

SPOONED FROM THE SAME POT

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J. R. R. Tolkien in his essay, "On Fairy Tales" uses the image of a Cauldron of Story in which simmers a constantly replenished brew made up of individual characters, events, themes, and settings drawn from all that has ever been written or told. Each new story-teller, Tolkien implies, stirs the pot afresh and draws out what he needs, blending it with his own imagination to produce a fresh and never-before-existent work of literature. Even a look at the cover and centerfold illustrations for Terry Brooks' The Sword of Shannara is sufficient evidence that Brooks drew from the cauldron of story an unusual number of the same ingredients that Tolkien used in his The Lord of the Rings.

The number of similarities is so great that it would be easy to write off Brooks' book as too imitative to deserve attention. Parallel characters, similar events and images, almost identical elements of setting can all be produced as evidence. It would seem that Brooks' memory and imagination were saturated with the Rings series. But imitative as The Sword of Shannara (SS) is, readers who enjoyed The Lord of the Rings (LoR) can still find some pleasurable hours in Brooks' novel, in part from noting the parallels.

One of the most obvious parallels is the concern with the conflict between good and evil. Whatever influence Tolkien has been, this conflict has dominated many contemporary novels of fantasy -- for instance, Susan Cooper's novels, such as The Grey Wolf, C. S. Lewis' space fantasies, and

Madeline L'Engle's A Wrinkle in Time and The Wind in the Door, to name a few.

These writers seem to be in rebellion against the popular view that distinctions between good and evil are relative and blurred. "Good and ill have not changed since yesteryear," says Aragorn (LoR), "nor are they one thing among Elves and Dwarves and another among Men. It is a man's part to discern them" (LoR, II, 50). The universe of these books is a moral one.

Most of these fantasies based on the conflict between good and evil have the central character seeking to find something, as does Shea in The Sword of Shannara. Frodo, on the other hand, seeks to get rid of something dangerous (LoR). He must hurl the ring of power into the fiery crack of the Mount of Doom, while Shea must find and use the Sword of Shannara, which has strong similarities to Excalibur. Evil forces know the identity but not the location of both characters. Both Shea and Frodo work against limited time and in rumor-infested societies, and the consequences of their acts go far beyond themselves. Neither can escape his role even in the face of his ignorance of the total problem and his weakness against his foes, yet each makes a deliberate choice to participate in his quest. "This quest may be attempted by the weak with as much hope as the strong. Yet such is oft the course of deeds that move the wheels of the world: small hands do them because they must, while the eyes of the great are elsewhere" (LoR, I, 353). All races on earth are affected by the outcomes.

Beside the similarity in type of conflict, the parallelism among characters in these works is undeniable. Tolkien's wizard, Gandalf, is almost

identical in role to Brooks' druid, Allanon. With the same magical fire blazing from his fingertips, Allanon is as adept as Gandalf at appearing out of his unexplained journeyings at the very spot where the action is crucial. "Allanon -- the mysterious wanderer of the four lands, historian of the races, philosopher and teacher, and, some said, practitioner of the mystic arts" (SS,18) is blood brother to Gandalf.

Tolkien's unlikely hero, Frodo Baggins the hobbit, has much similarity to Shea, also a halfling. Both are drawn reluctantly into the hero role. Frodo has a loyal friend and servant in Samwise Gamgee, while Shea is accompanied as much as possible by his half-brother Flick. One of Frodo's protectors and guides among his Nine Walkers is the border-ranger and king-to-be Aragorn, while Balinor, leader of the Border Legion and king-to-be of Tyrsis, is one of Shea's seven companions. Both companies are of mixed races. The elf Legolas (LOR) is quite interchangeable with Durin and Dayel (SS), as is the dwarf Gimli (LoR) with Hendel (SS). Orl Fane (SS) and Gollum (LoR) serve similar purposes and grovel in the same fashion. Brona, the Warlock Lord of the Skull Kingdom (SS) is close kin to Sauron the Middle Earth. The Skull-Bearers (SS) equate the Nazgul, evil servants of Sauron (LoR).

The settings and images related to them contain numerous likenesses between the two works. Both books use an unnatural silence in nature as sign of impending evil. Blackness and darkness are associated with evil forces in both: black birds wheel in the sky; black clouds rise in the north to blot out the sun; characters hear distant weird cries and see strange lights in the

darkness. Poisonous mists and vapors abound. The North in both works is linked with evil, which is devastating to nature as well as to the races of beings on earth. Mountains in both are sharp, dangerous, uneroded; with knife-edged peaks and lonely passes. Bad weather presages disaster. Elfstones protect Shea (SS) as they serve the needs of the Nine Walkers in the Ring series. The use of the elfstones makes Shea visible to the Warlock Lord just as the putting on of the ring makes Frodo visible to Sauron.

In spite of all these similarities between Lord of the Rings and The Sword of Shannara, there is a difference in the comment each makes. Power in both is dangerous. Good beings in The Lord of the Rings who already have it refuse possession of the ring because they know it would corrupt them. Flick and Shea (SS) grow to understand better and better the dangers that lie in power. But where Tolkien emphasizes the simple devotion to duty and loyalty such as we see in Frodo and Sam, Brooks makes a strong point of the need for the one who would wield the sword of Right to be willing to face the truth--especially to be willing to see himself as he really is. There is a process of purging going on as Shea holds the Sword of Shannara, and only when that process is completed is he dangerous to the Warlock Lord.

There are literally dozens of points of similarity that can be drawn between The Sword of Shannara and The Lord of the Rings, too many to be explained simply by saying that both authors have drawn from the same Cauldron of Story. But that is not to say that the more recent story is unworthy of being read. Brooks seems to have believed that he could do no better than follow the pattern of Tolkien's popular work, but there is also much in the book which is of his own creation.