

The Lord of the Rings
Book Review
Sophie Koulomzin
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Imagine a completely fantastic world and time—the Middle Earth in its Third Age. It is not our world, nor does it fit into any time span we can think of. But it feels curiously familiar and this is what makes it so strange. Into events, scenery, characters and feelings similar to ours are placed fantastic powers and beings.

The Middle Earth is inhabited by Elves, Men, Hobbits, Dwarfs, Orcs, living trees and many others. Elves are passing away. They are powerful, beautiful, timeless beings, that belong to an earlier age and have come from a different world. Their presence in Middle Earth is drawing to its end.

Hobbits are appealingly human. They are little people, between two and four feet by our measure. They love peace and quiet and good tilled earth. They neither like nor understand machines more complicated the forge bellows, a water mill or a handloom. Quick of hearing, sharp-eyed, inclined to be fat, but nimble and deft in their movements, they dress in bright colors but seldom wear shoes since their feet have tough leathery soles and are clad in thick curly hair.

Dwarfs are small, sturdy, secretive folk, somewhat mistrustful of others. Their work, of course, is mainly underground, in the mountains, working with metals, precious stones and the magic that lies in such things.

Orcs are horrible, half-beastly, half human beings in the service of the Power of Evil.

A terrible war begins in Middle Earth at its Third Age between Sauron, the Dark Master of the powers of evil, and the powers of light, served by the Elves. It is not the first such war. Sauron had seemed thoroughly defeated the last time, but now he has returned to his ancient “fastness” in the Dark Tower of Mordor. After respite the Shadow takes another shape and grows again. Powerful opponents in the war are Gandalf, the White Wizard, on the side of Light, and Saruman, who has betrayed his elfdom and has become a Wizard on Sauron’s side.

To win the struggle, Sauron needs the Ring. Several magic rings existed in earlier ages, but all disappeared. This Ring he made himself; it is his, and he let a great part of his own civil power pass into it, so that he could rule all others. The Ring was lost and has been lost for a long time.

A creature of a Hobbit kind finds the Ring. Immediately it begins to exercise its evil power. The creature kills his companions to test the Ring and then discovers that putting the ring on his finger makes him invisible. The Hobbit put his knowledge to crooked and malicious use, becoming sharp-eyed and keen-eared for all that is hurtful. He takes to thievery; and because he goes about muttering to himself and gurgling in his

throat, they call him Gollum. He begins to hate sunlight and one day finds a little cave out of which runs a dark stream. Worming his way like a maggot into the heart of the hills, Gollum vanishes out of all knowledge.

Ages later a Hobbit called Bilbo during a dangerous and adventurous journey finds himself in a dark underground cave and takes possession of Gollum's "precious" Ring. Bilbo returns home and lives for many years without realizing that the Ring is gradually beginning to possess him, but the good wizard Gandolph makes him relinquish the ring to his young nephew, Frodo.

Years pass and a dark shadow beings to spread over the Middle Earth. Evil creatures appear where they had never been seen before. Sauron is preparing to conquer the world. Through Gollum, Sauron learns that the Ring is held by a Hobbit and sends his spies to look for it.

The great struggle begins when Gandolph visits Frodo, the young Hobbit who holds the Ring. Already Frodo begins to be affected by the evil power of the Ring. Thinking of what Gandolph has just told him, he wants to throw the Ring into the fire but finds he cannot do so. With an effort of will he makes the movement to cast it away, but finds that he has put it back in his pocket.

"I do really wish to destroy it!" cried Frodo. "Or, well, to have it destroyed. I am not made for perilous quests. I wish I had never seen the Ring... You are wise and powerful. Will you not take the Ring?" "No!" cried Gandolph, springing to his feet. "With that power I should have power too great and terrible. And over me the Ring would gain a power still greater and more deadly... Do not tempt me! For I do not wish to become like the Dark Lord himself. Yet the way of the Ring to my heart is by pity, pity for weakness and the desire of strength to be good. Do not tempt me. I dare not take it!"

Gandolph sends Frodo with three of his friends to Rivendell, stronghold of Elves, where a Council is held. The only way in which the evil power of the Ring can be destroyed is to carry it back to the Mount of Doom, in the very heart of Sauron's kingdom and cast it into the fire mountain. Who will carry it? Dangers so great and horrible that no physical strength can overcome them stand in the way.

Tolkien's utterly fantastic epic is almost impossible to classify. The power of evil is described with a realism and strength that make it convincing to an almost frightening degree. No one is immune to its power, and yet it can be defeated.

The author never moralizes. He does not draw conclusions. He does not attempt to make it fit within any framework of historical Christianity, or any other religion. It always remains a complete fantastic story. But if a real genius in understanding the nature, power, and quality of evil is part of religion, then the book is deeply meaningful, religiously.

What it takes to overcome the power of evil becomes only gradually clear. Wisdom, valor, courage, loyalty, integrity—all have their place in the struggle, but the

decisive victory is carried out by an unheroic, small person of utter humility and selflessness, even though the act carries with it a wound that will never heal.

During the last few years Tolkien's trilogy, with an introductory children's book called "The Hobbit," has gained tremendous popularity, especially among high school and college students. Club emblems, slogans bearing fantastic names from the epic have become fashionable. What is curious is that the book is equally appreciated by older people (at least I know several among the Orthodox), by theological and philosophically minded adults. The late C. S. Lewis was a great admirer and friend of Tolkien. It seems to me that this fantastic story has a "religious breath" of its own, and is not this live breath, this spirit of life, what most of us yearn for?