

Task for *For the Term of His Natural Life*

Reader-centred reading of *The Lord of the Rings*

The Lord of the Rings by JRR Tolkien is a classic fantasy fiction novel which^[J1] tells how the hobbit, Frodo, must undertake a hazardous journey in order to destroy a ring which has come into his possession. This ring was crafted long ago and could, if it fell into the wrong hands, give total power over those who inhabit Middle Earth to its new owners. I had already seen *The Fellowship of the Ring* as a film and had regarded it as nothing more than a simplistic tale of Good versus Evil, so I was interested to see whether the book itself had any more substance than the film and whether I would make a different reading of the book than I had of the film.

When I started to read *The Lord of the Rings* I already had certain expectations of it based on its genre and what I assumed to be its associated structure^[J2]. That is, I expected the text to present a hero's journey^[J3] within a fantasy fiction genre. In that respect my expectations were fulfilled and I found that as the story unfolded I was looking for the next stage in the story and trying to locate various characters within the conventions of the hero's journey structure. I did find, though, that the fantasy world constructed by Tolkien was somewhat difficult to understand and this tended to set up a gap between me and the novel^[J4].

I found it difficult, also, to identify with any of the characters. I understood that Frodo was to be the archetypal hero of the book and yet I could not read with this character. I was disposed to identify more with the worldlier and, perhaps even cynical, Bilbo^[J5] but, of course Bilbo disappears from the scene fairly early in *TLOTR*. I tended to read the character of Strider/Aragorn sympathetically until Tolkien intimated that the Dunedain, of whom Aragorn is the chieftain, are roaming warriors who defend the peaceful and defenceless folk such as the hobbits. For me, this smacked too much of the rationale for intelligence services and special military forces in my own 'real' world^[J6].

I was prepared to read the novel on its own terms but I started to resist the likely meaning of the text, that good ordinary people must do exceptional things in order to resist power-hungry people, as a bit too simplistic. For me Frodo was too pallid a hero, Sam too deferential (virtually a Sancho Panza to Frodo's Don Quixote), and the evil ones too cartoonish. I tend to view humans (or human-like characters) as more complex than this. The further I read into the book the more I realised that there was a mismatch between me as a reader and the reading position which the writer probably wanted me to occupy.

Hero stories are very popular in our culture so it is likely that *The Lord of the Rings* will continue to enjoy its cult status, especially among those for whom it was presumably written: teenagers and young adults^[J7]. However, given its allegorical quality, it is possible that over time these readers will make different connections between the novel and events in the contemporary world to those which readers may have made at the time the novel was first published.

Bibliography:

Tolkien, J. (2001). *The Lord of the Rings*. London: HarperCollins.