Frodo lives

by Ralph C. Wood in the November 21, 2001 issue

J.R.R Tolkien: Author of the Century. By Tom Shippey. Houghton Mifflin, 328 pp., $26.00.

Recently I gave an eight-year-old friend a copy of *The Hobbit*, promising to send her T*he Lord of the Rings* when she's finished with Tolkien's warm-up to his half-a-million-word heroic fantasy. In a recent doctoral seminar devoted to 20th-century Catholic fiction, I included the Ring epic. How can both children and thoughtful adults read this Tolkien work with profit and delight--so that more than 100 million copies have been sold and it has been translated into 40 languages? This is the question Tom Shippey asks in timely relation to the December release of the first of the *Lord of the Rings* movies. Perhaps they will arouse an interest in Tolkien comparable to the flurry of attention given to C. S. Lewis after the showing of the film *Shadowlands* in 1993.

Shippey contends that Tolkien is the quintessential author of the 20th century--the century when perhaps 180 million people were slaughtered, causing Pope John Paul II to speak of our "culture of death." Tolkien, according to Shippey, offers what allegedly greater writers do not: a convincing narrative and mythological confrontation with the unprecedented violence and horror of late-modern life, yet without despairing over the victory of the forces of goodness and life.

When Waterstone, the British bookshop chain, conducted a 1998 survey of its patrons to determine what they considered to be the outstanding books of the 20th century, *The Lord of the Rings* finished first. Similar surveys by the Folio Society, the BBC and the *Daily Telegraph* yielded the same result. Shippey believes that literary critics should have been neither surprised nor incensed. If they had a greater regard for the mass readership, they would have noticed that fantasy has become the dominant genre of our time. The reason, for Shippey, is not hard to find: conventional realism cannot deal with the Somme and Ypres, with Bergen-Belsen, with Guernica and Dresden and Hiroshima, with the technocratic dehumanization of modern industries and cities or--we must now add--the terrorism of al-Qaeda. Direct

depiction of such monstrous evils often has the countereffect of making them aesthetically acceptable.

Fantasy, by contrast, enables writers to confront the terrors of our time by way of parabolic indirection. Hence the prevalence of the literary fable during the latter half of the 20th century: George Orwell's *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, William Golding's *The Lord of the Flies*, Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five,* Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*, T. H. White's *Book of Merlyn* (which defines humanity as homo ferox) and Ursula Le Guin's "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" (which recounts life in a "civilization" built on the torture of an idiot child). Rather than linking Tolkien to the Oxford Inklings, as another Christian apologist, Shippey puts him in the company of these fantasists of the frightful, these masters of the *un*real. He shows that, unlike the works of C. S. Lewis and Charles Williams, Tolkien's fantasy appeals as much to non-Christians as to Christians.

The irony underlying Tolkien's ability to speak deeply to "all sorts and conditions" of people is that he had no intention of becoming a celebrity-writer at all. He was first and last a philologist, a master of languages. Tolkien had an almost mystical regard for words. He considered articulate breath to be our greatest gift--indeed, to be the very image of God embedded within us. Words (at least in their origins) are never arbitrary or accidental, he believed. They come into being because they reveal the true character of things. Like Adam naming the animals that the Lord God brought before him, words give life to the created order. Our *logoi* are rooted in the *Logos*, and mythologies are supreme examples of the ontological character of speech.

Thor, the Norse god of thunder, was not, for example, a naïve and prescientific attempt to explain the phenomenon which we have come to regard as the clashing of cold and hot air. The word itself was born, Tolkien suggests, as ancient Norsemen experienced three related things at once: human rage in the form of a bellowing, hot-tempered, ox-stout farmer; the raucous noise of lightning and thunder; and the divine wrath before which we are all judged and found wanting. Events and experiences thus called forth their names, beckoning our forebears to give them their true nominative existence. Our modern languages have become largely the detritus of these primeval metaphorical analogies. Thus can mythologies help us regain a right linguistic relation to the world--a relation which for Tolkien is moral and religious as well.

Drawn early in life to the ancient sagas of Northern Europe, Tolkien mastered their difficult tongues: Icelandic, Old Norse, Gothic and Finnish, among several others. He was preeminently the master of Anglo-Saxon, and he became the world's leading authority on *Beowulf*, the Old English epic poem. Shippey shows that, as a scholar of antique and obscure texts, Tolkien became obsessed with explaining words whose meaning has been lost. He also postulated words that must have once existed--given the existence of cognate words--even though there is no record of them. This led him, in turn, to create languages of his own: three forms of elvish, for example. And speech implies worlds, so Tolkien invented creatures and realms which would have produced such languages. Hence his gradual invention of a massive mythological system that fills more than a dozen posthumously published volumes.

The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings are the books we remember and reread. The other works tend to have a chronicle-like character, interesting chiefly to Tolkien devotees. But the hobbit books provide a riveting account of how the ring of absolute power, which once belonged to Sauron, the prince of evil, came into the possession of an obscure creature named Bilbo Baggins, how he in turn bequeathed it to his nephew Frodo Baggins, and how--with the aid of his sidekick Sam Gamgee, the wizard Gandalf and seven other close comrades--Frodo took the ring back to the volcanic Cracks of Doom whence it was forged, there to witness its final destruction.

While the young read this tale mainly for its interesting characters and storyline, adults are able to appreciate Tolkien's complex parallel plotting, his large mythological patterns, his genius for giving philological depth to personal and place names, his many allusions to *Beowulf* and other ancient texts--all of which serve to create the remarkable "inner consistency" of Middle-Earth. Shippey, who succeeded Tolkien at Oxford before moving to St. Louis University, is especially adept at tracing out the linguistic and historical qualities that make Tolkien's great fantasy a work of enduring importance. The forthcoming film series may well capture the gripping action, convincing characters and macabre evil of the Ring books, but may, I fear, entirely miss the mythological depth and density of Tolkien's work.

The evil embodied by Sauron and his minions is uniquely modern. As Shippey makes clear, the power of the ring is *addictive*; it makes the mind desire to use it in ways that no act of the will can break. The Ringwraiths, one of Tolkien's most horrific inventions, reveal the terrible effects of such irresistible power. These shadowy, disembodied creatures who are nonetheless garbed and armed horsemen derive their name from the Old English verb *writhe*. The word *wraith* came to mean wispy

and smoke-like, but it was originally related to our modern words *wreath* and *wrath*. Tolkien's wraiths are the products of an anger that is literally "twisted up inside." Such all-consuming, all-destroying fury marks modern warfare, Tolkien saw, in ways that did not characterize ancient battle. Yet it is also the sign of something even more sinister, something cold and dark and menacing about our everyday existence, something (as Shippey says) "dreadful underlying the routines of daily life."

Shippey is right to contend that Tolkien's intuition of this new all-pervasive evil gives his work a deep appeal to those for whom religious belief is no longer possible. A confessed unbeliever himself, Shippey lays out the tragic quality of Tolkien's vision as few other critics have done. He understands the profound pessimism at work in *The Lord of the Rings*, the hard fact that death and defeat are our long-term (and perhaps also short-term) destiny in the personal as well as the collective sense, and thus the grim reality "that good is attained only at vast expense while evil recuperates almost at will."

Yet Shippey is nonplussed that Tolkien should have called his heroic fantasy "a fundamentally religious and Catholic work." His opacity is quite striking, given the character of Tolkien's own philological work. Just as the early Christians refused to turn away from pagan culture as something entirely worthless and inimical to the gospel, so Tolkien read *Beowulf* as a pagan story recorded by monks who infused it with Christian virtues. This is what Tolkien seeks to do in his Ring epic. He makes the decidedly unpagan virtues of mercy and pity--not heroic power and will--the key to the final victory over Sauron. Unaccountably, Shippey never mentions the profoundly Christian leitmotiv present in the merciful sparing of the evil Gollum, without whom the quest to destroy the ring would have failed. Yet the report of this act is repeated in all three volumes and thus governs the entire epic: "The pity of Bilbo will rule the fate of many."

Nor does Shippey recognize the clear metaphor of the church that Tolkien created in the Company of the Nine Walkers: the interracial and interethnic community consisting of a dwarf, an elf, a wizard, two men and four hobbits. This diverse lot is bound not only by their commission to destroy the ring of total force, but also by their deeply communal and self-surrendering regard for each other. Surely it is Tolkien's recovery of this ancient virtue of friendship that helps account for the lasting popularity of *The Lord of the Rings*.

Its currency for our own dark time also lies in the hope that it holds out when there seems to be no hope. Sam and Frodo encounter it on the slopes of Mount Doom,

where their quest seems defeated, their death certain, their lives lost to oblivion. In a single star glimmering through the gloom of Sauron's realm, Sam finds the insight of faith. He discerns the ontological priority and finality of good over evil. It is light that ultimately defines darkness, hope that is greater than despair, and companionate love and fidelity alone that can defeat hatred and terror.