

Tolkien Author of the Century

An Interview with Thomas Shippey

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Professor Shippey, can you tell us for what kind of public did you write the book *Tolkien: Author of the Century* ?

Many times, people write to me and say “I’m interested in Tolkien, I’d like to study Tolkien, I’d like to write my degree dissertation on Tolkien, but my teacher or my professor says that Tolkien is not a proper subject, that it is something that we do not study in schools, that we do not study in universities. I really wrote the book *Author of the Century* to try to show people like that that there were places where Tolkien was taken seriously. I think it’s unlikely that I am going to convince professors of this late stage, but there are many students there who’d like to study Tolkien and I feel they should have someone saying seriously and thoroughly that Tolkien is an author that deserves just as much as serious esteem as any author of what we call the mainstream. So you could say that I wrote the book for a group which I felt to be “disadvantage students”.

The main message in your book is that Tolkien was a typical author of the 20th century. Why has Tolkien become a typical author of the 20th century ?

Well, by the way, because ... Tolkien is *not* a typical author of the 20th century, people notice that straight away, he writes about a world which is almost entirely his own. Nevertheless, what struck me when we started to examine big polls and public opinion questionnaires about authors, was that the authors who very often came in the top 5 or top 10 were in some ways, rather, well, like Tolkien. They were authors like George Orwell, William Golding, Kurt Vonnegut, T. H. White, and Tolkien’s friend C.S. Lewis of course. They all wrote fantasy and most of them were veterans of serious warfare. So I thought that actually, although Tolkien might not look like a typical author in what he writes about, his themes are those of the unfortunate and horrible XX century which are industrialized warfare and a return to one could almost say “Medieval conditions” which we thought, during XVIII and XIX centuries, we Europeans had put behind us.

So the strange thing I say is that all these authors write about very serious and real topics, obviously they had 1st hand personal experiences. Nevertheless they felt that they only could write what they wanted to write through the media of fantasy. So, in that respect, in taking serious themes, in a fantastic mode, in that respect Tolkien *is* a typical author of the XX century. It’s just, I think, that far too many of my professional critical colleagues have not realized this. They do not pay very much attention to what people prefer to read and, as I said in my last answer, they say that ...there’s this lady in the “NY Times” wrote : “Tolkien is not literature”. But then who are they to decide what’s literature ? Literature, in the end, is what people read, and Tolkien has certainly been successful in that respect.

You describe *The Lord of the Rings* as a modern novel, dealing with many important issues of the XX century. Why have so many critics presented Tolkien as a nostalgic author, as a Medieval or an anachronistic author ?

Now, question three ... you ask why so many critics have presented Tolkien as a nostalgic author, as a Medieval or an anachronistic author. And of course, they say that because obviously he *is* and that is so.

But, again, one of the striking things which you find in authors other than Tolkien and which critics have not mentioned so far, is that they felt that, in a strange way, Medieval literature was more relevant and more serious for them than the writing of, again, the XIX to the XIX century. They thought in some respect that they had returned to a Medieval world. Robert Graves, the famous author of "I, Claudius" and "Claudius the God", he, like Tolkien was a fusilier in the 1st World War, like Tolkien thought himself as a poet, but when he wrote his autobiography "Good-bye to All That" he said he went to Oxford, at very much the same time as Tolkien, actually I presume they were both there together, and he was told Medieval literature was just something that had nothing to do with real life. But he said that actually, it had everything to do with real life, he had just emerged from a Medieval conflict, which was fought with knives, and maces, and clubs in the dark. And he said reading Anglo-Saxon literature seemed to him to be much more normal, much more real than reading the XVIII century literature of the Enlightenment. So, Tolkien is a Medieval and anachronistic author, but unfortunately, the XX century rapidly became anachronistic.

What other messages did you wish to communicate with your book ?

Well, I'll just pick one out, which I think is often ignored. Which is that Tolkien thought himself as a poet. Because he was a poet. I have not tried to count the number of poems by Tolkien that we have, but they must be more than a hundred. They are sometimes difficult to evaluate, because many of them, not all of them, are embedded in a story. But I think that Tolkien thought, also correctly, that he was not inventing all this for himself, that he was reviving a tradition of English poetry which had been very powerful and been forced out of sight by modern times, but had survived, actually, as such things often do, like fairy tales, in a kind of underworld, of sub-literature in popular forms. I am now in the US of America, where a common musical form is country and western singing, but quite often, in country and western songs, I hear lines of poetry which actually fit Medieval meters absolutely perfectly.

I often ask the authors "You don't know anything about Middle Ages" "No, I have never heard of any Medieval verses".

But they are still singing it, all of them, in the same traditions, as their grandfathers, and their grandfathers' grandfathers, and so on back for hundreds of years. This again is a phenomenon which has not been noticed by professional critics.

Which are the characters and the scenes you most like in *The Lord of the Rings* ?

Well, I have to tell you that for many years I was the head of department at a University, and as a result of listening to all those meetings in which my colleagues argued all time and they didn't do anything, the character I feel most sympathy with is Ugluk, the orc, the one which captures Merry and Pippin. He too has to deal with a very unruly and orcish band of followers who don't do what they are told. And he solves things the way I'd like to, he steps forward and he cuts a couple of heads off and he says "Everybody doing my way." I can't help ... I have felt so many times very like to be just like Ugluk.

Apart from that, I think other great scenes are of course the coming of Rohan, the scene at the end of the siege of Minas Tirith, when Gandalf is standing at the gate of Gondor, and he hears the cock's crow, he sees the Nazgul hesitate, and then he hears the horns blowing of Rohan. "Rohan had come at last." That was, I think, Tolkien's favourite scene, and it is one of my favourites as well.

Can you briefly mention the main differences between *The Lord of the Rings* and the *Silmarillion* ?

Well, that would take me a long time ! But perhaps the principal difference is that LOTR is written in the mode of, shall we say, a modern novel. It has a developed realism, it gives you a lot of detail, it gives you a great deal of dialogue, it tells you what the characters are thinking and what they are feeling. It is forward, ample, it tells you, as you know, much more than you need to know. The *Silmarillion* is written more in the style of a Medieval chronicle, and even more in the style of a Medieval Icelandic saga. So, it seems to us to be very abrupt, it does not tell us things that we need to know. The characters, when they talk, they talk very briefly, we move quickly from one event to another. There is a sense of crowding and, one would say haste, about getting on from one event to another. It is also of course, as we all know, very difficult to remember, because it is vital to remember who the characters are and who they are related to and with our feeble, weak modern memories we cannot always remember who is whose cousin, or exactly, what relationship there may be between, shall we say, Tuor and Turin Turambar. They walk past each other at one point, but they don't speak. It's vital moment in a way, but if you ask me now, "How is Tuor related to Turin Turambar ?" "I think they're cousins, but I have to look at a pedigree, at a genealogical table to answer that question. But I know it's an important question !" So, I think that, in a word, the *Silmarillion* is very much more compressed than TLOTR and that is what makes it hard to read for us.

You are a Medieval Language and Literature scholar, but you are also a careful observer of the XX century literature: in your opinion, what qualities are there in LOTR that are not in *Beowulf* ?

Well, this is a difficult question. I am much more used to answer the other question, which is what qualities the two works share. Well, a very short answer is that LOTR has Hobbits. Both *Beowulf* and *Lord of the Rings* have giants, they have elves, they have dragons, and they have a sense of immense history behind them, but LOTR has Hobbits. *Beowulf* does not have Hobbits, and along with the Hobbits comes the sense of anachronism, the sense of the world of Tolkien's own boyhood, one would call it the modern world, but a more modern world which exists in the centre of Middle Earth. It also has the Shire, which is a kind of centre of normality, which of course is quite alien to *Beowulf*, and it also has characters like Tom Bombadil, who I think, may have some very faint resemblances in Anglo-saxon literature ... But not in *Beowulf*. So I'd thoroughly say that LOTR is, as I say, a work of the XX century and the way that XX century gets into LOTR is through the Hobbits and the Shire.

Tolkien was a very skilful novelist. Can you put in kind of hierarchical order, Tolkien's following abilities as a romancer and as a novelist ?

- **The building of the story and the plot; the philosophical and moral contents of the work**
- **A good psychological depiction of the characters**
- **Realism and depth of the historical background, of descriptions, of details and languages**
- **Inspirational force in the creation of ideas.**

Well, the first thing, which has also been the most influential, it is what all the fantasy authors that followed him tried to do, more or less successfully, is to create a world. Tolkien gave us Middle Earth. It is true that Tolkien did not think that ME was his own invention. He thought that he was reviving it from an ancient period. But he made ME habitable for a modern writer. I

think that is the first and most important thing. I think the second thing is that Tolkien in his work produces a very complex structure and his imitators sometimes have tried to do that, but I think they have always failed, they have not been able to put together the multiple stranded plot, the interlaced plot which Tolkien managed to write and to make successful. I think a third point, which I think is very important but also very obscure, I find it difficult, is that Tolkien does have a philosophical standpoint and he tries to convey this, but the strange thing is that he tries to convey it through the plot. It is the cross connections of the plot which tell us what Tolkien thought about, shall we say, Luck, and faith and providence. But ... I'd like try to explain this. Every time I read the LOTR I find more connections and I just hope that one day I can get this straight in my head but I think that one thing that Tolkien is saying is that human minds do not actually, are not able to understand Providence. We do not have enough capacity. We just have to be aware that it exists but we can't ourselves expect to see it. And that is like the experience of reading Tolkien. I cannot take it all in at the same time. And finally I would say that Tolkien is very capable of creating striking and interesting characters. As I said before, the Hobbits are a great invention that is like nothing else that existed in the world, I think, until Tolkien invented them.

What do you think about the theme of Providence, or "Fate", or "Luke", or "Wyrd"? In your opinion, are there any XIX or XX century mainstream authors which have dealt with the theme of Providence ?

In the XX century I can't think of any, because they don't believe in it anymore. In the XIX century some of the great English authors write fables of providence. I would say perhaps the most striking of these is the female author writing under a false name who calls herself George Eliot, her novella, *Silas Marner*, in a way, is kind of a study on Providence, and Boetius. I don't know if Tolkien read this, but if he had he'd have recognized, I think, and be amused by the way George Eliot in a very firmly English environment. So, George Eliot is perhaps one writer. Another of a very different kind I Charles Dickens, but Dickens, while I think a great and a brilliant novelist, was not a thinker, so his presentation of Providence do not have the learning and the deliberate connections which Tolkien or George Eliot would have. Nevertheless his novels are often a strange study in the nature of coincidence.

Do you think Tolkien gave a good depiction of the theme of courage ? Can you trace a comparison with some XX century mainstream authors who write about theme of courage ?

I think perhaps the best is the Polish author writing in English whom we call Joseph Conrad. Joseph Conrad was agnostic, but Conrad, I think, again a man who had lived an active life and who had considerable non-literary experiences, for he was a ship captain and a master mariner, he wrote about courage and endurance very powerfully. He also wrote about cowardice very powerfully. But we should say that his ... Yes, you'd like this, I think. His great novel of courage is the novel *Nostromo*. "Nostromo", "our man" and yet in a way, it ends I think, as a study not of cowardice, but of someone who eventually fails a test, but *Nostromo* I think is a work which tells us a great deal about courage and in a way also about luck ... I wouldn't say Providence but luck.

Why is Tolkien popular both with Christians and with not Christians ?

The answer is, I think, that Christians are well able to see his benevolent intentions towards themes of religion but non Christians are quite capable of reading LOTR without thinking about it at all, because as you know there is no evident religion in LOTR. The riders do appear to have a religion, when they bury Théoden, they have a ritual, a kind of ritual, but it is not presided over by priests and there is no suggestion of religious hope when they construct the barrow. And it's the same with the Hobbits.

We know that the Hobbits get married ... where ? In church ? They don't have churches. In the Town hall ? Possibly ... Who presides, is it the priest ? No, they don't have priests. Perhaps it's the mayor, or one of the sheriffs. Well, we don't know, there really is no suggestion of religious grounding for the societies in LOTR. And yet there is a strong sense, I think that what we are looking at here, is, in Christian terms, a forlorn world, a world which is waiting for salvation and which cannot achieve lasting salvation by its own efforts. As everybody, as all the wise characters tell us, what they are doing is "fighting the long defeat" because there is no ultimate victory possible within the tenets of Middle-Earth. Any ultimate victory must come from the outside, and it has not come yet.

You mention many sources from the "true traditions" which have exerted an influence over Tolkien. Do you think that in Tolkien, literary traditions play a greater role than in other mainstream authors ?

I'm not sure, Franco, quite how to answer question 13. I would say only this. I have talked about Tolkien and what I regard as the true traditions of literature, let me just say that the true tradition which Tolkien talks about is more powerful in mainstream literature than it's often noticed. That the great English poets like Wordsworth, Coleridge and Tennyson are in many ways medievalizing poets and poets like Wordsworth or Coleridge who very deliberately go back to the oral traditions of ballads and poetry, and again, you see this in authors like Sir Walter Scott himself, a great creator of ballads and a great creator of ballads. This tradition goes on through authors like William Morris, and I suppose Swinburne and all the way up to Tolkien's own time. It tends to be pushed aside in long terms, but once again it is a powerful feature and once you know to get the works of the true tradition, they remain immensely popular. The most popular work in English in the XX century apart from the Bible is Tolkien and the most popular work in the XIX century in German apart of the Bible is Jacob Grimm, with the Grimm's Fairy tales, which everybody in Europe now knows. Well, these are both works of the true traditions we have the most popular work in the XIX century and the most popular work in the XX century ... That's two pretty good scores for the Medieval traditions !

Do you think that the mainstream critics will ever acknowledge the literary status of Tolkien's work in a short time, less than 200 years from now ?

This takes me on to the question whether the critical mainstream will accord literary value to the works of Tolkien. And of course, no, they won't. And I can say quite simply why. The critical mainstream is dedicated to the notion of modernism. And actually that is post-modernism, but there's not a lot of difference. And Modernism actually is a word of my grand-grandfather's time, it goes back to 1920, it's not really modern at all, they just say it is. It has a notion, I think of modernity and what the XX century literature was going to be about, which turned out to be completely wrong. So, in many respects it is an archaic, conservative, conformist movement, but I'm afraid it has become dominant in critical mainstream and this is the reason why the critical mainstream has failed to attract students, certainly in the USA it's steadily withering, students don't turn up, the universities close courses, that's because we have people sticking determinedly to something which didn't work. Well, it's a pity, it's a great pity, think, that there is not enough study of Fantasy and of science fiction and all the other popular novels of modern times, but just the same, that is what has happened.

Why is the fantasy genre not given proper status by mainstream ?

In the same way, I think because of this. The success of Fantasy, which was not supposed to happen, challenges the authority of the critics. The critics say "We are the ones who decide what is

literature. You have no vote.” and of course, the reading public, says “what do we care about what you think, we are going to read whatever we like, and if we decide to call it literature well, we will. You say we can’t call it literature, we’ll call it something else. It doesn’t make any difference.”

I think we have here a characteristic challenge to an entrenched authority and entrenched authorities, especially when they are bureaucracies, hate any sort of challenge and will try to deal with it by saying “it does not exist”, I don’t know, this is a great problem in normal life, Franco. How do we get over bureaucracies ? I don’t know !

Why is there such a difference between the popular success of authors such as Tolkien, Lewis and Orwell and their reviews by mainstream critics ?

I think perhaps that question 16 is why is there such a difference the popular success of authors like Tolkien and Lewis’ novels and their critical acceptance. It’s just as well, let’s say there is the authority challenge and there is also, I think, in the case of Tolkien and Lewis, their determined religious traditionalism, the fact that they are Christians, and loathed by modernists who think that all that kind of things are overpassé, out of date no need to bother about it any more. I would say that to me, I think to my colleagues, to my critical colleagues, people like Tolkien and Lewis, and Orwell, they’re like vampires. You think they are dead, you put a stake through their hearts, bury them at the crossroads, and it’s all over, and then someone drops a bit of blood on them and they’re alive again ! When they see Tolkien or someone like Orwell, they see the Middle Ages coming back, and they find that very hard to bear, and yet one of the things I have tried to do in *Author of the Century* is to explain why this is happening. It is a phenomenon, whatever you think about it, whether you like it or not, it is a phenomenon, and a phenomenon deserves an explanation, if you do not have an explanation for it, then you do not have a literary theory, and for all the talk these days about literary theories, we still do not have a good theory about fantasy.

In your opinions, what are the good points and the bad points of Peter Jackson’s movies ?

I don’t think there are many bad points, but ... every now and then, you feel that he has to reach out for an audience of teenagers, of female teenagers, and he has to do something to amuse them, so there is a scene in which Legolas skateboards down the steps, at Helm’s Deep. I can’t help thinking that skateboarding is not really part of Middle Earth. All right, and then there’s Gimli who is made into a comic figure. There are a lot of jokes about dwarf-tossing. I don’t know quite what is funny about dwarf tossing but it seems to be a popular idea in the United states of America and in Australia but I hope nowhere else. I don’t think we needed those jokes, so there we are.

The good things. The good thing is that Jackson is quite prepared to be quiet and not to be noisy. There’s a very good quiet scene in the third movie, there’s a violent action scene with the trolls battering down the door to get into the second level of Minas Tirith and during this Gandalf sits with Pippin who is afraid, and talks to him very quietly about death and consoles him in a way, taking the words from an earlier chapter of *The Lord of the Rings*, which Jackson has taken out and inserted in this point, and that’s very moving, I think. In same sort of way, it’s very good thing, I think, to see in the Council of Elrond, which Jackson changed very much from its original, and in this scene it ends up, as it does not in Tolkien, it ends up with everybody shouting and arguing with each other. In the middle of this Frodo says “I will take the Ring.” And nobody hears him because they are all shouting, but Gandalf hears and turns towards him and Frodo again says “I will take the Ring.” and Everybody goes quiet, because they realize that Gandalf is paying attention to Frodo, and not to them. And then Frodo says “I will take the Ring... but I do not know the way.” Well, that’s different from the way Tolkien did it, but I think very powerful and very suggestive. So, one of the quiet scenes actually again changed from its original place ... In Tolkien, Frodo, when he realizes what’s happening, quite early on, says to Gandalf “I wish this hadn’t happened in my time.”

and Gandalf says “So do all who live to see such times but that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us”. Well, Jackson takes this out of its context And has Gandalf talking to Frodo in the Mines of Moria, there’s nobody else listening, it’s all quiet and it’s just the two of them talking quietly. And then, at the very end of the first movie, when Frodo is about to set off on its own, he hears Gandalf, whom he thinks he’s dead, talking to him. You see Gandalf projected on the screen, there’s a voice over, and it says the same words, but this time it doesn’t say “them”, it says “You”. All “you have to decide is what to do with the time that is given *you*.”, so it becomes much more direct and much more personal Well, there are several moments like that, I think and I appreciate how Jackson has kept his thoughts on the core of the original story and not be completely distracted by the violent scenes and the action scenes.