"Don’t the great tales never end?"

“No, they never end as tales,” said Frodo. “But the people in them come, and go when their part’s ended. Our part will end later—or sooner.”

“And then we can have some rest and some sleep,” said Sam. He laughed grimly. . . . “I’m afraid that’s all I’m hoping for all the time. All the big important plans are not for my sort. Still, I wonder if we shall ever be put into songs or tales. We’re in one, of course; but I mean: put into words, you know, told by the fireside, or read out of a great big book with red and black letters, years and years afterwards. And people will say: ‘let’s hear about Frodo and the Ring!’ And they’ll say: ‘Yes, that’s one of my favourite stories. Frodo was very brave, wasn’t he, dad?’ ‘Yes, my boy, the famousest of the hobbits, and that’s saying a lot.’” (II, p. 321)1

Until 1954 the famousest of the hobbits was Bilbo Baggins. And if Frodo, his nephew, is now the most famous of these creatures, Bilbo still remains the most engaging. His career is recorded by J. R. R. Tolkien in The Hobbit (1937). There we learn that he is one of a small but numerous folk who dwell in hillside and love the simple pleasures of food and a comfortable fireside. Merry and commonsensical, he yet has a wonderful streak of resilience and toughness. The story tells how Bilbo set out with a band of dwarfs in quest of Smaug, the great fire-breathing Dragon, and with the help of Gandalf the Wizard brought about the destruction of the monster. Though it seems an innocent enough beginning, there are signs here of a major talent.

For one thing the world of the story, ranging from the pleasant agrarian life of the Shire (the home of the hobbits) to the desolation of the mountains, and peopled with such speaking beings as trolls, elves, and eagles, is created with remarkable variety and solidity. For another, the forces at work in this world, the brutishness and cruelty of the goblins, the evil power of the Dragon, and the goodness of Gandalf are someway incalculable and invoke a reality unlooked for in children’s literature. And finally, after the death of the Dragon when the dwarfs repossess their former home with its vast treasures, there is no simple happy ending. The dwarfs immediately find themselves in conflict with the men of the neighboring land. No magic formula or unlooked for triumph will work here. Good sense and compromise are needed; and after that, courage—for a terrible battle with the goblins has yet to be won.

These qualities of *The Hobbit*, though they imply a talent that has not fully revealed itself, hardly prepare for the monumental and unique achievement of *The Lord of the Rings*. Extending to over 500,000 words in length, written in an eloquent and elevated prose style with a pervasive and graceful archaism in its sentence structure, *The Lord of the Rings* is—so far as I know—the first attempt since the Renaissance to write a fully developed traditional romance. Moreover, the attempt is made in prose, no easy medium for conjuring up extraordinary events. But like his own hobbit heroes, Tolkien against all odds wins through. He does so at a time when it is commonplace to say: the novel is dead. Which is a short way of saying that the long prose narrative is dying. Tolkien, defying the prophets of gloom, shows it to have incalculable resources still.

The basic story of *The Lord of the Rings* is simple. In the Elder Days nineteen rings were forged; and after that, the One Ring, which gave power over the nineteen. In *The Hobbit*, Bilbo by chance or fate comes into possession of the One Ring. He passes it on to his nephew, Frodo. In *The Lord of the Rings* Sauron, the Dark Lord, seeks the Ring. Gandalf understands that it must be kept from him for it can confer absolute power. He understands also that it must be destroyed, for the Ring of absolute power—Tolkien does not use these words—will corrupt any one, however strong and good. Frodo’s quest or mission is to carry the Ring to the heart of Mordor, to Mount Doom, whose fires alone can destroy it.

Such a story could have been a straightforward narrative of Frodo’s trials in fulfilling his quest. Instead, Tolkien chose to write a far more elaborate kind of story. With respect to its subject matter, the
story is an anatomy of romance themes or myths; with respect to its structure, the story is a tapestry romance in the Medieval-Renaissance tradition.

We may evaluate *The Lord of the Rings* as an anatomy of romance themes by comparing it with the six phases of romance defined by Northrop Frye in *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, 1957; pp. 186–203). This will give us an objective basis for analysis in the sense that Frye’s six phases, abstracted from world literature, have been formulated without reference to Tolkien. Although one or another of these phases is frequently represented singly in a romance work, the appearance of all six in one work is not entirely remarkable since they span a natural cycle from the birth of the hero through the quest of his mature years to the detachment or mellowness of later life. What is remarkable about *The Lord of the Rings* is its inclusion of so many of the themes of each phase. Space will permit the mention only of some of the major ones.

Phase one, the birth of the hero, is passed over lightly in Frodo’s case, though his birth is not without that strangeness so typical of romance heroes. The characteristic flood of this phase appears as the river in which his parents drown. Frodo is then adopted by Bilbo and becomes the true (that is, spiritual) son of Bilbo, the heroic conqueror of the Dragon.

The second phase, the innocent youth of the hero, is conveyed through Frodo’s life in the peaceful and pastoral Shire. The phase is repeated with greater relevance to Aragorn, in the image of the house of Elrond, and in Aragorn’s love for Arwen whose elven and immortal nature typifies the sexual barrier dividing them. This phase is again repeated at a still higher level of idealization in the image of Lothlórien, the land of the elves. As Frodo stands on the Mount of Amroth, the heart of the ancient realm of the elven folk, he beholds a land where the winter flowers, the yellow elanor and the pale niphredil, bloom forever in the unfading grass:

It seemed to him that he had stepped through a high window that looked on a vanished world. A light was upon it for which his language had no name. All that he saw was shapely, but the shapes seemed at once clear cut, as if they had been first conceived and drawn at the uncovering of his eyes, and ancient as if they had endured for ever. He saw no colour but those he knew, gold and white and blue and green, but they were fresh and poignant, as if he had at that moment first perceived them and made for them names new and wonderful. In winter here no heart could mourn for summer or for spring. No blemish or sickness or deformity could be seen
in anything that grew upon the earth. On the land of Lórien there was no
stain. (I, p. 365)

Both Aragorn and Frodo must descend out of this Eden and, passing
down the river which separates Lothlórien from the world, answer the
call to adventure.

The third phase is the quest. On his journey Frodo encounters
more than his share of those sinister beings we expect in romance. But
because the hobbit hero is in some respects—discussed later—an ordi-
nary fellow, the imagery of the quest has undergone a certain ironic
displacement. Thus the dragon and the treasure hoard have been amal-
gamated in the Ring signifying power and wealth and also—as an early
reviewer pointed out—the dragon biting its tail. Because power and
treasure are destructive they are compounded with the uroboric
dragon. Moreover, the quest has no reward of a bride for Frodo. In
two respects, however, he is entirely typical. He suffers mutilation and
he passes through dark and labyrinthine places in the fulfillment of his
quest. Indeed, the whole of Mordor with the surrounding lands over
which its darkness spreads is a vast image of the world and its people
engulfed or consumed by the dragon. This image has been admirably
prepared in Volume One. Frodo, having placed on his finger the One
Ring which confers powers of vision, climbs to the very top of Amon
Hen and sitting upon the Seat of Seeing looks over the land in all di-
rections. Everywhere he sees signs of war:

Horsemen were galloping on the grass of Rohan; wolves poured from Isen-
gard. From the havens of Harad ships of war put out to sea; and out of the
East Men were moving endlessly: swordsmen, spearmen, bowmen upon
horses, chariots of chieftains and laden wains. All the power of the Dark
Lord was in motion. Then turning south again he beheld Minas Tirith.
Far away it seemed, and beautiful; white-walled, many-towered, proud and
fair upon its mountain-seat; its battlements glittered with steel, and its tur-
rets were bright with many banners. Hope leaped in his heart. But against
Minas Tirith was set another fortress, greater and more strong. Thither,
eastward, unwilling his eye was drawn. It passed the ruined bridges of Os-
giliath, the grinning gates of Minas Morgul, and the haunted Mountains,
and it looked upon Gorgoroth, the valley of terror in the Land of Mordor.
Darkness lay there under the Sun. Fire glowed amid the smoke. Mount
Doom was burning, and a great reek rising. Then at last his gaze was held:
wall upon wall, battlement upon battlement, black, immeasurably strong,
mountain of iron, gate of steel, tower of adamant, he saw it: Barad-dur,
Fortress of Sauron. All hope left him. (I, p. 417)
In destroying this terrible fortress, this dark labyrinth of the dragon power, Frodo is the Messianic hero who redeems society.2

The Lord of the Rings has many heroes. The bride who is the reward of the quest appears very typically in the stories of two of them. Arwen renounces her immortal nature and marries Aragorn once he has assumed his true character as King of Gondor. Meanwhile Faramir, the new Steward of Minas Tirith, marries Éowyn (a child of kings) who has come to Minas Tirith disguised as a warrior. In battle she successfully contends with the terrible Nazgûl, but falls under the deadly shadow of despair of the Ringwraith. She is afterwards healed by Aragorn. As the most prominent woman in the action, it is right that Éowyn should so completely embody the role of the innocent heroine found in a perilous place and redeemed from a stigma or dark fate.

This brings us to the fourth phase of romance—it is centered in Minas Tirith—in which the innocence and goodness of the individual and of society is preserved in its confrontation with experience and evil. The essential themes of this phase, the beleaguered castle and the monster controlled by the virgin, are prominent in Tolkien’s narrative. Minas Tirith, the city of white towers, is besieged by the forces of Mordor and the Nazgûl is decapitated by the invincible Éowyn.

The fifth phase is like the second, but raised to a more contemplative level. As a result of the quest, fertility and the natural cycle are reasserted, sexual barriers overcome and a hierarchy of lovers established.

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2 This quotation, and the previous one concerning Lothlórien reflect on the question of Tolkien’s Christianity. The fact that he has been associated with the Oxford Christians has insidiously affected the critical response to his work. In these passages the contrasts between darkness and light, shadow and substance, between the smoking iron Fortress and the glittering towers of Minas Tirith, between Gorgoroth the valley of terror and the Eden-like Lothlórien have a Western orientation. But they are not specifically Christian or even specifically religious. They are fundamental archetypes of human consciousness. In so far as the reader associates these archetypes with religion and specifically with Christianity, to that extent The Lord of the Rings may appear to be a Christian work. But because these archetypes emerge in an elemental form and are extraordinarily free of localized and historical accretions, they are not the exclusive preserve either of religion generally or of Christianity particularly. Thus from a strictly literary point of view there is no need to regard The Lord of the Rings as a Christian work. This is confirmed by Tolkien himself who has said of his book: “As for any inner meaning or ‘message,’ it has in the intention of the author none. It is neither allegorical nor topical.” See the Foreword to the authorized paperback edition of The Lord of the Rings, 3 vols. (New York, 1965). This revised edition offers a “Foreword, an addition to the Prologue, some notes, and an index of the names of persons and places.”
This hierarchy in *The Lord of the Rings* extends from Aragorn and Arwen to the domestic hobbit-life of Sam and Rose.

The sixth phase Frye calls “penseroso”: “it marks the end of a movement from active to contemplative adventure” (p. 202). The Third Age is over and those characters whose role does not extend into the Fourth Age now depart forever from Middle Earth. This represents an elaborate development of the theme of the old man in his isolated tower. In this phase also, society manifests itself in cozy domesticity. Sam is to become Mayor of the fertile and peaceful Shire and he and Rose are promised many little hobbits who will be named after persons and objects encountered on the quest. The telling of tales is characteristic of this phase. As the story ends, Frodo has completed his part of the memoirs long ago begun by Bilbo. In one sense *The Lord of the Rings* is a tale told by Bilbo and Frodo.

In its subject matter, then, Tolkien’s novel is an anatomy of romance themes. In its structure it is equally ambitious, for it follows the traditional Medieval-Renaissance pattern of the tapestry romance. Such a romance is a series of interwoven stories each of which is picked up or dropped as occasion and suspense require. In theory, a tapestry romance can go on indefinitely; in practice, its multiple strands converge towards an ending of sorts. This complex and highly sophisticated type of narrative has been out of fashion for a long time. Vinaver has convinced us that even Malory showed the modern propensity for the single story line when he adapted a variety of tapestry romances to the simpler narrative structure of his *Morte Darthur*. It is not Malory but Spenser, especially in the last four books of *The Faerie Queene*, who offers the best example of tapestry romance in English.

It would take too much space to sketch in, however briefly, the many interweaving plots that go to compose the narrative fabric of *The Lord of the Rings*. Only the broader structure can be indicated here. Near the end of Volume I, Frodo, with his faithful servant and companion Sam, sets out on the last and most terrifying part of his journey with the Ring. Meanwhile the other lines of action converge first on the preliminary battle of Helm’s Deep, and then on the great battle in defence of Minas Tirith. As Frodo moves towards Mordor and the destruction of the Ring, the powers of Mordor move towards the destruction of Minas Tirith. Here the two primary lines of action diverge. But after the forces of Mordor are defeated at Minas Tirith, the defenders of the city march towards the gates of Mordor, Fortress immeasurably strong, their object a direct and apparently hopeless challenge to the Dark Lord himself.
At this moment the primary lines of action converge. As the warriors from Minas Tirith, who represent all the free peoples of Middle Earth, join battle with the vast armies of Mordor, Frodo and Sam climb Mount Doom with the Ring. The destruction of the Ring breaks utterly the dark powers of Sauron. Sam, standing on the mountain, sees the destruction:

A brief vision he had of swirling cloud, and in the midst of it towers and battlements, tall as hills, founded upon a mighty mountain-throne above immeasurable pits; great courts and dungeons, eyeless prisons sheer as cliffs, and gaping gates of steel and adamant: and then all passed. Towers fell and mountains slid; walls crumbled and melted, crashing down; vast spires of smoke and spouting steams went billowing up, up, until they toppled like an overwhelming wave, and its wild crest curled and came foaming down upon the land. And then at last over the miles between there came a rumble, rising to a deafening crash and roar; the earth shook, the plain heaved and cracked, and Orodruin reeled. Fire belched from its riven summit. The skies burst into thunder seared with lightning. Down like lashing whips fell a torrent of black rain. And into the heart of the storm, with a cry that pierced all other sounds, tearing the clouds asunder, the Nazgûl came, shooting like flaming bolts, as caught in the fiery ruin of hill and sky they crackled, withered, and went out. (III, p. 224)

With the coming together of the main actions, the members of the Fellowship of the Ring who at the beginning had set out as a company are united once more. (Of the nine, one who would have betrayed the Fellowship has died in battle.) As the story ends they return to their separate homes. The Fourth Age has begun with Aragorn, a leading member of the Fellowship, as the new King of Minas Tirith and the ruler of all men. The Third Age has ended, and with it the important role of Elves and Wizards. The King of the Elves and Gandalf the White, accompanied by Frodo on whom “the memory of darkness is heavy” (III, p. 268), make their way to the sea and depart forever from Middle Earth.

Tolkien has allowed himself a certain neatness of plot at the beginning and end, but the entire central section—over half the novel—is in the tapestry tradition. We move from one land to another, one event to another, one leader to another. The result is a detailed yet panoramic view of a whole world in movement and turmoil. We have our first complete glimpse of that world, of its great vicissitudes and multifarious activities, in Frodo’s vision from the top of Amon Hen as he looks out from the Seat of Seeing and finds everywhere the signs of war and endless movement.
What must interest the student of the novel is the way Tolkien has been able to combine a very nearly complete catalogue of romance themes (many of them extraordinary in the highest degree) with an elaborate, capacious, immensely flexible plot structure and make of the whole a coherent and convincing modern prose narrative. The way Tolkien has accomplished this would lead us finally to the quality of his intelligence and his imagination. I propose, however, to stop short of that goal, or at any rate to approach it at one point only, namely characterization; for it seems to me that the selection and handling of characters is central to Tolkien’s achievement. In what follows I explore the nature and role of his characters generally and of his hobbits particularly.

Like the persons of traditional allegory, the characters of The Lord of the Rings are types. At the allegorical extremes are Sauron the type of all darkness and Gandalf (reinforced by Galadriel, the Queen of the Elves) the type of all light. Their exceptional characters are revealed by events. Sauron, having once been defeated in the past and having awaited the chance to rebuild his dark kingdom, appears as a returning and continuing figure. Similarly Gandalf the Grey, having returned from apparent death, becomes Gandalf the White, also a continuing figure. However, Gandalf is far more human than Sauron, for he also fulfills the role of the old wise man. The remaining characters are conventional human types. Strider, for instance, is Prince and King. As Frodo and his companions pass down the Great River, they come to the Pillars of the Kings where giant carvings of the ancient Kings of Númenor tower over them as they pass into the dark chasm. Frodo crouches in the boat as it moves beneath these dreadful cliffs. “‘Fear not!’ said a strange voice behind him. Frodo turned and saw Strider, and yet not Strider; for the weatherworn Ranger was no longer there. In the stern sat Aragorn son of Arathorn, proud and erect, guiding the boat with skilful strokes; his hood was cast back, and his dark hair was blowing in the wind, a light was in his eyes: a king returning from exile to his own land.” (I, p. 409)

Tolkien frequently uses the epic device of set epithets and of names, geographical and genealogical, to designate the typicality of his characters. Thus near the end when Faramir, the Steward of the Kingdom of Gondor and the city of Minas Tirith, addresses his men, he summons up a catalogue of names for Strider, all of which are familiar to the reader though they have waited appropriately until this moment to be gathered together in one place: “Men of Gondor, hear now the Steward of this Realm! Behold! one has come to claim the
kingship again at last. Here is Aragorn son of Arathorn, chieftain of the Dunedain of the North, Captain of the Host of the West, wielder of the Sword Reforged, victorious in battle, whose hands bring healing, the Elfstone, Elessar of the line of Valandil, Isildur's son, Elendil's son of Númenor. Shall he be king and enter into the City and dwell there?” (III, p. 245)

Éomund, Lord of Rohan, and Éowyn, his daughter (“for her deeds have set her among the queens of great renown” [III, p. 144]), are other examples of the heroic and princely type. But of all the heroes of this wide world the most interesting, though no prince, is Frodo the hobbit. He has, like all hobbits, a very ordinary streak in his nature; yet when he takes on the role of hero he can be just as heroic as the greatest of men. Such is his behavior when he encounters Shelob the Spider in the mountain tunnels of Mordor.

Into this dark place Frodo took with him two weapons: the Phial of Galadriel, the star-glass which if faithfully invoked would give light in the darkest place, and the magic sword Sting, which the Dwarfs had presented to Bilbo after the destruction of the Dragon. As Frodo advanced down the tunnel “he felt a great malice bent upon him, and a deadly regard considering him. . . . he was aware of eyes growing visible, two great clusters of many-windowed eyes—the coming menace was unmasked at last. The radiance of the star-glass was broken and thrown back from their thousand facets. . . .” Frodo flees from the monstrous and abominable eyes. But realizing that he is trapped beyond all hope of escape he makes a final stand:

“Galadriel!” he called, and gathering his courage he lifted up the Phial once more. The eyes halted. For a moment their regard relaxed, as if some hint of doubt troubled them. Then Frodo's heart flamed within him, and without thinking what he did, whether it was folly or despair or courage, he took the Phial in his left hand, and with his right hand drew his sword. Sting flashed out, and the sharp elven-blade sparkled in the silver light, but at its edges a blue fire flicked. Then holding the star aloft and the bright sword advanced, Frodo, hobbit of the Shire, walked steadily down to meet the eyes. (II, pp. 329–330)

In this moment of darkest confrontation Frodo with star-glass and flashing sword is the type of purest hero.

It is a well-known fact of the romance tradition that because the principal characters are simple types the complexity of human nature must be projected into the external world. The disruptive forces of darkness and inner conflict must be represented by persons and objects
outside the heroic characters. In *The Lord of the Rings*, Sauron, his servants, and his Fortress are persons and objects of this type. Sauron himself epitomizes evil and thereby transcends the possibilities of individual evil. His counterpart is Gandalf the White. Sauron and Gandalf have a special relationship not as individuals but as ultimate representatives of darkness and light. Sauron’s servants represent the evil potentialities of individual consciousness. Some of them are direct counterparts of the heroic characters. Denethor, the corrupted Steward of Minas Tirith, reveals the evil possible to Aragorn; Saruman, the former White Wizard, reveals the evil possible to Gandalf.

The evil characters are servants of Sauron. To this rule there are two exceptions. The first exception is Gollum who is directly connected with Frodo. This reflects a simple fact: in the narrative scheme of things Frodo is more individualized than the other heroes. For instance, in the Shelob episode, though he at last performs the act of purest hero, he at first is broken by the dark menace and flees. Thus Gollum as his double in darkness is more than a potentiality of his nature. His double is truly his, an actual and developing darkness in his own character.

Historically Gollum is the creature who possessed the One Ring, which Bilbo found and took. Long ago he had been a hobbit, but under the influence of the Ring retreated to a nether world of darkness and water where, by a process of devolution, he turned to a monster. Ever since losing the Ring he has searched for what he calls his Precious. When he discovers that Frodo is its bearer, he follows him. It is only gradually, as he continues his unwearying pursuit, that we come to see him as representing some darkness in Frodo’s own character. We understand, then, the reason for Sam’s intense hatred of Gollum and for his desire to kill him. But Gandalf has said he may yet have a part to play and Frodo will not let him be killed.

The Ring confers power if the owner chooses to put on the Ring and assume the power. Such power, even when corrupted, entails the exercise of will and intellect. But at a lower level the Ring exerts a terrible attraction simply as a possession. It fosters an all-consuming and wholly selfish personal indulgence. This has been its effect on Gollum and this is what he represents. It need not surprise us, then, that as Frodo stands on Mount Doom looking into the fires which alone can destroy the Ring he is overcome by the awful attraction of its possession. It is not its power he thinks of, it is simply the thing itself, the having of it. “I will not do this deed,” he says. “The Ring is mine!” (III, p. 223) The Gollum side of his nature has triumphed. As he sets
the Ring on his finger and vanishes from sight, Gollum rushes forward to struggle with his invisible counterpart. He bites the ring-finger off Frodo's hand, holds up the Ring, and in a mad dance of exultant possession accidentally reels over the precipice taking the Ring with him into the destruction of the fire.

So Frodo accomplishes his mission. The loss of his finger symbolizes the eradication of a part of himself. Those who perform great deeds do so at a cost to their own natures. They will never be the same again, nor will the world appear to them the same. Thus Frodo, as he returns home, says: "There is no real going back. Though I may come to the Shire, it will not seem the same; for I shall not be the same. I am wounded with knife, sting, and tooth, and a long burden. Where shall I find rest?" (III, p. 268) Gollum has been destroyed; but there is no sense of triumph as there is in the case of the other evil characters who are destroyed. For unlike them Gollum stands in a wholly individual relationship to the hero and his overthrow represents a terrible personal struggle and an eradication of a part of the hero's nature which under more ordinary circumstances might be harmless and even conducive to his comfort. But the sacrifice of the hero is necessary that others may be free of his burden and may have their comfort.

On the journey to Mordor, Gollum leads Frodo through the Dead Marshes. In the lower world of quagmire and stagnant pool he is a guide. But he would also lead Frodo to Shelob and destruction. Shelob is like Gollum in that she is independent of Sauron. We may therefore suppose her to have some special relation to Frodo who encounters her as he enters Mordor:

There agelong she had dwelt, an evil thing in spider-form. ... How Shelob came there ... no tale tells, for out of the Dark Years few tales have come. But still she was there, who was there before Sauron, and before the first stone of Barad-dur; and she served none but herself, drinking the blood of Elves and Men, bloated and grown fat with endless brooding on her feasts, weaving webs of shadow; for all living things were her food, and her vomit darkness. Far and wide her lesser broods, bastards of the miserable mates, her own offspring, that she slew, spread from glen to glen. ... But none could rival her, Shelob the Great, last child of Ungoliant to trouble the unhappy world. (II, p. 332)

Like Sin and Death at Hell Gate who serve neither God nor Satan but look solely to their own interests, Shelob—a bolder and more effective creation than Milton's—thinks only of herself. Sauron may use her in so far as their interests coincide but she is independent of him. She
is the expression of something older than Sauron and his evil, she is the Death and Chaos that would overcome all. And men, elves, and orcs, all are potentially her prey. Thus, unlike Gollum, she is not a unique counterpart of the hero. Yet she must be personally confronted by the hero. Against the menace of Death and Chaos, he must assert the sustaining power of Life before he can go on to encounter the final evils of Mordor.

Frodo’s confrontation with Shelob and his heroic advance with star-glass and flashing sword in hand show clearly the kind of narrative this is. The characters are simple types and in themselves are not especially interesting. But the objects and forces they encounter and the events they participate in are archetypal. What happens to them is universal and recurring; it has a resonance that stirs the imagination.

Bilbo recognizes this when he speaks to Frodo about the Ring: “I understand now. . . . I am sorry: sorry you have come in for this burden: sorry about everything. Don’t adventures ever have an end? I suppose not. Someone else always has to carry on the story.” (I, p. 244) Though the adventures and the characters are equally typical, it is not primarily the type characters but rather the continuing adventures and the mysterious and awesome world of their happening that sustain the narrative interest and convey a sense of magnitude and resonance. In all this *The Lord of the Rings* resembles traditional romance.

Tolkien had very good reasons for following tradition. Indeed it was essential for him to subordinate character to action and setting. He recognized that the psychologically convincing character was at the heart of modern realism. To escape realism, his first aim must be to avoid this kind of character. Having done that, he might hope to make objects and events of a romance type seem probable. However, this is not the last word to be said about the characterization. The hobbits have a very special role in Tolkien’s design. They introduce an element of realism into the narrative for they are not entirely type characters. What is more important, they provide a narrative point of view. This is Tolkien’s most notable concession to modern taste.

The mighty world of the Rings, with its kings and peoples, its cities and battles, is seen through the eyes of the hobbits. Now in *The Faerie Queene*, for example, the story is told by a kind of omniscient author who at each moment focuses attention on the character at stage center. Thus there is a foreground figure, and attached to him whatever most immediately concerns him or most commands his attention. Everything else is background. The result is a marked contrast between
foreground and background. But because the relationship of the two is constant, because the tonal values are unchanging, the further result is a flattening out of the total effect. There is nothing of that subtle interplay of foreground and background that comes from placing the point of view of the narrative within the story but at a certain and often varying distance from the center. By using the hobbit point of view, Tolkien adds variety and interest to the portrayal of his type characters and his archetypal events.

In addition he gains realism from his deployment of the hobbits. They are four in number. Frodo and Sam are nearly always together. Each offers a perspective on the other. This is especially important in view of Frodo’s central role. We not only see with Frodo’s eyes, but we see Frodo from the outside with Sam’s eyes. The two remaining hobbits, Merry and Pippin, are frequently apart. Thus we have three basic centers of narrative. The realism comes from Tolkien’s commitment to these centers. Minas Tirith may appear in Frodo’s vision, it may be conjured up in the speeches of those who have seen it, but only when one of the hobbits enters Minas Tirith do we enter Minas Tirith.

Tolkien is eminently flexible in his handling of the hobbits as narrative centers. There are accounts of things the hobbits did not or could not have seen. And there are other accounts in which the quality of observation does not reflect the quality of the hobbit mind. But in this intricate story with its varied and interweaving strands, the hobbits do offer an acceptably modern rationale for shifting from one scene to another.

They are all the more acceptable as narrative centers because they are more realistically conceived than the other characters of the story. Here is an example. After the great victory of Minas Tirith, Merry and Pippin meet. Though small in stature they have behaved splendidly in the heroic encounters of the time. Now, as they discuss these stirring events, their thoughts turn to food and a good pipe of tobacco and taking it easy for a bit. “Dear me!” says Pippin. “We Tooks and Brandybucks, we can’t live long on the heights.” (III, p. 146) Such self-analysis and variety of response is not possible to the other leading characters who are pure types. Were they to reflect on or discuss their own actions and characters, they would lose their noble simplicity and would, as Spenser’s heroes sometimes do, appear self-satisfied or self-righteous. The hobbits, unable to live long on the heights, are free of this hazard. One of their most ingratiating qualities is the happy surprise they feel at their own heroics. It is not modesty, but innocence about their own greatness.
In writing a traditional romance Tolkien has thrust forward his hobbits as a hostage to modern realism. Yet they could not be too much in the realistic tradition or they would spoil his whole design. That is why they are not humans. On the other hand, because their natures are so engagingly human, they serve the reader as a point of contact and enable him to enter sympathetically into an extraordinary world.

Naturally, in so long a novel there are arid stretches. When Tolkien’s imaginative invention fails—Tom Bombadil as a personification of elemental natural forces is an example—then elevated style, second-rate songs, plot complication (or alternately, no plot at all), and stereotyped characterization force the reader to languish or skip forward. Such failures do not seriously detract from the originality and formal significance of Tolkien’s achievement. In doing battle with the Dragon of Realism, he has for the first time made accessible to the novel the vast treasure hoard of traditional romance.

As a final step in defining this romance novel, we may consider how others have described Tolkien’s book. The terms we will have most to do with are fantasy and fairy story.

Douglass Parker, in his admirable review article “Hwaet We Holbytla . . .” in The Hudson Review (IX, Winter 1956–57), insists that The Lord of the Rings belongs to the genre of fantasy rather than romance. But is fantasy a genre? And is it just bad literary ethics that leads to the practice of pre-empting to some other genre any work of fantasy that attains literary respectability or renown? My answer to these questions is no. Far from indicating a genre, the word fantasy points to the phenomenon of displacement.

Every literary work has human experience as its subject matter. Some works express this experience through a created world that seems to us familiar and probable. To a greater or lesser degree such a world is said to be realistic. It is realistic not because it conforms to reality but because—as Ortega y Gasset has observed—it conforms to our most familiar and established expectations about reality. The real itself—and the outer world no less than the inner world—is frequently too improbable to be realistic. In that case the representation of the real calls for drastic procedures. Accordingly some works express human experience through a created world that seems to us imaginary or fantastic. As in dream, the elements of the familiar world undergo a radical displacement. When the displacement is wholehearted we are likely to speak of fantasy, when it is prominent but less than wholehearted we are likely to speak of romance. Here the difference between fantasy
and romance, when the terms are used in this way, is one of degree only. In a very rough way the terms indicate the extent to which the elements of the familiar world have been transformed through displacement. In this situation, it would save a lot of confusion if we could agree to say that romance is a genre and that fantasy is one of its distinguishing characteristics. We could then go on to say that The Lord of the Rings is a romance in which the element of fantasy is more than usually powerful.

No sooner have we disposed of fantasy—it being presumed the reader has followed so far—than the fairy story rears its head, invoked by no less a person than Tolkien himself, whose essay “On Fairy-Stories” was first published in 1947 and is now included in Tree and Leaf (London, 1964). It takes no time at all for the reader to discover from this essay that on Tolkien’s own definition The Lord of the Rings is indisputably a fairy story. As a way of reminding ourselves of what is here being talked about as possibly a fairy story, we may resort to the field work of W. H. Auden who has researched the history, geography, and topography of Tolkien’s Middle Earth:

The area of his world measures some thirteen hundred miles from east (the Gulf of Lune) to west (the Iron Hills) and twelve hundred miles from north (the Bay of Farochel) to south (the mouth of the River Anduin). In our world there is only one species, man, who is capable of speech and has a real history; in Mr. Tolkien’s there are at least seven. The actual events of the story cover the last twenty years of the Third Historical Epoch of this world. The First Age is treated as legendary so that its duration is unknown, and its history is only vaguely recalled, but for the 3441 years of the Second Age and the 3021 years of the Third, he has to provide a continuous and credible history. . . .

His hero, Frodo Baggins, is on the road, excluding rests, for eighty days and covers over 1800 miles, much of it on foot, and with his senses kept perpetually sharp by fear, watching every inch of the way for signs of his pursuers, yet Mr. Tolkien succeeds in convincing us that there is nothing Frodo noticed which he has forgotten to describe.\(^3\)

The story of this world is a quest according to Auden, a fantasy according to Parker, and a fairy story according to Tolkien. Quest, fantasy, and fairy story are insisted upon as genres. Yet the three critics are in complete agreement concerning the object so variously defined: it is a fully developed imaginary world. Auden is right to emphasize the quest, which is the most frequent and most important form of the ro-


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mance story. Tolkien, though not wrong, is less than right to transform the fairy story into a literary giant, the most so as his giant attains to apocalyptic vision. What he has in fact done, however, is abolish terminological distinctions. He uses the word fantasy as synonymous with fairy story and once, in the opening sentence of the Epilogue, he speaks of “the true fairy-story (or romance).” We will be on the safest ground if we reject this confusion of terms and insist on the traditional word to describe the fully developed imaginary world of The Lord of the Rings.

Tolkien has created a prose romance in which displacement is radical and the fantasy element extremely powerful. For this reason he was able to ransack the entire storehouse of early northern literature (mythology, fairy tale, saga, epic), transmute its materials, again through the process of radical displacement, and combine them with the materials and conventions of romance. His feeling for and his valuation of the more extraordinary elements of northern literature are clearly to be seen in his famous essay on “Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics” (1936), now reprinted in L. E. Nicholson’s An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism (Notre Dame, 1963). Comparing the story of the hero’s struggles against Grendel and the Dragon with an imaginary story of the kind some critics think the Beowulf poet should have written, the story of a king’s fall in the war of princes, Tolkien writes:

It is just because the main foes in Beowulf are inhuman that the story is larger and more significant than this imaginary poem of a great king’s fall. It glimpses the cosmic and moves with the thought of all men concerning the fate of human life and efforts; it stands amid but above the petty wars of princes, and surpasses the dates and limits of historical periods, however

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4 One could also object, on grounds pointed out by Freud, that the typical fairy story with its great dependence on fantasy and a never-never world is not productive of uncanny effects. The uncanny requires a less radical displacement of reality, a more convincing sense of the actual. Because romance is typically less fantastic than fairy story, it can—though it need not—achieve uncanny effects. As Freud also observes, much depends on the angle from which an event is seen. For instance, Tolkien’s Shelob the spider is entirely fantastic, but she has a mysterious and uncanny effect on the hero and he in turn is sufficiently real that we participate in his sense of the strange and fearful. Precisely the same point can be made about Grendel in Beowulf. The fantastic monster so impinges on the real world of the hero that his effect is mysterious and powerful. Such impressions of the uncanny, though Tolkien includes them in his definition, are not characteristic of the fairy story. See The Standard Edition of . . . Sigmund Freud, XVII (London, 1955): “The ‘Uncanny,’” pp. 219–252, esp. pp. 245–252.
important. At the beginning, and during its process, and most of all at the end, we look down as if from a visionary height upon the house of man in the valley of the world. A light starts . . . and there is a sound of music; but the outer darkness and its hostile offspring lie ever in wait for the torches to fail and the voices to cease. (pp. 87–88)

*The Lord of the Rings* is a twentieth century *Beowulf*. It too “glimpses the cosmic and moves with the thought of all men concerning the fate of human life and efforts.” But the epic tradition was no longer open to Tolkien. The epic, for all its magnitude, moves within realms of the possible and expected. We sense that even Grendel and the Dragon have for the *Beowulf* poet and his audience a certain inherent probability. (If this judgment is unacceptable, the reader may follow Tolkien’s lead and exclude *Beowulf* from the epic canon.) For precisely the same reason, and for others as well, the chronicle was not suited to Tolkien’s purposes. The chronicle depends on a substantial core of historically probable events which then enable it to absorb a host of improbabilities, both real and fictitious. However, Tolkien’s pretense that *The Lord of the Rings* is based on ancient chronicles is not entirely unfounded. As the Appendices which round out Volume III show, Tolkien himself has written the chronicles of Middle Earth, and *The Lord of the Rings* is an elaborate exposition of certain events in the chronicles relating to the end of the Third Age.

The substantiality and magnitude of Tolkien’s book is sufficient proof that epic and chronicle were within the reach of his technical and creative ability; but they were not suited to his purposes. Only the romance tradition, with its radical displacement of probable reality, could accommodate the many wonders of Tolkien’s imagined world and so allow us to glimpse the cosmic and the thought of all men.

To have opened to prose fiction the vast resources of traditional romance is a great achievement. This heroic encounter with the Dragon of Realism comes at a time when critical studies like Angus Fletcher’s *Allegory* are enabling us to understand and re-evaluate the nature of allegorical and romance works. As that re-evaluation goes on, Tolkien’s achievement will become more widely recognized. Meanwhile we may speculate on the extent to which *The Lord of the Rings* will influence the future development of the novel.