Whispers of the Past: Tolkien and 20th Century Medievalists

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A work of the medievalist movement, J. R. R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* tends to idealize the Middle Ages. An exploration of the source of Tolkien’s world, his written work, plus its representation in the contemporary world and recent films, aids in our understanding the allure of the Middle Ages.

Medievalism began with the Romantic Movement of the late 18th century, the Romantics stressing themes of nationalism, spirituality, purpose, and emotion over rational belief – all aspects of medieval life. Romantic writings, architecture’s gothic revival, and the Pre-Raphaelite movement in art hold similar ideals. Their descendants, the Medievalists of today, likewise concern themselves more with the principles of the past than the reality.

Tolkien’s work, drawing on Norse and medieval myths and his love of archaic languages, creates an ideal modern medieval romance, though his portrayal of women does reflect the traditional roles of women in medieval society. The stories are often viewed as Christian allegory; however, Tolkien’s themes exemplify rather than symbolize Christianity. And he goes against the traditional quest archetype by creating a hero, Frodo, who seeks not to gain power but to discard it.

Influenced by the taste of contemporary audiences, the film versions of *Lord of the Rings* often deviate from Tolkien’s medievalist ideas. Tolkien’s continued popularity may be attributed to the fact that he creates a romantic and enjoyable ideal, with the audience drawn to similarities perceived between heroic figures in our time and the characters and values of another world.

Works Consulted

