

Sex and Subtext in Tolkien's World

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THE TECHNOLOGICAL WIZARDRY of Peter Jackson's film trilogy of *The Lord of The Rings* has contributed enormously to the worldwide popularity of J.R.R. Tolkien. *The Lord of The Rings*, a massive book that Tolkien labeled "heroic romance" rather than a novel, was originally published in England in three volumes in 1954 and 1955. The book achieved cult status among college students in the U.S. and England beginning in the 1960s, and book sales soared.

Nevertheless, Tolkien has generally been excluded from "literary" studies at colleges and universities, in part due to derisive attitudes towards the genre of fantasy fiction, which Tolkien referred to as "fairy stories." On another level, Tolkien's genius has also been under-recognized because of a powerful undercurrent of same-sex love within the realm of Middle-earth. The homoeroticism of the hobbits, the race of beings that launched Tolkien's fame, has often been glossed over, denied, and sometimes attacked, albeit obliquely. The revolution in attitudes toward gay and lesbian people in the 21st century offers the chance for a dramatic re-evaluation of Tolkien's place in the literary canon and a deeper understanding of the gay themes in his books.

The New Zealand filmmaker Peter Jackson capitalizes on a modern sexual sensibility in his three visually stunning film adaptations of *The Lord of The Rings*, released in 2001, 2002, and 2003. Homoerotic desire is up there on Jackson's very large screen for all to see. All three films were critically acclaimed, with dozens of Oscar nominations collectively. But while the films have secured Tolkien's place as a literary giant, the gay themes in these adaptations have engendered controversy. In the decade since the films were released, Tolkien scholarship, far from embracing sexual modernism, has become increasingly repressive. Religious conservatives have dominated published biographies and critical works. Their approach toward homosexuality in Tolkien's work and in his life has been complete silence.

What, then, is the truth about the author's treatment of homosexuality in the original *The Lord of The Rings*? Are Jackson's films faithful to Tolkien's vision, or do they augment the story with contemporary sexual attitudes? Equally engaging is the question of the life of Tolkien, and the role that homosexuality played in his relationships with men, especially his attachment to the author C. S. Lewis and the literary circle known as "The Inklings."

FRODO AND SAM: HOBBITS IN LOVE

Tolkien's vision of the way of life of hobbits is crystallized in the first book in the trilogy, *The Fellowship of The Ring*. The hero,

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Frodo Baggins, is a confirmed bachelor who, like his older relative Bilbo Baggins (the hero of the earlier work, 1938's *The Hobbit*), possesses the characteristics of a lonely homosexual man who has made a comfortable life for himself in a world where finding love is not an option.

When Frodo embarks on a quest to destroy the evil Ring, he is accompanied by his faithful gardener, Sam Gamgee, and two other hobbits named Merry and Pippin. The intense bonds of love that bind the four hobbits together bolster the interpretation of the hobbits' way of life as a sort of gay male commune. In *The Two Towers*, the second book in the trilogy, Tolkien comes into his own as a visionary and a mythmaker, and his treatment of homosexuality becomes more explicit. The book centers on Frodo and Sam, who are now alone on their increasingly perilous journey. Surrounded by omnipresent evil, an atmosphere based on Tolkien's horrific memories of the Battle of the Somme, they gradually fall in love and find the strength to counter the evil around them.

Tolkien frequently comments on the physical and moral beauty of his male characters. Most admired by the author is undoubtedly Sam Gamgee, whom Tolkien modeled on the working-class soldiers he met in the trenches in World War I. Rustic, unwaveringly loyal to Frodo, rough-hewn in speech and manners, Sam becomes Tolkien's ideal man. In his earthiness and sensual charm, Sam resembles the gamekeeper Alec Scudder in E. M. Forster's *Maurice*. Both authors utilize the honesty and physicality of a working-class man to illustrate the naturalness of same-sex love.

In one of the most emotional scenes, Sam has an epiphany while watching Frodo sleeping. He imagines that a light is shining from within Frodo, and the truth of his own feelings becomes apparent to him. "He shook his head, as if finding words useless, and murmured: 'I love him. He's like that, and sometimes it shines through, somehow. But I love him, whether or no.'" Sam's all-consuming love for Frodo becomes the guiding force of goodness throughout the remainder of Tolkien's epic.

Sam's epiphany is followed by scenes in which the two hobbits express their love in increasingly homoerotic terms: holding hands, sleeping huddled together, swearing eternal devotion. Near the end of *The Two Towers*, when Frodo is apparently killed by Shelob, a gigantic spider, Sam's grief is overpowering. In a poignant scene reminiscent of Romeo in the Capulet's tomb in *Romeo and Juliet*, Sam mistakenly believes his beloved to be dead. After embracing and kissing Frodo, he contemplates suicide as a means of being reunited with him. In such climactic moments, Tolkien recasts the literary traditions of romantic love.

C. S. Lewis was deeply moved, sometimes affected to tears, when listening to Tolkien read him the chapters in *The Two Towers* that dramatize the love between Sam and Frodo. These read-