

Alan Lee's illustration from  
J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*  
(1997 edition).



# Filming Tolkien's Legendarium

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**R**epresentatives of the Tolkien Society and other fan groups are regularly quizzed in the press about the community's response to Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* and, more recently, *The Hobbit*. Despite some hostility from the more longstanding elements of the Tolkien community, many welcomed them as opportunities to engage new audiences with Tolkien's legendarium, as phenomenal pieces of 21st-century cinema, and as legitimate attempts to portray Tolkien's stories on screen. However, the films remain controversial in their treatment of the source material.

This article defends Jackson's creation and argues that those who most heavily criticised the films are judging them against different criteria from Peter Jackson and more casual fans of the film, although both sides can appreciate that the films cannot be entirely faithful to Tolkien's 1,200-page trilogy. First we will focus on J.R.R. Tolkien's views and the early attempts at adaptations; and second we will look at the fan reception and compare Jackson's adaptations to their source material. The differing reactions from fans is dependent on whether or not they see the distinctive characteristics of Tolkien's characters as integral and inextricably linked to the essence of the story.

## **Tolkien's views and early attempts**

Since *The Lord of the Rings* was published in 1954-5 there has always been interest in adapting Tolkien's stories for stage, radio and film. Despite claims that Tolkien 'would've hated the films',<sup>1</sup> Tolkien himself was actually open to seeing *The Lord of the Rings* on screen. In 1957 he was approached by an American company to make a film of his book; in a letter to his publisher Tolkien said:

As far as I am concerned personally, I should welcome the idea of an animated motion picture, with all the risk of vulgarization; and that quite apart from the glint of money, though on the brink of retirement that is not an unpleasant possibility. I think I should find vulgarization less painful than the sillification achieved by the B.B.C.<sup>2</sup>

The 'sillification' was a radio dramatisation on BBC Radio 3, broadcast over 1955 and 1956, which annoyed Tolkien for its poor attention to detail: 'I think poorly of the broadcast adaptations. Except for a few details I think they are not well done, even granted the script and the legitimacy of the enterprise (which I do not grant).'<sup>3</sup> Tolkien told the producer

Terence Tiller that there was too much emphasis on dialogue with not enough context; he preferred narration of passages in order to prevent characters and scenery from appearing 'flat'. Tolkien recognised the difficulty of adapting *The Lord of the Rings* and admitted to Tiller that he 'had a very hard task': 'Here is a book very unsuitable for dramatic or semi-dramatic representation. If that is attempted it needs more space, a lot of space.'<sup>4</sup>

It seems that the often repeated criticism that *The Lord of the Rings* films were too long would not have been levied by Tolkien himself! The following year, Tolkien received a request from a group of Americans asking for permission to produce a film version of *The Lord of the Rings*; after reading the script he sent a response to his publisher:

An abridgement by selection with some good picture-work would be pleasant, & perhaps worth a good deal in publicity; but the present script is rather a compression with resultant over-crowding and confusion, blurring of climaxes, and general degradation: a pull-back towards more conventional 'fairy-stories'. People gallop about on Eagles at the least provocation; Lórien becomes a fairy-castle with 'delicate minarets', and all that sort of thing.

But I am quite prepared to play ball, if they are open to advice – and if you decide that the thing is genuine, and worthwhile.<sup>5</sup>

Tolkien's motives were not entirely honourably based on dramatic merit, however. He told his son, Christopher, that his policy was 'Art or Cash. Either very profitable terms indeed; or absolute author's veto on objectionable features or alterations.' It seems that when Tolkien sold the film rights to United Artists in 1969 for £100,000 (equivalent to nearly £3 million in today's money, with 7.5% royalties of any future adaptations),<sup>6</sup> he ultimately chose Cash over Art. Subsequently, *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* film trilogies have netted over \$10 billion in ticket sales and merchandise – a sum of money equivalent to the GDP of Mongolia – so that 7.5% stake in royalties has now generated a healthy return.

In respect of Art, there were two 'dramatists' we know Tolkien disliked. First, he was not a fan of William Shakespeare, whose works he 'cordially disliked' at school and which he described as 'folly' to either read or study.<sup>7</sup> Not only was it Shakespeare's portrayals of fairies that annoyed Tolkien, but perhaps – judging by Tolkien's earlier complaints about adaptations – the exclusivity of dialogue was not much to his liking either. The second dramatist that Tolkien disliked was Walt Disney. Tolkien said he 'loathed' Disney and referred to his productions as a 'transatlantic juvenile taste'. In a letter to his aunt in 1961 Tolkien referenced the 1933 Disney film *The Pied Piper*: 'I am sorry about The Pied Piper. I loathe it. God help the children! I would as soon give them crude and vulgar plastic toys. Which of course they will play with, to the ruin of their taste. Terrible presage of the most vulgar elements in Disney.'<sup>8</sup>

It is unclear precisely what Tolkien disliked about Disney (aside from his using the plural 'dwarfs' rather than 'dwarves'), but it does not appear, at least, to have tainted his views against an animated film. What Tolkien seemed to be primarily concerned with was seeing adaptations that respected the story and gave it the space to breathe; he certainly wanted a greater emphasis on the context and the scenery rather than simply on dialogue. On these grounds it is clear that Peter Jackson's film trilogies are rather more successful at representing this vision than might initially be supposed at face value.

## Peter Jackson's films

After an attempt by the Beatles – which would have starred McCartney, Harrison, Lennon and Starr as Frodo, Gandalf, Gollum and Sam respectively – John Boorman tried to make a version of *The Lord of the Rings* which would have included a scene where Frodo and Galadriel make love.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps mercifully, neither of these endeavours passed the proposal stage.

Peter Jackson, a relatively unknown New Zealand film-maker, had read *The Lord of the Rings* at the age of 17 and retained a lifelong ambition to adapt the book on screen.<sup>10</sup> After originally being turned down by Miramax, New Line Cinema agreed to finance a trilogy based on the three volumes, which were released on consecutive Christmases in 2001-3. *The Lord of the Rings* series was a fantastic critical and commercial success: with 17 Academy Awards, and over \$6 billion in revenue, *The Lord of the Rings* has become one of the most successful film trilogies ever. *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* became the second-highest grossing film after *Titanic*, whilst becoming the first ever, and so far only, fantasy film to win the Academy Award for Best Picture, and the leading actors were propelled into international stardom overnight. To this day, the films continue to rank in critics' polls as three of the best films of all time.<sup>11</sup>

Despite the commercial success, critical acclaim, and book sales precipitated by the films – with HarperCollins reportedly selling 10 million copies of *The Lord of the Rings* as a result of the trilogy – the response from the Tolkien community was a little lukewarm. The Tolkien Society issued a non-committal 'Position Statement' on the films whilst rumours were abound in the press that the Tolkien family had fallen out with one another as a result of the films.<sup>12</sup> Tolkien fans became more and more aghast as the trilogy went on: the absence of Tom Bombadil, Frodo's age, Aragorn's reticence to become King, Gandalf's doubt and Faramir's initial desire for the Ring were all lambasted by die-hard Tolkien fans. This is all despite the fact that Jackson went to great effort to match the canon Tolkien fans had become accustomed to, including employing well-known Tolkien artists John Howe and Alan Lee as conceptual artists.

Indeed, with a runtime of 11 hours for *The Lord of the Rings* it can barely be claimed that Jackson failed to give the story room; in Tolkien's words, he gave it a lot of space. He resisted attempts to cut the films down and was determined to tell the story in its fullest extent; all of the major elements are present as are all the major characters, locations and events. So determined was Jackson to create the best possible films he built up WingNut Films, Weta

Workshop and Weta Digital all to furnish his trilogy. Following the success of *The Lord of the Rings*, New Zealand's film and tourist industries have been transformed and revitalised. All of this happened as a consequence of Jackson's desire to get the films right.

It is an oft-heard complaint that much of the on-screen dialogue is original but, as Tolkien observed, there is not that much dialogue in the book. Despite this, Jackson, Boyens and Walsh did their very best to lift as much as possible from the books, as the following extracts show:

The Balrog reached the bridge. Gandalf stood in the middle of the span, leaning on the staff in his left hand, but in his other hand Glamdring gleamed, cold and white. His enemy halted again, facing him, and the shadow about it reached out like two vast wings. It raised the whip, and the thongs whined and cracked. Fire came from its nostrils. But Gandalf stood firm.

'You cannot pass,' he said. The orcs stood still, and a dead silence fell. 'I am a servant of the Secret Fire, wielder of the flame of Anor. You cannot pass. The dark fire will not avail you, flame of Udûn. Go back to the Shadow! You cannot pass.'

The Balrog made no answer. The fire in it seemed to die, but the darkness grew. It stepped forward slowly on to the bridge, and suddenly it drew itself up to a great height, and its wings were spread from wall to wall; but still Gandalf could be seen, glimmering in the gloom; he seemed small, and altogether alone: grey and bent, like a wizened tree before the onset of a storm.<sup>13</sup>

This compares rather favourably to the same scene in the film.

GANDALF: You cannot pass!

FRODO: Gandalf!

GANDALF: I am a servant of the Secret Fire, wielder of the flame of Anor. The dark fire will not avail you, flame of Udun.

*Frodo watches as the Balrog puts one foot on the bridge and draws up to Full Height, wings spreading from wall-to-wall. Gandalf is a tiny figure, balanced precariously on the narrow bridge.*<sup>14</sup>

There are also some magnificent scenes which fully encapsulate the majesty of the story. Going back to that 1956 radio adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien posed the question to Terence Tiller: 'Can a tale not conceived dramatically, but epically, be dramatised?' Jackson, with the help of his concept artists and Howard Shore's award-winning scores, certainly proved, in scenes such as 'The Lighting of the Beacons' and 'The Ring Goes South' (where the Fellowship set out from Rivendell), that an epic tale can be dramatised and a dramatisation can be epic.

With all that in mind, why are the films so very controversial with fans? For a start there are number of tongue-in-cheek and humorous scenes which jar rather pointedly with the epic tales that Jackson is trying to convey. Examples of this include 'Barrels out of Bond' in *The Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug*, Legolas riding an Oliphant in The Battle of Pelennor Fields, and Merry and Pippin discussing Lembas bread in Lothórien. Furthermore, Frodo's alleged 'wimpy' persona is not helped by the fact he falls over at least 36 times in the trilogy.<sup>15</sup>

Some critics would cite the above as proof of the 'dumbing down' of Tolkien's works, and they are in good company with Christopher Tolkien. In an interview with *Le Monde*, Christopher said: 'They eviscerated the book by making it an action movie for young people aged 15 to 25'. He continued: 'The chasm between the beauty and seriousness of the work, and what it has become, has overwhelmed me. The commercialization has reduced the aesthetic and philosophical impact of the creation to nothing. There is only one solution for me: to turn my head away!'<sup>16</sup>

Yet if one asks Tolkien fans what they dislike, they complain not about the lack of philosophy in *The Lord of the Rings* and *Hobbit* trilogies, nor will they argue that Jackson's physical and visual Middle-earth is incompatible with Tolkien's Middle-earth. Instead, fans will focus on characters. Both BBC radio series were exclusively audio affairs focused on the dialogue of the characters – the 1981 radio series in particular is well regarded by fans despite inaccuracies (including the axing of Tom Bombadil) – whereas Jackson's films focus on the epic tales of Tolkien's stories.

A popular question in the press is why do Tolkien's works have an enduring appeal. Aside from the epic David-and-Goliath nature of the stories of good versus evil, the sheer wealth of characters means that there is always a character any reader can relate to, which then affects how they perceive the focus of the stories. Whereas – as the name suggests – *The Hobbit* is very much Bilbo's story, some people variously regard *The Lord of the Rings* as the story of Frodo's journey; Gandalf's triumph in his quest to defeat Sauron; Aragorn's eventual return as the King of Gondor; or Sam's stoic support of Frodo. It is the portrayal of these characters in the films and of others, particularly Faramir, Denethor and Arwen, that so often angers Tolkien aficionados.

In their excellent book, *Watching The Lord of the Rings*, Martin Barker and Ernest Mathijs published the results of a worldwide audience survey of 30,000 people who had all watched *The Lord of the Rings* films. The book is a work of film audience analysis rather than cinematic criticism or literary comparison but it does highlight this phenomenon: film fans very strongly identified with particular characters whereas, by contrast, Tolkien fans specifically did not feel that connection and were most likely to describe *The Lord of the Rings* films as 'epic'. Barker talks about how audiences differentiate between the books and the films but struggle to appreciate the films when they are emotionally invested in the books' characters:

[...] one complete answer read: 'I loved it. As a fan of the books I was disappointed at some of the missing parts and the changed ending but as a cinema fan I found it breathtaking.' This tactical split, allowing separate criteria for judgement, is now possible for those for whom emotional engagement is a journey into meanings. [...] 'It brought one of the greatest stories in literature to a conclusion as well as could possibly be done within the confines of a film.' Here, a clear preference is shown for the literary mode of expression without outright rejection of the cinematic.<sup>17</sup>

Fundamentally, Jackson had to play the hand that was dealt to him. That hand involved a visually rich world with complex characters who had limited dialogue. Tolkien himself recognised this difficulty when he spoke of the need for 'space' to avoid any overemphasis on 'dialogue'. *The Lord of the Rings* is a huge book at around 1,200 pages, but even in 11 hours Jackson struggled to tell the story of the characters in their fullness at the same time as conveying the physicality of Middle-earth and treating the actual adventure with the richness it deserved.

To realise the disconnect for Tolkien fans in their appreciation of Jackson's adaptation, observe the changes to the story that do not affect character development and do *not* invoke the ire of those attached to the books. For instance, about five chapters of text – 'A Short Cut to Mushrooms', 'A Conspiracy Unmasked', 'The Old Forest', 'In the House of Tom Bombadil' and 'Fog on the Barrow Downs' – amounting to 100 pages, are entirely removed. Save for Tom Bombadil (a controversial character in his own right) there are no missing characters, so the removal of these chapters is barely commented on. Similarly, massive swathes of the final chapters of *The Return of the King* are also cut up, including 'The Field of Cormallon', 'Many Partings', 'Homeward Bound' and 'The Scouring of the Shire'. Again, no character has been cut or changed so the reorganisation of the plot is more commonly accepted.

What does upset Tolkien fans is when their beloved characters are altered, albeit for legitimate cinematic reasons. Take Faramir, the character most often complained about. In the book he is of high nobility who valiantly helps Frodo; in the film he removes Frodo from Ithilien to Osgiliath and threatens to take the Ring. In doing this Jackson was fixing a plot hole in Tolkien's story: the Ring is all evil, no one can resist it (especially men), and it must be destroyed. Yet Gandalf, Bombadil, the entire Council of Elrond, Aragorn and the Fellowship of the Ring, Galadriel, Gollum and Faramir are either offered the Ring – or have the opportunity to take it – and yet fail to do so. Frodo's staggering good luck that he keeps happening to encounter the very few people who can resist the Ring would not play quite so well on screen.

## Conclusion

Ultimately, Jackson created a world which was visually perfect and textually accurate to the spirit of the quest, rather than to the nature of the specific characters. As has been shown, in this regard Jackson would have had the sympathies of Tolkien, even if he lacked Tolkien's

support. For Tolkien fans, however, to cut out chapters is forgivable, but to alter characters is reprehensible. Until lovers of the book can appreciate a film that is faithful to the story of the quest, and not just the story of the characters, debate over the accuracy of the films will continue. Whereas the animated films of the late '70s are simply laughed off and ignored as patently ridiculous, Jackson is ridiculed because he got so close to what a lot of people regarded as perfection. But instead of criticising him for relatively minor changes to the story, they should applaud him for the sympathetic attitude he took in adapting Tolkien's stories, the accuracy with which he did it, and the millions of people around the world who now have a copy of *The Lord of the Rings* sitting on their bookshelves.

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### Notes

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