
Why the film version of *The Lord of the Rings* betrays Tolkien's novel [Part 1]

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Sacrificing literature on the altar of Hollywood

THIS YEAR marks the 50th anniversary of the original publication of J. R. R. Tolkien's celebrated novel *The Lord of the Rings*. Voted both 'the book of the century' in a poll conducted by the UK book retailer Waterstones in 1997 and 'The UK's best loved book' in a BBC survey carried out in 2003, *TLOTR* was adapted to the screen in 2001 by the previously little-known director Peter Jackson and released in three parts between 2001 and 2003 to widespread popular acclaim. But does the film version of *The Lord of the Rings* betray both the letter and the spirit of Tolkien's novel?

Introduction

The launch in 2003 of the last film in the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, *The Return of the King*, triggered an avalanche of enthusiastic reviews which culminated in a triumphant sweep of eleven Oscars at the 2004 Academy Awards (curiously enough, the same number as *Titanic*). Two months earlier, the film had won five BAFTA awards, the UK equivalent of the Oscars, including Best Film. Many saw this as a just reward for one of the greatest achievements in cinema history. Even such serious British newspapers as *The Guardian* and *The Observer*, with notable reputations in Arts criticism, joined in the praise, the latter opining that 'Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* is indeed a very fine achievement, moving, involving and, to many people, even inspiring' (Philip French, December 14, 2003).

Critics were equally enthusiastic on the other side of the Atlantic, particularly with regard to the films' action-packed epic dimension and visual richness – derived from a com-

ination of spectacular special effects and New Zealand scenery. To quote just one critic from a prestigious source, Elvis Mitchell in *The New York Times* called the trilogy 'a meticulous and prodigious vision ... a victory', employing such terms as 'epic, enduring, heartbreaking, majestic' (December 16, 2003).

In these remarkably positive reviews, *The Lord of the Rings* is judged simply as an action movie with striking special effects, an epic to be compared with products ranging from *Ben Hur* to *Star Wars*. The film's basic merit is seen to lie in its frantic pace, exciting action scenes and overall visual impact, though there is also some praise for the cast and for the moral message contained in the final triumph of good over evil.

Tolkien betrayed

What is entirely absent is any comment on whether the films faithfully reflect the content

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of the original work, or even the spirit of Tolkien's book. Indeed, it should be clarified here that, though originally released in three volumes, *The Lord of the Rings* is not a trilogy in the true sense but a single story which was split into three parts when first printed for purely practical reasons, as a result of its enormous length. This question, which is clearly important to many of those who read the book before seeing the film, is entirely ignored by the critics, who have judged the film merely on its entertainment value. For readers who truly appreciate Tolkien's works, however, the films can only be seen as a gross betrayal of the original novel.

Few have dared to raise their voices against the virtually unanimous roar of approval from the established media, although there are exceptions: Tolkien's biographer Michael White believes that the author would have hated the film, and Christopher Tolkien, the author's son and close collaborator, while not openly condemning the film, leaves us in no doubt as to his underlying opinion when he says: 'My own position is that *The Lord Of The Rings* is particularly unsuitable to transformation into visual dramatic form' (quoted on BBC News website, Dec 01).

Tolkien himself would apparently have shared this opinion. It is said that he disliked Hollywood and sold the film rights to his work only because he needed cash in a hurry to pay off a debt. He was not interested in visual entertainment: his medium was the printed page and the spoken word, and his writing draws on epic poetry, sagas, myths and fables, particularly from ancient Germanic and Norse sources.

The scholar Tolkien was a tremendously gifted story-teller. In *The Lord of the Rings*, the reader is picked up from the first line and swept along in a style within the grasp of only the great writers of adventure fiction (Dumas, Kipling, Conrad), while intricate detail brings the prose vibrantly to life. His use of English is masterly, employing registers ranging from the solemn pronouncements of wizards and kings to the everyday banter of the genial hobbits. His style becomes biblical at times, describing action that reflects his indebtedness to Anglo-Germanic and Norse mythology in tones that echo the majestic prose of the King James Bible.

A typical example is the following account of the dramatic moment when Theoden, King of

Rohan, and his army of horsemen finally come to the aid of their brethren in the besieged city of Minas Tirith and charge the enemy from the open plain (from *The Return of the King*, Chapter 5):

Fey he seemed, or the battle fury of his fathers ran like new fire in his veins, and he was borne up on Snowmane like a god of old, even as Oromë the Great in the battle of the Valar when the world was young. His golden shield was uncovered and lo! It shone like an image of the Sun, and the grass flamed into green about the white feet of his steed. For morning came, morning and a wind from the sea; and darkness was removed, and the hosts of Mordor wailed, and terror took them, and they fled, and died, and the hoofs of wrath rode over them.

Oromë, the Valar and Snowmane are not to be found in any Norse legends, but they certainly sound as if they could be. The air of ancient myth is accentuated through the use of antiquated terms (*fey, borne, lo, wail, flee* and *wrath*), while the clauses strung together by commas and the occasional semi-colon, reflecting the grandiose style chosen by the translators of the 17th century 'official version' of the Bible, (commonly known as the King James Bible).

This excerpt is a small illustration of the elaborate writing to be found in Tolkien. Language, and particularly the English language, was central to his life both as an academic and fiction writer. On the academic side, he obtained a first-class degree in English Language and Literature from Oxford University (1915), and went on to hold the positions of Reader in English at Leeds University and Professor of Old English at Oxford. As a writer of fiction, Tolkien placed language at the heart of his works. In the Foreword to *The Lord of the Rings*, he even says: 'I had little hope that other people would be interested in this work, especially since it was primarily linguistic in inspiration.'

He invented distinct languages for the creatures that peopled his stories (elves, dwarfs, and the large, evil goblins he called orcs) and wrote detailed appendices concerning the pronunciation of words and names, writing, and translation. The appendix on translation is indeed curious. As Tolkien himself put it: 'The Common Speech, as the language of the Hobbits and their narratives, has inevitably been turned into Modern English.'

In other words, the entire tale is a transla-

tion from the Common Language used in Middle Earth as a lingua franca by hobbits, men, dwarfs, elves, wizards and other creatures. Such depth of detail provides *The Lord of the Rings* with a richness that cannot be reflected in any other medium. Indeed, Tolkien apparently resigned himself to selling the film rights partly because he was confident that no-one would ever succeed in adapting his work to the cinema due to the gigantic scale of the task this would involve.

Some readers are intoxicated forever by Tolkien's narrative skill with a force which, while understandable in terms of mankind's traditional fondness for a great story well told, in some ways goes beyond rational explanation. For such enthusiasts, Peter Jackson's film is simply unbearable.

There is nothing new of course about book-lovers despising film versions; however, *The Lord of the Rings* goes beyond the usual irritation at the condensation and adaptation required by the film format. Tolkien's work is cruelly distorted, transformed from a skilful, poetic, grandiose tale into a commercial behemoth devoid of any art or subtlety, with no respect for the nuances of the original.

Wizard of Orthanc or Wizard of Oz?

For a start, there is the cast. They are uniformly weak, with few exceptions, these being the good wizard Gandalf (Ian McKellen) and the elf monarch Galadriel (Kate Blanchett), who are well played, and the monstrous Gollum, who is digitally generated. Viggo Mortensen also deserves credit for his effort to achieve the impossible in the central role of Aragorn, known as Strider when he first appears and later as Ellessar when he is revealed as the rightful heir to the kingdom of men.

This role of Strider/Aragorn/Ellessar is illustrative of the difficulties facing the actors. He is tremendously old, being a descendant of a line of superior men (the Númenoreans) with the gift of longevity, yet is strong and quick enough to beat virtually anyone in battle; he is as learned and powerful as the wizards, yet leads a humble life as an anonymous rural protector of the weak hobbits and town dwellers. The men of the town of Bree, ignorant of his true identity, consider him a shifty outsider, while for the elves he is a wise and trusted friend. These contrasts must somehow be reflected by the actor concerned, though he is helped in this

case by the fact that Aragorn is a man, albeit of a superhuman sort.

The roles requiring imaginary creatures – hobbits, dwarves, elves – are even more complicated.

The hobbits are particularly weak. In Tolkien's work the main hobbit characters – Frodo, Sam, Merry and Pippin – are adults, Frodo being almost middle aged. The hobbits in the film look and behave like children, albeit in adult clothing. They are sadly reminiscent of the midget people called 'Munchkins' in *The Wizard of Oz*. The film Frodo could be about 16 years old, while Tolkien's Frodo is in his mid-thirties. In the film he has a thin, somewhat elfish face with big staring eyes and an anguished look, bearing no resemblance at all to the self-satisfied, complacent and rather plump Frodo described by Tolkien.

The characters of the hobbits and the relations between them are among the most carefully developed in Tolkien's story, particularly the strong master/servant bond between Frodo and Sam. One feels the author has a special love for his most renowned creations. In the film, in contrast, one struggles to ascertain who the hobbits are and what drives them, with the exception of Frodo, or how they got into the story in the first place. In fact, the only accurate reflection of the original hobbit characters resides in their lack of stature and their large, unshod, hairy feet.

The elves are little better. Kate Blanchett as the elven queen Galadriel is the exception, in her brief appearance on screen. Her refined features and ethereal air are well suited to the part. There is little positive to be said for the rest, including their rather absurd pointed ears – to which there is no reference in the original work by Tolkien. Orlando Bloom's portrayal of Legolas is flat and insensitive: Rather than a vital, poetic and profoundly peace-loving creature, as are all Tolkien's elves by nature (pushed unwillingly into violent conflict by the direst of circumstances), he offers us an inscrutable martial arts expert, a bow-bearing, knife-wielding, blond Samurai capable of pulling weapons practically from behind his ears. For her part, Liv Tyler as the wistful and lovely Arwen simply does not look elvish, despite the best efforts of the make-up crew, and she becomes irritating when it turns out that her role has been extended far beyond Tolkien's original in order to satisfy Hollywood's staple requirement for a 'love story'.

However, the most unfortunate casting choice is the elf leader Elrond. In *The Hobbit*, Tolkien described him thus:

He was as noble and as fair in face as an elf-lord, as strong as a warrior, as wise as a wizard, as venerable as a king of dwarves, and as kind as summer.

How Peter Jackson could give the role of this serene character to Hugo Weaving, best known for his portrayal of the vicious agent Smith in the *Matrix* film series, is beyond comprehension, except perhaps from the viewpoint of mercantile opportunism. Having recruited Christopher Lee from the latest *Star Wars* movie, here was a chance to bring in a well-known face from another high-tech saga. The younger members of the audience, who comprise the most important segment in commercial terms, would doubtless recognise him at once.

Apparently accepting the limitations inevitably imposed by his own physical appearance, in his portrayal of Elrond Weaving does not even try to appear noble, fair, strong, wise, venerable or kind, and accordingly looks as mean and sinister as usual. The film Elrond also turns out to be spiteful, harassing his daughter Arwen because she wishes to marry Aragorn and renounce her elven immortality in scenes derived wholly from Jackson's imagination, not Tolkien's. A worse piece of casting (and character adaptation) is difficult to imagine.

As for the only dwarf in the fellowship, Gimli son of Gloin, his face is covered by a mat of hair so thick that his facial gestures become indiscernible, rendering him expressionless. It would also be interesting to know why the director decided to give him a Scottish accent, which is bizarre and quite unnecessary.

Christopher Lee's portrayal of Saruman the wizard has been praised by many as one of the best performances in the film, a view which merely betrays the critics' ignorance of the book. In the original, Saruman is subtle, powerful and dangerously clever, a charming trickster with a bewitching voice capable of duping all but the strongest and wisest: Gandalf, as it turns out. He is in a line of attractive evil-doers that in the English literary tradition goes back to Milton's Satan. In contrast, Jackson's Saruman (like all the characters in the film except the computer-generated Gollum) is monochrome, a caricaturesque evil wizard with a

false hooked nose and long greasy hair. Coming back to *The Wizard of Oz*, he seems to be inspired more by the Wicked Witch of the West than by any character in Tolkien. In the original story, Saruman is a fascinating character, a potential saviour gone wrong. In the film version he exhibits the same degree of nuance as the mindless goblins he produces in his grotesque factory at Isengard.

King Solomon's Mines of Moria

A second major objection to the film is the cutting of certain scenes and the inclusion of new ones. When adapting a book to the screen it is inevitable that scenes and even characters have to be eliminated, to make the book's content fit into a film's duration. For instance, one can understand the removal of the pastoral spirit Tom Bombadil (who appears near the beginning of the adventure but does not reappear thereafter), as his deletion has no impact on the story as a whole (though even in this case the work is marred, since Bombadil powerfully embodies Tolkien's love of nature). Nevertheless, Jackson tellingly concentrates on removing or minimising the quieter passages of the book while inflating the noisier ones. The restful scenes at Elrond's house in Rivendell, or in the woods of Lothlorien with Galadriel, or in the abode of Treebeard the ent (giant tree-like creatures invented by Tolkien) in Fangorn Forest, are reduced to the minimum. Conversely, the battles in the Mines of Moria, Helm's Deep and Minas Tirith become interminable. In addition, Jackson eliminates the perverted wizard Saruman from the final third of the work, thus depriving *The Return of the King* of one of its most attractive components.

Conversely, the film version introduces gratuitous action scenes which are apparently incorporated solely for the purpose of assuring that not a minute goes by without a noisy, gory confrontation. Thus, a collapsing-bridge scene worthy of some vintage version of *King Solomon's Mines* is invented for the passage through the abandoned tunnels and vaults of the Mines of Moria, as if this riveting chapter of Tolkien's book did not already contain sufficient doses of tension and bellicose excitement. Later, a fight between Aragorn's company in Rohan and wolf-riding orcs is grafted into the story, which again adds nothing to the narrative except more sweaty, sword-wielding

action. Towards the end of the film, a face-to-face confrontation between the ring-bearing Frodo and a winged monster ridden by a fearful Nazgul is concocted for no evident reason. Perhaps the director wished to raise the excitement to an even more frenzied pitch, or give the special effects crew an opportunity to show their skill.

None of these alterations to Tolkien's original plot can be justified on the grounds that they are needed to transmit elements of the original that cannot be otherwise conveyed due to the restrictions of the visual format. Nothing is learnt from their inclusion; except, perhaps, that the director does not care a whit about distorting the original story. This insistence on continuous action at the expense of restful scenes or even some comic relief brings us to yet another reason for regarding the film trilogy as a travesty of Tolkien's original work, this being its frantic pace.

From slow build-up to no build-up

One of the greatest narrative achievements of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* is its long build-up, the gradual gathering of inexorable speed, like a vast steam locomotive. The mere description of Frodo's departure from Hobbiton at the beginning of the tale is long enough to constitute a minor novel in itself. An entire year goes by in the book's chronology before Frodo gets around to starting his journey. It takes 112 pages for him to finally leave the Shire (the hobbits' little homeland), and for the real adventure to begin. The plot develops very slowly, in both metaphorical and practical terms, with the characters travelling mostly on foot for the first third of the story through landscapes and towns which are described in enormous, time-consuming detail.

Thereafter the pace gradually quickens, with boats and horses becoming available as the main part of the company near the end of their journey, building up to the climactic battle at the citadel of Minas Tirith and the final victory thereafter.

For its part, the film remains steadily paced for all of five minutes, even though the director has ten hours of overall duration available. The action commences slowly enough with Gandalf placidly driving a horse-drawn cart through the rolling countryside of the Shire, then chatting over a pipe with the old hobbit Bilbo Baggins. However, Gandalf soon confirms his fear that Bilbo's magic ring is the great ring of power, already being sought by the fearful Black Riders, emissaries of the Dark Lord. Glowering down from his relative height at little Frodo (Elijah Wood), who assumes here the perplexed expression that will accompany him all the way to the story's climax on the slopes of Mount Doom, Gandalf orders him to be off, quickly, lest the Black Riders get him. From then on the film is a frantic race, from Hobbiton to Bree, from Bree to Rivendell, thence to Lorien and all the way to Minas Tirith, with barely a second's respite for the audience. The steam locomotive, gradually and powerfully gathering momentum, becomes a bullet train, reaching top speed in a question of seconds and staying there to the end of the journey. Calm scenes are eliminated and, as mentioned above, new action scenes are invented.

Such is the frenetic pace of the filmic *Lord of the Rings* that the *Star Wars* series seems sedate by comparison. One of the most attractive elements of Tolkien's work, carefully crafted by his narrative skill, is thus destroyed.

After all this, what is left? Nothing, other than the consumer product so highly praised by critics around the world: a non-stop, action-packed epic with state of the art special effects, cut to the standard Hollywood pattern, rivalling in its audience's appreciation such low-brow blockbusters as *Gladiator*, *Troy* and the latest King Arthur. Could Tolkien ever have imagined that his greatest tale would be placed in the same category as these rudimentary and violent works? His biographer, Michael White, must surely have been right when he said: 'I think he would have just closed his eyes to it.'

[to be continued]