Inklings Forever: Published Colloquium Proceedings 1997-2016

Volume 6 *A Collection of Essays Presented at the Sixth Frances White Ewbank Colloquium on C.S. Lewis & Friends*

Article 4

5-29-2008

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Cover Page Footnote

Undergraduate Student Essay

INKLINGS FOREVER, Volume VI

A Collection of Essays Presented at the Sixth

FRANCES WHITE EWBANK COLLOQUIUM ON C.S. LEWIS & FRIENDS

Taylor University 2008

Upland, IN

Tolkien's Theory of Courage

The Good, the Bad, and the Evil

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Second Place Student Essay Contest Winner

Abstract:
The fiction of J.R.R. Tolkien has captivated readers for the past five decades, perhaps because it portrays a world so drastically different from our own. Middle-earth is indeed informed by vestiges of an ancient tradition, preserved in the mythologies of different cultures. One very good example of this is Tolkien's theory of courage, which he gleaned from Old Norse myth and discussed in his lecture "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics." In brief, the gods and their human allies, the heroes of Norse mythology, know that eventual defeat is inevitable. However, this does not make their actions any less righteous nor allow for defection to the side of the giants and monsters, which will be victorious in the end. Heavily influenced by ancient mythologies, Tolkien develops his theory of courage through the heroes and the villains in *The Lord of the Rings*.

Bowerman, Emily. "Tolkien's Theory of Courage: The Good, the Bad, and the Evil." Inklings Forever 6 (2008)
www.taylor.edu/cslewis

Tolkien's Theory of Courage: The Good, the Bad, and the Evil
Emily Bowerman

The fiction of J.R.R. Tolkien has captivated readers for the past five decades, perhaps because it portrays a world so drastically different from our own. His stories tell of brave men and women risking life and limb in the name of higher ideals, combating creatures that are the embodiment of evil. This stands in sharp contrast to the egocentrism and instant gratification of modern times, when people's actions can be so morally ambiguous that one cannot tell the 'good guys' from the 'bad guys'. Middle-earth is indeed informed by plot and principles from ancient tradition, preserved in the mythologies of different cultures. One very good example of this is Tolkien's theory of courage, which he gleaned from Old Norse myth and discussed in his lecture 'Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics.' In brief, the Norse gods and their human allies know that they will be defeated at the end of the world, called Ragnarok, which according to Tolkien scholar Tom Shippey, literally means 'the destruction of the gods' (*J.R.R. Tolkien* 150). However, Tolkien, quoting Ker, said, '"[The gods] *are on the right side, though it is not the side that wins. The winning side is Chaos and Unreason"*—mythologically, the monsters—"*but the gods, who are defeated, think that defeat no refutation*"' (Ker, as cited by Tolkien, 'Beowulf'). Or, as Shippey paraphrases, 'Victory and defeat have nothing to do with right and wrong' (*J.R.R. Tolkien* 150). This concept is present throughout Tolkien's work, and one can trace its influence through the manner in which he portrays both good and evil characters. Heavily influenced by ancient mythologies, Tolkien develops his theory of courage through the heroes and the villains in *The Lord of the Rings*.

Naturally, one would expect the heroes of any story to model courage in their actions, and those in *The Lord of the Rings* are no exception. Yet Tolkien develops two different types of heroes, and each displays a unique type of courage. The first is the ancient or standard hero, of which Aragorn is the preeminent example. His character resonates strongly with the heroes of ancient mythology, and as Clark comments, 'Aragorn… and his followers, like the gods and heroes of Old Norse mythology, are prepared to fight to the death… even if there is no hope for victory' (Clark 44). This is precisely the attitude with which Aragorn leads the armies of the West to assail the Black Gates of Mordor as a diversion to protect Frodo and the Ring. Gandalf counsels him, and the other captains of the West:

> We must walk open-eyed into that trap, with courage, but small hope for ourselves. For, my lords, it may well prove that we ourselves shall perish utterly in a black battle far from the living lands; so that even if Barad-dûr be thrown down, we shall not live to see a new age. But this, I deem, is our duty. And better so than to perish nonetheless—as we surely shall, if we sit here—and know as we die that no new age shall be (Tolkien, *The Return of the King* 172-173).

Gandalf's speech is a good example of the theory of courage in action, and it definitely indicates the same type of courage displayed by the Norse gods as they face the approach of Ragnarok. Yet it is not quite the fatalistic outlook that characterizes mythology, as the characters do hope that through their deaths they will be able to help defeat the powers of evil. Therefore they have hope for the world, but not for themselves. This exemplifies Tolkien's theory of courage, though in a slightly modified way, and his use of it shows the influence of mythology on *The Lord of the Rings*.

The second sub-type of hero in Tolkien's fiction is the spiritual or new hero, manifested by the Hobbits, especially Frodo and Sam. Again, unwilling to accept the fatalistic attitudes that accompanied the mythological theory of courage, Clark observes, 'Tolkien sought a true hero motivated by a heroic ideal consistent with his own religious and moral ideals' (39). Therefore the hobbits' courage shows the influence of Tolkien's Christianity on his fiction. He began to develop this 'true hero' in *The Hobbit*, as Bilbo slowly discovers his own type of courage through his adventures. Shippey says of Bilbo, '[Tolkien] provide[s] a behavior-model which is not quite beyond emulation (no one can fight a dragon, but everyone can fight fear). Mainly [he] place[s] in a kindly light that style of courage—cold courage, 'moral courage', two-o'clock-in-the-morning courage—which our age is most prepared to venerate' (*Road to Middle Earth* 79). As Shippey notes, this notion of 'modern courage' also provides a portal through which contemporary readers can enter Middle-earth.

Very few could identify with Aragorn's archaic heroism, but the Hobbits bring Tolkien's conflict down to the level of the modern reader.

The heroism of the hobbits differs from that of Aragorn and the other warriors in several important ways. Firstly, it suites their stature and temperament. Unlike Aragorn, Frodo and Sam simply do not have the ability to achieve victory through battle, as they are no match for their enemies in that type of contest. However, as Gandalf says before the final desperate battle at the gates of Mordor, 'I said victory could not be achieved by arms. I still hope for victory, but not by arms' (Tolkien *The Return of the King* 171). His hope is not in Aragorn and his military prowess, but in Frodo and Sam, the new heroes equipped with a different, and in the end, perhaps more important, type of courage. Clearly, some vestiges of the ancient hero are apparent; the uncertainty of success, the likeliness that the quest will claim their lives, and their willingness to accept the mission despite these grave risks. However, they must accomplish this, like Bilbo, not through their strength or skill, but with a simple desire to do what is right regardless of the outcome. Another quality differentiates them from ancient heroes: their optimism and cheerfulness. Though they are aware of the monumental risk posed by their quest, they remain optimistic that they may achieve something of worth despite the obstacles. Sam compares their impossible situation to that of an old legend, saying, 'Beren now, he never thought he was going to get that Silmaril from the Iron Crown in Thangorodrim, and yet he did, and that was a worse place and a blacker danger than ours' (Tolkien, *The Two Towers* 379). Even after the ring is destroyed and Frodo and Sam believe that they will be swept away in the destruction of Sauron's works, the hobbits do not despair. Shippey comments, 'Those who… felt from the start that the whole thing was going to be a disaster remain immune, even cheerful, when their expectations are confirmed' (*J.R.R. Tolkien* 153). Even Aragorn and the other representatives of the mythic heroes are colored by a grim hope. Therefore, Tolkien is able to develop a modern version of the theory of courage, modeled after the heroes of ancient myth yet informed by the hope of his Christianity.

Yet the actions of the heroes might not seem as courageous if Tolkien did not construct suitable villains to oppose them. As he in his essay on *Beowulf*, 'There are in any case many heroes but very few good dragons.' The gods of Norse mythology know that their enemies will overcome them one day, and this alone makes the giants and monsters credible opponents. The more formidable the villains, the better the courage and nobility of the heroes. Yet these must be carefully crafted. Shippey quotes C.S. Lewis, a personal friend of Tolkien, 'Wickedness is always… "the pursuit of some good in the wrong way." But since "goodness is, so to speak itself" while "badness is only spoiled goodness"… the Dark Power in which Lewis firmly believed, must be a mistake, a corruption' ('Orcs, Wraiths, Wights' 185). So for Tolkien's villains to personify evil in a believable manner, they must display some kind of corrupted goodness, and Tolkien does this on literal and figurative levels. In *The Silmarillion*, readers learn that orcs were once elves whom the Black Lord captured and tormented (Tolkien 47). In addition to that, they display qualities not unfamiliar to humans. On the positive side, they demonstrate a kind of loyalty to their close companions and a distrust of outsiders, and even enjoy laughing and joking together. However, they also seem willing to forsake loyalties whenever it suits them, act violently towards both friends and enemies, and find humor in cruel and repulsive things. Their behavior is full of contradictions, but as Shippey comments:

> Orcs represent only an exaggerated form of recognizably human behavior… [and] orcish behavior, whether in orcs or in humans, has its roots not in an inverted morality, which sees bad as good and vice versa, but in a kind of self-centeredness that sees indeed what is good—like standing by one's comrades or being loyal to one's mates—but is unable to set one's own behavior in the right place on this accepted scale. ('Orcs, Wraiths, Wights' 187-188).

At first, orcs may be more easily recognized as mythic monsters than humans. Yet they also display both positive and negative human characteristics, and it is this apparent corruption which makes them seem so evil.

Additionally, the Ring-Wraiths also demonstrate a distinctive brand of corrupted goodness. They were human kings, to whom Sauron gave magic rings. Subsequently, they became mighty lords of men, but as Tolkien wrote, 'They obtained glory and great wealth, yet it turned to their undoing' (*Silmarillion* 346). Sauron eventually dominated and enslaved them. Shippey observes:

> [The Wraiths] accept[ed] the gifts of Sauron, quite likely with the intention of using them for some purpose which they identify as good. But then they start to cut corners, to eliminate opponents, to believe… in a 'cause' that justifies anything they do. The spectacle of the person eaten up by the cause is familiar enough to give the wraith-idea plausibility ('Orcs, Wraiths, Wights' 192).

Similar to the Orcs, the Wraiths are comparable to the human being so enslaved to an ideology that he loses sight of his moral compass and rationalizes his evil behavior. Just as Frodo's courage might display humanity at its best as a modern hero, the Wraiths and Orcs give a glimpse of humanity at its worst. This contrast alone makes the valor of the heroes seem all the greater, and worthy of emulation even by modern readers. Once again showing the influence of his Christianity, Tolkien displays a war between what readers may recognize as the best and worst aspects of mankind in general. This casts the modern theory of courage as something very practical, and Tolkien shows that one need not make a journey to Mordor to exercise it.

Tolkien uses *The Lord of the Rings* as a venue to explore his theory of courage, and one way he does this is through his characterization of the heroes and the villains. Tolkien made it very clear that he despised allegory, and that *The Lord of the Rings* is definitely not one. Readers should not assume that the good and evil characters represent specific people or ideas. But as his biographer Carpenter says, 'Tolkien believed that in one sense he was writing the truth. He did not suppose that precisely such peoples as he described, "elves", "dwarves", and malevolent "orcs", had walked the earth and done the deeds that he recorded. But he did feel, or hope, that his stories were in some sense an embodiment of a profound truth' (91). Though one should not look for symbolic figures in *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien did mean it to reflect reality on a certain level. Therefore, courage and nobility may be uncommon in modern life, but it need not stay that way. Through observing these principles in Tolkien's writings, one may be able to gain practical insight into human nature and perhaps recover some version of the ancient courage that has been so refreshing and inspiring to generations of readers.

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