholic, has put such emphasis on separate evil, which in operation is seen to be everywhere. Despite this, ultimately one would expect the moral theology of Tolkien's writings to be orthodox.

Not all of Tolkien's fictional works have had the same imaginative and moral impact. Although the larger cosmologies fill in much background detail, they do not have the appeal of the works with hobbits, or with simple village settings. The general reader is more able to involve himself imaginatively in the moral struggles in these humble settings. In addition there is a fundamental difference between the two bodies of work in their use of language. This study intends to limit itself to an examination of these more popular texts, i.e., those published within Tolkien's lifetime.

It must be remembered throughout that Tolkien was a philologist and teacher of medieval literature, and that he sought to bring a fresh and creative approach to his professional work. Witness his Songs for Philologists written with and for

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his students and colleagues at Leeds University. When he turned his imagination
to longer creative work it should not be surprising that he took with him his
scholarly concern with the history of words. Today, with Classics less widely
studied and the Diploma in Comparative Philology all but disappeared, the nature
of a philologist’s perception of language is not generally realised. Philology is
literary and cultural history, as well as sounds and changes, over a vast time
scale. It gives an awesome overview of all human existence. Furthermore,
philological investigation of Old English and related languages had reached a
point, with its limited body of text, whereby further large advances could only be
made through speculative work, such as neo-medieval story and the fabrication of
analogues of Germanic mythic story, a situation ideally suited for the creative
Tolkien. It is deemed to be true that there is no formal line or sharp division
between Tolkien’s lectures or published comments on Old and Middle English
texts, and his fictional works.

There is great authorial reliance on vocabulary repeated for moral effect in
Tolkien’s fictional works, words such as ‘light’, ‘dark’, ‘gold’, ‘wonder’, ‘path’ and
‘pity’ amongst others. Such repetition is an unfashionable device in modern
literature, but was frequently used and praised in medieval times. These words
are used not merely as simple and obvious antitheses for general symbols of
opposing forces. Rather the words are repeated and varied, so that a structure of
echoes is set up, bringing metaphysical nuances to the situations of their use. As
well as repetition, the positioning of this vocabulary in the text often heavily
underscores the concepts involved. It is the perception of these moral counters

4. After tracing Tolkien’s derivation of toy, one of his students surmised:
‘Unhappily this attractive hypothesis cannot yet be considered proved’, A.J. Bliss
‘Three Etymological Notes’, English and Germanic Studies, Vol. IV, 1951-52,
p. 29. This comment neatly suggests the rewards and uncertainties of Tolkien’s
speculative approach.
that determines, for the little people of the stories, the pattern of good and evil. These words give them, and the reader, an ethic for guidance in their daily lives. C.S. Lewis wrote that through myth, familiar details of life are 'dipped in a story', and that, instead of escaping from life, we thereby rediscover reality. He goes on to say (referring to The Lord of the Rings):

This book applies the treatment... to good and evil, to our endless perils, our anguish, and our joys. By dipping them in myth we see them more clearly.

It seems that Tolkien has so 'dipped' the commonplace words of good and evil, rediscovering their moral force. A detailed examination of this patterning will be the main method of approach taken by this study.

The body of criticism on Tolkien's work has already been categorized, and this analysis will not be repeated here. It should be added that much that passes as criticism is in fact 'sub-creation', the postulation of minor additional detail for the fictional worlds, usually in the attempt to reconcile differences. It was a method that Tolkien indirectly encouraged through his answers to queries from readers. Studies to date of Tolkien's language have concerned themselves primarily with the onomastics and the invented languages, ignoring his consistent use of metaphysical/moral vocabulary. In 1981 Neil Isaacs predicted that critical attention would be drawn to the 'stylistic aspects of the trilogy that

7. 'On Fairy Stories', p. 28.
8. Letters, see 19 Jan. 1965, p. 354 and passim. However, he naturally disapproved of these efforts on a larger scale. See 12 Dec. 1966, p. 371.
breathe life into its subcreation¹⁰, and this study proceeds along this line. To date studies of the depiction of good and evil have varied widely, usually too brief to accomplish more than signal that Tolkien's work has great moral force, or too narrow to be acceptable as a full response to a complex patterning of metaphysical perceptions. It is as a contribution to this necessary literary field of exploration that this study is offered.