
NEOROMANTIC ELEMENTS IN J.R.R. TOLKIEN'S WRITING

Ana KečanInternational Balkan University, Skopje, Republic of N. Macedonia, a.kechan@ibu.edu.mk

Abstract: Neoromanticism or the Neo romantic movement may be easier to define, than it is to frame within a strict time framework. Some see it as a 20th-century resurgence of romantic ideas which began around 1928 and lasted up to the mid-1950s, while others locate it within a larger framework going back to the 1880s (being a reaction against naturalism) and lasting up to today. Depending on which timeline one adopts, it is sometimes synonymous with post-romanticism and late romanticism. However, regardless of its timeline, the movement has had profound effects lasting well into the end of the 20th century, becoming a reaction against modernism and postmodernism, and spreading into areas such as painting, music, literature, cinema, as well as architecture. As a movement, neoromanticism seeks to revive both romanticism and medievalism (the influence and appearance of ‘the medieval’ in the society and culture of later ages) by promoting the power of imagination, the exotic, the unfamiliar, further characterized by the expression of strong emotions (such as terror, awe, horror and love) as well as the promotion of supernatural experiences, the use and interest in Jungian archetypes and the semi-mystical conjuring of home. Furthermore, neoromanticism feels strongly against industrialization and the disconnectedness from nature in the modern world, rejecting the dichotomy between society and nature. It also embodies a wish or desire for a Utopian connection to nature uncoupled from social expectations and tradition, and going back to nature that has not been victimized by human civilization and industry. Most of these ideas may be found embodied in both the life and the writings of J.R.R. Tolkien, who famously declared to his son that he was, in fact, a Hobbit. His writings abound in creatures who not only live in harmony with nature (the Elves, the Hobbits), but embody it as well (the Ents) because romanticism (and subsequently neoromanticism) is, in essence, all about nature. In contrast, the evil of the main antagonists in his mythology (Melkor/Morgoth, Sauron, Saruman) is seen through their destruction of nature. Tolkien actually reverses the romantic line of vision with the creation of the Shire, which is seen as a ‘post-medieval’ society that has developed out of the Middle Ages, making Tolkien a medievalist dreaming of an organic and harmonious continuation of transformed and ‘purified’ Middle Ages as found in the Shire. This essay will present several of these characteristics mentioned and how the creatures of Tolkien’s mythology present a reaction against the industrialization of his time and neighboring county, while showing how these are ideas are still (perhaps even more so) relevant in the 21st century as well.

Keywords: neoromanticism, romanticism, medievalism, J.R.R. Tolkien.

1. NEOROMANTICISM

The 20th century saw a dualistic attitude towards romanticism: for most of it, any reference to romantic ideas or notions was looked down upon as kitsch or cultural conservatism, because most of its impulses were seen as antimodern. The list of perceived negatives of romanticism continues with “its quietism, its sentimentality, its divinization of the visionary powers of the (male) artist, its depoliticization of art, its aesthetic ideology, its masculinism, and, for some (not so long ago), its emasculated, feminine sensibility” (Kompridis in Eldridge, 2009:248). However, an undeniable resurgence of interest in romanticism and its main postulates is very evident not just in the 20th, but in the 21st century as well. Furthermore, according to Kompridis (ibid.):

A reinherited romanticism might provide us with a richer evaluative vocabulary than modernism could provide, one that might make it possible for us to say yes or no to modernity, to the present, to the future, in more complex and nuanced ways. And so the resurgence of interest in romanticism could be construed as part of a growing realization that it may be unwise as well as self-contradictory to live modernity's form of life unromantically.

The name we give this ‘reinerited romanticism’ nowadays is neoromanticism or, as some have called it, the Neo Romantic movement. The exact timeline of this movement is problematic: according to some, it is a 20th-century resurgence of romantic ideas which “extended from around 1928 to the mid-1950s” (Saunders, 2004:506), claiming it was “short-lived, contained and minimal in its influence...in short, a kind of a mid-century aberration” (507). However, even those who see it at such, do not underestimate its significance, calling it “considerably more profound and far-reaching than its critics have so far acknowledged” (ibid.) Others locate it within a larger framework starting as a reaction against naturalism, going back to the 1880s, and lasting up to today, when it is seen as a reaction against modernism and postmodernism.

What is it exactly in the original ideas of late 18th and 19th century Romanticism that keeps resurging and has attracted the interest of writers, musicians, philosophers, readers for two and a half centuries?

2. ROMANTICISM

Romanticism appears to be quite difficult to define on its own as well: on the one hand, we may have studied it as a list of characteristics found in literature and art in the late 18th and early 19th century that were considered ‘romantic’ but, on the other hand, precisely due to its constant resurgence, there is a tendency *now* to understand it more “as the self-conscious attempt to confront the aesthetic problems of philosophy and modern society” (252) and by modern society we mean contemporary society, *any* contemporary society. To add further to its complexity, Craig R. Smith in his book *Romanticism, Rhetoric and the Search for the Sublime: A Neo-Romantic Theory for our Time*, shows us that “the Romantic Era had roots stretching back through Humanism to the classic writers on rhetoric” (276). Its coming to life in the late 18th century, however, “was a reaction to the Enlightenment, which Romantics blamed for the alienation of mind and body, and the separation of humans from nature” (ibid.)

Be that as it may, these two views make neoromanticism just as complex and stating that a piece of art *is* neoromantic would, in essence, require some sort of criteria to go back to.

That, inevitably, leads us to *The Lyrical Ballads* published in 1798 or, more specifically, to the preface written by William Wordsworth two years later which, according to Meyer Howard Abrams (1953) “does have something of the aspect of a romantic manifesto” (100). In this preface, he outlines an approach to poetry that will later on be labeled “romantic”. According to him, in this approach, he and Coleridge attempted

to choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them, throughout, as far as was possible in a selection of language really used by men, and, at the same time, to throw over them a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual aspect; and, further, and above all, to make these incidents and situations interesting by tracing in them, truly though not ostentatiously, the primary laws of our nature: chiefly, as far as regards the manner in which we associate ideas in a state of excitement. (2003:7)

Furthermore,

Humble and rustic life was generally chosen [...] because in that condition the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature. The language, too, of these men has been adopted because [...] from their rank in society and the sameness and narrow circle of their intercourse, being less under the influence of social vanity, they convey their feelings and notions in simple and unelaborated expressions. (ibid.)

Romanticism is, therefore, “first and foremost committed to nature” (Smith, 2018:4), but apart from this tendency to focus on nature and rural life, neoromanticism draws from some of the other characteristics of Romanticism for inspiration as well, such as the strong resistance against industrialization and urbanization. The need to reconnect with nature and resist urbanization is understandably very pertinent in the past two centuries, which saw mankind moving away from nature and towards technology, experiencing increasing senses of alienation and interpersonal despair. This form of neoromanticism rejects the dichotomy between society and nature. It also embodies a wish or desire for a Utopian connection to nature uncoupled from social expectations and tradition, and going back to nature that has not been victimized by human civilization and industry. This focus on nature is inspired by the first strand of the movement of Romanticism and it flows from Wordsworth and his poetry. In this strand everything is familiar, recognizable, as cited above, humble life is presented, ordinary people are portrayed and everyday language is used. The power of imagination is promoted, but here there are no supernatural elements.

They belong to the second strand of Romanticism, the one which stems from Coleridge and his writings. There, the focus is on the exotic, the unfamiliar, further characterized by the expression of strong emotions (such as terror, awe, horror and love) as well as the promotion of supernatural experiences. In his writings, “the supernatural is made to seem natural” and for example, in *Kubla Khan*, he “combined an exotic setting and a mysterious atmosphere with a strange and original music” (1980:9). This strand will pick up on the 18th century’s foundation of Gothic novels, which will continue into the 19th century as well.

3. MEDIEVALISM

Yet another movement, so to say, that neoromanticism seeks to revive is medievalism, a noun which came into being in the decade of the 1840s, according to David Matthews (2015:x), and that same decade saw “medievalist developments in architecture, literature, opera, religion and political theory” (ibid). Medievalism nowadays is considered “the study of responses to the Middle Ages at all periods since a sense of the mediaeval began to develop” (165).

When being inspired by the Middle Ages, according to Honegger, it is usually by “‘conceptual’ and idealised Middle Ages [which] are characterised by a pre-Reformation unity and spirituality, a clearly structured (feudal and paternal) estate society, a (more or less clearly) identifiable national character, and by personalised political and professional relationships” (2010:49). The 19th century found itself influenced by these ‘idealised’ Middle Ages, so that it “furthered the idea of the grotesque Middle Ages, simultaneously developed a romantic Middle Ages, and ultimately produced professional medieval studies” (Matthews, 2015:40).

To illustrate the perplexing complexity of medievalism, here is Umberto Eco’s taxonomy of the Middle Ages as presented in his essay “Dreaming of the Middle Ages” (in Matthews, 2015:17-18), in which Eco looks back at the different ways the Middle Ages has resurged in the centuries that followed it. He identifies ten different kinds of Middle Ages:

1. The Middle Ages as a *pretext*, where the historical background of the Middle Ages is used as a setting, but with no real interest in the history.
2. The Middle Ages as the site of an *ironical visitation*, where the Middle Ages are revisited as heroic fantasy.
3. The Middle Ages as a *barbaric age*, a land of elementary and outlaw feelings.
4. The Middle Ages of *Romanticism*, with stormy castles and ghosts.
5. The Middle Ages of the *philosophia perennis* or of neo-Thomism, of elements of the Middle Ages in modern structuralism and semiotics.
6. The Middle Ages of *national identities*.
7. The Middle Ages of *Decadentism*, for example the Pre-Raphaelites.
8. The Middle Ages of *philological reconstruction* which, according to Eco, help us criticize all the other Middle Ages that at one time or another arouse our enthusiasm.
9. The Middle Ages of so-called *Tradition*, referring to the Templars, Rosicrucians, alchemists, for example in Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code*.
10. The last one Eco writes about is the *expectation of the Millennium* and he calls it a source of many insanities.

Even though Eco probably intended this taxonomy in his satirical style, it still, nonetheless, should have brought home even more clearly that the two movements or periods neoromanticism seeks to revive – Romanticism and the Middle Ages – are far more complex than simple chronological periods belonging to the past, as they both have found ways to keep on reviving through the centuries.

4. J.R.R. TOLKIEN AS A NEOROMANTIC

Now, to move on to the author in question, J.R.R. Tolkien (1892-1973), who is best known for his trilogy *The Lord of the Rings*, as well as *The Hobbit* and the posthumously published *The Silmarillion*. Tolkien was a medievalist, a philologist and writer, who created a legendarium or a fictional mythology about the remote past of the Earth, as well as several artificial languages, some more, some less formed. His entire legendarium is in one way or another very obviously related to either the Middle Ages or Romanticism, and these references reflect his own beliefs and feelings as he reacted to the (changes of the) world around him. Let us look at a few examples from his writings.

First of all, the Shire – the idyllic home of the Hobbits, who seem as embodiments of romantic idea(l)s and thoughts. In the prologue to the first part of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, he says:

Hobbits are an unobtrusive but very ancient people, more numerous formerly than they are today; for they love peace and quiet and good tilled earth: a well-ordered and well-farmed countryside was their favourite haunt. They do not and did not understand or like machines more complicated than a forge-bellows, a water-mill, or a hand-loom, though they were skilful with tool. (Tolkien I, 1986:1)

Furthermore, “they keep flower gardens and have great appreciation for trees” (in Dickerson, 2006:98). And Tolkien, himself, in probably his most famous quote, states:

I am in fact a Hobbit (in all but size). I like gardens, trees and unmechanized farmlands; I smoke a pipe, and like good plain food (unrefrigerated), but detest French cooking; I like, and even dare to wear in these dull days, ornamental waistcoats. I am fond of mushrooms (out of a field); have a very simple sense of humour (which even my appreciative critics find tiresome); I go to bed late and get up late (when possible). (letter 213)

Both the description of the Hobbits and of him as a Hobbit clearly reflect the romantic ideals of the love of nature, a slow-paced, simple and plain life, detestation of industrialization. Furthermore, he says that “the Shire is based on rural England and not any other country in the world” (letter 230) – the rural England he has in mind is set around the time of Queen Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee, i.e. 1897.

Part of the reason why Tolkien romanticized the rural countryside has to do with his mother's death. According to his biographer, Humphrey Carpenter,

his mother's death had severed him from the open air, from Likey Hill where he had gathered bilberries, and from the Rednal Cottage where they had been so happy. And because it was the loss of his mother that had taken him away from all these things, he came to associate them with her. His feelings towards the rural landscape...now became emotionally charged with personal bereavement. This love for the memory of the countryside of his youth was later to become a central part of his writing, and it was intimately bound up with his love for the memory of his mother. (in Dickerson, 2006:73)

In addition to this, Tolkien's romantic ideas are "most clearly represented by his use of the nature-machine conflict" (Clinton, 2017:27-29). He grew frustrated and discontented with the changes happening and changing the face of England and he was quick to express that discontent:

Not long ago – incredible though it may seem – I heard a clerk at Oxenford declare that he 'welcomed' the proximity of mass-production robot factories, and the roar of self-obstructive mechanical traffic, because it brought his university into 'contact with real life'. He may have meant that the way men were living and working in the twentieth century was increasing in barbarity at an alarming rate, and that the loud demonstrations of this in the streets of Oxford might serve as a warning that it is not possible to preserve for long an oasis of sanity in a desert of unreason by mere fences, without actual offensive action (practical and intellectual). I fear he did not...The notion that motor-cars are more 'alive' than, say, centaurs or dragons is curious; that they are more 'real' than, say, horses is pathetically absurd. (in Helms, 1974:73)

Clinton further summarizes Tolkien's detestation of industrialization as follows,

What is mechanical or machine-driven is what is highly rational, reasoned and scientific. The machine is indifferent to its own functions; the machine doesn't care what the input is, nor what the output is, only that it runs and produces. The dark forces of Sauron and Saruman rely heavily on industrial machinery to produce their military strength. (29)

This is beautifully, albeit sadly, illustrated by Saruman's destruction of Fangorn forest, the home of the Ents, a tree-resembling race in Tolkien's mythology. Treebeard, one of the Ents, also voices Tolkien's detestation of industrialization when he says of Saruman

I think that I now understand what he is up to. He is plotting to become Power. He has a mind of metal and wheels; and he does not care for growing things, except as far as they serve him for the moment. (Tolkien II, 1986: 89)

The Ents are one of the races, together with the Hobbits, who clearly reflect Tolkien's (and the Romantics') deep appreciation and reverence for nature and a care for the environment. Another of these races are the Elves. They are "at least as environmentally aware as the Hobbits are, and in many ways, their environmentalism is more sophisticated...even more than Hobbits, Elves identify themselves, and are identified by others, with the life of Middle-earth and see themselves as stewards and guardians of its beauty" (Dickerson, 2006:99).

In relation to the Hobbits, some of them reflect the conflict between the familiar and the exotic, which tempted Bilbo Baggins to leave the Shire and go on an adventure, which was something Hobbits never did. The same is true for Frodo, who also had to leave on an adventure of his own, together with his 3 friends. Yet, these are the only exceptions, more or less, that we know of. Tolkien created the Shire to be so mystifyingly reminiscing of the notion of *home*, that, in a form of romantic longing, nobody would want to leave it.

The Shire is not only a reflection of romantic views and ideals, but it is a reflection of some of the views of the Middle Ages. According to Honegger, the Shire and

its idyllic rural and provincial qualities are exactly the elements that link it with the idealised 'conceptual' Middle Ages – which stand for a time before the cataclysmic events of the French Revolution (1789) in the case of the romantics, and the worst excesses of industrialisation and mechanised warfare (late 19th, first half of the 20th century) in the case of Tolkien. (2010:48)

This idea Honegger presents, of the 'conceptual' Middle Ages is particularly important, in our view, of what neoromanticism is trying to achieve. Furthermore, with Tolkien being a medievalist himself, he would be very apt indeed in bringing to life medieval ideas and his writings would, perhaps inevitably, be coloured by those ideas, or in the words of Jane Chance (2003:5) "Tolkien, was, over time, influenced by his own personal medievalism, his profession as a medievalist, his relationships with other medievalists, and his own mythologizing in constructing his major fiction".

So, it is not surprising that not only the Shire, but the whole of Tolkien's Middle-earth seems influenced by this idealized Middle Ages topos. One characteristic of it is presenting the idealized Middle Ages as having a holistic

and coherent view of the world, unified by religion (as this is Pre-Reformation, the religion in question is Catholicism). According to Honegger, as

Tolkien himself pointed out (in letter 172), *The Lord of the Rings* is a Catholic tale – even more so since he removed all (or almost all) overt references to religious rituals and organised religion. The underlying ethos, often more felt than consciously noticed, is that of a coherent and harmonious metaphysical view of the world – a world that is indeed ‘catholic’ in the sense of the word as ‘all embracing, comprehensive’. (2010:52)

Yet another characteristic of this topos would be the personal, yet hierarchical relationships of the pre-modern era and we find descriptions of these in *The Lord of the Rings*, in which “the societies of the Shire, of Rohan and of Gondor, are all hierarchical and personal” and are contrasted with the evil “‘modern’ and centralised state of Sauron that is hierarchical yet utterly impersonal” (Honegger, 2010:56).

These examples we showed here are only several of numerous ones that are to be found in the writings of J.R.R. Tolkien. More can be listed, which would further confirm the claim that he can, in fact, be considered a neoromantic.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, in Tolkien’s depiction of the Shire and the description of the Hobbits, Elves and Ents, we see the embodiments of romantic ideals, such as the love of nature, a simple, rustic life, environmentalism, as opposed to the destruction of nature and industrialization embodied in the evil characters. Largely influenced by his own medievalism, his writings also show a yearning for some of the aspects of the Middle Ages. Honegger actually gives more emphasis to the medieval elements in his writing, saying that “Tolkien is thus not so much a Romantic dreaming of a time long past, but a medievalist dreaming of an organic and harmonious continuation of transformed and ‘purified’ Middle Ages as found in the Shire” (2010:57).

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