

Letter to the Editor from Sandra Miesel:

TOLKIEN AND ROWLING: COMMON GROUND?

I follow the pronouncements of Michael O'Brien with special interest because I have been a professional in the science fiction and fantasy field for over 30 years. Because there is so much crammed into O'Brien's Essay, I will just address one aspect: magic in Tolkien's Lord of the Rings. O'Brien cites Letter #156 in The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien, which identifies Gandalf and his fellow wizards as incarnate angels. Tolkien explains that he calls them "wizards" for the connotative meaning of "those who know."

Note that Gandalf's own magic ring goes unmentioned by O'Brien. And Letter #155, which O'Brien uses with suspicious selectivity, pointedly defends the lawfulness of the magic arts employed by Middle-earth. Speaking of *magia* (magic) and *goetia* (sorcery), Tolkien says: "Neither is, in this tale, good or bad per se, but only by motive or purpose or use. Both sides use both, but with different motives." The ability to use magic "is an inherent power" in Middle-earth--just as in the secondary universe occupied by Harry Potter's wizards and muggles, not to mention most contemporary genre fantasy.

Some other premises of Tolkien's subcreation that diverge from Catholic teaching include angels that function as "gods," an absence of cultic religion, a different version of the Creation and Fall, death as the Creator's "gift" to men rather than their punishment, and reincarnation for elves.

O'Brien fears that Harry Potter will nudge children toward the occult. But contemporary neopagans routinely cite The Lord of the Rings as a work that predisposed them toward witchcraft. (They were also affected by a love of nature. Must we keep Catholic children away from trees lest they become Druids?) So if Tolkien were publishing now, O'Brien should logically have to condemn him in the same breath as J.K. Rowling.

Sandra Miesel
Indianapolis, Indiana

Michael O'Brien responds:

Sandra Miesel raises significant points, though they are not untainted by her own somewhat selective reading of Tolkien's letters.

In letter #156, Tolkien does not call Gandalf and the other Istari incarnate angels, as she suggests. He is careful to put quotation marks around the word "angels" and to explain that its meaning is only in the sense of the root of the word, messenger, as in one who is sent. Gandalf's powers are bestowed on him as a gift from Iluvatar, "the Father of All", Tolkien's mythological representation of God. This is a crucial point, *the* crucial distinction between Middle-earth and Potter-world. In the latter, all supernatural and preternatural powers are entirely naturalized. Rowling's sub-creation is fundamentally immanentized—it is a glamorized Flatland. By contrast, Tolkien's sub-creation is fundamentally hierarchical, representing a moral order that ascends

from the incarnate all the way up to the throne of God Himself.

In Tolkien's sub-creation, there are ranks of beings, and the Istari lie somewhere between angels and men. The term "wizard" is one men have projected onto the Istari, who are only superficially like the wizards in the Potter series. Tolkien has employed the sub-creator's liberty to envision a world that might have been. Yet he takes pains to state, in his essay "On Fairy Stories", that no matter how fabulous the sub-created world may be, no matter how wildly it departs from the details of material existence, it will remain faithful to the moral order of the real universe. He states elsewhere that like all incarnate creatures Gandalf and the other Istari are subject to weakness and suffering and moral temptations, and in fact it is only Gandalf who passes all the moral tests. Tolkien uses the word "gods" (again, he is careful to use quotation marks) to refer to the Valar, the Powers, the truly angelic forces who guide the world. Here he is using the word according to the consciousness of the peoples of Middle-earth, imbued as they are with primitive pre-Christian mythological understandings, similar to passages in the Old Testament in which angels are referred to as "gods".

Regarding Letter #155, Tolkien appears to be grappling with the question of magic (both *magia* and *goeteia*) as neutral power, as if he himself has not come to a clear understanding of it: "I have been far too casual about 'magic' and especially the use of the word..." He points out that the good characters in Middle-earth use *magia* sparingly, and *goeteia* as a kind of artistic exercise. The decisive point of this letter, however, reinforces my own position, for at its conclusion he says that "magic" (again in quotation marks) is not what we think of as magic in this world, which is obtained by lore or spells (the Gnostic seizing of secret knowledge). Rather, in Middle-earth it is "an inherent power *not* possessed or attainable by Men as such." In other words it is a faculty of the higher ranks of creatures (Elves and Istari), bestowed on them by Iluvatar as a gift. In addition, it should be added that Middle-earth is a mythological pre-Christian age, and more than once in the epic it is stated that these powers must pass away from the world.

It is important in assessing Tolkien's impact on modern consciousness to situate *The Lord of the Rings* in the fuller context of the body of the author's writings. The ring trilogy is only entirely comprehensible, and properly understood according to its author's intention, in the light of his foundational work *The Silmarillion*. With some leeway for imaginative expansion on his themes, Tolkien has given us the "theological" foundation to Middle-earth, one that corresponds in essence to the book of Genesis. It's all there: the Creator, the creation of the universe, the revolt of the fallen angels, Satan, the corruption of Man, the ensuing battle between good and evil in the incarnate world. The names have been changed and the details of the battles enlarged, but this is a dramatic portrayal of reality itself. If New Age devotees have to some degree co-opted Tolkien's writings to their own purposes, this does not negate the author's original intention. The New Age has attempted to co-opt sacred Scripture as well—the cults are notorious for this—but

does this negate the original intention of the Author of the Bible?

What is the context of J.K. Rowling's Potter-world? What are its "theological foundations", if you will? In a word, there are none. The Harry Potter series is a fantasy-projection of materialist man, *homo sine Deo*, man without God imagining himself to have god-like powers without any reference to the source of those powers, nor to any set of moral absolutes against which he can measure the rightness or wrongness of his thoughts and actions.

Witchcraft is not so much about love of nature, as it is about love of control over nature. It is about power—god-like power without accountability to objective standards, without obedience to the Creator of nature. It is about our root sin, pride. It is about rebellion against God's authority.

Sandra Miesel's *reductio ad absurdum* regarding keeping children from trees is clever, but self-defeating. A tree lives according to God's intention for its ontological value and purpose. Druids and witches do not. The characters in Potter-world do not.

I have read *The Lord of the Rings* aloud to my children five times over the years, and I hope to read it to my grandchildren some day. A few of my children have gone so far as to purchase copies of the trilogy for themselves, and to read extensively in Tolkien's other writings. While it is true that there are ambiguous elements in his vast and splendid sub-creation, these are minimal, and indeed at times have prompted fascinating discussions in our family. But we do not read Potter here. This is neither parental paranoia nor the ghettoization of the imagination. We know full well that there is no work of fiction that does not in some way fall short of a complete vision of reality. However, there is a great deal of difference between a flawed detail and a flaw in the fundamental vision. A house with a weak window frame is not the same thing as a house built on sand. No matter how beautiful the decor of the latter may be, it is a place I would rather not live. More importantly, it is place where I will not take my children to live.

Michael D. O'Brien