

Why is the only good orc a dead orc? The dark face of racism examined in Tolkien's world.

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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In Jonathan Coe's novel, *The Rotters' Club*, a confrontation takes place between two characters over what one sees as racist elements in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*:

Birmingham, Doug maintained, had produced two notable racist thinkers in the last few decades: Enoch Powell and J. R. R. Tolkien. Philip was outraged by this statement. Tolkien was unquestionably his favorite author and in what way, he wanted to know, could he be described as racist? Doug suggested he reread *The Lord of the Rings*. Philip assured him that he did, at six monthly intervals. In that case, Doug replied, surely he must have noticed that Tolkien's villainous Orcs were made to appear unmistakably negroid. And did it not strike him as significant that the reinforcements who come to the aid of Sauron, the *Dark Lord* are themselves dark skinned, hail from unspecified tropical islands from the south, and are often mounted on elephants?

(143)

The passage is telling on three levels. First, the character Doug gives in a nutshell the basic concerns raised about racism in Tolkien's Middle-earth. **[End Page 861]** It is undeniable that darkness and the color black are continually associated throughout Tolkien's universe with unredeemable evil, specifically Orcs and the Dark Lord Sauron. So unredeemable is this evil, in fact, that especially in encounters with the Orcs during the war's action, it is dealt with by extermination. Contrariwise, the Orcs' mirror-selves, the Elves are called "the noblest of the children of Eru"¹ (Tyler 148) and continuously described as extremely fair. Galadriel's hair is "deep gold" (357; bk. 2, ch. 7) and emphasis is made on her "white arms" (367; bk. 2, ch. 7). In fact, so fair are the elven folk in general that the dark hair of Elrond and his daughter Arwen, caused by them being part human, is considered extraordinary among the Elves.

Second, the conversation described in *The Rotters' Club*, while fictional, is set during the seventies. If accurate-and there seems no reason to

doubt the author—the setting of thirty years ago indicates how long questions centering on Tolkien's possible racism have existed. Yet the debate occurs between fans who are themselves out of sync with most of their peers, thus underscoring the fact that Tolkien's work has up until recently been the private domain of a select audience, an audience who by its very nature may have inhibited serious critical examinations of Tolkien's work. As Neil Isaacs writes in his introductory essay to *Tolkien and the Critics*, since "*The Lord of the Rings* and the domain of Middle-earth are eminently suitable for faddism and fannism, cultism and clubbism . . . [its special appeal] acts as a deterrent to critical activity" (1). This barrier may suggest why, even in the face of a long-term awareness among readers, the whole question of racism in Tolkien has been ignored by the academy.

The fact that the debate occurs between fans underlines the third level emphasized by the quote, the silence of scholars. Philip has nothing but his own reading with which to defend Tolkien; there are no other authorities. Historically C. S. Lewis did make a passing comment on racism during the *Lord of the Rings*' first publication in his "The Dethronement of Power," noting that people who dislike a clear demarcation of good and evil "imagine they have seen a rigid demarcation between black and white people." However, Lewis does not pursue the issue, saying that by the conclusion of *Lord of the Rings* it is clear that the "motives, even on the right [and light] side [of the War of the Ring] are mixed," and this mixture stops readers who might "brazen it out" from continuing their claim of racism (12). Lewis may have been overly optimistic concerning what he expected to be a short-lived claim, for while the charge of racism has endured, little has been written academically since the works' original publication. Joseph Pearce does set aside a few pages in his 1998 *Tolkien...*

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