

Middle-Earth under Attack, Again: The Axiological Debate on „the Lord of the Rings”

Drugi atak na Śródziemie: debata aksjologiczna nad „Władcą Pierścieni”

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Keywords:

Lord of the Rings, fantasy, J. R. R. Tolkien, axiology

Słowa kluczowe:

Władca pierścieni, fantasy, J. R. R. Tolkien, aksjologia

Abstract

The Lord of the Rings (abbreviated as *LOTR*) by J. R. R. Tolkien is a cult work whose cultural status seems unquestionable. Surprisingly, it is also a source of many literary controversies and a long-lasting debate among scholars and critics. This debate appears doubly axiological. First, the literary merit of the work is discussed, questioned, rejected or affirmed; at this occasion *LOTR*'s case forces us to (re)consider the ways we (scholars and critics) read and evaluate literary works, as well as the criteria according to which we include books in literary canons or in academic syllabuses. Second, the axiology presented in and by the book is also put to scrutiny.

The objective of this particular paper is to review the part of the debate, related directly to axiology presented by *LOTR*.

Abstrakt

Władca pierścieni to dzieło kultowe, o niezaprzeczalnym statusie kulturowym. Co zaskakujące, stało się ono też źródłem wielu kontrowersji i nieustającej debaty wśród literaturoznawców i krytyków. Debata ta wydaje się podwójnie aksjologiczna. Po pierwsze, literackie walory samego dzieła są dyskutowane, kwe-

stionowane, odrzucane bądź potwierdzone; przy okazji przypadek *Władcy* zmusza nas (literaturoznawców i krytyków) do rozważania na nowo sposobów w jaki czytamy i oceniamy dzieła literackie, jak również kryteriów, na podstawie których umieszczamy książki w kanonach czy uniwersyteckich sylabusach. Po drugie, ocenie podlega również aksjologia zaprezentowana przez samą książkę.

Celem niniejszego artykułu jest podsumowanie części wspomnianej debaty odnoszącej się bezpośrednio do aksjologii zaprezentowanej przez *Władcę*.

Middle-Earth under Attack, Again: The Axiological Debate on *the Lord of the Rings*

The Lord of the Rings (henceforward abbreviated as *LOTR*) by J. R. R. Tolkien poses a very special case study in contemporary literature. This is a cult work which has been heard of by almost everybody who shows even minor interest in imaginative fiction, and actually read by innumerable masses of readers. Its cultural status and lasting popularity are unquestionable. It has found its place both in the canon even though its merit is sometimes questioned.

Given the fact that, on the surface at least, Tolkien's work appears to be a sort of fantasy epic tale, labelled by some as "mythic" while by others as "escapist", and that it does not relate – except in a highly metaphorical way – to any contemporary political or ideological issues, it is, perhaps, surprising, that it has caused so much controversy and inspired such a lively critical debate ever since it was published. This debate is doubly axiological. First, the literary merit of the work is discussed, questioned, rejected or affirmed; at this occasion *LOTR*'s case forces us to (re)consider the ways we (scholars and critics) read and evaluate literary works, as well as the criteria according to which we include books in literary canons or in academic syllabuses. Second, the axiology presented in and by the book is also put to scrutiny.

From the chronological point of view the debate can be roughly divided in two phases which also represent the two main facets of the problem. First, shortly after the publication of *LOTR*, and, what is, perhaps, more important, after the surprising popularity and acclaim it has gained, the world of literary criticism split into those who admired the work and those who were astonished (and sometimes terrified) by this admiration, dismissed it mostly as escapist and lacking serious literary merit. This discussion (or theoretical implications related to it) has been perhaps best summarized by such scholars as, for example Brian Attebery¹, Tom Shippey², Patrick Curry³, Marek

¹ B. Attebery, *Strategies of Fantasy*, Bloomington and Indianapolis 1992. See, especially, chapter two: *Is Fantasy Literature? Tolkien and Theorists*, s. 18–35

² T. Shippey, *J. R. R. Tolkien. Author of the Century*, Boston and New York 2001. See, especially, *Foreword*.

³ P. Curry, *Defending Middle-Earth: Tolkien: Myth and Modernity*, New York 1997, *passim*.

Oziewicz⁴ and Robert Scholes⁵ who not only explained well-deserved popularity of the work but also exposed the mistakes of its “reductionist” opponents and proposed more adequate tools for the analysis of mythopoeic fantasy texts. On the whole, it seems that this first attack was quite successfully and convincingly pushed back by *LOTR*’s critical proponents.

In this particular paper, however, I am more interested in reviewing the other, apparently more current facet of the debate, related directly to axiology presented by *LOTR*. This discussion differs from the previous one particularly in one respect. Here, Tolkien’s opponents do not simply ignore the book, find it unworthy of a serious scholarly analysis, or dismiss it on the grounds of the lack of literary merit (according to the set of criteria applied by themselves), but they tend to read and treat the book more seriously, contesting – and often rejecting – its axiological message. Notably, this “second wave” of “the critical siege of Middle-Earth” – in vivid contradistinction to the first one – has been undertaken mostly by scholars and critics well-read or even specializing in “fantastic” or non-mimetic literature, accepting its essential paradigms and genuinely appreciating many of its works. Also, the discourse in question is more overtly ideological or, perhaps, at times, even strictly political, not hiding its real nature behind the mask of literary theory and artistic preferences (although obviously it is impossible to draw clear demarcation lines between the particular spheres).

My task at hand is to summarize the main fields of the debate and, perhaps, approximate most interesting issues implied by it which could be further researched in the future.

To organize, at least provisionally, the discussion I will divide the axiological attacks on *LOTR* into three groups which for the sake of convenience will be labelled as “the narratologist”, “the radical Marxist” and “the moderate Marxist”, respectively. Then, it must be understood again, that the division lines between the tree are not defined sharply.

⁴ M. Oziewicz, *One Earth, One People. The Mythopoeic Fantasy Series of Ursula K. Le Guin, Lloyd Alexander, Madeleine L’Engle and Orson Scott Card*, Jefferson, North Carolina, and London 2008. See especially chapters 1-4. Although Oziewicz does not speak explicitly about *LOTR*, he discusses at great length the “reductionist” and the “hollistic” critical approaches to fantasy which result, respectively, in dismissing fantasy literature as a whole or acknowledging its worth in context most suitable for its interpretations.

⁵ R. Scholes, *Structural Fabulation: An Essay on Fiction of the Future*, London 1975. See, especially, chapter one. Scholes, again, does not relate directly to Tolkien, but he questions the assumptions prevailing in modern criticism that result in rejecting “fantastic” fiction and explains the real virtues of such literature for contemporary reader.

I will start from the presentation of what I call “the narratologist” criticism of *LOTR*. It is relatively mild, as it does not usually unambiguously condemn the work, but simply emphasizes certain of its narrative features which may be seen as drawbacks or limitations. Such an approach is (to certain extent) represented in the work of Rosemary Jackson⁶, but first of all, in a more recent study by Farah Mendlesohn⁷.

Rosemary Jackson basically applies Freudian and Marxism criticism to structuralist theories of Tzvetan Todorov⁸. She includes the works of Tolkien and his followers to the category of “the marvellous” fiction and contrasts them with true “fantasy” texts which possess significant subversive potential. Secondary universes of fantasy, in turn, “in which goodness, stability, order will eventually prevail”⁹ are simply products of old-fashioned nostalgia. Her approach, however, appears to be relatively one-sided which has been pointed out quite convincingly by B. Attebery¹⁰ or M. Oziewicz¹¹.

Typically narratologist observations of Farah Mendlesohn are probably more systematic and interesting. All secondary world fantasy (with *LOTR* as a quintessential specimen) is included by the researcher in the one of the four proposed categories – “the portal-quest fantasy”. While describing this category she points out certain limitations of the Tolkienesque narration. She observes for example that:

Fantasyland is constructed, in part, through the insistence on a received truth. This received truth is embodied in didacticism and elaboration. While much information about the world is culled from what the protagonist can see [...] history or analysis is often provided by the storyteller who is drawn in the role of sage, magician, or guide. While this casting apparently opens up the text, in fact it seeks to close it down further by denying not only the reader interpretation, but also that of the hero/protagonist. [...] The nature of the club story is that it valorizes the control of the narrator. [...] A contributing factor is the portal quest fantasies’ denial of argument with the universe. It is truism that fiction is about conflict, but in the portal-quest fantasies the possibilities of such conflict are limited by the ideological narrative that posits the world, as painted, as *true*¹².

⁶ R. Jackson, *Fantasy: the Literature of Subversion*, New York 1991.

⁷ F. Mendlesohn, *Rhetorics of Fantasy*, Middletown, Connecticut 2008.

⁸ See, T. Todorov, *The Fantastic. A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, Ithaca 1973.

⁹ R. Jackson, op. cit., 173-174.

¹⁰ See B. Attebery, op. cit., pp. 20-22.

¹¹ See M. Oziewicz, op. cit., pp. 43-46.

¹² F. Mendlesohn, *Rhetorics...*, pp. 7; 17.

Thus, it might be argued that *LOTR* promotes a passive, uncritical response (both on the part of the character and the reader) to the narrative that is downloaded to him by a figure of authority instead of inspiring more active and autonomous one's cognitive and ethical response. If we relate this to the empirical reality, one could suggest that such an uncritical attitude might prove dangerous and ethically dubious in a world that has seen so many totalitarian narrations accepted unquestioningly by large masses of ordinary people.

Mendlesohn also observes (which has also been noted by several Marxist critics before and after her) fantasy's incompatibility with history as we perceive it nowadays:

This form of fantasy embodies a denial of what history is. In the quest and portal fantasies, history is inarguable, it is "the past." In making the past "storyable," the rhetorical demands of the portal-quest fantasy deny the notion of "history as argument" which is pervasive among historians. The structure becomes ideological [...]¹³

This brings us to the problem of idealizing and conserving the past. Most fantasies, as Mendlesohn notices, begin with a sense of stability which is then threatened and sometimes broken and conclude "with *restoration* rather than *instoration* (the making over of the world)"¹⁴. Thus, fantasy as the whole, and Tolkien's work in particular, appear to be radically conservative – not in the immediate political connotation of the word – but in more philosophical sense. It tells the story of conserving the world or bringing it back to its original, desirable shape, to its natural order (first of all ontological but also social and political). Man's task is only to preserve this order, and not to contest it or assess it critically¹⁵. Any desirable change seems impossible here. This clearly distinguishes Tolkien's work and fantasy in general from the SF genre convention which, in its classical shape, mostly tells stories of changing and improving the world¹⁶.

Finally, Mendlesohn makes also another very crucial observation. She notes that "structures of a genre are themselves ideological and even where an author sets out to deliberately subvert those structures this remains an en-

¹³ Ibidem, p. 14.

¹⁴ Ibidem, p. 3.

¹⁵ Comp. A. Zgorzelski, *Fantastic Literature and Genre Systems*, in: idem, *Born of the Fantastic*, Gdańsk 2004, p. 38-39.

¹⁶ See. G. Trębicki, *Świat wartości Aksjologia fantazy świata wtórnego – model podstawowy*, chapter 3.5, unpublished.

gagement with the structural ideology”¹⁷. This observation will be later used, for example, by the Marxist critic Irina Rupp Malone (discussed later in this article) to condemn the whole genre of Tolkienesque fantasy.

At this point we move on to the discussion of more overtly ideological criticism of *LOTR*, connected mainly with the Marxist approach. A good example of what I refer to as “radical marxist” attitude to Tolkien is provided by French author Isabelle Smadja’s study *Le seigneur des anneaux ou la tentation du mal* which was also published in Poland¹⁸ or – to a lesser extent – by a prominent British fantasy writer (and a trotskist activist) China Mieville’s opinions¹⁹.

Smadja’s attack is especially sharp. She asserts that Tolkien affirms violence as – according to her – the protagonists find joy in fighting and killing. She even suggests that *LOTR* may enable young people to symbolically enact their most murderous fantasies without any guilt²⁰. The book also approves of racism as – Smadja points out – “Tolkien refuses Orcs human dignity and does not require that other characters treat them humanely, and this because of reasons typical for racist ideology – they belong to the evil race, their culture is regarded as disgusting, their look ugly...”²¹. *LOTR* is also accused of approving social inequality (as, for example shown by Frodo-Sam master-servant relationship), homophobia (as the clearly homosexual relationship between the two is never declared openly)²² and misogyny (as the role of female protagonists in the plot is inferior and the social structure of Middle-Earth visibly patriarchal)²³.

¹⁷ F. Mendlesohn, *Crowning the King: Harry Potter and the Construction of Authority in The Ivory Tower and Harry Potter*, ed. Lana Whited., Columbia, Missouri 2004, p. 160.

¹⁸ I. Smadja, *Władca pierścieni albo kuszenie zła*, tłum. B. Spieralska, Warszawa 2004. Smadja’s study caused a lot of controversy in Poland and was discussed (mostly critically) by numerous scholars, for instance T. Majkowski in his *W cieniu Białego Drzewa. Powieść fantasy w XX w.*, Kraków 2013, pp. 227–229 (my own argument here owes much to his discussion). However, it has not been translated into English and is basically unknown in Great Britain and the USA and are of no great consequence for the main discourse therein.

¹⁹ As voiced, for example, in J. Newsinger, *Fantasy and Revolution: an Interview with China Mieville*, “International Socialism Journal 2000, no. 88, <http://pubs.socialistreviewindex.org.uk/isj88/newsinger.htm>, access: 08.04.2020. Mieville’s opinions have also been discussed by Majkowski (op. cit., pp. 226–227).

²⁰ I. Smadja, op. cit., p. 69.

²¹ Ibidem, p. 108. Translation mine.

²² Ibidem, p. 127–128.

²³ Ibidem, p. 129–130.

Some of Smadja's arguments, especially those relating to the sphere of religion or metaphysics seem clearly far-fetched or based on misinterpretations of the text²⁴. Majkowski suggests that most of these accusations derive from the "reactionary" character of the novel, as Smadja perceives it, and its incompatibility with the politically correct ideology – Marxist, queer or feminist²⁵.

However, one might consider at this point whether some at least of Smadja's arguments could be valid outside of her political agenda and jargon, and useful for readers and researchers not sharing her strict ideological position. It seems that, for example, it might be the case in reference to *LOTR*'s racism. Probably, at closer scrutiny, a lot of readers would find it disturbing that there exist in Middle-Earth whole races of intelligent beings who are doomed as irredeemably evil, devoid of any positive characteristics, described simply as ugly and cruel. Such demonization of "the other", when we analyze it outside of *LOTR*'s mythical framework and relate it to human psychology, sociology and history might prove a very dangerous and doubtful ethically thing. The question arises, of course, whether such analyzing of the motif outside of Tolkien's mythical framework is legitimate. This is, by the way, the problem that often recurs in the axiological debate about Tolkien's work: can we (and if yes to what extent) relate *LOTR*'s motifs to the immediate political, social or ideological structures that govern the empirical reality?

China Mieville, in turn, as Majkowski comments, criticizes Tolkien's historical-axiological program, based on the false promises²⁶. The British writer remarks, for example that:

If you look at stereotypical 'epic' or 'high' fantasy, you're talking about a genre set in magical worlds with some pretty vile ideas. They tend to be based on feudalism lite: the idea, for example, that if there's a problem with the ruler of the kingdom it's because he's a *bad* king, as opposed to a *king*. If the peasants are visible, they're likely to be good simple folk rather than downtrodden wretches (except if it's a *bad* kingdom...). Strong men protect curvaceous women. Superheroic protagonists stamp their will on history like characters in Nietzschean wet dreams, but at the same time things are determined by fate rather than social agency. Social threats are pathological, invading from outside rather than being born from within. Morality is absolute, with characters – and often whole races – lining up to fall into pigeonholes with 'good' and 'evil' written on them. [...] In Tolkien, the reader is intended to be consoled by

²⁴ See T. Majkowski, op. cit., pp. 227-229.

²⁵ Ibidem, p. 229.

²⁶ T. Majkowski, op. cit., p. 227.

the idea that systemic problems come from outside agitators, and that *decent people* happy with the way things were will win in the end²⁷.

These observations largely coincide with the prominent American Marxist critic Darko Suvin's views on fantasy (and Tolkien in particular). As Suvin does not condemn *LOTR* or fantasy entirely, but criticizes some aspects of Tolkien's work, his stance might be perhaps described as "Marxist moderate". The main shortcoming of fantasy, according to Suvin, lies in the fact that it "creates a world not only radically different from the author's historical moment of life but also, and primarily, denying history as socio-economic lawfulness"²⁸. Thus [fantasy's] general absence of cognitiveness is bound up with denial or repression of key elements of earthly history, of what we usually classify as political and economic interpersonal regularities, tendencies or strictures²⁹. As a result, it may be argued that – since the vision of social and historical reality presented in *LOTR* and other fantasy works is false – so is bound to be an axiology that is based on it.

More recent Marxist ventures into Tolkien and fantasy criticism seem to be much more radical than Suvin's but, perhaps, better argumentative and more sophisticated than Smadja's. Frederic Jameson develops Suvin's argument emphasizing that the mythology of good and evil, on which Tolkien's work as well as most of fantasy is based, "the ethical binary [...] is incompatible with history"³⁰. This ethical binary – the organizational principle of the genre – at the same time constitutes its main ethical deficiency. It is built on the suppression and demonization of the Other³¹. It is also main source of *LOTR*'s axiological failure. This stance is upheld by Irina Rupp Malone who bluntly regards *LOTR* as "a pseudo-history passing absolute judgment on its characters and subjecting all their actions to the principle of the ethical binary"³².

²⁷ C. Mieville, op. cit.

²⁸ D. Suvin, *Considering the Sense of "Fantasy" or "Fantastic Fiction": an Effusion (1999-2001)*, Academia.edu. – Share Research. https://www.academia.edu/14688975/CONSIDERING_THE_SENSE_OF_FANTASY_OR_FANTASTIC_FICTION_AN_EFFUSION_1999-2001_21_780_words_, access: 10.02.2017, pp. 13-14.

²⁹ D. Suvin, *On Ursula K. Le Guin's "Second Earthsea Trilogy" and its Cognitions: A Commentary*, "Extrapolation" 47.3 (2006), pp. 488-504. Source: Findarticles.com. Access: 14.02.2010.

³⁰ F. Jameson, *Radical Fantasy*, „Historical Materialism”, vol. 10 (4/2002), p. 274.

³¹ See I. R. Malone's comment on Jameson (I. R. Malone, *What's Wrong with Medievalism? Tolkien, the Strugatsky Brothers, and the Question of the Ideology of Fantasy*, "Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts", Vol. 27 (2/2016), p. 205.

³² Ibidem, p. 215.

There is also an interesting opinion shared by most of the Marxist critics cited in this paper. They draw a clear distinction between fantasy (which is ahistorical) and science fiction, which, by contrast “has largely evolved into the historical or historicist mode of consciousness”³³. There is a clearly ethical difference between science fiction and fantasy³⁴, the first being progressive, historical, cognitive, based on true assumptions about the world, while the other conservative, reactionary, ahistorical, intellectually infantile and based on false assumptions about the world. This political split between left-wing science fiction and right-wing fantasy, real enough to influence convictions of many readers, has been noticed also by one of fantasy’s greatest critical proponents, Brian Attebery who even felt obliged to defend fantasy and Tolkien against accusations of possible affiliations with fascism³⁵.

Jameson puts forward also another crucial argument that in away helps to draw clearly another front line in the dispute. Namely, he states that

modern fantasy does more than simply [...] replicate the thought mode of an archaic society. Religion is, of course, precisely one of shoes archaic thought modes; but when it generates the fantasies of a Tolkien or a C. S. Lewis, this palpably reactionary movement requires a contemporary political explanation³⁶.

Fantasy as a genre is, in a way, a semi-religious mode, which has been pointed out by numerous researchers³⁷; while not promoting any particular religion, it is permeated with the transcendental and the spiritual. The genre created by Tolkien (with *LOTR* being a quintessential example) brings back to contemporary culture long forgotten archaic elements and axiologemes fulfilling most profound human psychic and religious needs related to spirituality. If one, on the other hand, fully absorbs the principles of historical materialism, it is probably impossible for her or him to find any value in works that are *per se* so deeply rooted in a semi-religious mode of thinking. This is one of the impenetrable front-lines in the critical battle of the Middle-Earth; obviously, the contrastive stances of *LOTR*’s proponents and opponents cannot be reconciled here. Moreover, probably there can exist no genuine and

³³ F. Jameson, op. cit., p. 274.

³⁴ I. R. Malone, op. cit., p. 221.

³⁵ See B. Attebery, *The Politics (If Any) of Fantasy*, “Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts”, Vol. 4 (1/1991), pp. 7-28.

³⁶ F. Jameson, op. cit., p. 277.

³⁷ See, especially, M. Oziewicz, op. cit., chapters 3 & 4; D. Waggoner, *The Hills of Faraway. A Guide to Fantasy*, New York 1978, pp. 3-60, K. Filmer, *Scepticism and Hope in Twentieth Century Fantasy Literature*, Bowling Green, Ohio 1992, chapter 1 and G. Trębicki, op. cit., chapter 3.5.

cognitively inspiring dialogue between the conflicting sides, at least in this particular respect. The split in evaluating the ethical significance of Tolkien's work only signals here the deeper split between the para-religious (in the philosophical sense of this word) or "metaphysical" mentality and atheistic (again in the philosophical sense of this word) or materialist mentality.

Obviously, probably most of us – even if we do not perceive ourselves to be "religious" or "para-religious" (again, not in the institutional but in the philosophical sense) – do not at least exclude the possibility of some form of transcendentalism and spirituality existing in the empirical world and/or in human psyche. And this is probably enough to appreciate Tolkien's (and genre's in general) spiritual values.

Again, the question remains, however, whether some of the Marxism criticism presented above is still worth consideration even for those of us who do not share materialist beliefs. Here, we are still left, on one hand, with the accusations of racism (or at least racialism), misogyny, conservatism (here, as it has been said, not meant as a valid political stance, but rather as a philosophical attitude, preventing any change or reform in social life) or affirming social systems that are responsible for inequality (feudalism), and on the other hand, with the pronouncements of *LOTR*'s failure in relating – even metaphorically, in the way ambitious SF does – to human historical, social or political reality, as it is perceived nowadays. One does also not need to be a rigorous Marxist to see dangers of demonizing the Other or "escapism" meant as inadequacy to grasp the truth (no matter whether presented in mimetic or non-mimetic, metaphorical way) of the human relations. Mendlesohn's observations on the structure of narration in portal-quest fantasy and its limitations and drawbacks are also not to be dismissed easily.

The issues signalled above have been partly addressed by fantasy's proponents³⁸, but they obviously require further careful consideration.

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