

## *The Hobbit and the Hippie*

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FEW COLLEGE bookstores or shops selling what are called psychedelic accessories would be considered well-stocked today if they did not feature large colored maps of Middle Earth and a box full of buttons (even in Elvish) proposing Gandalf for President or rejoicing that Frodo Lives! Throughout this country young Americans of the most contrasting and even contradictory beliefs and interests have been swept up in their admiration for a twelve-hundred-page fairy tale, J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. (In three volumes: *The Fellowship of the Ring*, *The Two Towers*, and *The Return of the King*.) There has been much comment, from sources as various as *The Nation* and *Seventeen*, on the popularity of this long tale by a retired professor of Anglo-Saxon literature at Oxford.

When *The Lord of the Rings* was first published over a decade ago it was best known and loved by a small English literary group (of which Professor Tolkien was

a prominent member) who were and are traditionalists in manners and morals. Like-thinking persons make up part of Professor Tolkien's following today, their numbers swelled by crowds of readers who feel drawn toward a similar view of life without clearly realizing its implications. Recently, however, the trilogy has also been enthusiastically adopted by some of the most unrestrained modern opponents of the standards agreed upon in traditional Western (and often Eastern) society—standards which underlie *The Lord of the Rings*. Indeed, if one can believe what one has somewhere read, this work is Timothy Leary's favorite piece of contemporary literature. A man may get very tired of being shown paradoxes (for literary persons what tabloid headlines are for the unliterary), but surely this is one. What do LSD High Priest Timothy Leary and the hippie community find in such a work as this?

The story of the trilogy, now familiar to a large number of readers, need be

sketched only briefly. Frodo Baggins is the hero and a hobbit. Small in size, simple, hospitable, fond of eating (especially fresh mushrooms), and pipe-smoking, hobbits "love peace and quiet and good tilled earth: a well-ordered and well-farmed countryside was their favourite haunt. They . . . did not understand or like machines more complicated than a forge-bellows, a water-mill, or a hand-loom, though they were skillful with tools." They inhabit the Shire, a small region of Middle Earth, during the last years of its Third Age.

Frodo has become the possessor of a marvelous ring as the adopted heir of his older cousin Bilbo, whose possession originated during the events described in Professor Tolkien's earlier book, *The Hobbit*. All Frodo knows at first is that the ring has the power to make its wearer invisible; but the wizard Gandalf the Grey guesses correctly that it is the One Ring of power, which on the hand of Sauron the Great, the Dark Lord of Mordor, would lead to the cruel enslavement of all Middle Earth. Sauron has discovered that the One Ring, long lost, has been found and he is searching for it. The ring is exceedingly powerful and more so for a great man than a small one, but its power is of a nature that twists and corrodes its user in proportion to his greatness. Thus the wise men who oppose the Dark Power cannot use, but must try to unmake it. It can only be destroyed, however, in the fiery volcano in which it was made, "In the Land of Mordor where the Shadows lie."

Frodo gets the job of destroying the ring and that quest, seemingly hopeless and often terrorizing, occupies most of the narrative. Though he sets out with a small company including several hobbits, men, the wizard, and others, he is in the end left with only his servant Samwise. At the same time the Dark Power is occupied by large battles and maneuvers waged for

the most part by men (though other creatures, including hobbits, join them) who choose to die if necessary rather than become slaves of Sauron.

Several of the underlying values of the story should be brought out here for the purpose of comparison later. Throughout the tale one is impressed by the very striking sense of history about Middle Earth. (Indeed Professor Tolkien informed the authors that in England most of the lending libraries over his protests classified the trilogy as history and non-fiction.) The characters have about them a great sense of the excellence of their past, even of its superiority. In the end Gandalf reckoned the leave-taking and the passing of the former age an occasion for tears, and that was the sentiment of all who did not embrace the Dark Power.

Perhaps the most memorable impression of a reading of the trilogy is the reality of the evil and, contrasted with it, the peacefulness of the Shire, the glory of the Elven lands, and the mysterious wonder of Tom Bombadil and Ents. Although this evil is clear to the reader, it is not always so to the characters. All of them are put to hard choices and even the best of them have moments of weakness.

And finally, there is the mature acceptance of the necessity of fighting the evil, even by the use of force. This is not an expectation that any particular effort of their own will finally conquer the evil, but a recognition of a present duty. Most importantly, beyond it all, in moments of greatest clarity, the characters acknowledge that "in the end the Shadow was only a small and passing thing: there was light and high beauty forever beyond its reach."

What then is the hippie interest in this "prose epic," as W. H. Auden has called it? Many hippies simply state that they think *The Lord of the Rings* is a well-writ-

ten and entertaining story, and here Professor Tolkien's other admirers would be in full agreement. The author's "sub-creation" of Middle Earth and its creatures is wholly successful. Read for story and atmosphere, a hippie or any other reader may ignore or fail to notice the values underlying the work as a whole.

Some hippies, on the other hand, consider the trilogy (or parts of it) a "psychedelic manual," akin to Hermann Hesse's *Der Steppenwolf*, the Chinese *Tao Teh Ching*, *Alice in Wonderland*, or any of a number of other widely varying types of writing. Passages from *The Lord of the Rings* read before or during an LSD "trip," for instance, may greatly stimulate the individual's mind and make his "trip" seem much more meaningful. It is no coincidence that both the hippies and Professor Tolkien feel particularly close to nature. Even those of us the hippies call "straight people," after reading the passages about the Old Forest and the Ents, come away feeling greater communion with forests in general and trees in particular. That the acid heads (and their turned-on fellows who avoid drugs) make use of passages such as these in order to "expand the consciousness" is hardly surprising. The splashy covers of the Ballantine edition of the trilogy are themselves somewhat reminiscent of one possible LSD-influenced vision of the story—covers which Professor Tolkien has described to the authors as "absolutely foul."

In the realm of underlying values the Tolkien-hippie paradox becomes pronounced and, with two possible exceptions, cannot be resolved. Taking the exceptions first, we note that both Professor Tolkien and the hippies reject (1) the "rationalist progressive" view of history as a series of distinct improvements over the past and (2) the materialist belief that matter is the ultimate determinant of all things. In spite

of the fact that Professor Tolkien and the hippies agree merely in the rejection, not the grounds for rejection, here is a kinship which might make a hippie feel at ease in the world of *The Lord of the Rings*.

Yet even here the paradox remains just below the surface. For instance, the great respect for the past found in the trilogy has already been noted, and it is this respect which in part supports the rejection of the idea of continual progress. For the hippies, however, continual progress is denied because it conflicts with the exaltation of undifferentiated experience and with the state more usually associated with madness. (Still, one must be cautious in trying to pin the hippies down. The authors have heard Teilhard de Chardin praised without dissent from the listeners in a hippie discussion group.)

Will Herberg has recently written that the hippies can perhaps best be understood as a modern version of a small early Christian sect called the Adamites. He points out some of the characteristics the two groups share: a sense of primal innocence; antinomianism; hostility to all authority; pacifism; sexual freedom; community of goods; free-floating fantasy-thinking; emotional self-indulgence; and a comprehensive cult of love. That these Adamite-hippie positions are incompatible with the underlying values expressed throughout *The Lord of the Rings* should be pointed out although the fact ought to be obvious to anyone who has read the trilogy. It is evidently not obvious to the hippies.

The hippie fascination with the hobbits is particularly instructive. A Secretary of the best known of the hippie papers, *The Oracle* of San Francisco, has commented to the authors that *The Lord of the Rings* is "the most realistic fiction that has been recently published. The hobbits are very much of a sub-culture in their own time

(being that of the Middle Earth period); for they like to keep to themselves, not bothering others. They enjoy living and are a very happy people." The identification of this hobbit "sub-culture" with the hippie "sub-culture" is clear in numerous hippie statements. But just what does this identification—which is their own—tell us about the hippies?

As long as the identification is between happy and peaceful sub-cultures which generally keep to themselves, it can be made with some validity. But, with the one exception discussed below, the comparison cannot go much further. The lives and values of the hobbits which lead to their simple and happy existence include a respect for quiet and good order which would be repelled by the frenetic behavior and art of the Hashbury community. It is surprising that the hippies have not noticed the esteem for age and for ancestors which is so characteristic of the inhabitants of the Shire. In addition, the hobbits are a geographically isolated group and are generally just unaware of what is happening outside the Shire; the hippies remain in the centers of greatest population and both explicitly and implicitly condemn the whole society that surrounds them.

That exception, the further parallel which can be drawn between the hippie and hobbit sub-cultures, is not mentioned by the hippies. Though both consider themselves independent and self-sustaining, in fact neither the hobbits nor the hippies would long survive in their respective worlds if they were not constantly sheltered by those around them whom they ignore (hobbits and hippies) and condemn (hippies). Professor Tolkien points this out clearly with regard to the hobbits and other isolated peoples in Middle Earth just as many more mature people today have tried to make it clear to the hippies. According to Aragorn, the King of *The*

*Return of the King*, who with his kindred had long wandered the northern regions of Middle Earth in exile, quietly resisting the increasing power of the Dark Lord:

Peace and freedom . . . The North would have known them little but for us. Fear would have destroyed them . . . What roads would any dare to tread, what safety would there be in quiet lands, or in the homes of simple men at night, if the Dúnedain [Aragorn's kindred] were asleep or were all gone into the grave?

And yet . . . travellers scowl at us, and countrymen give us scornful names. "Strider" I am to one fat man who lives within a day's march of foes that would freeze his heart, or lay his little town in ruin, if he were not guarded ceaselessly.

Thus the happy, simple, and carefree existence of the hobbits in Middle Earth (and the hippies today) is possible only so long as others, recognized by the sub-cultures or not, provide them a haven in a dangerous world and relieve them of all responsibilities outside their own limited interests and domains.

One hippie told the authors, "I think Tolkien has come very close (not perfect) to a groovy way for human beings to get along better in this world." The same hippie, however, was bothered by what she felt was a contradiction between peace and violence in Professor Tolkien's writings. To the hippie generally, violence of any kind must be avoided at all costs; pacifism is the only way to the achievement of authentic peace. This idea, however, is entirely foreign to *The Lord of the Rings* (as is the belief that any peace once established will reign eternally.) This is not an inner contradiction in Professor Tolkien's work, but rather a conviction which underlies the whole trilogy. Indeed, *The Lord of the Rings* is in large part a narra-

tive of the experiences of four hobbits who finally rise above their limited personal contacts and comforts (not always without some regret) to join other groups of non-hobbits in active resistance to the forces of the Dark Power which are bent on war and enslavement.

Hippie enthusiasm cannot, therefore, reach down into the real underlying values expressed by Professor Tolkien in his trilogy. The hippies, in their bizarre search for values in the modern world, have enthusiastically taken up a book with a view of the universe and a creature's place in it which is distinctly opposed to prevailing philosophies. But their fervor for the mere act of opposing has blinded them to the substance of that alternative.

"How shall a man judge what to do in such times?" asks one of the characters in *The Lord of the Rings*. The reply, which provides insight into the author's views as they are elaborated throughout the trilogy, "As he has ever judged. Good and ill have not changed since yesteryear, nor are they one thing among Elves and Dwarves and another among men. It is a man's part to discern them." Over a decade ago, C. S. Lewis wrote that Professor Tolkien's work was "a recall from facile optimism and wailing pessimism alike, to that hard yet not quite desperate insight into Man's unchanging predicament by which heroic ages have lived." This is a recall to which persons in a disturbed world might well wish to attend. It is very far from a call to drop out of the world's struggles.