

The Gospel in Tolkien, Lewis, and Sayers

BY JOHN D. SYKES, JR.

Through their fiction, the Inklings found the means to display how God's gracious story of human redemption is the truth of history. Three recent studies of Tolkien, Lewis, and Sayers's work make it clear that our hunger not only for their stories, but also for the truth they disclose, remains unsatisfied.

Whatever became of sin? The question asked in the title of psychologist Karl Menninger's best-selling book of thirty years ago continues to be answered for many of us by a group of British writers active at mid-century. Whether the setting was the pre-Christian world of Tolkien's Middle-earth or the more contemporary context of space travel or detective fiction, the Inklings found the most compelling explanation of evil to lie within the frame of the theological category of sin. And it is in the narrative display of sin's dynamic through fiction that these writers offered their most profound treatment of evil. Three recent studies of their work take up this theme.

LEARNING FROM BABEL'S TOWER

The Tolkien explosion triggered by the success of Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* films has produced a bewildering assortment of commentaries. Tolkien was himself a complex and somewhat eccentric man, and so perhaps it should not surprise us to find books about him falling into at least three diverse categories, which for convenience we might call the mythic, Christian, and philological.

By "mythic" I mean those works that are content to explore the nooks and crannies of Tolkien's imagined world within its own terms. For the

most part, these books are aimed at fans seeking to extend the spell of Middle-earth that Tolkien has initiated.

Christian approaches to Tolkien usually take an apologetic stance, seeking to alert readers to themes and lessons that the deeply devout Roman Catholic author included *sub rosa*, so to speak, determined as he was to avoid didacticism and to concentrate on the pre-Christian history of European cultures.

Tom Shippey's *J. R. R. Tolkien: Author of the Century* (London: Harper-Collins, 2000; New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2002, 384 pp., \$13.00) looks at Tolkien from the standpoint of his professional interest, which was the study of the historical forms of language, specifically of Old English and its relatives. This approach may sound forbiddingly academic, but surely Shippey is correct in amplifying what Tolkien himself frequently said, which was that his stories grew out of language rather than language being the mere medium for narrative. For Tolkien, language had a life of its own that mirrored human thought and echoed national histories. Doubtless he was more than half serious when he claimed that the Tower of Babel represented man's true *felix peccatum*, the fortunate sin through which a great blessing came. Tolkien's views on language are so foreign to most readers and critics that having a guide who shares them is extremely enlightening. And Tom Shippey, himself a philologist, knows the philological side of Tolkien better than anyone.

Not content with small scale investigation of Middle-earth's construction, however, Shippey makes large claims for Tolkien's status, and they are claims which show, largely by contrast, Tolkien's Christian significance. The subtitle of the book indicates Shippey's estimate of Tolkien's importance, which is that Tolkien was the greatest author of the twentieth century by virtue of his having most fully developed the "metaphoric" mode of fantasy to deal with issues of contemporary concern. In opposition to critics he identifies as elitist, Shippey maintains that Tolkien, far from turning his back on his own time, addresses more seriously and satisfactorily questions of power, evil, and cultural relativity than do the modernist authors so often extolled by the literary establishment. According to Shippey, Tolkien belongs in a category of fantasy writers that includes George Orwell, William Golding, Kurt Vonnegut, and Thomas Pynchon—all of them writers who used fantastic settings to confront current problems. This suggestion is interesting, especially so in light of Shippey's observation that nearly all such writers have been combat veterans or otherwise seen the horrors of modern warfare firsthand. But his thesis also has serious limitations, especially when it comes to Tolkien's Christianity. This limitation is well demonstrated in his treatment of evil.

Tolkien's handling of evil in the guise of the Ring, Shippey claims, is both profound and anachronistic. This great source of power cannot be used for good. Any use of it at all will eventually corrupt its wielder, mak-

ing a tyrant of him or her. For Shippey, this feature of the Ring makes it a very modern metaphor; Tolkien's readers are instantly put in mind of the saying derived from Lord Acton: absolute power corrupts absolutely. The twentieth century bore out this truth repeatedly as extreme ideologies of right and left found their champions who spawned concentration camps and gulags. But according to Shippey, this timeliness also makes *The Lord of the Rings* anachronistic, for no pre-modern society finds power itself to be corrupting. This claim seems to be a stretch, however, in view of a tradition that goes back at least to Plato's *Republic*, where Gyges' ring (which also can render its wearer invisible) is the emblem of power used to gain private advantage without the wielder suffering any sort of recrimination.

Shippey also applauds Tolkien for recognizing that evil resides in human nature itself. He notes that like Orwell, Vonnegut, and Golding, Tolkien had seen war waged on a massive scale, and observes, "The life experiences of many men and women in the twentieth century have left them with an unshakable conviction of something wrong, something irreducibly evil in the nature of humanity, but without any very satisfactory explanation for it" (121). But the obvious reply is that the Christian doctrine of original sin has offered such an explanation for centuries, and that Tolkien is simply re-supplying it. Shippey is respectful of Tolkien's Christianity and far from ignorant of Christian treatments of evil, but his own commitments (which are elsewhere) seem to blind him to such manifest connections. Rather than find in Tolkien a deeply Catholic writer who is reviving a Christian vision through his mythic sub-creation, Shippey wants to discover a genius who has plumbed the spirit of our age to the chagrin of the would-be literary connoisseurs who continue to snub his work. Even so, his book is well worth the attention of serious Christian readers of Tolkien, who will learn from arguing with this knowledgeable and personable guide.

EXPLORING THE COSMIC REACH OF EVIL

A very different sort of help is available from David Downing's *Planets in Peril: A Critical Study of C. S. Lewis's Ransom Trilogy* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992, 200 pp., \$17.95). Downing's book grows out of years of work on C. S. Lewis at Westmont College. Whereas Shippey shares Tolkien's philological zest but does not endorse his Christianity, Downing clearly approves of Lewis's apologetic project as well as appreciating the more literary aspects of his endeavors. *Planets of Peril* is remarkably balanced and thorough in its treatment of a man known to be opinionated and blustery. The direct concern of the volume is the trilogy of science fiction novels by Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet*, *Perelandra*, and *That Hideous Strength*. Downing seems to have read every important piece of criticism on these novels; he also has at his fingertips a wealth of biographical and historical detail. Most laudable of all is his knowledge of

Lewis's academic writing. Although most Lewis enthusiasts know that he was an Oxford don, few seem to have read what he wrote in his strictly scholarly capacity. Downing shows that this omission is a mistake; although he avoids tedious summaries, by judiciously lifting passages and themes from Lewis's "other" books and lectures, Downing broadens and deepens our understanding of him. For example, in explaining the figure of the Great Dance that Lewis uses as the image of heaven in *Perelandra*, Downing quotes from a lecture on medieval cosmologists where Lewis mentions that their symbol for the *primum mobile*, the ninth and highest heavenly sphere of the universe, was a "young girl dancing and playing a tambourine." This brief reference ties together what Lewis so admired about pre-modern Western thinking with the striking but somewhat puzzling image at the conclusion of his myth re-told.

In fact, as other reviewers have noted, *Planets in Peril* serves as an excellent general introduction to Lewis. Taking the autobiographical memoir *Surprised by Joy* as his point of departure, Downing mentions major figures and events in Lewis's life through the publication of *That Hideous Strength* in 1945. Except that it does not cover the important final period of his life that was dominated by his relationship with Joy Davidman, what emerges from this book is a firm and rounded sense of the Lewis who produced the works so many have read. I almost wish that instead of filling the empty niche of a good book-length treatment of the space trilogy, Downing had set out to provide an intro-

duction to all the fiction. Those readers who do not count these novels among their favorites may unwittingly pass over one of the better treatments of Lewis.

Another reason to be less than happy with the book's focus (and its title) is that these novels simply do not represent Lewis at his best. For one thing, the books themselves are of

uneven quality. As Lewis modified his goals for each succeeding volume (changes Downing duly records), he issued books quite different from each other and of inconsistent worth. Although Downing is far from hagiographical in his approach to Lewis and includes shrewd observations on his subject's missteps, he avoids the kind of full-fledged evaluation that would allow him to say, for example, that while Lewis succeeds at moral allegory in *Perelandra*, he fails at social satire in *That Hideous Strength*. These are the

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kind of broad strokes that Lewis himself was capable of in his role as critic. Despite this limitation, Downing's is a rich book, elegantly written and accessible without being condescending.

DETECTING DEADLY SIN

Dorothy Sayers may be the least appreciated of the Christian writers connected to the Inklings, although she is hardly unknown. Her Lord Peter Wimsey murder mysteries continue to attract readers and have been the subject of excellent film adaptations. No less a figure than P. D. James, Baroness James of Holland Park and current queen of British mystery writers, serves as the patroness of the Dorothy Sayers Society. While Sayers did not attend the Inklings gatherings, she shared with them a strong connection to Oxford and had friendships with Lewis, Charles Williams, and to a lesser degree, Tolkien. And without doubt she made a major contribution to the mid-century exposition of "mere" Christianity in England with religious plays like *The Man Born to Be King* and collections of crisp essays such as *The Mind of the Maker*.

Janice Brown offers a comprehensive and sympathetic reading of Sayers's published work in *The Seven Deadly Sins in the Work of Dorothy L. Sayers* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1998, 286 pp., \$35.00). Her point of departure is Sayers's understanding of sin, which Brown believes was formed in her childhood and was enriched but not significantly altered as she matured. While the fruition of Sayers's long reflection is most visible in the introduction to her translation of the Purgatory section of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Brown demonstrates that from the time Sayers received instruction for confirmation at the Godolphin School in Salisbury she had a firm grasp on the Seven Deadly Sins and, more importantly, that her imagination was stirred by them. Although Sayers apparently abandoned it before completion, an allegorical poem she began between her first and second years at Somerville College, Oxford, had the seven sins as its unifying concept. Thus, from adolescence to the end of her life (Dante was her final passion), Sayers found this scheme to be central to making sense of human nature.

Like Downing's book, Brown's emanates from a deep acquaintance with its subject. And at twice the length, it not only gives a strong impression of Sayers, it provides insightful commentary on the whole range of her work. But the scheme of the Seven Deadly Sins—Pride, Anger, Envy, Sloth, Avarice, Gluttony, and Lust—does have its limitations: although it provides a ready means of organization, it sometimes threatens to become tedious and ill-fitting. Naturally, certain vices are more prominent in a particular work than are others, and a character seldom demonstrates only one. Thus, so far as elucidating Sayers's fiction goes, the scheme is rather hit or miss. When in discussing *Gaudy Nights*, which is set in an Oxford college, Brown observes that Sloth is the sin that leads a scholar to produce

dishonest work and ruin his career, her remarks are revealing. But when she describes the frustrations of Lord Peter and Harriet on their wedding night (which include getting smoked out of their own house) and praises them for not giving way to Anger, the analysis seems strained if not laughable. Still, Brown is on target more often than not, and she does take the freedom to leave her list at times, as in her Dantean discussions of love.

Of particular value in the book are Brown's helpful summary of the history of the Seven Deadly Sins (originally, there were eight, and the contents of the list did vary slightly into the Middle Ages) and a list of virtues that stand as correctives to these particular vices. Readers will also be grateful for trenchant quotations from Sayers's letters and papers, not all of which are published or readily available.

CONCLUSION

In various ways, these three volumes show how Tolkien, Lewis, and Sayers found the means to display how God's gracious story of human redemption is the truth of history, despite human sin. Together these studies are proof that the Inklings make a witness as powerful in this century as it was in the middle of the previous one. Indeed, the hunger not only for their stories, but also for the truth they disclose, remains unsatisfied.



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