

The True Lord of the Rings

There is little doubt that J.R.R. Tolkien has become, in his short reign within literary fiction, nothing short of legendary. His stories, while only recently presented to the world, have ensnared and enthralled thousands of readers around the world. While many “cultured” critics still scoff at this work, the effect Tolkien has had on this world is nearly as profound as the control he had over Middle Earth in his novels. Tolkien, while certainly a master of all elements of fiction, displayed unquestionable proficiency in the areas of character and setting.

Ann Charters defines character simply as, “any person who plays a part in a narrative” (Charters 1045). Charters also defines flat characters as those which are, “simple, one-dimensional, unsurprising, and usually unchanging,” and round characters as those who are, “complex, full, described in detail, often contradictory, and usually dynamic,” or changing (Charters 1045). The interesting part of Tolkien’s work is that there are absolutely no flat characters. The world of Middle Earth is changing and all the creatures within it change as well. Tolkien’s ability to control the fates of the hundreds of characters in his novels may be the single most important aspect of his novels. It is with these characters that readers identify, and this identification moves the readers from a detached, on-looker relationship to an involved, personal experience within the world Tolkien creates.

His development of characters seems to focus on one main character at a time, shifting from one to another. Specifically, Tolkien shifts from Bilbo to Frodo Baggins. In developing those characters, much is learned about the world and characters around them. In the first chapter of Tolkien’s, “The Fellowship of the Ring,” Tolkien introduces Bilbo Baggins and seemingly focuses entirely on him. An observant reader will however notice that they are given insight into the character of

dozens of characters. For instance, Ham Gamgee, “The old Gaffer,” tells other hobbits, “*Elves and Dragons!* I says to him. *Cabbages and potatoes are better for me and you*” (Tolkien 24). When no one objects to this statement, readers are given insight into the character of all hobbits. While Ham Gamgee may play only a small part in the rest of this story, readers also learn about the background of Sam Gamgee through this and other quotes from his father. It is this background that gives Tolkien’s characters the depths into which readers may delve. By telling us not only what the character is like and how they change throughout the story, but also why and how they became who they are, Tolkien gives his readers a sense of personal attachment, as if they really know the characters in the story.

Tolkien, while introducing minor parts, never fails to develop their character. Even Radagast the Brown, a wizard who is mentioned briefly on no more than two occasions is no exception to this rule. Tolkien tells his readers where Radagast used to dwell and explains his relationship with Gandalf, the only character with whom Radagast interacts (Tolkien 250). Glorfindel, the Elf-Lord who’s horse Frodo rides across the ford to Elrond, is a well developed character as Gandalf explains his nature and background to Frodo after their arrival in the House of Elrond at Rivendell (Tolkien 217-218). Through these descriptions of all the characters in his novels, Tolkien provides an emotional connection with Middle Earth and makes the story seem less fiction and more like a dream in which readers are completely immersed.

This immersion, while an exceptional accomplishment, is only one part of what brings readers into Tolkien’s world. The characterization makes readers feel as if they actually know the creatures in the story, while the setting makes readers feel as if they are walking alongside these characters on their journey through Middle

Earth. When these two are combined, readers feel as if they become an integral part of the story.

In her essay, “Master of Middle Earth,” Alina Corday stated that Tolkien’s, “penchant for perfectionism slowed his progress mightily” while writing his novels (Corday 3). She also mentions that Tolkien found it necessary to learn how to stew a rabbit before including such an event in his novel (Corday 3). This perfectionism is evidenced greatly in his development of the setting. After the prologue and before the first chapter, Tolkien includes a detailed map of The Shire. At the end of the novel, he includes six additional maps, all of which are drawn in great detail and depict parts of the world he has created. Charters defined setting as, “The place and time in which a story’s action takes place” (Charters 1051). This simple definition is certainly fulfilled in nothing more than the maps and, perhaps, a dozen pages of the novel. Charters does not, however, end her definition there. She goes on to state that setting includes, “the culture and ways of life of the characters and the shared beliefs and assumptions that guide their lives” (Charters 1051). Tolkien even goes so far as to explain what hobbits smoke in pipes, the history behind it, and where the best “pipe weed” is grown (Tolkien 7-9).

As the story progresses, detailed descriptions are given of every area through which the story takes us. In fact, Tolkien often presents background on parts of the setting before they are formally introduced to his readers. For instance, The Old Forest through which the Hobbits pass upon leaving The Shire is discussed in detail before the party even decides to travel through it. It is described as a dark, treacherous place, and is obviously a place the Hobbits fear (Tolkien 104-109). Because they have this background, readers are able to experience the feelings

of apprehension, surprise, and wonder in the same way the characters experience them.

In his obsession with perfection, Tolkien created an entirely new world, complete with customs, languages, races, songs, and countries. He also created a plethora of individuals through which his story is carried out and with which his readers identify. While he created this world and everything in it, he could not stray from the characters and lands he created. Because of this, he had little control over the events once he set them in motion. Tolkien, like the Lord of the Rings in the novel, had little control over the actions that took place. He could only set obstacles and helping hands before the characters and allow them to play out the story as they would, as if they were, in fact, real people in a real world that began in one man's mind and now exists in the minds and hearts of thousands of readers throughout the world.

Works Cited

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