



The Quest for Goodness in the Writings of J. R. R. Tolkien

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Introduction:

Why so popular?

Book sales, translations, movies

At the millennium, Tolkien – author of the century

BBC television – ‘Lord of the Rings’ the best loved book of the British

1. The thoroughly realized world of Middle Earth

Geography – maps – a landscape for us to love and explore

History of peoples and kingdoms going back thousands of years

Cultures we can imagine entering

Languages – this where Tolkien began; then characters to speak them; then a world to set them in

2. The constant subtle tie into our world

A myth for the English

‘These mythological ballads are full of that very primitive undergrowth that the literature of Europe has on the whole been steadily cutting and reducing for many centuries with different and earlier completeness among different people. ... I would that we had more of it left – something of

the same sort that belonged to the English.’

This constant evocation of our world draws us in

3. Unforgettable characters

4. A wonderfully told story

‘the little bit (two inches wide) of ivory on which I work with so fine a brush as to produce little effect after much labor’

Jane Austen writing to her nephew, Edward Austen-Leigh, November, 1816

5. Humor

6. Poetry

The Quest for Goodness

Battle between good and evil, light and darkness – this is the tapestry woven throughout the story

The enjoyment of the ordinary gifts of life – food, drink, laughter, fireworks!

The love of creation and a wise, careful and just exercise of dominion

Delight in family and friendship

Every virtue is present here

1. Choices of each character at every step along the road

Sam, Boromir, Gimli, Legolas, even Gollum

2. Behind every decision stands the unseen realm of heaven (and hell)

God invisibly at work fulfilling his purposes in the world

Yet, without violating the will of his creatures

Eternity in our hearts – draws us unknowingly into the quest

3. The temptation of power

Galadriel, Sam, Boromir, Saruman, even Gollum

The corruption of power – the use of other people

Saruman, Wormtongue, Denethor

Power used, not for self-glory, but to serve others

Aragorn – king and servant

Gandalf

The Elves – we must diminish that others may flourish

The Theme of self-sacrifice

Arwen

Faramir

Aragorn

Gandalf

The elves who join in the battle, risking death

Frodo and Sam

The beauty of weakness and ‘folly’

Hobbits

The destruction of the Ring

4. The unseen and unheard backdrop to all this - the Biblical story:

A good creation

A broken and fallen world

The hope of the restoration of what is good

Tolkien's view of myth and fairy story – See *Mythopoeia*

‘The heart of man is not compound of lies,

but draws some wisdom from the only Wise,

and still recalls him. Though now long estranged,

man is not wholly lost or wholly changed.

Dis-graced he may be, yet is not dethroned,

and keeps the rags of lordship once he owned ...

Whence came the wish, and whence the power to dream,

or some things fair and others ugly deem?

All wishes are not idle, nor in vain ...

Blessed are the legend-makers with their rhyme of things not found within recorded time.

It is not they that have forgot the Night

or bid us flee to organized delight ...

I would that I might with the minstrels sing

and stir the unseen with a throbbing string ...

I would with the beleaguered fools be told,

that keep an inner fastness where their gold,

impure and scanty, yet they loyally bring

to mint an image blurred of distant king,

or in fantastic banners wave the sheen

heraldic emblems of a lord unseen ...’

It is this memory of paradise once owned, of paradise lost, and of paradise that might be regained –

this memory and longing is present in every moment of the story –

it is this that is the most powerful evocation of the quest for goodness –

it is this that touches every reader of the books (and every viewer of the films) so deeply.