

10-1-2015

The Anti-War Adoption of Lord of the Rings

Kayla Spencer
Marquette University

The Anti-War Adoption of *Lord of the Rings*

Kayla Spencer

English 4610

12/18/15

Abstract

Ten years after Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy was first published in 1954, an unexpected party discovered Middle-earth. America's counterculture adopted the series, despite its largely conservative, patriarchal, and militant ideologies. Tolkien himself was not fond of the hippie movement, calling them his "deplorable cultus" (Helms 7). Although always adamant that his books were not allegory, the hippies found it anyway and applied his art to their own agendas.

Second-wave feminists understood Eowyn's refusal to let her romantic interest and her father determine her fate, as well as her fear of being kept in a cage and unable to participate in "great deeds," as resistance against the patriarchy. Mordor's impersonal machines, existing in stark contrast to the Shire's green pastures, spoke to environmentalists. The Shire's uninvolved and distant authority – bringing about Middle Earth's most peaceful, selfless, and content residents – resonated among anarchists. Even the drug culture identified with the hobbits' love for pipeweed and mushrooms. (Ciabattari)

But it was the anti-Vietnam movement which took up Tolkien's work more than any other group. "Frodo Lives," and "Go Go Gandalf," became the countenance of the young American counterculture. This essay will examine the publication and reception of Tolkien's work, as well as his philosophies on war, peace, and power which resonated among the anti-Vietnam movement, and which continues to resonate as we search for truth and peace in a disordered world.

Publication history

George Allen and Unwin published *The Hobbit* in 1937 and *Lord of the Rings* in 1954. These hardcover books included over fifty maps of Middle-earth and Tolkien's illustrations. With an import tax from Houghton and Mifflin, the trade publishing company through which American readers could purchase *Lord of the Rings*, the three-volume series cost about \$15 for an American reader (Liptak). The steep price of his *Legendarium* made Tolkien's following successful but small – a club of like-minded, conservative scholars like Tolkien himself. Helms, a Tolkien scholar specializing in reception, writes of the pre-paperback days: "Middle-earth was a sort of secret refuge where harried and conservative scholars could meet furtively to swill ale and smoke their pipes while feeling avant-garde and a bit mad." Tolkien was not interested in catering the medium of his work to match the needs of the masses, and the entire publishing process was seemingly annoying to Tolkien – a testament to his artistic, rather than commercial, intentions in writing *Lord of the Rings*. He was not eager to shed the series' elitist "cloistered, boyish, secret society" quality to gain a greater following. (Helms 7)

David Wollheim of Ace books, an American publishing company in New York, took notice of *Lord of the Rings*. Wollheim saw the *Legendarium*'s expensive and thick hardcover books as an opportunity, and he reached out to Tolkien directly to discuss Ace's purchasing rights in 1964. Tolkien was not interested. In an interview with David Wollheim's daughter Betsy years later, she recalled Tolkien's response: "He said he would never allow his great works to appear in so 'degenerate a form' as the paperback book." (Liptak)

Insulted, Wollheim printed the books anyway. He had researched and found that Houghton Mifflin's copyright had expired and was not renewed. *Lord of the Rings*, Wollheim argued, was now public domain. Historian Andrew Liptak wrote of the legal situation: "At this

point in time, the U.S. had yet to join the International Copyright Convention... As the trilogy became incredibly popular, Houghton Mifflin was technically in violation of the law when they exceeded their import limits, and failed to renew their interim copyright.” Wollheim proceeded to publish the books in 1965 – legally, but without Tolkien’s authorization.

Ace’s publication of *Lord of the Rings* was available everywhere – in bookstores, grocery stores, and gas stations – for 75 cents for each book of the trilogy. Furious that Wollheim was profiting from his work, Tolkien gave Ballantine books, another American printing company, his exclusive permission to copyright and publish the books in America. These sold for 95 cents each. Tolkien began informing his fans that Ace’s version was pirated and printed poorly, and encouraged them to boycott. Eventually pressure from fans and Tolkien himself brought Wollheim to stop printing new versions in 1966. (Liptak)

Tolkien was not completely pleased with Ballantine either. *Lord of the Rings* was still published in paperback, included fewer maps of middle earth, and its covers featured bright and strange illustrations with no clear connection to the Middle-earth. Tolkien said of the cover: “What has it got to do with the story? Where is this place? Why emus? And what is the thing in the foreground with pink bulbs?” (Liptak). Still, Ballantine books established themselves as “The Authorized Version,” and in a statement printed across the back was Tolkien’s approval: “This paperback edition, and no other, has been published with my consent and co-operation.” (Liptak)

Ironically, it was the paperback editions that Tolkien thought of as degenerate and cheap which catalyzed his popularity in America. And ironically, perhaps his biggest fanbase came from a demographic with whom he fervently disagreed: the hippies.

The Hippie Reception

Now available to the masses, *Lord of the Rings* was a staple in pop culture. Time Magazine, reporting on the books' popularity, wrote of the series: "Going to college without Tolkien is like going without sneakers." Hippies created Tolkien societies, and printed newsletters and magazines for other fans of Middle-earth. They learned how to speak and become literate in Elvish and drew their own maps. Many wore necklaces with titanium steel washers, resembling the Frodo as he wore the ring around his neck into Mordor (Meras). The elitist "secret society" quality held by conservative and respected professors was gone. (Helms 8)

Helms called *Lord of the Rings* a "campus religion," the trilogy outselling the Bible in 1967 and 1968. In the years during which the anti-Vietnam protesters were most active, Ballantine books sold 3 million copies of *Lord of the Rings*, and mostly on university campuses, where most anti-Vietnam resistance took place. "Go Go, Gandalf," "Frodo Lives," and "Smeagol died for your sins" were worn on t-shirts and pins, and graffitied onto subway walls (Ciabattari).

Bands like Rush, Genesis, and Led Zeppelin incorporated *Lord of the Rings* into their lyrics and album titles (Ciabattari). A pamphlet was published called *Rules for the Live Ring Game* – a role-playing game that allowed Tolkien fans to act out the Fellowship's quest (Barker). Soon, professors began teaching courses on *Lord of the Rings*. As the books gained popularity, "The Tolkien fan had ceased to be the wild man" (Helms 7).

Tolkien's Just War Theory

In a time when much of the American population was frustrated by the moral ambiguity of the Vietnam War, *Lord of the Ring's* popularity above other nonfiction works was likely due to Tolkien's understanding of war. The wars of *Lord of the Rings* were modelled after a just war

theory, which the hippies found favorable in contrast to America's unpopular actions during the Vietnam War.

The increased speed of communication allowed the American public to view the Vietnam War more closely than any other war up to that point. Americans normally shielded from the horrors of war were now exposed to the battlefield through television news coverage. They saw villages destroyed by Agent Orange, civilians burned by napalm, and the body bags of teenage American soldiers (McLaughlin). As Helms writes, "the illogic of destroying a village to save it from the communists produced a generalized disgust with the whole business" (12). America's baby boomers, now coming of age, did not feel the same "fanatical opposition to communism" as the previous generation (Helms 12). America's involvement in a poor nation's civil war was widely understood as unnecessary.

In contrast, Tolkien's fictional wars *were* necessary. Though the books are highly militant, Tolkien does not glamorize war. Our heroes engage in war only when it complies with the just war theory, something Tolkien – intentionally or not – embodies in his Legendarium. Gene Sharp, a pacifist and writer during the 1960s, and a man still heralded as the authority on nonviolence, established seven conditions as necessary in a just war:

1. *The war must have a just cause.*

Tolkien's heroes do not fight battles for revenge or the economic or political gain of their state, but rather to defend Middle-earth. Tolkien wrote in a letter to his sons: "War must be, while we defend our lives against a destroyer who would devour all; but I do not love the bright sword for its sharpness, nor the arrow for its swiftness, nor the warrior for his glory. I love only that which they defend" (Helms 25). American readers questioned America's intentions in its involvement

in Vietnam – the United States was not attacked, and Vietnam did not seek to harm it in any way. In the hippies’ view, rather than responding to injustice as Gondor does, America was causing it.

2. It must be waged by a legitimate authority:

The battles and wars in the Legendarium are each waged by legitimate authorities in Middle-earth – namely Aragorn, the true king of Gondor by Numenorean blood; and Gandalf, the only Maiar who has continued to care for Middle-earth’s welfare. Any character without true authority is incapable of making sound choices for his nation or in battle – like Denethor, or Theoden under the influence of Wormtongue. Even Eowyn is reprimanded when she makes decisions outside of her authority. Though her choices were well-intentioned and beneficial, Tolkien understands true rulers as the only ones with the authority to jeopardize their peoples’ lives.

3. It must be formally declared.

This tenant of just war may be the only one that Tolkien’s Legendarium lacks. But a formal declaration of war as we currently imagine it is out of context in a medieval, third-age Middle-earth. And even without a formal declaration, the Fellowship simply defends itself, and does not take the enemy by surprise. The only instance during which the Fellowship is not directly defending itself against an orc attack is when Aragorn marches with his army to the gates of Mordor and asks to fight Sauron – a formal declaration within this context.

4. It must be fought with a peaceful intention (the peace established after the war must be preferable to the peace that would have prevailed if the war had not been fought):

Without fighting against the enemy, no peace would have prevailed. The Fellowship fights for the current peace of Middle Earth to be preserved. Sauron’s victory would mean slavery for all of Middle-earth. Without a fight, there would be no peace at all.

5. It must be a last resort (all non-violent options must be completely exhausted before the use of force):

War is always a last resort for Tolkien. In *The Hobbit*, the men and dwarves attempt to parley before they fight, and Tolkien's hero Bilbo sacrifices his respected status with Thorin to bring about peace for all. In *Lord of the Rings*, the Fellowship is up against the devil, and still attempt to forgive those that work with him, like Wormtongue and Saruman. Frodo forgives Saruman again in "The Scouring of the Shire," but as Saruman continues to resist, the only battle the Shire has ever seen becomes necessary.

6. There must be a reasonable hope of success (all deaths and injury incurred in a hopeless cause are not morally justifiable):

Though the war against Sauron and Frodo's journey seems "a hopeless cause," their victory in the end indicates that this is not so. Because "death and injury" would surely befall all peoples of Middle Earth following Sauron's victory, the participation in a war – even one which has only a small chance of victory – is the most moral option.

7. The means used must possess proportionality to the end sought:

The means – fighting against Sauron's army – were proportional to the ends sought, and achieved – the lives of all good races of Middle-earth. Although many died, their deaths were not in vain – there would be no good end had they not engaged in war. The soldiers who died would have been Sauron's slaves if they were not killed in battle.

Sharp's just war theory additionally states that no civilian lives be taken or harmed in a just war – that just the soldiers of opposing sides who comply with their leaders may jeopardize their lives. Tolkien avoids this problem for his heroes by creating no orc which is not a soldier. In fact, civilian orcs – families, children, quiet citizens going about their lives in Mordor – seem absurd in *Lord of the Rings*. The orcs are ultimately incapable of being anything other than

soldiers. Shagrat and Gorbag discuss their hope that the war will end, and their desire to escape the “Big Bosses,” but end up killing each other over their differing obligations. Legolas and Gimli can compete for who kills the most orcs because every orc directly participates in Sauron’s war. The death of these orcs, in their blind allegiance to Sauron, is justified according to the just war theory. If Tolkien had complicated the orcs, portraying them as anything other than soldiers – a concept he attempted but never quite followed through – the Fellowship’s careless slaughter of them would have been problematic.

In *War and the Christian Conscience*, Joseph Fahey asserts that in our era – Middle-earth’s Seventh Age – there can be no just wars. Advances in technology have separated soldiers from their enemies. Drone and nuclear warfare allow for massive attacks from the distant touch of a button. Even during Vietnam, a pilots could drop bombs from above civilian villages, destroying them without ever stepping foot there. Even the hand-to-hand combat in battles in the *Lord of the Rings* lends itself to a just war theory. This more traditional and individual manner of fighting requires a personal investment, bravery, and understanding of the war, whereas a separation can lead to apathy. The Fellowship could physically see they were fighting their enemy, and understand that they had no choice but to kill them. But from a distance, a young American soldier was less aware if he dropping Agent Orange on his enemy or a community.

Although Sharp does not include this as a tenant of his just war theory, that the kings of Middle-earth each participate in the wars they wage is significant in Tolkien’s understanding of a just war. Anti-Vietnam protesters took issue with the disproportionate number of African-American soldiers killed in Vietnam, especially in light of the Civil Rights movement (McLaughlin). These soldiers fought and died for a country which gave them limited rights and unequal treatment upon their return. The white, powerful leaders chose to go to war with

Vietnam, but it was the civilians – men with an average age of 19 – who paid the price with their deaths or post-traumatic stress (Helms 13). But in Middle-earth, kings participate in battles along with their soldiers, and do not place the value of their lives above their subjects'. Many, like Theoden or Haldir, died in battle fighting for something they felt was so necessary that they placed their own lives in danger. Tolkien reveals Denethor as an inadequate king in part because of his inability to fight with his people as his city crumbles. Peter Jackson's films highlight this further, showing Denethor eating gluttonously, juice dribbling down his chin, while Aragorn and his men go to war for Gondor. For Tolkien, this is not how war should be conducted. Rulers and subjects should have an equal investment in war. This concept lent itself to the hippies, who resisted the imbalance of privilege and power in all aspects of life.

Finally, the moral ambiguity of Vietnam was increasingly frustrating for the American audience. The Mai Lai massacre of 1968 exposed that our American heroes were capable of atrocities when American soldiers killed and raped hundreds of civilians in South Vietnam ("Mai Lai Massacre"). But in *Lord of the Rings*, good and evil are clear, which comforted the hippies in a time of moral ambiguity. In Middle-earth, people are either good or bad – there is little room to understand them as complicated or morally grey. Aragorn does not make poor decisions, even when he does not know their implications, and orcs cannot make good decisions. One Tolkien fan told Time Magazine: "You cheer the hero and boo the villain" (The Hobbit Habit). This return to moral simplicity was comforting.

Tolkien's Pacifism

Although Tolkien's trilogy is filled with wars – albeit just wars – it was a pacifist message that the hippie movement understood from *Lord of the Rings*, and I think what Tolkien intended.

It was “Frodo Lives!” and not “Aragorn – or any other morally sound member of Middle-earth – Lives!” It was Frodo the hippies held as their hero, and Frodo who Tolkien held as the most noble of his characters as well. The other characters all fight, and are noble and justified for doing so. They could not have destroyed the ring without the battles that took place. But it is Frodo and Sam who ultimately conquer evil, not through taking up weapons of their own, but by getting rid of evil altogether. Frodo never kills anyone on his quest, and when he comes home to the Shire he is a pacifist. In “The Scouring of the Shire,” Frodo demands that no one be killed “if it can be helped.” When he sees that Lotho has joined the enemy, he laments that evil has corrupted him. Pippin, having seen only the battles of Middle-earth, does not understand Frodo’s sympathy, and wants to destroy him. Frodo responds, “I don’t think you understand things, Pippin.” Frodo understands war as terrible, and our enemies as good people corrupted by an evil system. (Helms 23)

Tolkien himself was a pacifist. Although he advocated for just wars, he first advocated for pacifism. For Tolkien, war was “utter stupid waste... not only material but moral and spiritual.” It was never something to be sought out or proud of. Tolkien saw the First World War as necessary, but as “the cynical world decided to number world wars,” he preferred pacifism. In letters to his sons, Tolkien wrote of World War II: “we are attempting to conquer Sauron with the ring” – an unwinnable battle that can only make the wearer as corrupt as the enemy himself. Understanding the corrupting nature of war, Tolkien worried that the Allies would lose their humanity in their attempt to win over Germany. He wrote of society’s moral degradation, “The only cure is to not have wars.” (Helms 24)

The hippies too hated war, and used Frodo as their vision of pacifism. One of the premises of *Lord of the Rings* is that one cannot succeed by using an enemy’s weapon to defeat

him. Tolkien writes: “Moral questions are not susceptible to resolution through immoral means – including violence and warfare. These immoral attempts at resolution are self-perpetuating.” His participation in World War I, where he first began writing *Lord of the Rings*, fostered his understanding of violence as only justified when peace is its end.

This was not a new view. Gandhi was the voice of nonviolent resistance against imperial England in India, and yielded great results while Tolkien was writing these books. Martin Luther King, Jr. took after Gandhi and advocated for nonviolent protesting in the civil rights movement, when Tolkien’s popularity was growing in the United States. Gene Sharp wrote *Gandhi Weilds the Weapon of Moral Power* in 1960, and *Exploring Nonviolent Alternatives* and *The Politics of Nonviolent Actions* in the 1970s (“Gene Sharp”). Sharp explained how successful nonviolence could be against a seemingly unbeatable and ubiquitous leader, and that no people should resort to violence without pursuing nonviolent resistance first. The idea of pacifism as a means to cause change was becoming more powerful, and resorting to violence to protect a nation from an ideology we did not agree with seemed a little orc-ish. (Helms 27)

Tolkien and Power

Hippies, like Tolkien, were against power. Although the kings in *Lord of the Rings* come to power through “divine right,” and every great city holds a certain feudal structure, Tolkien insists that the best rulers are those that do not want the power. His kings must inherit their power, for if they sought it out they would not be good leaders. Aragorn takes his spot as the true King of Gondor because his people need him; whereas Denethor seeks out power to his demise. As his city crumbles, he cannot remain strong, collapses into despair, and takes his own life rather than fighting against the enemy.

In *The Silmarillion*, Tolkien gives us a deeper understanding of the corruption and power in relation to the universe at large. Essentially all evil in Middle-earth comes from Morgoth's desire to elevate his power above his place as a Valar. Eru is able to direct the voices of the Valar because he inherently has the power to do so, whereas Morgoth's attempt to rise above his role as Valar is power-seeking and problematic. Tolkien wants us to remain content with the power we currently have. This seems not progressive in 2015 when we think of underprivileged groups. But in Middle-earth, modern problems are avoided when people lead simple lives. Being content with our place in the world is what determines the goodness of each character. Even Tolkien's good characters fall when they aspire for too much, like Saruman, Gandalf, and Boromir.

Some criticize Tolkien for having a Totalitarian view of society. Robert Westall, a young adult writer, wrote that Tolkien was guilty of "othering" the enemy. He was especially critical of Tolkien's portrayal of orcs as "execrable monsters... always dealt with by annihilation." No orc is capable of good, and none of the "goodies," as Westall calls them, are bad. When they stray from good, they repent and must pay for their sin by death, like Thorin or Boromir. Though he loved *Lord of the Rings* as a child, Westall finds its moral simplicity and "hunt for evil" a dangerous message, particularly for children. Westall believed "there is evil in the best of us and good in the worst," and that art which reduces people to either good or evil is problematic. Viewing *Lord of the Rings* in this way paints Tolkien as a fascist, in his understanding that some people are inherently good or evil, that the good are entitled to rule, and that the evil can and should be killed. (Yates 235).

But Jessica Yates argues in her 1992 essay "Tolkien the Anti-totalitarian" that Tolkien's orcs do not justify "othering" at all. It is not the Fellowship that is unable to understand orcs as complex and capable of doing good, for they will align with any cooperating race. It is the orcs

whose blind allegiance, crude violence, and unreasoning hate Tolkien criticizes. Tolkien wants us to avoid these aspects of humanity, especially as the propagandists from both sides of World War II depicted the enemy as monstrous, with death as their only end. The Fellowship could feasibly befriend an orc – but an orc could not befriend anyone other than orcs. It is this mindset that Tolkien warns us against. We should not “other” as the orcs do, killing anyone that is different than us out of patriotism and fear, but rather act as the Fellowship does, and see the good in people that are different than us. (Yates 235-240)

Tolkien’s understanding of power directly affects his pacifism. We should not be like the warmongering orcs, who are quick to go to battle, see little value in their lives, and understand anyone different than them to be their enemy. The orcs are incapable of pacifism. Instead, we should use violence sparingly if at all, and see the good in others different from us.

Concluding Thoughts

Lord of the Rings has remained relevant because of its timeless messages of peace. Several generations have preferred Tolkien’s Middle-earth and sought to emulate it, as the heroes fight just wars and defend the peace of Middle-earth, to the disordered, morally ambiguous, and violent world we live in. Ace and Ballantine’s paperback publication of the series in the 1960s caused a boost in *Lord of the Rings*’ sales, but that its popularity soared during the most unpopular war in American history is not coincidence. Especially during times of political unrest, when many believe a Sauon-like government endangers peace, Americans find truth in *Lord of the Rings*.

During the Bush administration’s War on Terror, protesters of the war used Tolkien again. “Frodo has failed. Bush has the ring,” became their mantra. The baby boomers who had cried “Frodo Lives!” found that a generation later, they had failed. The authority they had so

rebelled against as young protesters of the Vietnam War had regained its power. Peter Jackson's movies were released after the terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers of New York shook America. Tolkien's understanding of a nonviolent end to evil – in the form of two hobbits dropping a ring into flames – will continue to speak to audiences as long as evil is present. (Schalkwijk)

Works Cited

- Barker, Jack. "Rules for the Live Ring Game (1973)." Live Ring Game Rules from 1973. 1973. Web. 18 Dec. 2015.
- Blankenship, T.G. "Just War Theory: A Primer - Missio Alliance." Missio Alliance. 20 Feb. 2014. Web. 18 Dec. 2015.
- Burdge, Anthony and Burke, Jessica. "Fandom." Drout, Michael D. C. *J.R.R. Tolkien Encyclopedia: Scholarship and Critical Assessment*. New York: Routledge, 2007. Print.
- Bruther, Betty J. "Tolkien's Military." Meskys, Edmund R. *Niekas: Science Fiction and Fantasy*. Gilford, NH: Mac 'N Mike, 1967. Print.
- Carpenter, Humphrey. *J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biography*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000. Print.
- Ciabattari, Jane. "Hobbits and Hippies: Tolkien and the Counterculture." BBC. 20 Nov. 2014. Web. 18 Dec. 2015.
- "Frodo Lives!" Wikipedia. Wikimedia Foundation. Web. 12 Dec. 2015.
- "Gene Sharp." Wikipedia. Wikimedia Foundation. Web. 15 Dec. 2015.
- Grimsrud, Tim. "A Pacifist Reading of The Lord of the Rings." Thinking Pacifism. 30 June 2012. Web. 13 Dec. 2015.
- Helms, Philip W, Kerry E. Thompson, and Paul S. Ritz. *Tolkien's Peaceful War: A History and Explanation of Tolkien Fandom and War*. Highland, MI: American Tolkien Society, 1995. Print.
- Liptak, Andrew. "The Unauthorized Lord of the Rings." Kirkus Reviews. Web. 18 Dec. 2015
- "Mai Lai Massacre." Wikipedia. Wikimedia Foundation. Web. 13 Dec. 2015.
- McLaughlin, Erin. "The Media and the Vietnam War." The Media and the Vietnam War. Web. 15 Dec. 2015.
- Meras, Phyllis. "Go, Go, Gandalf!" New York Times Books. Web. 18 Dec. 2015
- J.R.R. Tolkien. *The Lord of the Rings*. Ballantine Books, New York. Copyright 1954-1974.
- Tolkien, J R. R, Humphrey Carpenter, and Christopher Tolkien. *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981. Print.
- Schalkwijk, Meghan. "From "Frodo Lives!" to "Frodo Has Failed"" Web.
- "Students: The Hobbit Habit." Time. Time Inc., 15 July 1966. Web. 18 Dec. 2015.

Witt, Johnathon. "Tolkien, Hobbits, Hippies and War." Acton Institute PowerBlog. 12 May 2014. Web. 13 Dec. 2015.

Yates, Jessica. "Tolkien the Anti-totalitarian." Reynolds, Patricia, and Glen GoodKnight. *Proceedings of the J.R.R. Tolkien Centenary Conference, 1992: Proceedings of the Conference Held at Keble College, Oxford, England, 17th-24th August 1992 to Celebrate the Centenary of the Birth of Professor J.R.R. Tolkien, Incorporating the 23rd Mythopoeic Conference (mythcon Xxiii) and Oxonmoot 1992*. Milton Keynes: Tolkien Society, 1995. Print.