

Tolkien the movie

by [Ralph C. Wood](#) in the [January 2, 2002](#) issue

The first of three annual film installments of J. R. R. Tolkien's 1,500-page epic *The Lord of the Rings*, directed by New Zealander Peter Jackson, has many fine qualities. The New Zealand scenery evokes the fantastically real world of Tolkien's Middle-earth, and the tunnelly hobbit-homes are finely rendered. The special effects--whether in the brilliance of Gandalf's magical fireworks or the hideousness of the fiend called the Balrog--are also well done. Jackson gives riveting attention to the actors' faces, especially the discerning eyes of the wizard Gandalf. The film's pacing nicely echoes the undulating movement of the book, as it moves from chilling confrontations with orcs and trolls and ringwraiths to episodes of tranquil splendor in the elven realms of Rivendell and Lorien. These latter places have a late Victorian loveliness about them, while the scenes of horror might have been borrowed from Hieronymus Bosch.

In times like these, it is remarkable that the two blockbuster films of the season--*Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* and *The Fellowship of the Ring*--contain neither nudity nor profanity nor sex scenes. But *Fellowship* is a wholesome movie not because it avoids these, but because it is whole. The Company of Nine Walkers charged with the task of destroying the one ruling Ring of power are not one-dimensional figures but embodiments of virtues: courage and trust, love and loyalty, friendship and resolute will. Both characters and viewers are made to feel the corrupting lure of the Ring. Knowing well that its power will ruin them, hobbits and wizards and men are nonetheless tempted to wield that power. The deeds of the wicked are depicted in arresting and memorable ways--especially the underground metal-works for manufacturing monstrous weapons of war. After September 11, the movie also serves as a salutary reminder that war is not an antiseptic affair of bombs dropped from on high, but that the battle against evil is dirty and dangerous and unending.

Yet in making iniquity obvious and uncomplicated, the film departs from Tolkien's heroic fantasy in lamentable ways. Consider Saruman, Gandalf's fellow wizard. In the movie he is utterly sinister, while in the book he is an almost tragic instance of good

gone wrong, a figure who wants to make an alliance with the demonic Sauron for the sake of a benevolent despotism. The film does show the warrior Boromir to be genuinely conflicted about wanting to use the Ring, but it fails to clarify the nature of his quandary. Tolkien, by contrast, reveals that the Ring corrupts virtues far more than it preys on vices. Boromir's stouthearted willingness to die in defense of his assaulted people tempts him to employ the Ring against the evil Sauron. His bravery is the source of his undoing, even as the wizard Gandalf is threatened by his compassion, and the elven-queen Galadriel by her beauty. Such subtleties and profundities are largely absent from the film. Neither does it catch much of Tolkien's humor. In fact, the film entirely misses the comical quality of Samwise Gamgee, the deferential and half-literate peasant who serves as Frodo's bumbling sidekick. The book also favors near encounters and narrow escapes over pitched battles, whereas the movie revels in brutal and bloody warfare.

The film's chief fault lies in the decision to depict the four chief hobbits--Frodo, Sam, Merry and Pippin--as raw youths rather than the fully adult creatures whom Tolkien invented. When the movie's boy-hobbits quaff a pint of beer, one expects the bartender to demand their IDs. It's no surprise that they are seldom shown smoking their beloved pipeweed. Technical ingenuity has enabled the moviemakers to shrink the size of these hairy-footed halflings, and thus to give them the appearance of adolescence. Thus the truly adult characters--Boromir and Aragorn, Gimli the Dwarf and Legolas the elf--command much more interest than the hobbits, even though the hobbits are meant to be the center of the story. The wonder of Tolkien's epic lies in the remarkable gap between the hobbits' small bodily stature and their nascent maturity of character. It is undeniably true that children are drawn to the hobbits because of their diminutive size, but it is truer still that we keep reading Tolkien's trilogy as adults because the hobbits' struggles are our own.

I have read 15 reviews of the film, and not one mentions that Tolkien imbues his pre-Christian masterpiece with Christian concerns. Nor did any critic acknowledge Tolkien's claim that his heroic fantasy is "a fundamentally religious and Catholic work." Such concerns and claims are almost wholly absent in the film. Whereas Tolkien's Frodo is transcendently summoned against his will to destroy the Ring, here he volunteers in good Boy Scout fashion. The movie does offer a slight gesture toward the Holy when, in moments of great awe, characters touch their foreheads as if they were about to make the sign of the cross. And the death of Boromir is redemptively portrayed. Yet the book's defining moment--when Gandalf explains to

Frodo why Bilbo did not slay the wicked Gollum--is rendered almost innocuous. We are not shown what the book makes plain: the implicitly theological character of Gandalf's deep teaching on the primacy of forgiveness over all other virtues. The camera's picture-making eye cannot do the work of the mind's reflective vision.

Despite these misgivings, I am grateful for this powerful cinematic version of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, and am determined to see it again. Perhaps it will prove the truth of the wag's saying that "the world is divided into two halves: those who have read *The Lord of the Rings*--and those who are going to read it."