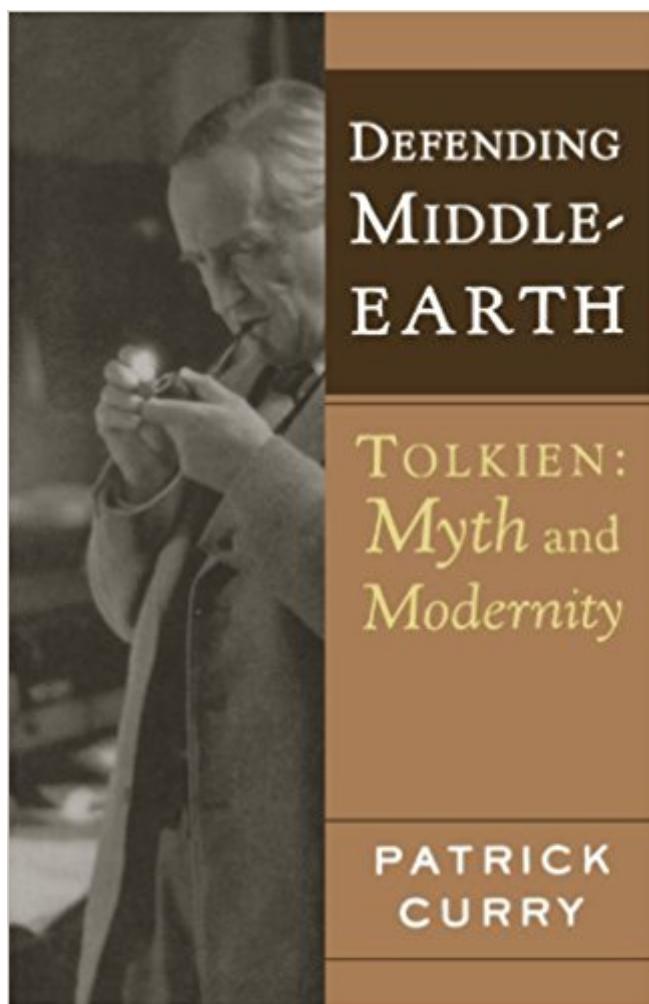


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# Defending Middle-Earth: Tolkien: Myth And Modernity



## Synopsis

What are millions of readers all over the world getting out of reading *The Lord of the Rings*? Newly reissued with a new afterword, Patrick Curry's *Defending Middle-earth* argues, in part, that Tolkien has found a way to provide something close to spirit in a secular age. His focus is on three main aspects of Tolkien's fiction: the social and political structure of Middle-earth and how the varying cultures within it find common cause in the face of a shared threat; the nature and ecology of Middle-earth and how what we think of as the natural world joins the battle against mindless, mechanized destruction; and the spirituality and ethics of Middle-earth, for which Curry provides a particularly insightful and resonant examination that will deepen the understanding of the millions of fans who have taken *The Lord of the Rings* to heart.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Ursula Le Guin has this to say about *\*Defending Middle-Earth\**: "Though modernism defines fantasy as irrelevance, readers know better.... What Tolkien offers is 'hope without guarantees,' and Curry shows us how he does it. A most valuable and timely book." Tom Shippey says: "Curry sees deep into the spiritual heart of Tolkien's world, and explains it in clear and unaffected language. The shade of Tolkien would nod approval." David Abram says: "...this audacious little gem of a book: a luminous study of *\*The Lord of the Rings\** and its growing relevance for our era."

Patrick Curry, a Canadian-born writer and scholar, is a Tolkien expert featured on the extended

DVDs of the films of The Lord of the Rings. He holds a Ph.D. in the history and philosophy of science and is the author of Introducing Machiavelli as well as several books and essays of social history.

I first saw Patrick Curry on the special features for the Lord of the Rings movies. I was impressed with him then and have enjoyed his book.

An interesting exploration of Tolkien's work: the theme of the book is to "defend" LOTR from its critics, and thereby explore the work itself, as well as Tolkien's writings. A fun read.

This book is a valuable attempt to draw out some of the societal lessons inherent in Tolkien's work. While interesting and at times excellent it suffers from a number of drawbacks. In particular, the Author's lack of sympathy with 'institutional religion', and Roman Catholicism in particular, leaves him at a disadvantage in considering the work of as devout a Roman Catholic as Tolkien undoubtedly was. It is, at times, also rather too defensive of Tolkien, which distracts from the presentation of the positive argument of the book. Within these limitations, however, it's a reasonable attempt to extract some valid (& overdue) lessons from Tolkien's work.

I tend to read criticism and analysis on Tolkien to discover new interpretations and ways of looking at his work; which then makes each time I read his works unique. Defending Middle-Earth succeeds in some respects, but fails in others. Although the author goes to pains in the Afterword to defend his work as "application" and not allegory, I don't think the assertion is quite right. I often thought, as I read this book, that all mention of Tolkien and Middle-Earth could be deleted and the book would still be viable. This was particularly true for me with regards to Curry's discussion on the dangers and pitfalls of Modernity and the threat to nature/ecology. While I agree with the author that these issues were of great import to Tolkien and Middle-Earth, the argument became too much about our own world, with little back-up or reference to Tolkien's writings. There are some clear and interesting insights within this book, but so often they are worked to death...to take a cue from Tolkien's "On Fairy Stories:" at times the tower was whole, and at times crushed to pieces. Too often it felt like I was reading a protest piece, a manifesto for the ills of this world. While I sympathize with these views, it is not what I expected or wanted from this book. Also, as one reviewer has stated, Curry is eminently obvious in his disregard towards the Christian aspects of The Lord of the Rings. He spends most of the chapter devoted to the spiritual downplaying the Christian nature of the work,

attempting, it would seem, to nullify it all together. And yet Tolkien himself defended LotR as a preeminently Catholic work! I was also slightly disgusted with the author's clear lack of understanding regarding Tolkien's views on the veracity of myth as proved through the meeting of Truth and Myth in Jesus Christ. This meeting does not refute all other myth or thought but substantiates it. We were made by God, the Creator, in His likeness. Therefore we are drawn to sub-create. As we are God's children, anything we create is also in the image and likeness of His creation and the ultimate Truth. Possibly Curry's lack of clarity on this topic lies with his lack of respect for the legitimacy of contemporary religion.

Defending Middle Earth: Tolkien: Myth and Modernity by Patrick Curry is an important book which attempts to take a look at the writings of J. R. R. Tolkien and defend him from some of the attacks made against him by various critics. Critics have often looked down on Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings trilogy and attempted to pigeonhole Tolkien into various unsavory categories. This book takes a look at Tolkien from an anti-modernist perspective, particularly with reference to his love for nature and the English countryside. The author emphasizes three aspects of Tolkien's works (The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings, The Silmarillion is left out of this book for the most part) "The Shire: Culture, Society and Politics", "Middle-Earth: Nature and Ecology", and "The Sea: Spirituality and Ethics". Tolkien, who was a deeply conservative and very pious man of the Roman Catholic faith, may be understood in terms of a "radical nostalgia" which surrounds much of his writing. Tolkien had a great love for the unspoiled English countryside, for the rural life untouched by modern industry, and for small business unencumbered by the excesses of monopoly. Tolkien also was a great lover of nature, his books include much on "tree lore", and he writes of the armies of orcs who are cutting down trees and destroying forests. Politically Tolkien was conservative, but also libertarian with a bent towards anarchy. Tolkien wrote that "My [Tolkien's] political opinions lean more and more to Anarchy (philosophically understood, meaning abolition of control, not whiskered men with bombs) - or to 'unconstitutional' monarchy." Tolkien also wrote approvingly of the dynamiting of factories and power-stations, and wrote that he was no socialist, entirely rejecting planning as a harmful invasion. Many critics have made various absurd allegations against Tolkien based on allegorical readings of his books, something he warned against. For instance, critics have called Tolkien a nationalist, a racist, and even a fascist for his praise of the English countryside. Others have claimed that for Tolkien, North is a sacred direction and that he was a nordicist, while the armies of orcs coming from the South represent various nonEuropean races. In addition, some have argued that Tolkien's use of the color white to represent purity and black to represent darkness

and evil is racist. Another bizarre interpretation is a Marxist interpretation of the dragon as representing monopoly capital and the hoarding of wealth. According to this interpretation, *The Hobbit* may be read in terms of class struggle, with an alliance of the lower middle class (the Hobbits) and working class miners (the dwarves) against an evil monopoly. On the other hand, Tolkien has been repeatedly called an elitist, who emphasized pure Englishness - pastoral and cozy - against the rest of the world. These interpretations are particularly absurd in light of Tolkien's own specific warning against the allegorical reading of his books, and Tolkien's specific denial that he was an "Aryan" when asked to provide evidence for this by the Nazis. More promising readings of Tolkien emphasize his love for the earth and for nature. In fact, Tolkien was particularly appalled with the chopping down of forests and the ruin of the countryside brought about through war and excessive industrialization. The author of this book places a special emphasis on these interpretations. With a coming global ecological crisis and the complete loss of transcendence brought on by modernism, scientism, materialism, and the New World Order, Tolkien's books may prove particularly pertinent today in their distinct anti-modernism. Indeed, in one interpretation, although rejected by Tolkien himself, the Ring may represent atomic energy. Although Tolkien rejected this, it is certainly clear that the Ring represents power and probably power over nature. In terms of religion, Tolkien was a devout traditional Roman Catholic. Many have found a Christian interpretation for *The Lord of the Rings*, arguing that the story shows the working out of the Christian virtues of humility and obedience, emphasizing the role that "small people" (i.e. Hobbits) may play in the world. However, others have found in Tolkien's writings a distinctly pagan, animist, or pantheist understanding. The pagan virtue of courage certainly plays no small part in the story. Tolkien himself was an expert linguist, who had worked closely with ancient and medieval Anglo-Saxon poetry, including *Beowulf* and Cynewulf's poem *Christ* (the inspiration for the term "Middle-Earth"). In these poems and sagas, pagan and Christian elements are blended together. In addition, Tolkien's expertise in languages may have led him to create the distinct Elvish tongues seen throughout his books. In particular, the pagan notion of reincarnation is not passed over by Tolkien, who incorporates these ideas into his elvish characters. To understand *The Lord of the Rings* one must understand the role of myth. Indeed, Tolkien may have sought to create a unique Anglo-Saxon myth, combining pagan and Christian elements. Today, Tolkien's writings remain some of the most popular ever written. While this has caused many critics to scoff at them, the author of this book believes their popularity resides in the fact that they tap into something deeper within us that rejects modernity and its crises, including especially the ecological crisis. Tolkien's books have proven especially popular among those in the counter-culture. Perhaps this is because

they speak to those who look for viable alternatives to the present day dilemmas of the modern world.

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