

The Lord of the Rings

Some stories can affect people emotionally, but once in a while a story can call a person to escape to it. The Lord of the Rings is an enchanting story with masterful use of setting and sensational characters that engages readers and can move them to experience life in a deeper way. As a child, J.R.R. Tolkien lived in Africa until his father passed away. Then his mother moved them to England. Mrs. Tolkien made certain that her children learned literature and languages. It was probably due somewhat to his mother's influence that Tolkien became who he was: an author and a linguist (Corday).

Tolkien had a special interest in "obscure" languages, even to the point of creating his own. He called it High-Elven and often in his stories he used the language. Tolkien also invented an entire world called Middle Earth where The Lord of the Rings takes place. Because he had invented this world it had to bow to his will and rules. He was an accomplished linguist and this greatly helped his ability to vividly portray and create in the reader's mind Middle Earth, a place that no person has ever been (Corday).

Charters defines setting as "the place and time of the story." Also according to Charters, "When the writer locates the narrative in a physical setting, the reader is moved along step by step toward acceptance of the fiction" (Charters 1008).

Tolkien's setting gives the reader a sense of goodness or malevolence. Unlike an environment that is removed from the work, Tolkien's setting sometimes is the story. Possibly the setting could even tell the story if there were no characters. For example, in the house of Elrond of the elves, Frodo's experience is defined by the setting. "He [Frodo] found his friends sitting in a porch on the side of the house looking east. Shadows had fallen in the valley below, but there was still a light on the faces of the mountains far above. The air was warm. The sound of running and falling water was loud, and the evening was filled with a faint scent of trees and flowers, as if summer still lingered in Elrond's gardens (220).

This describes a peaceful place that is not quite reality. The rest of the world is moving into winter, but Elrond's gardens haven't realized that yet. Next, is another example of how Tolkien uses setting to create

a picture that could not be obtained by just explaining the scenery. Tolkien is able to bring a place to life with words. We can see this when the Fellowship winds up going through the Mines of Moria.

The Company spent that night in the great cavernous hall, huddled close together in a corner to escape the draught: there seemed to be a steady inflow of chill air through the eastern archway. All about them as they lay hung the darkness, hollow and immense, and they were oppressed by the loneliness and vastness of the dolven halls and endlessly branching stairs and passages. The wildest imaginings that dark rumor had ever suggested to the hobbits fell altogether short of the actual dread and wonder of Moria (307).

This description is one of dread and fear, but like the experience at Elrond's house, it is filled with word pictures. It tells the reader that this place is terrible and that some evil is afoot.

Of course Tolkien received criticism as all writers do. For instance, Burton Raffel takes the opinion that "his [Tolkien's] descriptions often fail to create 'sense impressions' needed to make language 'more deeply felt and more deeply worked.'" Raffel also claimed that "Tolkien's nature descriptions are frequently somewhat overwrought..." (20).

Still, I maintain that Tolkien's extraordinary ability to paint a picture with words takes the reader into a place they've never been and still manages to keep them following the story. The characters that Tolkien artfully created, accent the setting and bring them further to life. This is an attribute to a great setting. Charters explains that "setting must also have a dramatic use. It must be shown, or at least felt, to *affect* character or plot" (Charters 1008). All through The Lord of the Rings the setting is imposing feelings onto the characters (e.g. fear, dread, peacefulness).

Charters describes characters in literature as "the people who make something happen or produce an effect," and explains that the "characters must come alive" (Charters 1006-1007). Tolkien received criticism on his characters by Raffel as well. Raffel feels that there is "too little meaningful truth about human reality and our own existences in Tolkien's characters." Kathryn Crabbe seems to disagree with

this statement. In her efforts to describe the characters as heroic she also shows us they have some very modern human characteristics. Crabbe says that Frodo is "neither stronger than most men, nor braver than most...He is selfless in his love for his companions." If there is not enough "meaningful truth about human reality" in Tolkien's writing, then maybe it is because he portrays a picture of ordinary people at their best. The heroes in The Lord of the Rings do not succumb to evil. They do not inadvertently get caught doing good. They are selfless. Isn't this exactly humanity at its best?

Middle Earth is a place where the spirituality of a person is closely connected to the reality of the person. Tolkien's characters are not mere people. Each has a position and job in the universe as well, something to make them heroic and larger than life-right down to Sam whose purpose it would seem is to guard and protect his "master". This is evident throughout the books but especially at the end of The Fellowship of the Ring when Sam, now understanding just what might lie ahead, insists on going with Frodo (397). The characters show that not just anyone is able to complete this quest. It requires a specific person for each job. For example, there is a reason that Tom Bombadil cannot take the Ring even though he is impervious to its power (259). Fate has chosen Frodo. In so doing Tolkien creates a story that even the average person can relate to. It propels people to see the possibilities of greatness amongst the commoners and restores our hope in the great ones. Almost anyone can find at least one hero among the fellowship.

One of the things that makes The Lord of the Rings so compelling is the way the setting and characters work together to produce the ultimate affect. The characters make the setting even more potent. As the external setting influences each character the reader sees how the struggle becomes internal. We are led to believe that the characters are closely connected to the earth. The diversity of the setting and characters simply propels us to see the uniqueness of each place. Where a group of caves might give us one thought, hearing Gimli discuss the majesty of his cave experience helps us to appreciate the diversity of the group and to see it through a cave dwellers eyes. "These are not holes," said Gimli. "This is the

great realm and city of the Dwarrowdelf. And of old it was not darksome, but full of light and splendour, as is still remembered in our songs"(307).

The Lord of the Rings is essentially a story about the struggle of good verses evil. The setting helps the story personify the difficulties the characters face. The characters go through the trials and share their feelings of fear and triumph with us. The two work together to make an excellent portrayal of external and internal struggles that yield an otherwise impossible effect.

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