

10-1-2015

Tolkien, Fandom, and Priorities

Melissa Conroy
Marquette University

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J.R.R. Tolkien

12/18/15

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The Legendarium, the collective works based in Middle-Earth, created by J.R.R. Tolkien has transcended beyond the realm of mere literature; Tolkien's works have become the foundation to a pop culture craze. It is rare to find someone who has not at least heard of *The Hobbit* or *The Lord of the Rings*; the notoriety of Tolkien is due in part to the popularity of his writing, but perhaps more notably due to the number and intensity of his fans. The Tolkien 'fandom' is not just a group of readers who enjoy the stories of Middle-Earth; they are a community who actively and creatively engages with Tolkien's work through their own interpretations and adaptations of the text. The fan works-music, art, literature, etc. - that arise from the reader's interpretation of Tolkien's work do not simply mimic the original source material; rather, they actively question and challenge Tolkien's canon, and in the process affirm the reader's priorities. Those parts of Tolkien's works that are adopted, rejected, altered or re-interpreted within fan works are done so not as an attempt to fix the original text; rather, fan work's engagement of canon affirms and challenges the reader's priorities for the text. This focus on priorities is a current which runs throughout all fan interpretations; those instances in which it is readily apparent are in Tolkien's re-interpretations of his own work, the adoption of the Legendarium by the 1960s counterculture and the recent adaptation of female characters in the Peter Jackson movies. All of these interpretations do not seek to challenge or change the canon; instead, they incorporate the audiences' priorities for the text into the canon. It is this process of

interpretation of Tolkien's works through an examination of the reader's priorities which has made and continues to make the *Legendarium* relevant literature to a contemporary audience.

Those readers of Tolkien who actively participate within the fandom culture create a myriad of creative adaptations and interpretations of Tolkien's works, which can collectively be referred to as 'fan works'. The most commonly-known format of these works is fanfiction, which are any "texts based on another or group of texts that form a canon of characters, settings, or plots."¹ This definition can be applied to any form of fan works, whether it is text, audio, video, any medium of art, etc. The Tolkien fandom contains within it a vast variety of creative projects- ranging from musicals, textual and literary analysis of Tolkien, visual art, professionally published pro-Orc fanfiction, the Peter Jackson movies- all of these are fan works and attempt to accomplish the same goal. Fan interpretations are a form of analysis and commentary on Tolkien's works which through the process of interpretation seeks to address something within the original text that does not coincide with the reader's priorities. These works, or interpretations, are not an attempt to re-write Tolkien's work in order to 'fix' some aspect of the text; instead, they seek to bring in the reader's experiences and textual expectations into the original text to create a new, additional 'version' of the original text which will engage more fully the reader, as fans:

Reconcile their object of fandom with their expectation, beliefs, and sense of self... the fan's semiotic power extends beyond the bridging of textual gaps to the inclusion and exclusion of textual episodes, fan readers exclude those textual elements that impede the normalization of the text and fail to correspond with their horizon of expectation.²

¹ Megan Abrahamson, "J.R.R. Tolkien, Fanfiction, and the 'Freedom of the Reader,'" *Mythlore* 32 (2009): 53.

²Qtd in *ibid*, 56.

The inclusion of those expectations, beliefs and experiences of the fan into the original text, and the resulting inclusion or exclusion of sections of that text, is essential to the normalizing or modernizing process. It is the combination of the fan and the original canon that produces interpretations of the text that better fit the priorities of modern readers. In this sense, fandom offers a creative space in which to explore those aspects within Tolkien's writings that do not agree with modern readers, more so than traditional literary criticism.³ These interpretations then become 'transformative' as they transform Tolkien's works into something that engages modern readers without destroying the original work.⁴ Fan works, to use one of Tolkien's terms, are sub-creations; something that is wholly new but its origins are based in an original canon.

This ability of the fans to take Tolkien's work and 'transform' it is encouraged by Tolkien's own notions about the nature of fantasy literature. In the foreword to *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien reflected on the nature of his work, and fantasy in general, by rejecting the perception that his works are allegorical: "I think that many confuse 'applicability' with 'allegory'; but the one resides in the freedom of the reader, and the other in the purposed domination of the author."⁵ This idea of applicability and its connection with the 'freedom of the reader' over the 'domination of the author' is paramount to the creation of fan works. Tolkien, through the *Legendarium*, strived for applicability within his work in order to give the reader a freedom to interpret rather than be subordinate to the author's will.

While Tolkien advocated for the freedom of the reader, he was less receptive to fan interpretations and on various occasions responded rather negatively to those fan works. One fan

³Abrahamson, "J.R.R. Tolkien, Fanfiction, and the 'Freedom of the Reader.'"

⁴Karen Viars, and Cait Cooker, "Constructing Lothíriel: Rewriting and Rescuing the Women of Middle-Earth from the Margins," *Mythlore* 33, no. 2 (2015).

⁵J.R.R. Tolkien, Foreword to *The Fellowship of the Ring* (New York: Mariner Books, 2012), xv.

wrote a sequel to *The Lord of the Rings* and sent it to Tolkien, who in turn sent it off to his publisher calling the fan, a ‘young ass’ and his work ‘tripe’.⁶ While Tolkien may not have openly encouraged and appreciated fan works, he did have a vision for his writing which arguably includes fan interpretations, as Tolkien wished to “draw some of the great tales in fullness, and leave many only placed in the scheme, and sketched. The cycles should be linked to a majestic whole, and yet leave scope for other minds and hands, wielding paint and music and drama.”⁷ While Tolkien thought this dream for his works ‘absurd’, it in some sense has been realized through fan works. Regardless of Tolkien’s personal attitudes towards fan interpretation, the vision for his works, and striving for freedom of the reader allows for the intensity of fan interpretation which the Tolkien fandom has produced. In fact, the Tolkien scholar, Megan Abrahamson argues that Tolkien’s work is so suited for fan interpretation and adaptation because the *Legendarium* is fanfiction of old medieval canon literature.⁸

Whether or not the *Legendarium* can be considered fanfiction, Tolkien himself did produce fan interpretations of his own works. In one of Tolkien’s letters (letter 246), he imagined an alternative ending for Gollum than what he published. The original ending for Gollum saw him trying to steal the Ring from Frodo at the top of Mount Doom, biting off Frodo’s finger with the Ring attached and Gollum and the Ring falling into Mount Doom, destroying the both of them. While this is the published fate of Gollum, it did not agree with Tolkien’s conscience and as a result, Tolkien re-imagined an ending that would better satisfy his priorities. As a devout Catholic, Tolkien believed in the possibility of redemption from sin within all people. This theme of redemption is shown throughout *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*; the ‘villains’-Gollum,

⁶Abrahamson, “J.R.R. Tolkien, Fanfiction, and the ‘Freedom of the Reader.’”

⁷Qtd in *ibid*, 54.

⁸*Ibid*.

Saruman, Wormtongue- are offered multiple changes to repent their evil deeds and redeem themselves (they never do). Gollum's inability to accept redemption in Mordor did not agree with Tolkien's priorities as a Christian; so Tolkien was compelled to adapt the canon to better fit his need for the redemption of villainous characters. In the letter, Tolkien created an 'alternate universe' to his canon where Gollum sacrificed himself (and the Ring) because of his love for Frodo, and thus redeeming himself from his previous sins:

Certainly at some point not long before the end he [Gollum] would have stolen the Ring or taken it by violence (as he does in the actual Tale). But 'possession' satisfied, I think he would then have sacrificed himself for Frodo's sake and have *voluntarily* cast himself into the fiery abyss...I think that an effect of his partial regeneration by love [for Frodo] would have been a clearer vision when he claimed the Ring. He would have perceived the evil of Sauron, and suddenly realized that he would not use the Ring and had not the strength or stature to keep it in Sauron's despite: the only way to keep it and hurt Sauron was to destroy it and himself together- and in a flash he may have seen that this would also be the greatest service to Frodo.⁹

Having imagined this alternate ending for Gollum, one in which his love for Frodo led to the path of his redemption, Tolkien did not go back and change the original ending. Tolkien was a notoriously obsessive editor; he did not shy away from rewriting sections of text, but he did not publish his re-interpretation of Gollum's ending. Tolkien did not write a new ending as the author but as a 'fan', analyzing the text through his personal priorities and making it a fanfiction of his own canon. The lack of redemption in Gollum's ending was not in line with Tolkien's priorities for the character- redemption from sin- and as a result Tolkien wrote a transformative work which better fit his Catholic priorities.

While Tolkien wrote transformative fan works of his own, he did not readily encourage the adoption of his work and the resulting fan works that arose out of the 1960s counterculture

⁹Qtd in J.R.R. Tolkien, "Letter 246," in *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, ed. Humphrey Carpenter and Christopher Tolkien (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1981), 330.

movement. By 1965, Tolkien's works had become very popular among and associated with college students and the hippie counterculture which they participated in, much to Tolkien's chagrin.¹⁰ While at first glance, the *Legendarium*, the majority of its plots revolving around violence and war, seems an odd choice for the peace-loving counterculture to adopt; however, the priorities promoted throughout the *Legendarium*, especially *The Lord of the Rings*, corresponded with the priorities of young college students at the time. An apparent overlap is Tolkien's emphasis on nature and the connection between Good and that which is natural. Tolkien's character trope of the gardener runs throughout his works, and is most notable in the character Samwise Gamgee. Not only is Sam a metaphorical gardener, as he nurtures Frodo throughout the story, but he is a literal gardener. When the fellowship meets Galadriel, each receive a gift: Sam's gift is a box of soil and a seed from Galadriel's gardens. When Sam returns to the Shire after the Scouring of the Shire, he plants the seed. One fan commented in the 1967 fanzine, *Tolkien Journal*, that by planting his gift from Galadriel in the ruins of the Shire, "Sam symbolizes the final victory of rich good over evil sterility."¹¹ Sam's connection to nature and his nurturing personality stems from him being a literal and metaphorical gardener and it is these qualities that make Sam so 'Good' and incorruptible by the Ring. Those other capital-G Good characters that prove to be both useful and powerful are also linked to nature, Tom Bombadil and Ents, for example.¹² Those Good in Tolkien's works are connected with nature, often being characterized as the gardener. One fanzine author, at the conclusion of his article, parted with

¹⁰ Joseph Ripp, "Middle America Meets Middle-Earth: American Discussion and Readership of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, 1965-1969," *Book History* 8 (2005).

¹¹ Jan Wojcik, "Samwise-Halfwise? Or Who is the Hero of The Lord of the Rings?" *Tolkien Journal* 3, no. 2 (1967). J.R.R. Tolkien Collection, Marquette University, 16.

¹² Patricia Meyer Spacks, "Ethical Patterns in The Lord of the Rings," *I Palantir* 3 (1964). J.R.R. Tolkien Collection, Marquette University, 1.

“let us leave these dark things- and cultivate our gardens.”¹³ That connection between Good, the gardener trope, and nature would have applied to the environmentalism of the counterculture. Furthermore, Tolkien’s connection between machinery and Evil would have also held a certain appeal. Evil, specifically Sauron, is often distanced from nature and turns to machines, as one fan reflected that “it is characteristic of the Enemy to depend upon machinery rather than natural forces.”¹⁴ A defining characteristic of the counterculture was its anti-war message as young people were drafted into the Vietnam War. The impersonal and destructive machinery of war, which ended those young lives in Vietnam, found an easy comparison in Tolkien’s works and Sauron’s connection with machinery over nature.¹⁵

The value of fellowship, especially in times of war and violence, was a priority within the text which reflected the values of the counterculture. The fan works in fanzines published during the 1960s spoke to the high valuation of fellowship and togetherness found in Tolkien’s literature and in the counterculture. One such fan work, a musical comedy version of *The Lord of the Rings* written by Kathleen Huber illustrates this priority of fellowship- through song. Throughout her comedy, various characters break out into song, such as when all four hobbits sing the song “Help!” by the Beatles (fitting as Huber’s ideal cast for the hobbits were the members of the Beatles), in a rather silly adaptation of Tolkien’s dark story. The play ends with the fellowship together after having defeated Sauron, and before breaking out into one last song, Gandalf remarks, “In the light we’re not all so different... We’re weird. But we’re all human. So what the

¹³DainisBisenieks, “The Watcher in the Water and Others,” *I Palantir*3 (1964).J.R.R. Tolkien Collection, Marquette University, 16.

¹⁴Spacks, “Ethical Patterns in The Lord of the Rings,” 7.

¹⁵Jane Ciabattari, “Hobbits and hippies: Tolkien and counterculture,” *BBC Culture* (blog), November 20, 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20141120-the-hobbits-and-the-hippies>.

hell, let's stick together!"¹⁶ While this musical comedy may not be the most conventional or serious of fan interpretations, it does resonate with the importance of fellowship found throughout *The Lord of the Rings*, a priority which the counterculture shared, evident through its concern for social equality.¹⁷

Alongside the echoing of priorities between Tolkien's works and the counterculture, college students during the 1960s felt a connection with Frodo's situation. Frodo's pacifist nature being challenged by forced participation in a war he was not prepared for was a situation that college students knew all too well during the draft for the Vietnam War. The young people who dominated the counterculture could see themselves in Frodo and gained hope from Frodo. The slogan, 'Frodo Lives!' became a popular one among counterculture Tolkien fans. Frodo's ability to survive the war and the influence of Evil became an inspiration. Donald A. Wollheim, a science fiction author, reflected on this inspirational interpretation of Frodo:

What does it mean when thousands of college students, young people of our day and age, suddenly started chalking on walls and penning on posters and putting on lapels buttons the slogan: 'Frodo Lives!' What could it mean but that Good lives? *Good* lives! What does it mean when a thirst for novels wherein unmistakable heroes fight against unmistakable villains continues to show itself in fantasy writings... For it means that hundreds of thousands- possibly millions- of young intelligent people are not basically cynics and victims of despair.¹⁸

The counterculture was a movement built on hope- hope for equality, peace, a better future- and Frodo offered hope. Young people could see themselves in Frodo - a small hobbit without remarkable stature or skills, who was able to fight against Evil for the greater good, win the battle, and survive the process. For young people, especially college students, standing up

¹⁶Kathleen Huber, "Hello Frodo! Or Whatever Happened to Sauron's Ring," *I Palantir* 4 (1966). J.R.R. Tolkien Collection, Marquette University, 39.

¹⁷Ripp, "Middle America Meets Middle-Earth."

¹⁸ Donald A. Wollheim, "Why Frodo Lives," in *The Universe Makers: Science Fiction Today*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 110.

against the police during protests or facing the prospect of war, Tolkien's works and Frodo in particular offered that much-needed hope.

While the counterculture enthusiastically adopted Tolkien's works and produced a considerable number of fan works, it did not readily accept all aspects of Tolkien's works. The counterculture did not see their priority of social equality reflected in Tolkien's characterization of the 'villains' of Middle-Earth. One fanzine article examined the portrayal of trolls and orcs in *The Hobbit* and *Lord of the Rings* and found it lacking:

Unlike us, too, are the Trolls of Mordor and the Orcs, for they appear to be irredeemably evil and incapable of repentance: on meeting either, there is only one thing to do: kill. I must confess I am not quite happy about these beings, for their existence seems to imply that it is possible for a species that can speak, and therefore, make moral choices, to be evil by nature.¹⁹

The article went on to argue that a group of people cannot be inherently evil; rather, individuals can turn to evil due to their circumstance and their upbringing. Tolkien's characterization of the trolls and orcs as inherently evil without the possibility for repentance was not in accordance to the counterculture's priority of social equality and as a result, that aspect of Tolkien's work was questioned and re-interpreted. By questioning those aspects which do not sit well with the reader, the reader's priorities are brought into their interpretation of the text and are therefore affirmed.

Recent Tolkien adaptations arise from and challenge contemporary priorities, just as the acceptance, rejection, interpretation and adaptation of Tolkien's works questioned and affirmed the priorities of the 1960's counterculture. The more controversial of modern fan works are the Peter Jackson movie adaptations of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. The movie adaptations attempt to address the inability of Tolkien's works, due to a perceived lack of female

¹⁹W.H. Auden, "Good and Evil in The Lord of the Rings," *Tolkien Journal* 3, no. 1 (1967). J.R.R. Tolkien Collection, Marquette University, 5.

characters, to align with modern priorities; whether or not the adaptations do this successfully or not is a contested point amongst fans. The number of female characters and the prominence of their roles in Tolkien's works do not satisfy modern reader's priority of female representation in media; as a result, Peter Jackson re-interpreted and enhanced the position of female characters in both *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. In an interview about his adaptation of Tolkien's works, Jackson commented, "To me, fantasy should be as real as possible. I don't subscribe to the notion that because it's fantastical it should be unrealistic. I think you have to have a sense of belief in the world that you're going into."²⁰For a modern audience, it would be unrealistic not to have female representation in a fantasy movie; Jackson evidently agreed with this statement as he added Galadriel as well as an original female character, the elf Tauriel, into his Hobbit trilogy, both of which were not in the original text. Evangeline Lilly, who played Tauriel, commented in an interview that it is not only unrealistic not to have female characters, but that it is "unacceptable these days to send young girls into a theatre for nine hours of entertainment without a single female character."²¹The addition of Galadriel and Tauriel into *The Hobbit* trilogy is a transformative adaptation of Tolkien's storyline and characters which addressed modern fans' priority of female representation; however, not all fans agree with the creation and characterization of Tauriel (though there does seem to be a general acceptance of Galadriel's participation in the adaptation). A common complaint amongst fans is that as Tauriel is not in the original source material, she does not belong in the storyline. One blogger, Zoe Chevat, with 'The Mary Sue' (a pop culture site) argues against this explanation for 'Tauriel-Hate'. Chevat

²⁰Qtd in Ruth D. Konigsberg, "The Hobbit: Why Are There No Women in Tolkien's World?" *Time Arts and Entertainment* (blog), December 31, 2012, <http://ideas.time.com/2012/12/31/the-hobbit-why-are-there-no-women-in-tolkiens-world/>.

²¹Qtd in Zoe Chevat, "Wish She Could Be Part of Your World: On Tauriel-Hate and Original Material," *The Mary Sue* (blog), December 17, 2013, <http://www.themarysue.com/wish-she-could-be-part-of-your-world-on-tauriel-hate-and-original-material/>.

rejects the dismissal of Tauriel due to a lack of canon compliance as sexist, as there are multiple instances where Jackson's adaptation ignores canon, such as Faramir not immediately rejecting the Ring.²² She goes on to discard the justification of Tauriel-Hate based on her originality, as Chevat illustrates that, fundamentally, Tauriel is not the only original character in *The Hobbit* adaptation; the thirteen dwarves in the company, while all present in the original text, are not all given separate personalities and so by creating distinctive personalities for each dwarf, Jackson was in essence creating new characters.²³ Chevat concludes her argument:

Tauriel's inclusion is a concession to modern taste, and it is the correct response for a filmmaker/screenwriter to have when confronted with a female-scarce source. She's not perfect, but then, she is one character, and, as we often discuss on *TMS* one character cannot be everything we need her to be.²⁴

Chevat alluding to modern tastes as a justification for a re-interpretation of Tolkien's works is the affirmation of contemporary priorities through fan works. For some fans, the representation of female characters and the quality of that representation in the original text is entirely lacking, and for others, the female characters within Tolkien's works are a source of inspiration and a justification for the addition of more female characters into fan works. One blog entry, reflecting on the addition of Tauriel, commented:

Why Tauriel? Because The Lord of the Rings trilogy had its strong female protagonists, as did the *Silmarillion* and the *Legendarium* before it. Therefore, in the spirit of a more diverse, modern telling of *The Hobbit*, I see it as only natural that Jackson and company would want to introduce a fresh female character. In truth, the only part of me that is uneasy is the fervently cynical, text-based fanboy who's shaking the bars of his cage, muttering, 'but she's not in the book!'²⁵

²²Chevat, "On Tauriel-Hate and Original Material."

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵NewsFromBree, "Why Tauriel?" *The One Ring* (blog), July 30, 2013, <http://www.theonering.net/torwp/2013/07/30/76128-why-tauriel/>.

The text-based objection to Tauriel is thrown out as her character, according to this fan, follows the spirit of strong female representation in Tolkien's other works, and is in the spirit of a 'modern telling'.

Jackson's adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings* did add more female partition in the storyline than the original text; however, not all fans agree that the movies' female representations were demonstrative of modern priorities. A common justification given by readers as to why there are so few female characters compared to male characters in Tolkien's works is that he was 'a man of his time' and that during his time female representation was not relevant.²⁶ There are fans who argue against this claim. One fan in particular, Mariah Huehner, argued for the opposite; she thought that Tolkien's female representation was much more modern than the movie adaptations. Jackson amplified the role of Arwen in his adaptation by giving her more scenes than in the original text, such as Arwen being the one who rescues Frodo from the Ringwraith in the movie, rather than Glordindel. It was not Arwen's portrayal in Jackson's adaptation that Huehner objected to, but rather it was the portrayal of Eowyn's character. Huehner preferred the original characterization of Eowyn: "it says something to me that a WWI vet from a devout Catholic background wrote about a warrior woman in a book published in 1954 that was more feminist than her modern interpretation ended up being."²⁷ By questioning recent fan adaptations in relation to the original source material, Huehner is challenging modern priorities. Huehner is not questioning the priority for female representation in media, but rather she is questioning what the priorities of a 'strong' female character should be, as "strength in a character is about more than their ability to hit or kill things, and while

²⁶Viars, and Cooker, "Rewriting and Rescuing the Women of Middle-Earth from the Margins."

²⁷Huehner, Mariah, "I am No Man' Doesn't Cut It: The Story of Eowyn," *The Mary Sue* (blog), January 27, 2015, <http://www.themarysue.com/the-story-of-eowyn/>.

Eowyn's big moment is certainly defeating The Lord of the Nazgul, it's her defiance in the face of insurmountable odds that truly makes her 'strong'. I wish the film version had honored that."²⁸Fan interpretation and adaptations can arise from an incompatibility between the original source and contemporary readers' priorities, but those priorities are not unaffected by this re-interpretation. Fan works can affirm the reader's priorities but they can also call into question those priorities and it is this cycle of affirmation and challenge that allows and encourages a continual reading of the original work and as a result, the original work remains relevant to modern readers.

While fan interpretation can be seen as a break from canon or an attempt to invade and change the canon, Tolkien's literary style is more lenient towards fan works. The whole of the Legendarium is written as a scholarly source; the stories told are histories that had to be written down and translated to find its way to the reader. Family histories, mythology, and alluded to events and much more are written about, not in the main text, but in the appendices. This translated history style is suited for fan interpretation. The creation of a new character or the continuation of a story left unfinished is not an attempt to 'fix' canon, but is rather another version of the history of Middle-Earth which was absent in Tolkien's 'translation'. Una McCormack sums up this possibility for harmony between canon and fan interpretations:

The simplest strategy available to a writer attempting to make up for the lack of women in *The Lord of the Rings* is to create female characters and write stories about them. Since there is no textual evidence *against* the existence of these women- and since women are so often erased from history or placed in the margins- the fanfiction writer is arguably reinscribing a history that has somehow been lost in translation or transmission.²⁹

²⁸Huehner, "'I am No Man' Doesn't Cut It."

²⁹Qtd in Viars, and Cooker, "Rewriting and Rescuing the Women of Middle-Earth from the Margins," 41.

Framing fan interpretation as another history which had been lost in either translation or transmission from that which is given in Tolkien's works allows for a harmony between canon and fan works. Fan interpretations become in some sense another entry in the appendix; they can be seen as a part of the greater whole of the Legendarium rather than in opposition to it. From this perspective, who is to say that Tauriel was not a participant in the events of *The Hobbit* but her participation was not relevant enough for Bilbo to record it, so she is lost from the 'history' of Middle-Earth. It is Tolkien's unique literary style that allows for this greater interpretation and freedom for the reader which encourages such a large quantity of fan works because fandom can be more easily incorporated with the original source.

The unique harmony between fan works and canon that is made possible through Tolkien's literary style allows for Tolkien's works to remain relevant to a contemporary audience. The freedom of the reader is given precedence over the domination of the author and as a result fans are inspired to interpret the text based on their own expectations, experiences and priorities. The freedom which Tolkien's works allow its readers encourages fan interpretations and his literary style lays the foundations for those interpretations to become a part of a larger Legendarium. The cyclical affirmation and challenging of readers' priorities as they relate to the original text demands a continual re-interpretation of the text as contemporary priorities change and thus Tolkien's canon continues to be considered relevant literature.

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