

ANDRZEJ ZGORZELSKI

Lublin

TIME SETTING IN J.R.R. TOLKIEN'S "THE LORD OF THE RINGS"

The study presented here aims at illustrating the changes that appear in the internal structural relations of the modern literary fairy story. It is understood, that the modern fairy story undergoes a process of development, the general tendency being an attempt at combining its conventional motifs and methods of narration with ones which are characteristic of other genres. Hence the analysis of the internal structural relations in the modern example of the fairy story helps to discover some departures from the established conventional pattern of motifs and methods of narration. The conclusions must necessarily be narrow. The changes in the genre revealed by the observations in the present study cannot be understood as being comprehensively applicable to the fairy story of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, they constitute one of the trends in the evolution of the genre. A more general view of the development could be achieved after similar research on broader literary-historical material.

The example of the modern fairy story to be analyzed here is J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (1954—1955). Restricting the field of the research, the author forgoes presenting the up-to-date historical development of the genre; in his investigation he will also stress only the most important issues connected with the chosen aspect of the analysis: the function of time setting in changing the characteristics of the genre convention.

The fictional world of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and the time in which it has been placed cannot be explained by any, even the most daring, historical hypothesis. There never could be nor was there such an era in human prehistory. This is the essential fact which usually makes the critics call it a fairy story world¹. But, as P. Kuncewicz rightly suggests², it is an exceptionally long fairy story. The

¹ Cf. P. Kuncewicz, *Tolkien, czyli świat*, [in:] P. Kuncewicz, *Samotni wobec historii*, Warszawa 1967; P. Mroczkowski, *Wielka baśń o prawdach*, "Przegląd Kulturalny" 1961, Nr. 49 (484), p. 4; also: by the same author, *Dalsza baśń o prawdach*, "Przegląd Kulturalny" 1962, Nr. 51—52 (538—539), p. 9, and *Powrót króla*, "Więź" 1964, Nr. 2, pp. 97—98.

² Cf. Kuncewicz, *Tolkien, czyli świat*, p. 134.

story itself is about an enchanted ring made by the bad wizard, Sauron. With the help of the ring Darkness and Evil can reign the world and can master other enchanted rings that usually serve the Light and Good. Hence, all the free tribes of Middle-earth: elves, people, ents, dwarves and hobbits decide to destroy the ring by throwing it into the flames of the volcano in which it has been forged. The journey to the volcano is dangerous — the way leads through Mordor, the kingdom of Sauron who feverishly looks for the lost ring. The task of destroying the ring is entrusted to a little hobbit and a few of his chosen friends. In spite of many dangers and adventures, Frodo, the hobbit, and his companion Samwise reach the Fiery Mountain and destroy the ring, thus bringing peace to Middle-earth. But the power of witchcraft and the knowledge of magic begin to die out and the last representatives of the most beautiful tribe on earth, the elves, sail out to the land of the Immortals.

The fictional world is built up with iron consistency. The fairy story takes place usually somewhere on the border of our real world, beyond the seventh mountain and the seventh river. No such connection links Tolkien's world with empiric reality. It is a completely separate and self-sufficient world. But hence it must not employ the device of indefinite time, place or action³. These elements must be well known and defined to constitute the intricate pattern of the fictional world. Though they establish a new fantastic world, the elements themselves are taken from empiric reality, drawn from the rich world of allusions to myths, legends and history.

In the foreword to his trilogy, the author states that the whole work is just an adaptation of old chronicles and diaries. Although these chronicles, mentioned in the preface, and "translated" partly in the *addenda* to the book, are the products of the author's imagination, the appearances of the translator's work are rigorously kept up. They are to be seen in almost all the elements of the work.

The era described by Tolkien comprises three ages and the first one hundred years of the fourth age (the word "age" means a different division of time from that of empiric reality). The beginnings of the Middle-earth history and the First Age are only hinted at. The number of the years in the Second and the Third Ages prompts the suggestion that one age comprised about 3000 years, and each of the ages was counted from zero. Then the whole era would cover almost 10000 years. Some plots are retold in the "stories within the story" by particular characters, and the times before the Third Age are described in detail in *addenda* to the book, giving fragments of chronicles and a history of all free tribes. It is difficult not to get lost in the extended time panorama, since many statements referring to chronology are dispersed through all the chapters. The *addenda* help the reader in this task.

The consistent organization of the time setting, its main function being the strengthening of verisimilitude, is deliberately complicated by the author in the course of the story to create some difficulties in relating the time setting to empiric reality.

³ Cf. *op. cit.*, p. 134.

Tolkien introduces the same terms for different epochs (Elder Days is both the period before the First Age and all the years preceding the Fourth Age) and counts the years of the Third Age not only according to the Elves' and Dúnedains' calendar but also according to Shire count (Elves date minus 1600 years). He does not say much about the Elder Days and finishes his report with the conventional date of 1000 of the Fourth Age, stopping thus all attempts at fixing any time continuity (if this were possible at all!) with empiric reality. Understanding of the time convention is not simplified by Tolkien's counting all the Ages from zero and simultaneously extending the limits of each age to 3000 years, especially since information about the counting method is only to be found in the *addenda*. But inserting the dates in the course of the seemingly realistic narration makes for the disappearance of the impression that the action "never" took place (which would be the right impression for any fairy story).

As the impression of "never" does not exist here, the same is true about the word "nowhere". The space borders of Tolkien's world are shown on the maps in the *addenda*. A search for any similarity between its shape and that of the known outline of our world would be futile. It is a fantastic world. But the continent of Middle-earth does not cover the whole of Tolkien's world. The Land of Rhûn, the northern wastes and the fabulous island of Westernessee (Atlantis?), the Land of the Immortals are left beyond the rims of the maps. Borders of both time and space are blurred in this world. The geographical details are clear only in the centre of Middle-earth, where the action takes place. The rest serves as a background.

This world, consistently organized and placed in time and space, is peopled by a crowd of fantastic beings: dwarves, hobbits, wizards, elves, dragons, giant spiders, enchanted wolves, ghosts and wraiths. Wild mountaineers fight with medieval knights, the animals bring people help against the hordes of trolls, giants and phantoms. The wonderful trees of mallorn, the unwithering grass and the flowers of yellow elanors and white niphredils are substantiating elements in the setting of the peaceful lands. The action takes place in deep forests, on broad plains and wild moors, in besieged castles, enchanted forests and mountain caves.

The often realistic method of narration (the categories of pure narrative and description) shows no trace of surprise on the part of either narrator or protagonist.

There was another burst of song, and then suddenly, hopping and dancing along the path, there appeared above the reeds an old battered hat with a tall crown and a long blue feather stuck in the band. With another hop and a bound there came into view a man, or so it seemed. At any rate he was too large and heavy for a hobbit, if not quite tall enough for one of the Big People, though he made noise enough for one, stumping along with great yellow boots on his thick legs, and charging through grass and rushes like a cow going down to drink. He had a blue coat and a long brown beard; his eyes were blue and bright, and his face was red as a ripe apple, but creased into a hundred wrinkles of laughter. In his hands he carried on a large leaf as on a tray a small pile of white water-lilies [134—135]⁴.

⁴ J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, London 1968. In this and in the following quotations the ciphers in brackets refer to the pages of this edition.

But there exist marvels in this pseudo-realistic world. Though the appearance of wraiths and ghosts is laboriously made plausible, the courage of Dúnedain who leads them to battles is astonishing. The whole world is surprised at the strength of Frodo's will struggling successfully with the magic powers of Sauron. The existence of an Oliphaunt appears an old fairy story to Samwise. The strangeness of the realistic elements and the realistic treatment of fantasy co-operate with the consistency in the planes of time and space in strengthening the plausibility. The verisimilitude is heightened by the allusions to myths, legends, beliefs, historical events and primitive rituals. The protagonists' names have linguistic roots of Greek, Turkish, Arabic, French, Slavonic, Germanic and Celtic origin. The reader can find motifs that recall the myth of Atlantis, the mythology of Celtic Ireland, the mythic rites of purification. The whole story of the destruction of the ring resembles the great Solar Myth, the events of action being in accordance with the main dates of the solar year⁵. Even the anaphoric syntax and vocabulary of some sentences echo well known fragments from the *Bible*:

One Ring to rule them all, one Ring to find them,
One Ring to bring them all and in the darkness bind them [63].

One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all⁶.

All these motifs and events are united mainly by rules and laws which are strictly obeyed. They are the laws governing the world of a fairy story: Gandalf opens the enchanted door by uttering the forgotten magic word from Elder Days, the charms spoken above the hilt of a sword cure the wounds that were inflicted by it. Darkness and Light are the powers that reign in the divided world. The world is characterized by the symbolic quality inherent in the particular elements. The evident symbolism of motifs and events and of the sensational action is closely connected with fairy story ideas, where the good always prevails and the happy end after many adventures is but an example of a moralistic thesis. But is this the only thematic layer of the trilogy?

The Lord of the Rings is a book about history. It treats of the universal truths concerning Man and his relations with the world around him. There is no great hero of the story. One could even risk the statement that there are too many of them: Frodo, Gandalf, Aragorn, Sauron. All of them know that their deeds and adventures are only a fragment of the long history of the world, whose end is still far away. Being aware both of the past and future, the protagonists treat themselves as legendary characters, knowing that their epoch is waning⁷.

The novel is about the passing of times. There dominates the atmosphere of longing for the passing years of marvels, for the years, when "the songs have come

⁵ Cf. Kuncewicz, *op. cit.*, p. 142.

⁶ *The Holy Bible, Ephesians*, Ch. 4, v. 5—6.

⁷ The remarks in the last few paragraphs are based on the observations of Kuncewicz (*op. cit.*, p. 137).

down... out of strange places and walk visible under the sun" (534). People lose the ability to understand and love Nature (machinery and civilization being the domain of Saruman and Sauron!), the elves, who explained to the other tribes all secrets of Nature, sail away to their remote island. Man loses his noble features by shutting himself within the walls of human cities. All this is retold on one thousand pages and the atmosphere of sorrow and sadness is created by means of introducing lyrical elements. These elements appear in short sentences ("as he sang the white stars opened in the hard black vault above"[450]), as well as in long descriptions.

Then Frodo kissed Merry and Pippin, and last of all Sam, and went aboard; and the sails were drawn up, and the wind blew, and slowly the ship slipped away down the long grey firth; and the light of the glass of Galadriel that Frodo bore glimmered and was lost. And the ship went out into the High Sea and passed on into the West, until at last on a night of rain Frodo smelled a sweet fragrance on the air and heard the sound of singing that came over the water. And then it seemed to him that as in his dream in the house of Bombadil, the grey rain-curtain turned all to silver glass and was rolled back, and he beheld white shores and beyond them a far green country under a swift sunrise. But to Sam the evening deepened to darkness as he stood at the Haven; and as he looked at the grey sea he saw only a shadow on the waters that was soon lost in the West. There still he stood far into the night, hearing only the sigh and murmur of the waves on the shores of Middle-earth, and the sound of them sank deep into his heart [1068—1069].

The broad perspective of 10000 years, the epic treatment of the story itself and the lyrical atmosphere are the inherent qualities of the fictional world and its thematic layers. The manifold elements constitute the world, strange and fantastic, but in its symbolic meanings true and rich, presenting moral, philosophical, ethical and metaphysical problems.

Up till now the discussion has pointed to the existence of many structural elements of the fairy story, the heroic epic, the myths, and the adventurous novel in Tolkien's work. It has also stressed the dominance of the fairy story convention in creating characters, action, fictional world and ideas.

But it seems that at least one of the elements is not shaped according to this convention. It is the time setting of the trilogy.

The time of the fictional world is not homogeneous and appears in three layers, strictly connected with one another. These layers are: epic time, the chronicle time, and the fairy story time⁸. The second and the third appear mainly in *addenda* and in the "prologue" to the trilogy, in *The Hobbit*⁹. The main story is characterized by the epic quality of its time setting.

⁸ The presented analysis of the time setting is based to a certain extent upon the theoretical considerations of D. S. Likhatchev (*Poetika drevnerusskoy literatury*, Leningrad 1967, pp. 212—352), especially the differentiation of various categories of the fable time and the determination of their typical features. Cf. also: M. Czerwińska, *Problematyka czasu we współczesnych badaniach literackich*, "Pamiętnik Literacki" 1969, fasc. 4, pp. 371—373.

⁹ The novel *The Hobbit, or There and Back Again* (1937) forms an introduction to the trilogy and treats about earlier events. It was written mainly for young readers, hence one-plot action is always in the centre of interest and the ideas of trilogy are here but of marginal importance.

The time layer of the broadest vista is created by the *addenda A* and *B*. These *addenda* were to complete the history of the War for the Ring, explain its causes and fill up the gaps in the whole story. Their aim was to create a frame of reference which would be a historical setting for the action of the trilogy. Hence both *addenda* resemble fragments of chronicles or a history handbook. They are divided into parts, which treat separately about the history of particular kingdoms, tribes and families and are preceded by short introductions. These introductions mention the most important battles and events. Much space is devoted just to the catalogue of kings' names and the dates of their deaths:

Ruling Stewards. Mardil 2080, Eradan 2116, Herion 2148, Belegorn 2204, Hürin I 2244, Tùrin I 2278, Hador 2395, Barahir 2412, Dior 2435, Denethor I 2477, Boromir 2489, Cirion 2567. In his time the Rohirrim came to Calenardhorn¹⁰.

In *addendum B* this stylization is still clearer. Only the most important dates are given here. There is no interpretation of events, no detailed descriptions, no syntheses. The style is laconic: short sentences are full of names both of kings and geographical places:

- 1695 Sauron's forces invade Eriador. Gil-galad sends Elrond to Eregion.
- 1697 Eregion laid waste. Death of Celebrimbor. The gates of Moria are shut. Elrond retreats with remnant of the Noldor and founds the refuge of Imladris.
- 1699 Sauron overruns Eriador.
- 1700 Tar-minastir sends a great navy from Númenor to Lindon. Sauron is defeated¹¹.

The chronicles become more and more detailed when the dates mentioned in them approach the time of the action in the trilogy. The historical knowledge about the past years is also enlarged by the information about the events that constitute the "Nachgeschichte" of the main plots.

The chronicle time in both *addenda* has one function: it reflects the most important fantastic events of fantastic history. The report about the old times has an enormous time vista and the reader can identify no precise date in which the chronicle was written. The fantastic fate of kingdoms does not differ much from any remote wars of real pharaohs and emperors. The course of time is even and peaceful, there are no breaks there, no jumps, slowing or accelerating the course of time, which are typical of other prose genres. The chronicles use mainly the method of account, which, lacking the story about the events, results in mere enumeration of the chronologically ordered events.

Another layer is constituted by the time of the fairy story, which is limited and enclosed within itself. It appears in the main plots of *The Hobbit*, the story about

¹⁰ J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, New York, p. 347.

¹¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 392.

Aragorn and Arwen in *addendum A* and in the third part of the *addendum* about the Durin tribe. Chronologically the stories precede the main plots of the trilogy. The conventional characteristics of the fairy story are manifest in the vagueness of the time setting of those stories. This quality is reflected in the constant use of such phrases as: "in the days that followed", "then Aragorn was troubled", "then Aragorn took leave [...] of Elrond", "it came to pass that" (1073—1075). The gaps in the action of *The Fragment...* give rise to the breaks in the fable time: "for nearly thirty years he laboured", "after a few years", "thus the years drew on [...]" (1073—1075). The enclosure of the time setting is reflected in the separation between the fable time and the narration time, which in turn is caused by the "literary" shaping of the narrator. According to the convention of the fairy story the narrator opens the action of *The Hobbit* with the phrase: "once upon a time" and his omniscience and omnipresence is sustained throughout the whole story. He can even utter some remarks directed straight to the addressee of the narration. Similarly, when the action of *The Fragment...* reaches its finale the narrator has to break the continuity of the fable time by reminding the reader of the whole narrative situation: "Here ends this tale as it has come to us from the South; and with the passing of Evenstar no more is said in this book of the days of old" (1077).

The fable time of the trilogy is the third time layer in the book. The action covers the last years of the Third Age. Logically the Third Age is also included in the first layer, but the novelistic method of narration in the trilogy expands the slight data of chronicle time. The chronicles inform the reader about the events, names and dates; the three volumes of the novel present a fanciful story of the fragment of the history. There appear individualized protagonists who enrich the epoch with their feelings and emotions, their joys and sorrows. So, the fable time of the trilogy is not that of the fairy story. Unlike the latter it is defined. The layer of chronicle time becomes the frame of reference here, the historical setting for the plots. Owing to the existence of such setting the epoch chosen for the main action is endowed with heroic qualities. Consequently, the places in the fantastic space of Middle-earth have their heroic past, the names of the characters are associated with those of old heroes. The trilogy cannot begin from the void with the words "once upon a time", for the chronicle layer of *addenda A* and *B* creates the possibility of referring the particular events to the exact year, month and day. Neither can the story end by destroying the fairy story illusion nor return to empiric reality by means of a phrase:

My tale is done,
You've had your fun,
If you doubt it's true
Go eat your shoe!

The fable time of the trilogy has its opening and finale in the chronicle layer of time in both *addenda*, it has its recent past in the fairy story layer of *The Hobbit* and *The Fragment...*, thus being linked to the whole course of history. Though the

history is fantastic and it is not joined with empiric reality, as far as the fable time of the trilogy is concerned, it still remains history in the full meaning of the word.

The "opening" of the fable time into broad perspectives of history is achieved not only because of the general frame of reference in *addenda A* and *B*, but also owing to the use of the translator convention. Here the translator is the only element joining fiction with empiric reality. It is he, who "opens" the fable time; the pseudo-historical frame of reference (the fantastic chronicle layer) and the real course of history are united solely by his existence. The translator convention strengthens the plausibility of the fictional world, in opposition to the use of the omniscient narrator who usually kills verisimilitude by reminding the reader of the fictitiousness of the story. Time loses the fairy story meaning of "never" and acquires the symbolic meaning of "always" as the passage of time becomes one of the main thematic centres of interest in the novel.

The departure from the fairy story convention in the creation of fable time results in the adoption of the characteristics of epic time. The events are placed in the broad historical vista of the chronicle time of the *addenda*, and the choice of an epoch depends on its heroic quality. The fairy story is based usually upon the anecdote or it operates within events chosen from a longer period of time. The breaks in action are then necessary, being breaks in time that sometimes comprise several years. The epic time of Tolkien's trilogy is broader, the story does not choose separate events, it is led in several sub-plots and retells history. The consequence is the lack of breaks in action and in the fable time.

But both action and the fable time are subordinate to rhythmical pulsation. When the action enters in turn each particular stage of the dangerous journey, the narration becomes more detailed, narrative prevails there, time goes slowly and it is clearly defined: "after half an hour", "noon passed", "the sun hid behind the hills on the west". Day after day, night after night is recorded in this way. But when the travellers reach the peaceful and friendly villages or towns, time begins to run, the days pass quickly and their passage is hardly noticed:

So the days slipped away, as each morning dawned bright and fair, and each evening followed cool and clear. But autumn was waning fast; slowly the golden light faded to pale silver, and the lingering leaves fell from the naked trees. A wind began to blow chill from the Misty Mountains to the east. The Hunter's Moon waxed round in the night sky, and put to flight all the lesser stars. But low in the South one star shone red. Every night, as the Moon waned again, it shone brighter and brighter. Frodo could see it from his window, deep in the heavens, burning like a watchful eye that glared above the trees on the brink of the Valley [291].

The narrative loses its importance, dialogue and descriptions take the first place. The characters stop feeling the lapse of time.

But so it is, Sam: in that land you lost your count. There time flowed swiftly by us, as for the Elves. The old moon passed, and a new moon waxed and waned in the world outside, while we tarried there. And yestereve a new moon came again. Winter is nearly gone. Time flows on to a spring of little hope [409].

But though the action often is quick and there are many events, the reader feels the peaceful and slow course of the epic time. The noble elves look at the happenings with the eyes of ages. The High Tribe of Elves had its beginning, but it has no end; somewhere on the horizon of Tolkien's world there exists the Land of the Immortals, where nothing passes and time has no importance. The aspect of eternity evokes here the feeling of the unchanging order of the universe, of the endless processes of history. The feeling strengthens the metaphor of "always" which is present in the thematic layer of the story. The aspect of eternity has its function in the opening of broad time limits which are formed by the fictional history of the *addenda*.

As Aragorn puts it: "we are not bound for ever to the circles of the world, and beyond them is more than memory" (1076).

The creation of fable time in Tolkien's trilogy has an enormous importance for the genre structure. The three time layers decidedly influence the creation of a hybrid of the fairy story and heroic epic conventions. One of the most characteristic features of this hybrid is the coexistence of the epic story with the elements of lyrical reverie and poetical descriptions. The new narration methods are needed here for stressing the philosophic ideas connected with the fight of good and evil in man and in the fictional world. The prevalence of the epic time strengthens the idea of transience which is of primary interest in Tolkien's work.

CZAS W POWIEŚCI J. R. R. TOLKIENA "THE LORD OF THE RINGS"

STRESZCZENIE

Celem niniejszego studium jest przedstawienie zmian zachodzących w wewnętrznych związkach strukturalnych współczesnej baśni literackiej. Założono, że baśń podlega procesowi rozwojowemu. Główną w nim tendencją jest połączenie tradycyjnych motywów i metod narracji z motywami i metodami, które są typowe dla innych gatunków literackich. Przedstawiona analiza *Władcy pierścieni* J. R. R. Tolkiena ma wykryć jedną z wielu dróg odejścia od ustalonej konwencji baśniowej. Wykrycie innych sposobów przełamania tej konwencji wymagałoby, zdaniem autora, szerszych badań materiału historycznoliterackiego. W obecnym szkicu autor rezygnuje z omówienia dotychczasowego rozwoju baśni literackiej na terenie angielskim; badania swoje ogranicza też do najważniejszych zjawisk związanych z wybranym aspektem analizy. Aspekt ten to funkcja tła czasowego w zmienianiu cech gatunkowych baśni.

W pierwszej części artykułu autor wskazuje na różnorodność motywów literackich u Tolkiena. Choć elementy baśniowe wyraźnie dominują w trylogii, kształtując świat przedstawiony, dało się także wykryć obecność elementów epiki bohaterskiej, mitów i powieści przygodowej. W porównaniu z tradycyjną baśnią zwraca zwłaszcza uwagę poszerzenie problematyki, stała troska o uprawdopodobnienie oraz użycie zarówno rozległego, epickiego opowiadania, jak i lirycznego opisu.

W drugiej części studium stwierdzono, iż tło czasowe trylogii jest jednym z tych elementów, które nie są tworzone według konwencji baśniowej. Wyróżniono trzy kręgi czasu fabularnego:

1. czas rocznikarski, stworzony dzięki dodatkom A i B do właściwego tekstu trylogii i kształtujący system odniesienia, tło historyczne dla kręgu trzeciego;
2. czas baśniowy, pojawiający się we fragmentach opowiadań zamieszczonych w dodatkach i w powieści *The Hobbit* stanowiącej prolog do trylogii;

3. czas epicki, właściwy czas fabularny tekstu trylogii, oparty na historycznym tle czasu rocznikarskiego i baśniowego, związany konwencją tłumacza ze światem realnym, rozszerzony w perspektywę wieczności dzięki wybijającej się na plan pierwszy problematyce przemijania.

Jak się zdaje, ukształtowanie czasu fabularnego w trylogii Tolkiena ma decydujący wpływ na zmiany zachodzące w gatunkowej konwencji baśni. Zmiany w wewnętrznych związkach strukturalnych przejawiają się w połączeniu baśniowych motywów z epicką konwencją tła czasowego i z taką metodą narracji, która łączy elementy epickiego opowiadania z liryzacją opisów. Wspomniane zjawisko związane też jest ściśle ze zmianami w problematyce, która dotyczy walki dobra ze złem zarówno w człowieku, jak i w świecie przedstawionym, porusza filozoficzne zagadnienia i na plan pierwszy wysuwa problem przemijania.

Andrzej Zgorzelski