

THE HERO RETURNS WITH “THE RETURN OF THE KING”

By Don Feder

The final installment of Peter Jackson’s stunning screen adaptation of J.R.R Tolkien’s “Lord of the Rings” – “The Return of The King” -- premiered on December 17th. Not surprisingly, it had the highest first 5-days box office in history (\$246 million worldwide).

Since its publication in Britain (1954-1955), Tolkien’s Trilogy – as fans reverently refer to the epic – sold over 50 million copies, and that was *before* the release of Jackson’s movies, which naturally spurred sales of the books.

Such is the author’s popularity that a Lycos word search of J.R.R. Tolkien turns up over 2 million entries, compared to less than half that number for his slightly more famous countryman, Winston Spencer Churchill.

How to account for the popularity of the films? Of course there’s the rousing adventure yarn -- set in a fantasy world of elves, dwarfs, hobbits, Ents (giant, sentient creatures that resemble trees), orcs (rather a cross between a troll with a really bad hair day and Barbra Streisand) and other mythical creatures.

The battle scenes beggar the word spectacular – Agincourt meets Hans Christian Andersen. Only the wizardry of computer animation could do justice to Tolkien’s vision.

But that’s far from all.

The Lord of The Rings (books and movies), and especially “The Return of the King,” is about the struggle of good and evil – a dark lord of supernatural malevolence intent on crushing free will and enslaving humanity, a ring of power which corrupts those who possess it and therefore must be destroyed, courageous warriors, a wise and benevolent wizard, and

ordinary folk (represented by the prosaic Hobbits) who – through their sacrifices – rise to heroic heights.

It's a morality tale especially suited to our times. Like the inhabitants of Middle Earth, we too confront a spreading shadow (“One ring to bring them all and in the darkness bind them, in the Land of Mordor where the Shadows lie.”) Our Shadow isn't the Dark Lord Sauron, but an equally demonic force variously designated terrorism, fanaticism or Islamicism. It is anti-Western, anti-human rights and (ultimately) anti-humanity.

The struggle against this Dark Lord has also shown us unparalleled heroism by ordinary people – firefighters and police, soldiers and citizens. (One thinks of the noble Todd Beamer of “Let's roll” fame.)

Not many of those flocking to “The Return of the King” know much about the author of Middle Earth. A few would identify Tolkien as an Englishman. Fewer still know he was an Oxford don and a traditional Catholic. But in Tolkien's life and worldview lie the roots of his trilogy.

Born in 1892, John Ronald Reuel Tolkien was a product of the Victorian era. He studied at Oxford from 1908 and served in the First World War, where he endured combat on the Somme and returned home suffering from shell shock. The blasted land of Mordor of “The Lord of The Rings” probably was conceived in No-Man's-Land on the Western Front.

Tolkien became a professor of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford in 1925, and was appointed Merton Professor of English at the college in 1945, retiring in 1959.

The author's Catholicism and arch-conservatism were instrumental in shaping his opus. (During the World War II Blitz, the author kept a rosary next to his bed)

His Oxford friends included fellow don C.S. Lewis, author of “The Chronicles of Narnia.” When they met, Lewis was a skeptic. Tolkien has the distinction of bringing back to the Christian fold the greatest Christian apologist of the 20th century.

Although he loathed allegory, Tolkien wrote in a 1953 letter to Fr. Robert Murray: “The Lord of the Rings' is of course a fundamentally

religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision.”

Tolkien believed that mythology was primarily a moral medium -- that through fairy tales great lessons are imparted. Thus, the architect of Middle Earth wrote, “There is indeed no better medium for moral teaching than the good Fairy-story (by which I mean a real deep-rooted tale, told as a tale, and not a thinly disguised moral allegory).”

As Hillsdale College Professor Bradley J. Birzer explains in his book “J.R.R. Tolkien’s Sanctifying Myth” (ISI Books -- 2002), “Tolkien believed that myth can teach men and women how to be fully men and women, not mere cogs in the vast machine of modern industrial society.”

Perhaps that’s why Tolkien’s mythology has such powerful appeal in today’s world of global conglomerates, mass movements, mass media and information technology.

In “The Lord of The Rings” Tolkien dealt with such paramount matters as corruption of the soul, temptation, the will to power, mercy, forgiveness, redemption and salvation. He did so brilliantly, with prose that sears the soul like an incandescent blade.

Tolkien also wrestled with the 20th century – an era that brought previously unimagined material and scientific progress, but also untold suffering and unspeakable horrors. Tens of millions died in wars fostered by obscene dogmas, millions of others were murdered to advance grand utopian schemes. This is the century gave us secret police, torture cells, death camps, political propaganda and causes that substituted leaders and ideologies (the church of race or the church of the proletariat) for God.

Tolkien believed that the only way to combat this slide to technological barbarism is for people to rediscover their essence – to know that each of us has a divine spark within, to understand that history isn’t shaped by relentless forces but is the product of individuals with a vision (angelic or demonic), and that we are not “mere cogs in the vast machine of modern industrial society” but sub-creators, whose works can reflect the glory of the ultimate Creator. As the wizard Gandalf proclaims when he confronts the monstrous Balrog in Moria: “I am a servant of the Secret Fire!” So too was Tolkien. And so should we all be, the author implies.

Finally, “The Lord of the Rings” is about faith – faith that moves the weary footsteps of two dispirited hobbits toward the appropriately named Mt. Doom and what they believe will be their certain doom, faith that keeps the men of Gondor on the battlements fighting insurmountable odds, faith that gives Aragon the strength to lead when all seems hopeless.

While religion is pervasive in “The Lord of The Rings,” it is never overt. We never see characters involved in worship. With one exception, there are no references to an afterlife.

But religion is there in the Hobbits’ sense of wonder, in charity in unforeseen places, in heroism from unlikely sources and in the white magic of the Elves (especially Galadriel, the Elf lady of Lothlorien).

Galadriel bestows parting gifts on the members of the fellowship. To Frodo she gives a crystal phial, wherein “is caught the light of Earendil’s star May it be a light to you in dark places, when all other lights go out.” In the Bible, light symbolizes knowledge – especially the knowledge of God.

Jackson’s films are surprisingly true to Tolkien’s vision. Even more, in some instances, they add a subtle emphasis to what was only hinted at in the books.

In the first movie, when the fellowship leaves Lothlorien, Galadriel is standing on the shore with her hand raised in a serene gesture of farewell as the company paddle away. Dressed in white with a hood framing her head, shining with an inner radiance, she looks like the perfect Madonna figure.

Tolkien feared the age of heroes had passed – that what he saw as the ant-hill society of modernity, and a culture that washed all of the poetry, splendor and joy out of life, had made heroism on an epic scale impossible.

But the response to his books – and Jackson’s films – shows there is a genuine hunger for heroes and a yearning for the transcendent. Along with the capture of Saddam – the Shadow of Baghdad – “The Return of The King” is one of the most hopeful developments of 2003. And, fittingly, it comes in a season of hope – when mankind’s steps are illuminated by the Star of Bethlehem or the light of the menorah.

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