From Page to Screen

J.R.R. Tolkien and Peter Jackson

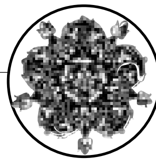
TOM SHIPPEY

J.R.R. TOLKIEN'S *THE LORD OF THE RINGS* must be at least in the running for the title "Most-Read Work of the Twentieth Century," yet its success remains as surprising as ever. Consider how it must have seemed to Tolkien's publisher, Sir Stanley Unwin, when Tolkien first submitted it fifty years ago. Sir Stanley had asked, some seventeen years before, for a sequel to the children's book *The Hobbit*. What he eventually received was a work half a million words long, supported by more than a hundred pages of appendices studded with tables in unknown alphabets, impossible to follow without detailed maps, and dotted with poems and quotations in unknown languages, which as a final flourish its author not infrequently *had not bothered to translate*. Sir Stanley thought that this was commercially impossible, only to be talked round by his son Rayner, who argued that it was a work of genius. "If you think it is a work of genius," his father replied, in a story possibly apocryphal, "you may lose a thousand pounds of the firm's money on it." Sir Stanley was not so benevolent, however, as to forbear hedging his bet. Instead of offering Tolkien royalties, he took the book on a profit-sharing agreement, under which Tolkien would get nothing till the book had "earned out," or recovered its costs, which Sir Stanley clearly thought it might not.

Sir Stanley's judgment was not as obviously unsound as one might think nowadays, confronting the work's long success

Editor's note: Special thanks to Houghton Mifflin, the official U.S. publisher of Tolkien's works for more than sixty years, for providing the cover images reproduced in this issue (www.houghtonmifflinbooks.com).

WLT AUTHOR FACTS
AUTHOR J.R.R. Tolkien (1892–1973)
COUNTRY England
PRINCIPAL GENRES Fiction



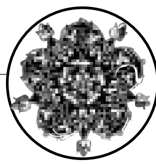
and its emergence into yet another wave of bestsellerdom, propelled by the Peter Jackson movies. Tolkien was not a professional author, and he did things in his writing that must, one would think, have driven the director and the scriptwriters of the movies quite distracted. All beginning writers are told, for instance, how vital it is to start a story swiftly, with the reader fully involved in the characters' problems from the beginning. In *The Fellowship of the Ring*, however, the most basic item of the plot—take the Ring to Orodruin and throw it into the Cracks of Doom—is not revealed until the Council of Elrond, well over two hundred pages into the story. That whole chapter, furthermore, resembles nothing so much as the transcript of a long, confused, and ineptly chaired committee meeting, in which everyone speaks, no one decides anything, and people must keep on being reminded of the agenda. There could never have been the slightest chance of the moviemakers presenting this in anything like its original form. Nevertheless, it is the necessary starting point of the main plot.

What Peter Jackson did, as we now know, was to take the story of the Ring, which is unraveled from many sources in that chapter, and present it as a long continuous narrative at the very start of the movie, with the battle—and journey-scenes accompanied by a voice-over—putting the viewer in the picture both literally and metaphorically. When the viewer then gets to the Council of Elrond in the movie, the many characters present may still be arguing, but at least they have all agreed, and the viewer already knows, what it is they are arguing about. But why could Tolkien not have done that in the beginning?

Something similar crops up, as it happens, in the second movie, *The Two Towers*. Here the problem Tolkien set for his adapters was in a way a more complex one, though it led to just as obvious an impasse. *The Fellowship of the Ring* was at least single-stranded, with the narration following Frodo the hobbit as he leaves Bag End and travels across country, accumulating aides and supporters as he goes. In *The Two Towers*, however, the Fellowship breaks up into three groups, all with widely separated adventures, and with the groups further rejoining, reseparating, and subdividing in bewildering fashion. Nor does the narration follow them neatly, picking each group up again where it had left them before, but instead moves forward in what one can only call a "leapfrog" pattern, the strands of story overtaking one another and then backtracking.

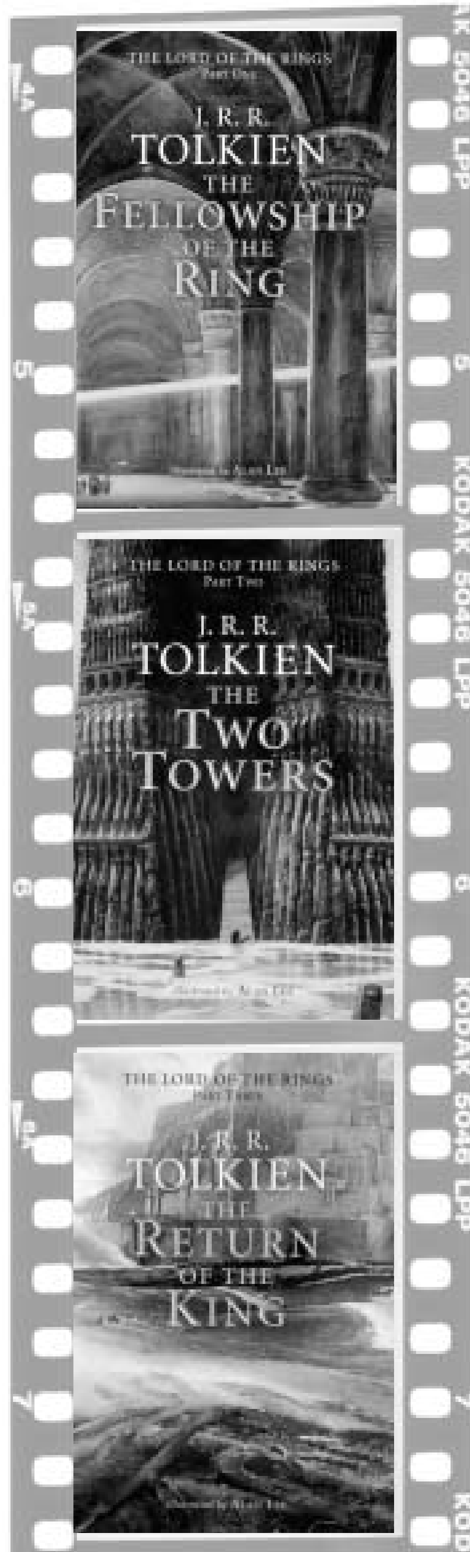
This might be acceptable to a scriptwriter in terms of suspense. What no scriptwriter in the world would have allowed, though—and, sure enough, the scriptwriters for *The Two Towers* took it right out—is the scene in which Aragorn, Legolas, and

This somber awareness of likely defeat, very far removed from the mode of commercial cinema, may explain why Tolkien took some of the narrative turns he did. The advantage of his nonchronological explanations in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, of the recurrent flashbacks and crosscuttings in *The Two Towers*, is that the reader is forced to share the characters' repeated bewilderments. . . . That's what it is like for us, too, Tolkien implies, even if we do not recognize it. We are all bewildered, and his narrative mode insists on making us feel the bewilderment.



Gimli, by this time accompanied by Gandalf, Théoden King, and a host of Riders, eventually arrive at Saruman's Isengard, to find the junior hobbits sitting or lying in the ruins, peacefully sleeping or smoking. For what this means is that the Ents' attack on Isengard, which has taken place offstage while the narrator's eye was elsewhere, is never given a full description at all but only *reported in flashback*. All beginning writers know the adage, "Don't tell them, show them!" Tolkien, it seems, did not. At the end of book 3, chapter 4, the angry Ents are looking down into Nan Curunir, the Valley of Saruman. The next time we see Wizard's Vale, sixty pages later, it is a ruin, and we do not find out what happened to it till the hobbits give their explanation a further ten pages on.

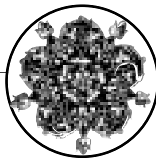
In the movie, of course, the Ents' assault and the drowning of Isengard are a major climax, parallel to the Battle of Helm's Deep that is going on in the other half of that half of the plot (for there is, of course, yet another completely separated strand, the journey of Sam and Frodo into Mordor). This makes excellent sense in narrative terms and shows what competent and imaginative professionals can do. Tolkien, though, was not a professional, at least as regards authorship. At this point, one should wonder, what is the difference between his "amateurish" narrative and the slick professionalism now superimposed on it? Do amateurs like him perhaps know something that professionals do not?



Covers of the illustrated editions (Houghton Mifflin, 2002)

Tolkien's narrative structures, I would suggest, are a part of his worldview. That is why they cannot be imitated on screen. The problem is that commercial cinema, for obvious social reasons, is essentially a triumphalist genre. In it, Good must Prevail. Villains get their Just Desserts—as they do in Tolkien, of course, but the difference is that Tolkien never thought this was inevitable. To return to his own personal experience as an author, as mentioned at the start of this piece, Tolkien was of all the writers in the world perhaps the best example of the Man Who Had a Dream and Did It His Way. For most of his life, though, experience was telling him that this was not going to work. As he was finishing *The Lord of the Rings*, he wrote the short story "Leaf by Niggle," the autobiographical sense of which is perfectly clear: in it a "little man," Niggle/Tolkien, who has spent his whole life trying to paint a Tree in spite of innumerable distractions, is called away by Death before he finishes it. The story ends happily, in the world the other side of Purgatory, with Niggle's Tree coming true and turning into a whole country. However, in this world, the real world, the ending is total failure, with Niggle forgotten, his paintings destroyed, and the last word on him being "never knew he painted." At about the same time Tolkien was writing another fiction in which his work survived only as a bundle of papers on a dusty shelf, anonymous and unread. As a medievalist, after all, Tolkien was professionally familiar with works just like that, surviving only in single manuscript copies, their authors no longer identifiable. For decades this looked to be the likely fate of *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion*.

Tolkien furthermore, a veteran of the Somme, might well have found it easy to generalize his experience. In his lifetime, European societies learned the hard way that while victory was by no means inevitable, the price you paid was. *The Lord of the Rings* certainly ends with a sort of a victory, like World War I for the British, but it has built into it, one should note, several alternative endings. Bilbo is convinced that "and he lived happily ever after to the end of his days" would be a good one, but Bilbo is a "pre-war" character, a hangover, one might say, from the Edwardian age. He never really understands what happens in the War of the Ring. Tolkien included a *Star Wars*–style ending, too, on the Field of Cormallen, with the hobbits ceremonially praised and Sam saying "all my wishes have come true";



In the familiar lines from* King Lear *(Tolkien knew Shakespeare very much better than he pretended), "We must endure our going hence, even as our coming hither," but for most of our lifetimes we also have to endure our coming back. That is the unflinching station where we fight, like Young Siward in Macbeth, and it goes on till our bright day is done, like Cleopatra's.

but then the story continues, to a much gloomier homecoming and a sad and final leave-taking. There is a possible ending, too, when Frodo and Sam collapse in Mordor, their job done but with no further hope of survival. When Sam wakes up he is sure he must be dead, because the first person he sees is Gandalf, and he knows perfectly well Gandalf is dead. Sam is wrong about this, but (as happens in romances) the alternative ending does not entirely go away, remaining a possibility.

This somber awareness of likely defeat, very far removed from the mode of commercial cinema, may explain why Tolkien took some of the narrative turns he did. The advantage of his nonchronological explanations in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, of the recurrent flashbacks and crosscuttings in *The Two Towers*, is that the reader is forced to share the characters' repeated bewilderments. They are "bewildered" both literally and metaphorically—literally in being repeatedly lost in Wilderland, metaphorically in that they honestly do not know what to do, what is for the best, what is going on, or even who they are talking to. The moral, expressed by the characters' strong vein of proverbialism rather than by the narrator, is that in all doubts and discouragements one must plug on: again, a moral perfectly congenial to commercial cinema, yet not one normally expressed with anything like Tolkien's sense of genuine uncertainty.

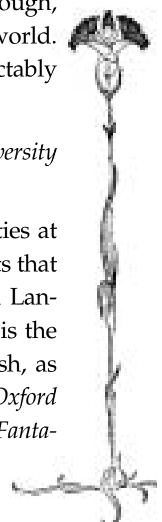
Tolkien's image of life, one might say, is a development of the traditional Christian image of humanity as a pilgrim, detached from the world, traveling to a distant destination that is the only true home. This is itself strongly antipathetic to American cinema's sentimental hominess, but Tolkien takes it further. His characters are walking down a road just like John Bunyan's, but their road tends to take them into the wood, the Old Forest, Fangorn Forest, Mirkwood, even Lothlórien, and the thing about woods is that you rapidly lose your bearings in them. That's what it is like for us, too, Tolkien implies, even if we do not recognize it. We are all bewildered, and his narrative mode insists on making us feel the bewilderment.

The big question for movie three, accordingly, is how to do the ending. One familiar cliché would be the ship sailing into the sunset, and that is not far from the end of *The Return of the King*. It is already clear, however, that the movies are not keeping pace with the books, so that some serious cutting will have to be done for movie three. A cheap solution would be just to stop like George Lucas at the Field of Cormallen. Peter Jackson, who has dealt sensitively with several issues hinted at here, will no doubt not take up that alternative. It is already clear that he is building up the role of Arwen, Aragorn's elf-maiden betrothed, perhaps with the aim of using yet one more alternative ending, which Tolkien relegated to an appendix: Aragorn dead, "in sorrow . . . but not in despair," but Arwen, the immortal who chose death for love, left inconsolable. It is hard to see a modern teenage audience accepting that, or even understanding it, given the limited reactions to death with which their culture equips them. Yet it is also hard to imagine a commercial movie repeating the deliberate bathos, the ultimate anticlimax, with which Tolkien ends his epic: Sam going home, having turned his back on immortality like Arwen, sitting down, and saying the most noncommittal final words in modern literature, "Well I'm back."

Cover of *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century*, by Tom Shippey (Houghton Mifflin, 2002)

It is difficult to see them rolling the credits on that line. But in Tolkien's worldview, what else is there for man or hobbit to say? In the familiar lines from *King Lear* (Tolkien knew Shakespeare very much better than he pretended), "We must endure our going hence, even as our coming hither," but for most of our lifetimes we also have to endure our coming back. That is the unflinching station where we fight, like Young Siward in *Macbeth*, and it goes on till our bright day is done, like Cleopatra's. Earlier in *The Return of the King* Sam had indeed declared, in song, "I will not say the day is done," but there comes a time when even Sam the undaunted will have to desist. Tolkien's heroes are a powerful blend of courage and realism: in Middle-earth the best you can do is keep on stiff-arming defeat. Some of this still gets through, in a different genre, a different culture, a much-changed world. It may be this which has kept Tolkien's appeal so unpredictably alive. WLT

Saint Louis University



TOM SHIPPEY is currently Walter J. Ong Chair of Humanities at Saint Louis University. He has held previous appointments that include a fellowship at Oxford and the Chair of English Language at Leeds held in the 1920s by Tolkien himself. He is the author of two books on Tolkien and three on Old English, as well as the compiler of several anthologies, including the *Oxford Book of Science Fiction Stories* (1992) and the *Oxford Book of Fantasy Stories* (1994).