

Tolkien's Fantasy World*

Haifeng Pu

School of Foreign Languages, Tianjin University of Technology, Tianjin, China

Email: harrypu@sina.cn

Abstract—*On Fairy Stories* is one of the most important works written by Tolkien to elucidate his theory on fantasy literature. He invented the words—"fairy stories" to show its difference from "fairy tales", which is the literary form mainly for children. This article examines the features of his fantasy and secondary world created by Tolkien.

Index Terms—Tolkien, fantasy world, *On Fairy Stories*, Secondary World

Tolkien's fantasy works--*The Lord of the Rings* has been wildly popular among readers since its first publication. In a 1997 survey conducted by British Television Channel Four and Waterstones', a prominent British bookseller, *The Lord of the Rings* was chosen as "the greatest book of the century" by British readers. At the same time, the criticism over the artistic values of Tolkien's works arose. One of the most common criticisms was that Tolkien's works was so idealistic that it would only cater to children and those who intended to escape from reality. The Australian feminist writer, Germaine Greer, wrote in Waterstone's own magazine that it had been her "nightmare" that readers would deem Tolkien as the "most influential writer of the twentieth century," and now, "the bad dream has materialized." (Greer, G, 1997, p. 6) She further sneers, "Novels don't come more fictional than that...The books that come from Tolkien's train are more or less what you would expect; flight from reality is their dominating characteristic." (Greer, G, 1997, p. 2)

In response to the criticism from these literary establishments, Rogers Sale defended on Tolkien's behalf. He stated Tolkien didn't "single-handedly transform public taste and publishing practice; but his work is so outstanding and his influence so conspicuous that his name stands first: Tolkien and twentieth-century fantasy, like Shakespeare and Elizabethan drama". (Sale, R, 1973, preface) The poet and literary critic W. H. Auden once declared of Tolkien's fairy stories, "If someone dislikes it, I shall never trust their literary judgment about anything again." (Auden, W.H, 1968, p. 45) No matter what the criticisms are, the very fact that Tolkien is one of the most influential writers in the twenty century and has great influence on those fantasy writers thereafter can not be denied.

I. INTRODUCTION TO J. J. R. TOLKIEN

John Ronald Reuel Tolkien was born January 3, 1892 in South Africa. His mother moved him away from there when he was about three. His father died on February 15, 1896 when he was four in South Africa. Tolkien's mother converted to Catholicism in 1900, being a Protestant before. This influenced his writing and his stories took on a Catholic view. From an early age Tolkien had a love for languages and had a good knowledge of Middle English, Old English, Old Norse, Welsh and Finnish. In later life he started making one up called Quenya which he used in *The Lord of the Rings*. One of his first jobs was helping compile the New English Dictionary. He was also a famous philologist, whose academic career spanned 39 years. In 1920 he was appointed as Reader in English Language at Leeds University. He became the Rawlinson and Bosworth Professor of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford University in 1925, and held the prestigious Merton Professor of English position at Oxford from 1945 until his retirement in 1959. His first novel, *The Hobbit*, was published in 1937. His *Lord of the Rings* trilogy was published in 1954 and 1955. Tolkien led the way to change using transformational leadership. His books changed what people thought about fantasy literature. Tolkien died on September 2nd, 1973. His another fantasy works—*Silmarillion* was published posthumously by his son Christopher Tolkien. Tolkien's legacy still lives on in his books, which are loved by millions.

Tolkien thought of the *Silmarillion*, which focuses on good and evil, as his most important book. *Silmarillion* gives account of the First Age of Tolkien fantasy world though published after his death. Feanor, the most gifted of the Noldor creates the three Silmarils, in which he captures the light of the Two Trees of Valinor. Later the Trees are destroyed by Melkor, and the three jewels are stolen by him. He flees the Undying Lands, and entrenches himself in Angband. Against the will of the Valar, the Noldor return to Middle-earth, swearing to make war on Melkor until they recover the Silmarils.

In *The Hobbit*, Bilbo Baggins who is a comfort-loving and provincial guy is persuaded by the Wizard Gandalf to set out on an adventure of treasure recovery with the company of thirteen dwarves. On their road, they encounter trolls, goblins, wargs, and many other perils; but they are also helped by friendly creatures like Eagles, or Beorn. When wandering through a tunnel, Bilbo finds a golden ring and meets Gollum who wants to eat him. Bilbo outwits Gollum by riddle game and gets away with the Ring which will introduce the stories of *the Lord of the Rings* trilogy.

* The article is sponsored by the Planning Projects of Philosophy and Social Science of Tianjin (Project Name: A study on Tolkien's Fantasy literature, Project Code: TJWW11-004)

The Lord of the Rings is a recounted story in the Second Age of the Middle Earth. The Elven smiths of Noldor are directed by the Dark Lord Sauron to forge three rings for elves, seven for Orcs and nine for human beings. Sauron creates the One Ring by filling his own power in it in order to rule the world. The Ring is so powerful that it could make the bearer invisible, immortal and corrupted. But the One Ring is taken from him by Isildur in the battle, and later lost in the River Anduin and recovered by a hobbit called Gollum. Eventually, he loses the Ring which, is found by Bilbo Baggins. Meanwhile, Sauron takes a new physical form and reoccupies his old realm. He sends his servants to seize the Ring. Frodo Baggins inherits the Ring from Bilbo, his cousin and guardian. Both are unaware of its origin, but Gandalf, a wizard and old friend of Bilbo, suspects the Ring's identity. When he becomes certain, he advises Frodo to take it away from the Shire. So Frodo sets out to the journey of Mount Doom to destroy the Ring.

II. THE FAIRY STORIES DEFINED

Tolkien was referring here to his approach to the creation of fantasy stories. In 1938, years before the release of *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien delivered a lecture at the University of St. Andrews, which was later published under the title, *On Fairy Stories*. In it he addresses his own theories regarding the origin, the imagination and the functions of fairy stories. He also defines the fantasy on his part and invents the words “fairy story” in order to differentiate it from the term “fairy tale” applied to the traditional genre for children. According to *Oxford English Dictionary*, the “fairy tale” is defined as “a tale about fairies, or generally a fairy legend; with developed senses”. Tolkien believes that this definition is too narrow to make too much sense in actual usage. He also provides some examples to deny the idea that a fairy must be included in a traditional fairy tale. For Tolkien, fantastic elements are crucial to make up a good fairy story. He defines “fairy story” in his own way. “A ‘fairy-story’ is one which touches on or uses Faerie, whatever its own main purpose may be: satire, adventure, morality, fantasy. Faerie itself may perhaps most nearly be translated by Magic—but it is magic of a peculiar mood and power, at the furthest pole from the vulgar devices of the laborious, scientific, magician. There is one proviso: if there is any satire present in the tale, one thing must not be made fun of, the magic itself. That must in that story be taken seriously, neither laughed at nor explained away.” (Tolkien, J. R. R., 1966, p. 39)

As for Tolkien, fairy-stories are not necessarily stories about fairies, but “stories about Fairy, that is Faerie, the realm or state in which fairies have their being. Faerie contains many things besides elves and fays, and besides dwarfs, witches, trolls, giants, or dragons: it holds the sea, the sun, the moon, the sky; and the earth, and all things that are in it: tree and bird, water and stone, wine and bread, and ourselves, mortal men, when we are enchanted.” (Tolkien, J. R. R., 1966, p. 38)

Despite the great success of Tolkien's the Lord of the Rings trilogy among readers, the criticisms of juvenility have been targeted against Tolkien's books. The criticisms from the literary establishment decry his books as “prose of the nursery room...Winnie the Pooh posing as epic”. In response to these criticisms, Tolkien believes that they revealed an unfortunate, but all too common, ignorance of the true nature and value of fairy story. Unlike his critics, Tolkien believed that fairy-stories had many “permanent and fundamental things to talk about” and were of tremendous value to adults as well as to society as a whole. For him, fairy-story was one of the highest forms of literature, and quite erroneously associated with children. Tolkien believes that it is erroneous to associate “fairy stories” only with children and the genre is also inextricably linked with adults. As Tolkien points out, “the association of children and fairy stories is an accident of our domestic history. Fairy-stories have in the modern lettered world been relegated to the ‘nursery’, as shabby or old-fashioned furniture is relegated to the play-room, primarily because the adults do not want it, and do not mind if it is misused.” (Tolkien, J. R. R., 1966, p. 58)

He likens fairy-stories to a pot of soup into which mythology, romance, history, hagiography, folk tales, and literary creations have all been tossed together and left to simmer through the centuries. Each storyteller dips into this soup when writing or recounting magical tales—the best of which have slipped right back into the collective pot. Shakespeare added to the soup with *The Tempest* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, as did Chaucer, Mallory, Spenser, Pope, Milton, Blake, Keats, Yeats, and numerous other writers whose works were never intended for children.

III. THE SECONDARY WORLD CREATED

Tolkien states that Fantasy is “the making or glimpsing of other worlds”. In his fantasy world, Tolkien intends to create by using human imagination a Secondary World, where the magic language is appropriated and the inner consistency of reality is achieved. According to Tolkien, this Secondary world is not imaginary and visional, but to some extent another Reality paralleled with the reality where people live. In regard to the creation of Secondary World in literature, Auden points out that people usually have two desires for their lives and literary creation, one is the desire to know the Truth of the real world they live and the other is the desire to create a Secondary World and share with others. (Auden, W. H., 1968, p. 112) The latter is usually reflected in the fantasy literature and in the subjectivity of the writer.

Tolkien posits that fairy stories are the magic of language which can be used to describe what doesn't exist when the language is used creatively.

“The human mind, endowed with the powers of generalization and abstraction, sees not only green-grass, discriminating it from other things (and finding it fair to look upon), but sees that it is green as well as being grass. But

how powerful, how stimulating to the very faculty that produced it, was the invention of the adjective: no spell or incantation in Faerie is more potent. And that is not surprising: such incantations might indeed be said to be only another view of adjectives, a part of speech in a mythical grammar. The mind that thought of light, heavy, grey, yellow, still, swift, also conceived of magic that would make heavy things light and able to fly, turn grey lead into yellow gold, and the still rock into swift water. If it could do the one, it could do the other; it inevitably did both. When we can take green from grass, blue from heaven, and red from blood, we have already an enchanter's power—upon one plane; and the desire to wield that power in the world external to our minds awakes.” (Tolkien, J. R. R., 1966, p. 48)

Sub-creation is an artistic act, usually literary, in which a person fashions a fictional setting in some way unlike the real world. This fictional setting, or Secondary World, may then be imaginatively entered by the reader. If the Secondary World is skillfully constructed, it will produce in the reader what Tolkien calls Secondary Belief. He also explains in that essay that a fantasy writer creates a Secondary World and thus you try to create Secondary Belief. Critics often speak of “the willing suspension of disbelief” --a term used to mean that a work is believable enough that a reader is willing to put aside any disbelief and enjoy the story for what it is. Tolkien thought the term was unhelpful. Rather, he says,

“What really happens is that the story-maker proves a successful ‘sub-creator’. He makes a Secondary World which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is ‘true’: it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside. The moment disbelief arises, the spell is broken; the magic, or rather art, has failed. You are then out in the Primary World again, looking at the little abortive Secondary World from outside. If you are obliged, by kindness or circumstance, to stay. Then disbelief must be suspended (or stifled), otherwise listening and looking would become intolerable. (Tolkien, J. R. R., 1966, p. 60-61)

Fantasy writers usually create a Secondary World in their literature so that readers can enter and get themselves lost in it. When their minds and imaginations can let go of the world they know and become completely absorbed in the fantasy world. However, no matter how imaginative the secondary world is, it must be founded on universal principles of reason and logic in order to ensure a consistent, coherent, and credible reality. It must also contain certain elements, such as characters, settings, and themes, which are so easily recognizable that readers can navigate in the unfamiliar world.

Tolkien's Middle-Earth is a prime example of a believable secondary world. In order to make Middle-Earth consistent and credible, Tolkien invents maps, languages, folklore, and histories. There is a detailed explanation to the languages and the letters of the Middle-Earth in *The Hobbits*. The first chapter begins with a detailed description of hobbits in general and Bilbo Baggins in particular.

The names and phrases on Tolkien's maps usually remain readers of similar landscapes that have been seen before. In order to give comforting and familiar touches to a world which might otherwise seem too strange, remote, wild and frightening, Tolkien makes constant use of commonplace objects and activities. However, not all of the characters and objects that appear in *The Hobbit* are ordinary, and not everything that happens is normal – that is, according to this world's standards. Tolkien's stories, after all, are not merely fiction but high fantasy. Middle-Earth contains its own special brand of magic. There are characters who can wield the magic, such as Gandalf, or who are magical in essence, such as Beorn. Other characters are mythical creatures (dragons, goblins) or animals that exhibit human qualities (lordly eagles, evil spiders, wise thrushes). Some objects are also invested with magic and power. The trolls' purse squeaks when someone tries to steal it. Bilbo's ring can make the bearer invisible. All these demonstrate a fantasy world with a familiar touch and common objects and activities, but at the same time magic and marvel are introduced so that the imagination and interest are aroused among readers.

IV. THE FUNCTIONS OF FAIRY STORIES

Of the many functions of fairy-story, Tolkien believed that the most valuable was its ability to elucidate certain universal truths that are rarely seen clearly in everyday life. Tolkien wrote that fairy-stories contain in solution moral and religious truth, but not explicit, and reveal some aspects of truth “that can only be received in this mode.” For Tolkien, fairy stories can serve three purposes: escape, recovery and consolation.

According to Tolkien, “escape” is the main function of fairy stories, but nevertheless it is often misused by people. In people's mind, fantasy has often been accused of being escapist. In “*On Fairy Stories*”, Tolkien denies the claim that fantasy is ‘mere escapism’ and rhetorically asks,

“Why should a man be scorned, if, finding himself in prison, he tries to get out and go home? Of if, when he cannot do so, he thinks and talks about other topics than jailers and prison-walls? The world outside has not become less real because the prisoner cannot see it. In using escape this way, the critics who accuse fantasy of being escapist have chosen the wrong word, and, what's more, they are confusing, not always by sincere error, the Escape of the Prisoner' with ‘The Flight of the Deserter.’” (Tolkien, J. R. R., 1966, p. 79)

Twenty century sees a rapid development in mass production and scientific power and two great World Wars that shatter people's dreams and worldviews. It may say that World War I unfolds the modern age. At the same time, it also begins a process of disenchantment with the modernization. Tolkien witnesses the World Wars I and suffers from grief and loss of his friends. He takes a negative attitude toward the war and the industrialization, believing that they are the hostile forces of modern life. In response to the modern crisis, Tolkien feels the great need to create an alternative

reality because he thinks the modern reality is not realistic enough. Not only Tolkien, but other writers like Ursula LeGuin, William Golding, George Orwell, Aldous Huxley, J.K. Rowling, C.S. Lewis, or Kurt Vonnegut use their works as a fight-back to the modern crisis. No wonder Tom Shippey points out that “The dominant literary mode of the twentieth century has been the fantastic.” For Tolkien, fairy stories reflect the human desires to escape from pain, poverty, sorrow, injustice and death – into a homeland hospitable to the human mind, heart and imagination in order to be no longer “out of touch with the life of nature and of human nature as well” (Tolkien, J. R. R., 1964, p. 56)

Tolkien defines “recovery” as a regaining of a clear view. All along, fantasy finds its material in the primary world, only to enable us to see those elements “otherwise”. Viewing the world in this manner allows us to see the simple, most fundamental things in our world with a renewed vision. For Tolkien fairy stories had this ability to recapture the sacramental vision. “It was in fairy-stories that I first divined the potency of the words, and the wonder of things, such as stone, and wood, and iron; tree and grass; house and fire; bread and wine.” (Tolkien, J. R. R., 1966, p. 78) What Tolkien means is that we appropriate our world through language acquisition and familiarity, and we lose a sense of total participation in the natural world. Fantasy, by its subversiveness, allows us to view the world in a new and unfamiliar sacramental manner, as a reflection of the numinous. As Tolkien states, it allows us to view the world “freed from the drab blur of triteness or familiarity---from possessiveness.” (Tolkien, J. R. R., 1966, p. 75)

The world is revised or recovered in a sacramental manner. Fantasy offers certain consolations, which is the third area of concern for Tolkien “Fairy tales offer consolation from this world’s suffering through tapping into desires we have, such as the desire to visit far off places, ...to survey the depths of space and time. Another is ... to hold communion with living things.”

The main consolation is seen in all fairy tales: It is the happy ending. Tolkien calls this the “Eucatastrophe”, a word he invented, drawing on the word catastrophe (a sudden calamity or disaster) to mean a sudden, unexpected turn of events from sorry to happiness. When we experience a Eucatastrophe, we feel a deep, piercing joy. The gospels, according to Tolkien, are like a fairy story, marvelously artistic, yet true, not fictitious. The incarnation and resurrection are both Eucatastrophes.

In a letter to his son Christopher, Tolkien describes hearing a true story that had a happy, unexpected ending:

“I was deeply moved and had that peculiar emotion we all have – though not often. It is quite unlike any other sensation. And all of a sudden I realized what it was: the very thing that I have been trying to write about and explain – in that fairy-story essay that I so much wish you had read that I think I shall send it to you. For it I coined the word ‘eucatastrophe’: the sudden happy turn in a story which pierces you with a joy that brings tears (which I argued it is the highest function of fairy-stories to produce). And I was there led to the view that it produces its peculiar effect because it is a sudden glimpse of Truth, your whole nature chained in material cause and effect, the chain of death, feels a sudden relief as if a major limb out of joint had suddenly snapped back.” (Carpenter, Humphrey, 1981, p. 100)

Ding Di states in his Chinese translation of the Lord of the Rings in such a physically abundant post-modern world, people are still wandering mentally. So they have the impulse to mend the sky with their hands, which can not be realized through traditional literature and modern literature. (Tolkien, J. R. R., 2001, preface 7) It is out of this fact that Tolkien uses his imagination to create his own fantasy world.

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Haifeng Pu was born in Daqing, Heilongjiang Province in 1975. He received his M.A. degree in Translation Studies from Henan Normal University, China in 2005. He is currently a lecturer in School of Foreign Languages, Tianjin University of Technology. His research interests include English literature and translation.