

Two Different Red Books

J.R.R. Tolkien and C.G. Jung's Contrasting Worlds

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Abstract

“A Myth for Our Times” is the title of a series of lectures given by Becca Tarnas on J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien, 2013). The lecture material is collected and condensed in *Journey to the Imaginal Realm* (Tarnas, 2019), a deep yet lightweight companion book to Tolkien’s masterwork. Interspersing the analysis of Tolkien’s text with reflections on aspects of his life, passions, and artistic pursuits, Tarnas (2019) manages to enrich an already unique experience: entering Tolkien’s enchanted world of Middle-earth.

Tarnas (2019) draws a parallel between Tolkien’s work and that of C.G. Jung, the great Swiss psychologist. In this paper, I will try to show that the intentions, methodologies, and styles of both authors are essentially different. I will argue that trying to find profound meaning in Tolkien’s work does not lead to a better understanding of his text but instead steers us towards distorted interpretations. I will posit that the best way to enjoy Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* is as the author himself intended it: as a masterwork of epic literary fiction.

Roving in Middle-earth

I was only nine or ten years old when my grandmother gifted me a copy of *The Lord of the Rings*. To this day, I am somewhat puzzled by her choice. What made her think a child my age would read, let alone enjoy, a book that was more than a thousand pages long? Yet she was right. I plunged into Tolkien's world of Middle-earth as if it were as or more real than my everyday life in Rome. As the story neared its end, I was invaded by a feeling of unbearable melancholy; I did not want to let go of Middle-earth and its epic adventures, and I read the last few hundred pages as slowly as I could. Towards the end of the book, the Hobbits Frodo and Sam, and the wretched creature Gollum, enter the dark lands of Mordor, where their fate and that of the entire Middle-earth will be decided. The prospect of finishing the book terrified me, but I also wished for the nerve-wracking adventure to end and for the Hobbits to make it back home safe and sound.

The Lord of the Rings did come to an end, but my hunger for Tolkien's tales only increased. In the following years, I dutifully read all of Tolkien's literature that I could find in Italian. But my thirst was unquenchable; I became painfully aware that, no matter how many Tolkien books I read, they would all come to an end. And then, at around eighteen, after years of perusing Tolkien's world as an avid reader, I was granted the unexpected chance to create my own stories in it when a group of friends and I got together to play MERP: the Middle-earth Role Playing game.¹

Role-playing games (RPGs) are a brilliant invention and an incredibly potent form of interactive storytelling. RPG mechanics are deceptively simple: players create fictional characters that embark on imaginary quests. The characters travel, explore forests and

¹ More information about MERP can be found here: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Middle-earth_Role_Playing

dungeons, meet other friendly or hostile non-playing-characters (NPCs), fight monsters, and recover treasures, usually collaborating rather than competing with one another. Within the group of players, one person has a special role as the game master (GM). The GM represents “the world”: he or she is the narrating voice that describes situations, places, and encounters to the other players, and that impersonates all the NPCs. The GM also uses a rulebook that contains all sorts of rules and tables to decide what happens when, say, Laurelin the elven wizard attempts to fire a fireball at the charging troll. The rolling of various kinds of dice represents the element of chance. Will the fireball hit the target? A player rolls one or more dice, modifies the result with bonuses that express, say, his or her ability to throw fireballs and the troll’s resistance to fire, and the result will show the damage done. Rules serve as a support for the collective imaginative effort rather than a strict control system. In short, with a simple set of materials (paper, pen, and dice) and the combined power of imagination, a group of people is capable of traveling together to a fantasy world filled with adventures. In the case of MERP, the fantasy world is Tolkien’s Middle-earth, with its unique charm and enchantment.

Our MERP sessions were held every Sunday, and lasted anything from four to eight hours, supported by compassionate parents who provided the playing space and occasionally fed us (lest we completely forget to eat). With very few interruptions, my role-playing friends and I roamed through Tolkien’s world, making it our own, for about three years, week after week. Our characters explored, fought, evolved, and sometimes, much to our chagrin, died (Middle-earth can be a dangerous place after all). One of the players of our group even created a comic featuring our characters and their adventures. It was, in some ways, one of the happiest times of my life.

Thanks to the power of role-playing, my relationship with Tolkien's world became much more intimate. Suddenly I was there, making my way through the world of Elves, Dwarves, Orcs, and other creatures that Tolkien so minutely described. My adolescent self was happy to identify with characters I created to my liking: a powerful elven mage, a stealthy human warrior, or a sturdy Dwarf. My immersion in Tolkien's world was pure; I did not need to concern myself with finding a hidden meaning beyond its stories and characters. Not knowing anything about Tolkien's political or religious views, I enjoyed his creation to the fullest.

Today, Tolkien's work is the subject of all sorts of erudite speculations and analyses. Yet, even as I read *The Lord of the Rings* again, supported by the gentle, unobtrusive guidance of Becca Tarnas' companion book, *Journey to the Imaginal Realm* (Tarnas, 2019), I still believe an unconcerned, innocent attitude is the best way to approach Tolkien's work. Granted, for those who look at literature through the lenses of philosophy and morality, *The Lord of the Rings* is an easier target than Tolkien's other famous novel, *The Hobbit*. The tone in *The Lord of the Rings* is more solemn, its themes more adult; in a letter to W. H. Auden dated 1955, Tolkien confessed that, when asked to write a sequel for *The Hobbit*, he decided to try to write a story "that was not addressed to children at all" (Tolkien, 1955). But Tolkien was equally clear in expressing his annoyance at those who tried to find meaning in his stories, and he adamantly denied writing *The Lord of the Rings* to prove some philosophical or ethical position. In the foreword to the second edition, which, as we shall see, got omitted in some published versions of *The Lord of the Rings*, he stated about his tale: "As for any inner meaning or 'message,' it has in the intention of the author none." (Tolkien, 2013, p. xxiii).

Alas, even such a direct warning from the author is not enough to stop our relentless search for meaning in works of fiction. Do the Hobbits represent the English middle-class? Is

The Lord of the Rings a parable on the dangers of industrialization and ecological devastation? Or is it a racist saga pitting the good, white Northerners against the evil, brown Southerners? It is hard to discredit or endorse any of these suppositions, because they are all based on the hypothesis that Tolkien intended to communicate some profound meaning with his storytelling. It, perhaps, legitimate to ask whether the strength of Tolkien's characters indicates that they are sourced in something deeper than his incredibly prolific imagination. Did Tolkien have privileged access to parts of the collective unconscious? Do his characters and storylines derive their almost universal appeal from their resonance with general patterns of our collective psyche? Are Tolkien's characters and stories "archetypal" in the strict sense?

Tarnas (2019) seems to support the notion that Tolkien draws his stories straight from the archetypal world. She writes that when Frodo beholds the forest of Lórien, he is "glimpsing the archetypal" (p. 57), and discusses the role of archetypal darkness and archetypal evil in The Lord of the Rings (p. 129). But speaking of archetypes when referring to Tolkien's work warrants some caution. If we take the word archetypal in its more ordinary sense, as synonymous of symbolic and recurrent, then there is no denying some of Tolkien's stories follow familiar motifs that we can retrace in myths and fairy tales. And yet, as I hope to illustrate, Tolkien did not access archetypes in the psychological sense described by C.G. Jung. The archetypal realm, as intended by Jung, is the sedimentation of centuries of psychic experiences of millions of individuals. It is a world much more complex, chaotic, rich, and ambivalent than the enchanted world of Middle-earth.

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The part in us that strives to find meaning beyond Tolkien's stories has some justification. Tolkien's prose is so compelling, the suspension of disbelief it elicits in us so strong, that we

may feel as if we are reading the detailed chronicles of a real world—perhaps our own world in a distant past. It can be then tempting to look at Tolkien for advice or answers. Moreover, Tolkien’s self-reflections do indeed suggest he felt he was discovering his tales rather than inventing them (Tarnas, 2019, xxviii) and accessing material that existed somewhere, waiting to be found.

One stunning example of Tolkien’s writing process is chapter nine of *The Lord of the Rings*, where the four Hobbits (Frodo, Sam, Merry, and Pippin), having left their homes behind, enter the village of Bree, which to them represents the edge of the known world. At the inn of the Prancing Pony, they spot Strider, a “strange-looking weather-beaten man” who seems to be very interested in the Hobbits and their journey (Tolkien, 2013, p. 156). Reading the passage, we can’t help being intrigued by this mysterious man. But, apparently, so was Tolkien who, in the cited letter to W. H. Auden, wrote: “Strider sitting in the corner at the inn was a shock, and I had no more idea who he was than had Frodo” (Tolkien, 1955). What is most remarkable is that Strider will develop into one of the main characters in Tolkien (2013): he is none less than Aragorn, son of Arathorn, of royal descent, and destined to rule over the reunited realms of Arnor and Gondor after Sauron’s defeat. That one of the main protagonists of his tale came to Tolkien as a surprise may seem to support the idea that Tolkien was discovering stories and characters that existed somewhere in the depths of our collective psyche.

Perhaps guided by these considerations, Tarnas (2019, p. xv) compares Tolkien’s creative process with active imagination, C. G. Jung’s methodology for exploring the unconscious. Active imagination consists in allowing the images of the unconscious to manifest with complete freedom and then engaging directly with them, giving rise to a dialogue between different inner voices (Jung, 2009, pp. 53-54). *The Red Book* (Jung, 2009) is the most famous

product of Jung's personal experiments with active imagination, containing both a reproduction of his inner dialogues and a record of his interpretations of the fantasies.

Beyond a surface resemblance, however, it is unclear whether Tolkien's method for exploring his own fantasies followed the principles of Jung's active imagination; Tolkien does not engage emotionally with the characters of *The Lord of the Rings*, nor does he offer any exegetic interpretation of their deeds.

Tolkien does present himself as the translator or curator of an ancient document called "the Red Book of Westmarch."² This fictional book is the compendium that Bilbo Baggins, the protagonist of *The Hobbit* and a secondary character in Tolkien (2013), puts together towards the end of his life, recording his and Frodo's epic adventures. Tolkien used the Red Book of Westmarch as a literary device to reinforce the suspension of disbelief for the readers, who feel they are accessing the chronicles of an existing world. Yet, the parallel between the two Red Books is more suggestive than substantial. When Tolkien finished writing *The Lord of the Rings* in 1949, Jung's Red Book was just a private manuscript he held in his office and showed to selected friends and family members³, so a direct influence between the two Red Books is out of the question. But beyond the fact that Tolkien could not have known about Jung's Red Book, Jung's and Tolkien's approaches are fundamentally divergent—both in intentions and style.

To start with, both men's motivations for writing are different. Jung embarked on his active imagination sessions because he was worried about his mental health, following a series of deeply troubling visions (Jung, 2009, p. 18). His main intention was self-exploration

² The Red Book of Westmarch was most likely inspired by the Red Book of Hergest, an early 15th-century compilation of Welsh poetry.

³ Jung's Red Book was not published until 2009, long after the author's death. (Jung, 2009, Loc. 162-172)

and healing, and he used active imagination as a therapeutic tool. Although Jung did not rule out that a wider audience would eventually read the Red Book, he did not proactively seek out its publication (Jung, 2009, Loc. 167). Tolkien, on the other hand, began writing *The Lord of the Rings* when his publisher insisted on having a sequel to *The Hobbit* (Tarnas, 2019, p. xxvi). After the publisher had rejected his most beloved work, *The Silmarillion*, he was motivated to write a book that would be well-received by critics and audience.

Both authors' writing style is also fundamentally different: unlike Jung, Tolkien was so interested in writing in an engaging way that he constructed a whole theory about the literary creative process, which he called "sub-creation." He posited that for sub-creation to be successful, the author needs to create a secondary world so coherent that the reader perceives it to be as real as the primary world of the senses. Tolkien called the most sublime attainment of sub-creation "enchantment": when an author achieves enchantment, the secondary world he or she creates is so immersive that both reader and author roam in it, gradually discovering its characters and stories (Tarnas, 2019, pp. 21-25). Middle-earth being one of the most enchanting worlds ever brought to life, it is no wonder Tolkien felt he was uncovering stories that had a degree of objective existence.

For his part, Jung found any suggestion that his visions could be regarded as art troubling, as it made him doubt whether his fantasies were spontaneous and natural (Jung, 2009, p. 43). Jung had neither the freedom nor the constraints of a fiction writer. As a psychologist, he was bound to write down his fantasies as they came, without taking the liberty to adjust or embellish them; on the other hand, he was not excessively concerned with factors such as style, coherence, or character development. As a result, in the Red Book we will not find an immersive secondary world where we can experience enchantment, no compelling characters like Frodo or Gollum, but rather a host of archetypal figures that disappear from the stage as

swiftly as they arrived, like visions in a dream. In Jung (2009), there is no secondary world to speak of, only the raw psychic material he retrieved from the depths of the individual and collective psyche. Enthralling as it may be for whoever is interested in Jung's work, the Red Book can be a hard and tortuous read for anybody else.

But perhaps the most important difference between both men is that Jung, unlike Tolkien, believed his fantasies had a meaning. In fact, an essential part of the Red Book consists of Jung's effort to interpret his fantasies and find their hidden significance (Jung, 2009, p. 47). Sonu Shamdasani, the curator of the Red Book, observes that Jung used different linguistic registers to convey the content of his fantasies. The first layer consists in faithfully reporting the fantasies and inner dialogues, while a second layer constitutes the elaboration and commentary of the fantasy material (Jung, 2009, p. 98). This second layer conveys Jung's conceptual interpretation of his own fantasies, with excursions into the fields of psychology, philosophy, morals, and religion. In other words, Jung consciously leads us in the analysis of his fantasies; a completely opposite position to that of Tolkien, who constantly invites us to enjoy his tales without any interpretation. Tolkien wrote *The Lord of the Rings* "as a personal satisfaction, driven to it by the scarcity of literature of the sort that I wanted to read," and he was satisfied that readers enjoyed it "as an exciting story; and that is how it was written." (Tolkien, 1955).

In sum, the comparison between Tolkien and Jung highlights their differences and serves to better locate them in the pantheon of contemporary geniuses. We would be wise to keep treating Tolkien primarily as a fiction writer, although one whose work is of astonishingly epic and solemn quality, and whose stories have an air of eternity to them. Jung, on the other hand, remains primarily a psychologist, although some of his work, most notably the Red Book, possesses qualities of literary fiction that stretch the boundaries of purely scientific

work. Treating Jung as a writer of literary fiction is just as confusing as considering Tolkien a philosopher or a moralist, yet the latter inaccuracy is perhaps more dangerous. For if we insist on looking for moral significance in Tolkien, the epic of *The Lord of the Rings* becomes a reactionary parable with racist undertones.

Tarnas herself (2019, p. 128) admits that one cannot help but interpret some of the text from Tolkien's descriptions of war scenes as carrying racist implications. For instance, how else can we explain that, across Tolkien (2013), the men who have joined the forces of Evil are dark-skinned, and dwell in the East and the South? Yet, I believe that the relevant question here is why we need to interpret those scenes at all. Isn't it enough to allow them to evoke images and feelings in us, to transport us to an enchanted world? By looking for hidden meaning in Tolkien's work, we do not gain much besides giving our curiosity temporary relief. But we may be losing something precious: the freedom to roam in an imaginary world that does not need to incarnate, or even conform to, our opinions and values; a world where we can relax our judgment and experience enchantment.

In fact, if there is one point where the Jung of the Red Book and Tolkien agreed wholeheartedly, it is in cautioning the reader against using their work as an inappropriate source of inspiration. We already noted that Tolkien repeatedly warned the reader against turning his writing into an allegory. But even Jung, whose work lends itself more readily to being considered didactic and inspirational, admonished the readers against falling into the trap of following his footsteps. "There is only one way and that is your way" he proclaimed, right after arguing that living according to a (moral) example amounts to not living at all (Jung, 2009, p. 125). It is arguable that Jung did not quite heed his own warning: after going through the process that gave birth to the Red Book, he actively encouraged his patients to engage in similar explorations. As a result, he ended up creating around himself a circle of

devoted explorers of the unconscious who hoped that his methodology would transform society at large (Jung, 2009, p. 39). One of Jung's disciples, Erich Neumann, went so far as to devise a system of ethics based on Jung's findings (Neumann, 1990).⁴ Despite the warnings woven into the Red Book, Jung took his own experience as paradigmatic (Jung, 2009, p. 39) and believed his methodology to be universally applicable to anyone willing to explore the depths of their psyche.

Was Jung insincere when asking the readers of the Red Book to not imitate him? My sense is that Jung, conscious of the Red Book's explosive nature, felt he had to figuratively cover his back before he could lay bare before our eyes the morally complex and contradictory world he found within his psyche. But we are more than justified in entertaining philosophical, ethical, and even spiritual interpretations of the Red Book; after all, Jung was a psychologist conducting a scientific psychic experiment onto himself. On the other hand, taking Tolkien's work as philosophically and ethically meaningful is not just contrary to the author's intention—it can have inappropriate and dangerous consequences.

The Morals of Middle-earth

One of the most extreme forms of moral interpretations of Tolkien's work is contained in the version of *The Lord of the Rings* I read as a teenager in Italy. Rusconi, the first publisher to put out a complete edition of the book, decided to replace the author's preface (exactly where Tolkien warned against treating his work as an allegory) with one written by Elémire Zolla, an Italian esotericist and historian of religions (Tolkien, 1999, p. 5-19). This editorial

⁴ Neumann (1990) argues the necessity of a new ethic based on psychic wholeness, which includes acceptance of both Good and Evil when brought to the light of consciousness. Neumann predicts that the new ethic will substitute the current ethic, based on the request for the individual to attain moral perfection, and which leads to the unhealthy prevalence of the mechanisms of psychological repression and suppression.

choice had far-lasting consequences. In his controversial piece, Zolla praises Tolkien for his supposed philosophical and moral stances. According to Zolla, Tolkien stands as a bastion of antiquity against modernity, one of the rare writers to recognize the existence of absolute Good and Evil and celebrate the victory of the former upon the latter. Zolla despised modernity, which he considered “androgynous, erotic, soaked in confusion,” and its champions, among which he counted, precisely, C. G. Jung (Tolkien, 1999, p. 7). Zolla’s text was seminal in fostering a vision of Tolkien as a reactionary ideologist, and it opened the door to Tolkien’s cultural appropriation by the Italian far-right political camp, providing a form of spurious literary endorsement to fringe extremist movements.⁵ Though flawed because based on the fallacy that Tolkien intended to convey his moral views through his novels, Zolla’s argument may serve as a warning of where searching for moral meaning in Tolkien can lead us.

The simplistic, absolutist moral view that Zolla wanted to project on Tolkien stands in stark contrast to Jung’s complex psychological findings in the areas of morals and ethics. In the Red Book, Jung navigates a constant mediation between the opposites: Light and Dark, Masculine and Feminine, Good and Evil. In Chapter I of the *Liber Secundus*, the second part of the Red Book, Jung has a meeting with the Devil himself, represented by the “Red One” (Jung, 2009, pp. 212-219). Jung understands the Devil as the archetypal adversary⁶: our other standpoint, the part in us that holds the contrary position to what we believe we stand for. As such, confronting one’s Devil means neither annihilating him nor succumbing to him, but instead finding a way to “come to an understanding” (p. 218). Jung consistently advocates

⁵ For example, starting in 1977, the far-right party Movimento Sociale Italiano called its summer camps, where young neofascist militants from all over Italy convened annually, “Hobbit camps.” In my youth in Italy, far-right extremist groups would regularly use runes from *The Lord of the Rings* (such as the G rune for Gandalf) as their logo.

⁶ The original Hebrew word for “Satan” literally means “adversary.”

compromise and embracing paradox as a methodology for psychic growth. For him, the exploration of the unconscious entails the effort to know Evil, or more accurately, the effort to embrace the psychic totality, which in turn necessitates the intimate knowledge of Evil. The metaphysical, spiritual, and moral implications of this position are difficult to overstate. Jung essentially affirms that in order to grow psychologically and know ourselves, we need to know and integrate Evil—a psychological and ethical statement that no author of fiction needs to accept or embed into their stories.

What does Tolkien have to say about the issue of Good and Evil? Tarnas (2019, p. 87) suggests that Middle-earth's ethical landscape is multifaceted, citing as an example the Ents, the "tree-shepherds" who protect certain forests, and their gruff yet endearing chief Treebeard, who affirms that he is not on anybody's side. Yet when the war between the forces of Darkness and Light breaks, the Ents take sides without hesitation, and they march over the tower of Isengard, delivering a mortal blow to Saruman, Sauron's chief ally. Tarnas (2019, p. 129) argues that Saruman himself is an example of Tolkien's willingness to differentiate between darkness and Evil. After all, Saruman, of soft tongue but treacherous intentions, is one of the most wicked characters in *The Lord of the Rings*, and yet his nickname is White. In contrast, Gandalf the Grey, who is often brash and calls everyone a fool, is pure of heart and intentions. But does the relationship between Saruman and Gandalf really stand as a sign of moral complexity in Tolkien?

In *The Lord of the Rings*, Gandalf's grayness is more than anything a device to cover his true power and prevent it from showing before the time is ripe. After his deadly fight with the monstrous (and dark) Balrog, Gandalf is resurrected; he can now show himself fully clad in white (Tolkien, 2013, p. 495). For his part, by the end of *The Lord of the Rings*, Saruman has revealed his true colors. He is now known as Sharkey, a ruffian leader spoiled of any magic

powers, who will die miserably at the hand of his own servant (Tolkien, 2013, pp. 1018-1020). The narrative arc of both Gandalf and Saruman's characters confirms the equation between white, light, and goodness; it is just that Saruman completely fails to live up to his name. Gandalf himself puts it very clearly: "I am Saruman, as he should have been" (p. 495).

And what about Gollum? Isn't he an example of a basically evil character that can, albeit against his will, do good? In the culminating scene of *The Lord of the Rings*, where Frodo and Sam reach Mount Doom, the only place where they can destroy the Ring and stop Sauron's plans, Frodo finally succumbs to the Ring's power and refuses to throw it into the fire (Tolkien, 2013, p. 945). But, in a prime example of what Tolkien called a "eucatastrophe" (Tarnas, 2019, p. 190), it is thanks to Gollum, a dark creature driven to insanity by his lust for the Ring, that the mission can be accomplished. Frodo wears the Ring, thus becoming invisible; Sam tries to stop him but fails; Gollum snatches the Ring and Frodo's finger with one bite, loses his balance, and precipitates into the furnace, carrying the Ring with him (p. 946).

It may be tempting to interpret this scene psychologically, considering Gollum as a representation of Frodo's shadow; Tarnas (2019, p. 192) finds that the scene of Gollum's demise is an example of "enantiodromia," or the tendency of things to change into their opposites, a principle that was dear to Jung. But the comparison is, again, alluring rather than illuminating. For Jung, the psychological process of enantiodromia was a way for the unconscious to balance the unsustainable one-sidedness of consciousness (Jung, 1977, p. 334). For instance, enantiodromia happens when a righteous person who boasts about being peaceful starts shouting at somebody for no apparent reason. The unconscious takes over and performs a sort of violent correction, a compensatory act. But then, speaking of

enantiodromia in the context of *The Lord of the Rings* means turning Gollum into a compensatory character for Frodo's one-sidedness. It is a hazardous interpretation, one that takes us far from any of Tolkien's declared intentions.

It is undeniable that Gollum is a complex character, more so than many others in *The Lord of the Rings*. It is easy to look upon the wretched creature with sympathy, even with respect. Gollum is shady and sneaky, yet also knowledgeable, sturdy, and strong. And yet, even Gollum's qualities and past (he was, after all, a Hobbit once) are not enough to redeem him. For a moment, as he looks at Frodo sleeping, Gollum seems on the verge of making a tremendous internal shift: he extends a hand almost in a caress, perhaps reaching for connection. But when Sam awakens and reacts with fear and suspicion to the sight of Gollum touching Frodo, the fleeting moment passes, and Gollum's only chance of moral redemption is forever lost (Tolkien, 2013, p. 714).

If we insist on taking *The Lord of the Rings* as a moral allegory, then we must conclude that the possibility of mediation with Evil, represented by Sauron the Dark Lord, is non-existent. In Tolkien (2013), the opposites are at war, and only one of them can emerge victorious. For all its complexity and scope, *The Lord of the Rings* is still a tale of heroes and villains, and we shouldn't ask it to be anything else. When we allow it to be no more and no less than an epic fantasy tale, *The Lord of the Rings* can give us immense gratification. It is such a relief to immerse ourselves in a world more simple, more clear-cut than the one we're used to. Rarely, if ever, are in our lives things as morally clear as they are in Middle-earth.

Conclusion

It is not only the extravagant positions of Elémire Zolla, but the part in us that wants to find meaning everywhere that can be our greatest obstacle to enjoying Tolkien's art. The risk

of forgetting we are reading a pure work of fiction is particularly high with Tolkien, a master of enchantment, whose Middle-earth is one of the most coherent, solid, believable secondary worlds ever created. We may experience Middle-earth as being so real that we may be tempted to turn to it to solve the problems we face in our lives. We may ask ourselves, “What would Frodo or Aragorn have done here?”, forgetting that Frodo and Aragorn were not dealing with the complex reality that we live in, but with a fictional one created by a genius.

It is better to keep exploring Middle-earth with the mind and the spirit of a child, unencumbered by ideology or by the responsibilities of adulthood. One of the great gifts of a book like *The Lord of the Rings* is that it can transport us to a different world, almost as credible as our own, but where things unfold in a simpler, more rewarding way than in our reality. There are often no clear winners or losers in our lives, and we do not quite know whether we stand in the camp of Good or Evil. Jung was well aware of that, and if we are to give any credit to his insights about the human psyche, then the fact that we sometimes don't know whether we are Frodo or Gollum, Gandalf or Sauron is an essential feature of our human condition.

And still, while being careful not to turn *The Lord of the Rings* into a moral allegory, we can and should read into its depths, get familiar with its characters, know them and love them, read their stories again and again. On a first impression, *The Lord of the Rings* is an epic adventure full of explorations, combat, treason, and magic. Yet hidden within it lies the inner journey of its main characters, especially the four Hobbits. These humble and sensible creatures embark on a true initiation journey; they discover a world much larger than that they had so far inhabited, where much more is at stake. They also discover they have more power and more responsibility than they ever thought. Even though the Hobbits manage to return home, there is really no return from an initiation: we cannot forget what we have

learned, and we cannot erase what we have seen. The adventures we have lived change us forever. Isn't this, somehow, the story of all of us, as we grow from childhood into adolescence and then into adulthood?

Yet the mere fact that we can relate to the characters in *The Lord of the Rings* so intimately shows they are fictional characters rather than archetypes. Pure archetypal figures, such as those of fairy tales, have, from a psychological standpoint, not much to do with ordinary human beings (Von Franz, 1993, p. 5). Archetypes do not have a personality to speak of, and often behave in ways we cannot fully comprehend, as do many of the figures that populate Jung's *Red Book*. Archetypes and fictional characters belong to different categories, though they may share common origins. Similarly, Tolkien's and Jung's work are two different expressions of human genius, and they cater to different needs of the human spirit. Finding parallels between geniuses can sometimes be more misleading than letting them rest in their own individual glory. Outstanding works of literary fiction such as *The Lord of the Rings* are meant to enchant us; we should not ask them to teach us morality, not burden them with philosophical questions.

I must then disagree with considering *The Lord of the Rings* as a myth for our times. Yes, reading Tolkien has the undeniable potential to remind us how enchanting nature is, evoking the mystery of walking through a forest at night, the awe-inspiring sight of snow-capped mountaintops, the power of galloping through a vast plain. Learning to love Middle-earth means falling in love with its trees, its rivers, its starred sky. But other than that, I doubt reading Tolkien can provide us with insights about the complex, multifaceted problems we are facing today: ongoing degradation of our relationship with Nature, overpopulation, inequality, and, as of 2020, a raging and debilitating pandemic.

Middle-earth is an independent world, one that obeys its own laws and has a right to exist disconnected from our projections and needs. Yes, in times of convulsion we may need a cultural revolution and a massive upgrade to our collective myths. But the process through which new myths are born out of the collective unconscious is inscrutable, mysterious, and prophetic in nature. Those who are destined to express new archetypal content for the collectivity are often misunderstood, cast away, and severely punished before they are celebrated as prophets. Let us not wish that for Tolkien, a brilliant, extraordinary artist, who was wise enough to keep his political and religious ideas out of his creation.

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