

New Version 4/1/16 Tolkien Pop Culture

Tolkien in Popular Culture

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Tolkien's Fandom and Pop Culture the Polite and the Vulgar

As I researched for this year's topic and thought about a title, I began to think how fandom and popular culture co-exist. I also thought about how Tolkien fandom has changed over the years. Some have suggested perhaps the first fans of Tolkien's work could have been the Inklings. I would not include the Inklings as fans of Tolkien any more than fellow members of the Tea Club and Barrovian Society. I would say Tolkien fandom began with the publication of *The Hobbit*. In Drout's encyclopedia under the heading of Fandom we are told early admirers participated in an activity dear to the professor's heart but now almost lost to society: Letter writing. The article written by Anthony Burdge and Jessica Burke points out that few Tolkien letters until just a few years before WW2 survive, as a result measuring fan mail from this period is not possible. Then about a decade after the publication of "*The Lord of the Rings*" fandom exploded. This owes much to the publication of the first paperback editions published in the United States. These being the unauthorized Ace paper backs soon followed by the authorized Ballentine books. Interestingly enough this questionably legal move by the Ace publishers may also have been responsible for increased interest and sales of "*The Lord of the Rings*" as the battle over rights received the attention of the media even more readers were brought to Middle-earth, The late 1960s and early 1970s saw Tolkien's fame and popularity quickly rise to the point of no longer just a few but instead the rise of Tolkienian Pop Culture. From this point on Tolkien would no longer be replying to every letter. In fact from this point on fame would begin to weigh upon the author, the income would be welcomed but the intrusions into the private life of a man who did not relish his new found cults had begun. He said "Being a cult figure in one's own lifetime I am afraid is not at all pleasant. However I do not find that it tends to puff one up, in my case at any rate it makes me feel extremely inadequate. But even the nose of a very modest idol (younger than Chu-Bu and not much older than Sheemish) cannot remain entirely un-tickled by the sweet smell of incense. Tolkien's fame spread and sales of his books continued to rise. The world moved forward and times changed the internet was born and you can bet Tolkien fandom and pop culture were a part of it. Burdge and Burke say "Tolkien Fandom has likewise metamorphosed into something beyond

the simple Tolkien fan. In the years since the internet and post Jackson, we have Ringers, fangirls, purists, canon freaks, newbies, film nuts, swooners, legomaniacs, Hobbitophiles and more. In 2001 long after he had passed away the world began once again to be introduced to Middle-earth with the release of Peter Jackson's first film installment of "*The Lord of the Rings*". Now years later, and we have seen Tolkien's most popular works brought to the silver screen. Are they lies even if projected onto silver? Sorry I could not resist. Of course they are not lies they are Mr. Jackson's interpretations of the works of J.R.R. Tolkien. Regardless of how one feels about the films, once again it is another giant jump in sales of all things Tolkien.

Author of the century this is the claim to fame given to J.R.R. Tolkien by Dr. Thomas Shippey, well-known scholar, philologist and one of the world's foremost Tolkien experts. Professor Shippey is uniquely qualified to opine on all things Tolkien: he taught at Oxford University at the same time as J.R.R. Tolkien, and later taught with the same syllabus, which gives him an intimate familiarity with the works that fueled Tolkien's imagination. He subsequently held the chair of English language and medieval literature at Leeds University that Tolkien had previously held. In numerous reader polls, Shippey says "*The Lord of the Rings*" has been consistently voted as the greatest book written in the 20th century. However, with some notable exceptions, many highbrow critics have dismissed Tolkien and the entire fantasy genre as escapist fare." Dr. Shippey argues that the so-called *literati* who have dismissed Tolkien and his works are at best misguided, and at worst have ulterior motives for attempting to dismiss an author who has become a cultural phenomenon.

Brian Rosebury in his book "*Tolkien: A Cultural Phenomenon*" tries to examine how the structure of his work and its style has justified such grandiose claims. Rosebury says "as I have suggested the energetic elaboration of an imaginary world is the essence of the distinctiveness of "*The Lord of the Rings*" from the novel tradition, this structural use of the journey is a crucial part of that distinctiveness." And "*The Lord of the Rings*" has a plot based structure simple in outline but complex in detail." "He took elaborate care to co-ordinate the phases of the moon with the chronology of his narrative in "*The Lord of the Rings*". A number of narratives in that work benefit from the added level of realism which comes from a scientific understanding expressed unobtrusively in non scientific language." or "The imaginative potency of names and the impact of powerful contrasted landscapes are essential to his literary achievement." And, the mythical

history of Tolkien's legendarium "stands in the position of a remote background to the events of *The Lord of the Rings*" which are dated several thousand years later. The numerous allusions to the earlier history in that work are internally consistent and indeed contribute greatly to its exhilarating sense of wide expanses of time."

How ever phenomenon is not our subject even though the works of Tolkien and the reasons for their huge success are often studied, and to pin down exactly why may not be able to be fully explained, though there are many who have, and will continue to try. That they are very popular there is no doubt and through huge sales numbers certainly is easy enough to confirm. Instead we are here to speak on Tolkien in Popular Culture. What is Popular Culture? Well if we listen to people such as John Mullan Professor of English at the University College of London we will be told that in order to have Pop Culture we first had to have High Culture. He says by the 19<sup>th</sup> century respectable culture, now viewed as beneficial to health, was bestowed upon the lower class. It became important to find improving activities for the working classes whose work and leisure times were clearly separated by industrialism. According to Mullan Pop culture has always been the ill mannered twin of the high. Mullan's views appear to make polite and vulgar synonyms for the high and the low cultures. When Tolkien speaks of his own goals to create his mythology he said "Do not laugh! But once upon a time (my crest has long since fallen) I had a mind to make a body of more or less connected legend, ranging from the Large and cosmogonic, to the level of romantic fairy story- it should be 'high' purged of the gross, and fit for the more adult mind of a land now long steeped in poetry." Ranging from the large and the cosmogonic, which certainly seems an apt description of the creation myth as it appears in *The Silmarillion* to the level of romantic fairy tale we see this in *Of Tuor and the fall of Gondolin*, *The Children of Hurin*, *The Hobbit*, and *The Lord of the Rings*. Then we have the high of a cosmic nature perhaps referring to 'God on high', that which is of heaven, a tale of moral strength with the heroes living and acting in the way that a good Christian would live his or her life while overcoming the evils and temptations of dark lords and devils. It would be purged of the 'gross' or perhaps the 'vulgar' seemingly representing evil but also the 'low culture' of those without the guidance of help from 'on high' often found in persons not raised with religious faith or proper education and an upbringing such as Tolkien received from his martyred mother who must have been a woman of strong fate and courage to have converted to the catholic religion there by losing the support of family and taking on the upbringing, education, and religious guidance of two very young sons, Father Francis Morgan had met Mabel Tolkien shortly after they moved to

Edgbaston and began attending the church where he had just taken over duties as parish priest. Father Francis became close to the family and became the boy's guardian after Mabel's death. In Drout's Encyclopedia Michael Coren wrote, "Father Francis Morgan was one of the most significant figures in Tolkien's early life. "He was more than a father to me," Tolkien wrote" I first learned charity and forgiveness from him. "King Edwards School and Oxford College were also large parts of his culture growing up.

I believe Tolkien was also given inspiration of high cultures from his peers in particular I am thinking of the friends he made at King Edward's school who banded together to become the TCBS 'The Tea Club and Barrovian Society'. A club of young men with shared interests and a feeling of a destiny beyond the ordinary and mundane life of the 'common man'. As we read in Garth's "*Tolkien and the Great War*" "For in moments of seriousness the key members of the circle felt that they were a force to be reckoned with: not a grammar school clique, but a republic of individuals with the potential to do something truly significant in the wider world.

When reading Carpenter's "*J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biography*", "*The letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*", Garth's "*Tolkien and the Great War*", and more, it does seem as if this group had discussed and planned to make changes to society to instill morality and bring back some sensed loss of morals, and culture from a romantic past. Tolkien himself said in a letter to Geoffrey Smith fellow TCBSer sent in response of the death of Robert Gilson in the great war "I now believe that if the greatness which we three certainly meant (and as more than holiness or nobility alone) is really the lot of the TCBS, than the death of any of its members is but a bitter winnowing of those who were not meant to be great- at least not directly. God grant that this does not sound arrogant- I feel humbler enough in truth and immeasurably weaker and poorer now. The greatness was that of a great instrument in God's hands- a mover, a doer, even an achiever of great things, a beginner at the very least of large things. In a letter sent to Tolkien from G.B. Smith another TCBS member and friend he says "My chief consolation is that if I am scuppered tonight- I am off duty in a few minutes- there will still be left a member of the great T.C.B.S to voice what I dreamed and what we all agreed upon....May God bless you, my dear John Ronald, and may you say the things I have tried to say long after I am not there to say them, if such be my lot. Shortly after this letter G. B. Smith was walking along a road and was hit in the right arm and buttocks by fragments of a bursting shell. The wounds did not seem life threatening, but after

two days he developed gas gangrene, and died. Hammond and Scull's "*J.R.R. Tolkien Companion and Guide*" says of the aims of the TCBS "If any clear statement of aims of the TCBS was ever written down, it does not appear to survive: but one may be deducted from references and allusions in correspondences, especially in letters to Tolkien after a TCBS meeting in London, which he was not able to attend. The friends seem to have hoped that through their artistic achievements, including poetry, music, and architecture, they might bring about reform of what they saw as the corrupt state of arts and attitudes in England. All of this and so much more was the culture which inspired Tolkien to begin the Mythology. As his friend and the only other surviving member of the immortal four of the TCBS Christopher Wiseman told him "you ought to start the epic" and he did. From these beginnings we go on to a man who is now surely known around the world.

Where does Tolkien sit in popular culture? Maybe everywhere with the hugely expanded following thanks to the recent films, Tolkien himself may not even have been all that familiar with the term "Pop Culture". The term Gained much wider spread use in the twentieth century, especially as the old times of the Victorian, and Edwardian eras faded into history. The industrial revolution began the advent of machines and man's increasing dominance over nature. The world became smaller and the works of an Anglo Saxon professor in England became know around the world. "Modern Fantasy Fiction" if I can call it that, I would agree owes much to Tolkien. Fantasy stories are not new they have been with us for a very long time some say even back to Homer. Fantasy fiction has grown to become perhaps one of the most prevalent forms of storytelling around. So popular in fact it has become a mainstream television setting, in particular I think of shows like Grimm and Once Upon a Time. If we include all those which may have some Tolkien influence even if just by genre alone today's selection is copious indeed. One need only go to one of the many Tolkien web sites to get lists and examples of the machine which Tolkien fandom has become. Social Media is a buzz with witty memes and Tokieny tweets. It would seem as if modernity desires the past to find the values it has lost. Is the current influence and general opinions of Tolkien fandom what the young men of the TCBS would have wished to pass on to future generations? Carpenter in his biography says there was a clear call to Tolkien to begin the great work that he had been meditating for some time, a grand astonishing project with few parallels in the history of literature. He was going to create an entire mythology. That Tolkien's enthusiasm for sharing his creation is also part of his reasons for creating it I think shows when in a letter to Milton

Waldman an American book publisher he said “It is difficult to say anything without saying too much. The attempt to say a few words opens a floodgate of excitement. The egoist and artist at once desires to say how the stuff has grown. The stuff began with me I do not remember a time when I was not building it.

That he had doubts about how his work would be interpreted becomes obvious in more than one of the letters of J.R.R. Tolkien First this from letter 198 an American film maker had enquired about the possibility of making a cartoon film of “*The Lord of the Rings*” As far as I am concerned personally, I should welcome the idea of an animated motion picture with all the risk of vulgarization; and that apart from the glint of money, though on the brink of retirement that is not an unpleasant possibility. I should find vulgarization less painful than the sillification achieved by the BBC. Then in letter 207 in regards to this same project and a story line by one Morton Zimmerman “I feel very unhappy about the extreme silliness and incompetence of Zimmerman and his complete lack of respect for the original.

I will admit I had a hard time finding my fit for writing on this year’s topic. I first thought I did not want to simply walk in here with a very long list of examples of Tolkien being spoken of in present day media in all its forms. I have a Google Alert set up for that and each and every day it delivers news of the Tolkien Pop culture craze, along with some stuff that really is worth reading.

January brought me the alert headlines “MTV’s Shannara Chronicles is Tolkien meets George Lucas, another was Google Translate has been changing Russian Federation to Mordor, and Radio Poland reports “Protestors March for Poland’s Oldest Forrest” within the article we find “It was a march of the Ents, as the organization chose to call it, referring to the Ents Onodrim, Shepard’s of the Trees from JRR Tolkien’s “*The Lord of the Rings*”. While something called ‘Mental Floss’ headlines “J.R.R. Tolkien’s Tower: Ideas sought for what to do with it”. Apparently there is a seven story tower called Perrot’s Folly in Edgbaston, Birmingham which I have seen popping up quite frequently as the inspiration for Isengard.

My alert also brings me nice surprises such as this from the “Los Altos Town Crier with a small piece titled “How to cultivate childlike faith in a grown up world”, written by Sharon Lennox a certified life coach. She writes “I recently read an essay by J.R.R. Tolkien titled “*On Fairy Stories*” in which he outlines his formula for writing the fantasy fiction that made him famous. Tolkien outlined the

elements he used to draw in the reader through what he believed was a “Memory Trace”- a heart “truth” that we are born with but gets deleted as we morph into this physical world, and so through his writing, he made a way for us (as adults) to remember what we have lost, and what we desperately want back. She goes on to say Tolkien lists the following as notions that most people, at some level, wish were true, and which speak to the “memory trace” that God places inside of each of us: conquering death, overcoming evil, existing outside of time as we know it, communication with nonhuman beings and perfect love with no parting.” How lovely to see that there are also people out there that get great reward and insights from the works of Tolkien.

Then there is this kind of thing from an article I found from November of 2014 at the British Broad Casting web page called Culture. Jane Ciabattari author of two books “California Tales” and “Stealing the Fire” has a lot to say about Tolkien’s creations and it makes me wonder. Her article is titled “Hobbits and Hippies: Tolkien and the Counter Culture” here are just a couple excerpts. “The values articulated by Tolkien were ideally suited to the counter culture movement of the 1960’s.” She says “the drug culture of Tolkien’s novels may have served as an initial hook for the boomer generation. Many of the characters of Middle-earth are drawn to hallucinogenic plants. The “Little People” of the shire used hallucinogenic drugs, mostly “the herb called pipe weed”. Even the dark wizard Saruman who was curious about the shire because, Gandalf showed an interest, had taken to the halflings leaf. He was skeptical of it too: Saruman says to Gandalf in Peter Jackson’s “The Fellowship of the Ring” “your love of the halflings leaf has clearly slowed your mind.” Really, I don’t know how I missed the ‘Drug Culture’ of the Shire way back when I first read the books, yet surely I should have been tipped off much latter by this line in the movie. Jane’s article goes on to quote Ralph Wood a noted Tolkien scholar and author of two books “The Gospel according to Tolkien” and “Tolkien among the Moderns”. She says “many felt the experience of reading the text itself is akin to an acid trip”, and she quotes Wood as saying “Indeed the rumor got about, a wish seeking fulfillment no doubt, That Tolkien had composed “The Lord of the Rings” under the influence of drugs” and so it goes on and on every day. Tolkien’s works and his words show up in our everyday lives. Be they accurate representations of his thoughts as some are or taking the movies as the real Middle-earth as many now do who have never read the books, as I said I wonder.

Has the enormous success of what could now be called the Tolkien machine now become more about making money than making Myths? Are we seeing a denigration of what Tolkien termed the “High” and the “Cosmogonic”. When we use the term Pop Culture do we place the current topics in a status of “Low Culture” as opposed to the “High”. Is the attention of Pop Culture an indication of the lowest common denominator to mean the quality of something is poor because it is designed to appeal to the largest number of People. Surely we know the recent movies are designed to appeal to masses. Yet what of Tolkien himself was this his goal when he said “I wrote *“The Lord of the Rings”* because I wished to try my hand at a really long story that would hold the attention of readers, amuse them, and at times excite them, or deeply move them. With sales of over three hundred million between the Hobbit and “The Lord of the Rings” it would seem he may have succeeded. Being able to appeal to so many surely seems to be finding the common denominator but in Tolkien’s case I think his story remains of a high tone of high romance and real heroes.