



MIDDLE-EARTH AS A LITERARY MYTH: J. R. R. TOLKIEN AND NICK PERUMOV – A DIALOGUE ACROSS THE AGES

R. A. Asanov

Teacher of the Department of Uzbek Language and
Language Teaching at the Gulistan State Pedagogical Institute

Abstract

In this article, we conduct a systematic comparative analysis of two versions of Middle-earth – J. Tolkien’s original and N. Perumov’s – based on key parameters: mythology, anthropology, eschatology, narrative strategy, and philosophy.

We argue that N. Perumov’s text is not merely “fan fiction” or an epigonic imitation, but an independent philosophical gesture – a polemic with J. Tolkien on the nature of power, good and evil, and the meaning of history. The phenomenon of literary sequels set in someone else’s universe has become a widespread practice in the 21st century and requires theoretical analysis.

The dialogue between J. Tolkien and N. Perumov reproduces the fundamental dispute between Western and non-Western traditions in the perception of myth. Middle-earth continues to live on in films, TV series, games, and the readers’ consciousness, and the question of its canonicity is not an academic one, but a living one.

Keywords: Middle-earth, phenomenon, mythology, anthropology, eschatology, narrative strategy, philosophy, fantasy.

Introduction

There are literary universes that cease to belong solely to their creator. Middle-earth is one of the rarest examples of this kind. J. R. R. Tolkien (1892 –1973) spent more than half a century building this world: its languages, geography, theology, poetry, and history spanning millennia. It was precisely this richness and appeal of J.R.R. Tolkien’s world that gave rise to a phenomenon that became a cultural phenomenon in the 20th century: the emergence of authors who decided to enter the created universe and continue it. Among them, Nick Perumov (Nikolai Danilovich Perumov) holds a special place. In 1993, at a time when Russia was experiencing a cultural shock and feverishly searching for new points of reference, he published “The Ring



of Darkness” – a direct continuation of the events of “The Lord of the Rings”. The book caused a scandal among Tolkien fans and simultaneously became a bestseller.

Materials and Methods. The primary source material for this study consists of the following texts.

From J. Tolkien: “The Hobbit, or There and Back Again” (1937), “The Lord of the Rings” in three volumes (1954 – 1955), “The Silmarillion” (1977), “Unfinished Tales” (1980), as well as his correspondence – “Letters” edited by Humphrey Carpenter (1981) – which are essential for understanding the author’s intent. From N. Perumov’s works – the “Ring of Darkness” trilogy:

“The Elven Blade” (1993), “The Black Spear” (1993), “Henna’s Adamant” (1995), as well as the author’s prefaces and interviews, in which N. Perumov articulates his polemical position. The study is based on a comparative methodology in its narratological dimension. We draw on the tools of comparative mythology (primarily Northrop Frye’s work on mythical narrative patterns), Gérard Genette’s theory of intertextuality (the concept of “hypertext” as applied to sequels and rewritings), as well as the concept of the «secondary world» developed by Tolkien himself in his essay “On Fairy Stories” (1947).

The ontology and theology of the fictional world. Eru Ilúvatar and the Fate of Providence.

The central theological question on which J. Tolkien and N. Perumov differ most radically is the nature of the One and its relationship to the history of the world. For Tolkien, Eru Ilúvatar is the absolute creative principle, whose Music determines the fate of Arda. Melkor’s evil is included in Eru’s design, though contrary to Melkor’s own will: “He has not yet created anything that was not in my thought from the beginning.” This is a strictly providential picture of the world, in which history moves toward a predetermined conclusion – Daagor Daagorath, the final battle.

N. Perumov deconstructs this providentialism. In “The Ring of Darkness” and subsequent books, Middle-earth is a world in which forces oppose one another without any apparent “direction” from above. Eru is either silent, or his role is reimagined:



N. Perumov suggests that Darkness has as much a right to exist as Light, that the division itself is arbitrary. This is not atheism in the cheap sense, but something closer to Gnostic ambivalence or Nietzschean “beyond good and evil.”

The nature of evil.

In J. Tolkien’s ontology, evil is parasitic: it does not create, but distorts. Morgoth and Sauron are not rival gods, but fallen Ainur who have lost part of their original power. The destruction of the Ring is not a temporary victory within a cycle, but an ontological weakening of the very principle of Darkness. This is a fundamentally anti-Manichean position.

N. Perumov constructs a different model. In his system, Darkness is not a parasite, but an equal principle. The Orcs in “The Ring of Darkness” are portrayed as a people with their own culture, traditions, and code of honor. They are victims of an unjust history, not absolute villains. This overturns J. Tolkien’s axiology and brings the narrative closer to political fantasy, where “us” and “them” are categories of perspective, not of being.

Anthropology and the ethics of the characters.

Elves: from greatness to decline.

In J. Tolkien’s work, the Elves are the firstborn children of Ilúvatar, bearers of the highest wisdom and beauty in this world. Their departure across the Sea at the end of the Third Age is a tragedy, but a metaphysically correct one: the time of Men has come, and the Elves have fulfilled their role. Even Galadriel, who was tested by power and stood firm, possesses impeccable dignity.

N. Perumov turns this image on its head. His Fourth Age elves are a degenerate people who have lost their connection to Valinor and their spiritual elevation. Some of them are driven by selfishness, revenge, and political calculations. This is not a slur on the genre – it is a logical conclusion: if the world continues, if the story goes on, then degradation is possible. Perumov applies the laws of historical entropy to Middle-earth, which Tolkien fundamentally left out of the picture.

The hero and his moral choice

A J. Tolkien hero is, as a rule, a small man facing a colossal task. Frodo, Sam, Merry, Pippin – hobbits who embody “simple virtues”: loyalty, perseverance, love of home.



Their moral choice is clear, though difficult. Even Frodo's breakdown at Mount Doom is a moment of human weakness, redeemed by a strange Providence through Gollum.

N. Perumov introduces a fundamentally different type of hero. Folko Bregins and his companions are men of action, embedded in a world of political intrigue where the right choice is not obvious. Thorin One-Eye is an even more complex figure: a dwarf who has endured defeat and survived, carrying within him the bitterness of a generation that witnessed the victory of the Light but found no happiness in it. In this sense, N. Perumov's hero is closer to the existential tradition than to the epic one.

Narrative and Stylistic Strategy

J. Tolkien's narrative style is deliberately archaic. It draws on Old English poetry, Icelandic sagas, and the Finnish "Kalevala". His novel is an imitation of a chronicle, a "translation" from the Red Book of the Western Realms. This stylization as a primary source creates the effect of a genuine legend. The language is slow-paced, solemn, rich in alliteration and rhythmic prose.

N. Perumov writes in a different tradition – that of the dynamic adventure novel, closer to Soviet and post-Soviet science fiction of the 1990s. His prose is fast-paced, dialogic, and realistic in an everyday sense. This is a conscious choice: N. Perumov wants the reader to "live" in the world, not "contemplate" it from an epic distance. This difference in narrative pace reflects a profound difference in the understanding of what fantasy is: a tale of the past or a story of the present.

The Philosophy of History and Eschatology

For J. Tolkien, the history of Arda is linear in a profound sense: it moves toward the End. The Third Age is over, magic is fading, and the age of men begins – more modest, more sober, devoid of the presence of the Ainur. This historical melancholy is one of the strongest themes in "The Lord of the Rings". Sauron is defeated, but with him goes a part of the world's beauty – the beauty embodied by the Elven Rings.

N. Perumov constructs a cyclical, rather than a linear, philosophy of history. The darkness, defeated at the end of the Third Age, has not been destroyed – it has merely retreated, only to return in a new guise. History is not a path to the End, but an endless succession of struggles. This makes Perumov's narrative less tragic in a metaphysical



sense, but more alarming in a political one: there is no victory that lasts forever, no established order that cannot be destroyed.

Discussion. The Right to Continue: The Ethics of the Sequel

The publication of “The Rings of Darkness” sparked a heated debate in 1990s Russia, which, in broad terms, boiled down to the question: did N. Perumov have the right to write what he wrote? This question, for all its naivety, touches on a genuine theoretical problem: what is the status of a “secondary” text written within another author’s universe?

Genette’s concept of hypertextuality allows us to move beyond evaluative judgments. “The Ring of Darkness” is a hypertext in relation to Tolkien’s hypotext. N. Perumov does not “steal” the world – he transforms it by entering into a dialogue. Literature knows of similar cases: Jean Rhys’s “Wide Sargasso Sea” – a rewriting of the Brontës; Stoppard’s “Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead” – a rewriting of Shakespeare. In each case, the “derivative” text exists through its tension with the original, not in spite of it.

The key difference lies in the level of polemical transparency

N. Perumov engages with J. Tolkien on a metaphysical level. His book says: “The world is not as you have portrayed it. The story continues, and it is not so bright.” This is not the destruction of the myth – it is a test of its resilience. Our study focused primarily on N. Perumov’s first trilogy. His later works – in particular, the “Keeper of Swords” and “War of the Mage” cycles – take the author out of the space of J. Tolkien’s Middle-earth and into a universe of his own creation. A comprehensive analysis of the evolution of N. Perumov’s thought would require a separate study. Furthermore, the history of reception remains outside the scope of this article: the sociology of the readership of both authors deserves a separate empirical study.

Conclusion

The analysis conducted allows us to formulate a number of conclusions. J. Tolkien’s Middle-earth is a world built on the principles of Christian theology, providential historiography, and epic poetics. Its beauty lies in its completeness: every element serves a single design; every event is woven into a grand mythological narrative from



Ainulindalë to the fall of Sauron. This is the literature of the finale, of farewell, – hence its inescapable melancholy.

N. Perumov’s Middle-earth is a world built on the principles of postmodern ambivalence, Nietzschean revaluation of values, and political realism. Its beauty lies in its incompleteness: the story continues, and this means that the struggle does not stop, victory is never final. This is the literature of continuation, of renewal – hence its anxiety and dynamism. These two texts do not contradict but complement each other in a broad cultural sense. J. Tolkien created an archetype – N. Perumov put it to the test. J. Tolkien built a temple – N. Perumov showed that ordinary people with all their weaknesses live within it. This interaction, despite all its polemical sharpness, ranks among the most fruitful relationships in the history of world fantasy: the relationship between myth and its critical reinterpretation.

The phenomenon of N. Perumov’s “apocrypha” poses an important theoretical question for literary studies: where does the “foreign” world end and the “familiar” one begin? The answer is likely this: at the moment when the author finds his own voice within the borrowed space. N. Perumov achieved this – which is precisely why his books are still read and debated to this day. And so, the dialogue through Middle-earth continues.

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