

faith and fantasy

J. R. R. Tolkien and the relevance of fantasy for faith
worlds

The computer games of the 21st century reveal the traumatized imagination of the 20th century. Authors who personally felt the firestorms of this century – like Kurt Vonnegut (*.copy 13*), C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, Michael Ende, Ursula LeGuinn, and George Orwell – all found realism inadequate to portray the human condition after they had witnessed war and genocide. Instead of realism, they opted for heroic fantasies that include monsters, dungeons, and dragons. Today's massive multiplayer online role-playing games like *Second Life* (*.copy 27*) and *World of Warcraft* (*.copy 26*) display like-minded fantasies. Fantasy dominates other genres like realism, formalism, and avant-garde literature. Nearly every bookstore carries a huge selection of fantasy and science fiction, with other genres left behind in sales. Even if you've never played, you have at least read or heard about fantasy games.

The granddaddy of fantasy games is *D&D, Dungeons & Dragons*, the best-known and best-selling role-playing game of all time, with an estimated 20 million players and over one billion US-Dollars in book and equipment sales. In the United States, six percent of 12- to 35-year-olds have played role-playing games. Of those who play regularly, two thirds play *D&D*. The original was a tabletop game published in 1974 for paper, pencil, and dice. It was created by Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson who intended their work to be a sequel to "The Lord of the Rings" by J. R. R. Tolkien.

Long before Peter Jackson filmed Tolkien's trilogy, the epic tale had lent its fantasy atmosphere to *D&D* and sparked similar spin-offs like *Tunnels and Trolls*, and *RuneQuest*. As literary professionals now recognize, Tolkien was a major influence on 20th-century imagination and continues to influence the 21st century from Harry Potter to magical realism.

For Tolkien himself, fantasy was inseparable from faith. In an era when metaphysics and myth are out of fashion, the believer seeks other modes of expression. As a professor of philology at Oxford and author of hugely popular fiction, Tolkien developed profound insights into language. As a devout Catholic, he forged new connections between the languages of faith and fantasy. His essay "On Fairy-Stories" clarifies the importance of fantasy for faith.

Fantasy, according to Tolkien, creates a Secondary Reality, which is not a suspension of belief but belief in a self-consistent secondary world. Fantasy is not allegory because allegory takes its meaning by reference to the primary world. Instead, fantasy is an act of enchantment in which

humans are sub-creators imitating the universal Creator. Fantasy worlds exist in the imagination, present as imagined, seen darkly as in a virtual world. Fantasy should strive for the richness and self-consistency of primary reality without duplicating it. Fantasy rides on the magic of words. Words are dangerous in that they can create illusions, delusions, and outright lies, and Tolkien calls such verbal exploitation "magic" or sorcery. Fantasy is not the kind of magic that forces others under the spell of the magician. Fantasy is rather an agreed partnership in enchantment, a shared space of delight in which imagination probes heights and depths. Like faith, enchantment is a state of lightness and grace, not a dark inward-turning possessiveness.

One of the most graceful touches in "The Lord of the Rings" is the less-than-heroic stature of its central figure, Frodo Baggins. As Ring-bearer chosen to destroy the evil Ring by dropping it into the Cracks of fiery Mount Doom, this Hobbit or halfling must accomplish what most "big people" cannot do. Because of their ambition or pride, big people are more readily seduced by the Ring of Power. Simply holding the Ring endangers big people because they soon want to wear it to dominate others. Hobbits like Frodo, on the other hand, are less inclined to self-aggrandizement since they live close to the land and enjoy the humble pleasures. Yet the culmination of his quest at the peak of Mount Doom finds even Frodo swayed by covetous possession of the Ring. He hesitates to drop the Ring into the volcanic fires, and instead puts it on his finger, at the last moment declaring: "I will not do this deed." Just then, the perverted imp Gollum, who has been following Frodo all along, leaps out and bites off Frodo's ring finger. The leap pitches Gollum into the volcano along with the finger and the Ring.

Here is failure that succeeds in the end. Such "happy disaster" (*felix peccatum Adae*) is what Tolkien calls "eucatastrophe": a disaster avoided in the end not by singular acts of heroism but by the convergence of many small difficult efforts none of which are entirely perfect. Frodo does all he can to accomplish his mission but in the end he proves inadequate to complete the task. Gollum, wretched as he is, has lost the taste for heroism but inadvertently fulfills the heroic quest in spite of his narrow interests.

Tolkien's fantasy points to a Providence underlying small actions and individual characters. It is the fantasy of a guiding hand more graceful than Adam Smith's and as enchanting as the words of a well-worn fairy story. ■

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KURZFASSUNG

Der Artikel in 9 Sekunden

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