Influence of the Past and Modernity in Book V

ENGL 283: The Tolkien Legendarium

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Dec. 3, 2024

In *The Lord of the Rings*, and particularly in Book V, perspectives and trends from Middle-earth's distance past are often discussed in contrast to the state of the world at the time of the narrative. There are various prophecies and songs from the past that are recounted in the book, and each of them, along with characters' reactions to them, suggests a view that Tolkien had of the past and of the time he wrote in—in general, he seems to believe there is a level of decline in virtue from the past and to disagree with various modern values. One example is that good and evil are largely drawn across racial lines, and the narrator and characters the reader is meant to trust discuss a sort of hierarchy of blood lines and talk about "greater" and "lesser" men. Another example is Gandalf and Aragorn's attitude toward the healers in Minas Tirith, which show skepticism and a certain level of contempt toward the scientific method and medicine rooted in evidence. Finally, Aragorn's near blind faith in the prophecy about the Paths of the Dead wins out completely over others' skepticism and is integral to the success of the Battle of the Pelennor Fields. These run contrary to the themes of human equality, science, and a level of religious skepticism, and throughout the book, Tolkien pushes back on a number of such enlightenment and modern values in ways that sometimes feel jarring or even troubling from a 21st-century perspective.

One modern idea Tolkien resists is the notion that all people are equal in value. For example, race is often used as an indicator for a character's valor or goodness. In the Battle of the Pelennor Fields, a description of Gandalf's bravery is followed by saying that "he and his knights still held themselves like lords in whom the race of Númenor ran true" (806), and the narrator says of the Paths of the Dead that "no other mortal Men could have endured it, none but the Dúnedain of the North" (772). There is a clear hierarchy of strength of will and worth, and the top of this hierarchy is Aragorn and the Dúnedain from Númenor. This contrasts with whom

Faramir calls the “Middle Peoples, Men of the Twilight” (663); the narrator says that “they were reckoned men of Gondor, yet their blood was mingled, and there were short and swarthy folk among them whose sires came more from the forgotten men” (734). These people are not seen as evil, but it is viewed negatively that the bloodlines have mixed. These people are viewed as less worthy of attention and even expendable: for example, as the army is leaving Minas Tirith for Mordor, Gandalf says that “there are names among [them] that are worth more than a thousand mail-clad knights apiece” (864). This is reminiscent of him saying in Book III to Théoden that “seldom has any lord of Rohan received three guests. Weapons they have laid at your doors that are worth many a mortal man, even the mightiest” (502). From a modern perspective, the idea that it would be better to lose a thousand men than one great man, or to lose many men than a weapon, is at best uncomfortable.

Tolkien’s description of whom Faramir calls “the Men of Darkness” (663) is perhaps more troubling. In the Battle of the Pelennor Fields, the people from Far Harad are described as “black men like half-trolls with white eyes and red tongues” (828), and the Mouth of Sauron is introduced as “a renegade, who came of the race of those that are named the Black Númenoreans” (870). White and black are used as symbols for good and evil constantly throughout the book, and Tolkien does not shy away from extending this to race: almost all good characters are light-skinned, and most dark-skinned characters are evil. The Men of Darkness are almost completely dehumanized, and there is little indication throughout the book that there is a possibility for their redemption. These patterns suggest a level of racialism in Tolkien, which is regressive and stands in sharp contrast to the ideal that all human lives have equal worth and are equally deserving of a baseline of respect and dignity.

Another area where Tolkien prefers a past perspective over a modern one is in the area of

medicine. In the Houses of Healing, the herb-master is portrayed as largely incompetent and focused on the wrong things. When Aragorn asks for *athelas*, the herb-master responds:

> 'It has no virtue that we know of, save perhaps to sweeten a fouled air, or to drive away some passing heaviness. Unless, of course, you give heed to rhymes of old days which women such as our good Ioreth still repeat without understanding.
>
> *When the black breath blows*
> *and death's shadow grows*
> *and all lights pass,*
> *come athelas! come athelas!*
> *Life to the dying*
> *In the king's hand lying!*
>
> It is but a doggrel, I fear, garbled in the memory of old wives. Its meaning I leave to your judgement, if indeed it has any. But old folk still use an infusion of the herb for headaches.' (847)

Gandalf then says to "go and find some old man of less lore and more wisdom who keeps some in his house!" (847). The herb-master is skeptical of pursuing a treatment for a dying patient for which he knows of no evidence of efficacy, a stance that most modern doctors would support, but as a result he is condemned as being out of touch and too unwilling to trust to historical perspectives. This shows a level of distaste in Tolkien toward enlightenment-era research-backed medicine and science and gives credence to older methods of healing.

Another prophecy from the past in which Aragorn successfully puts faith is the prophecy from Malbeth the Seer, which ends "*Whose shall the horn be? / Who shall call them from the grey twilight, the forgotten people? / The heir of him to whom the oath they swore. / From the North shall he come, need shall drive him: / he shall pass the Door to the Paths of Dead*" (764). This is quite reminiscent of passages from Isaiah and other biblical prophetic books, and Aragorn puts his faith in it so completely that he leads a company to the Paths of the Dead. He does so against the pleading of Théoden, Éomer, and Éowyn, who tell him that "if you seek the Paths of the Dead, then our parting is come, and it is little likely that we shall ever meet again under the Sun" (762) and ask "is it then your errand to seek death? For that is all that you will find on that

road" (766). Despite their disbelief, Aragorn's choice is completely vindicated, and the Battle of the Pelennor Fields very likely would have been lost without it. With this, Tolkien affirms Aragorn's faith in the past and rejection of the Rohirrim's religious skepticism. In these examples and throughout the book, Tolkien hearkens back to a past he seems to believe is better in certain ways than the time he was writing in, and he pushes back on a variety of modern tendencies and values.

Works Cited

Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Two Towers*. HarperCollins Publishers, 2007.

Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Return of the King*. HarperCollins Publishers, 2007.

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