

Reader - Response Criticism of J. R. R. Tolkien`s Work in Russia at the Turn of xx-xxi Centuries

Ellina V. Shustova*

Kazan Federal University, Kazan, Russia

Anastasia A. Blagoveshchenskaya

Kazan Federal University, Kazan, Russia

Abstract

The paper considers the problem of reception of the J.R.R. Tolkien`s work in Russia by readers who are not professionally engaged in literary studies. This type of reception is the response of a wide readership to the writer`s texts and means the attitude towards them. The relevance of the research topic is determined not only by the significance of the figure of J.R.R Tolkien as a writer, but also by his significant influence on world literature and culture and the need for his comprehension. The analysis of reception characteristics in relation to the socio-cultural and literary context seems timely and meets the needs of modern literary science and Tolkienism as an area of studies of Tolkien`s work. Written response of the non-professional readership to the themes of J.R.R Tolkien work previously did not become the objects of detailed scientific study, and their study seems a promising direction research. The paper identifies and analyzes the main receptive approaches of unprofessional readers to the texts of J.R.R Tolkien. The reception is presented as a dynamic process and is considered in development. This research contributes to a further deeper understanding of the work of J.R.R Tolkien, as well as the interpretations that it receives in the Russian cultural and literary context.

Keywords: Education; Student; Language learning; J. R. R. Tolkien; Aesthetics.



CC BY: [Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

1. Introduction

J. R. R. Tolkien`s work in general and his conception of Middle-earth in particular appeared to be quite complicated objects to interpret in terms of a culture, which is different from one it was created within. Kondrateva and Fakhrutdinova note: *“Multiculturalism is a prevalent worldwide societal phenomenon”* (Kondrateva and Fakhrutdinova, 2016). The reception of J. R. R. Tolkien`s work in Russia, being an example of intercultural reception, is a multi-componentdynamic phenomenon that demonstrates a wide range of its perception, comprehension and creative processing. J. R. R. Tolkien`s work was introduced to Russian wider public later than it was in Europe or the United States. In fact the first officially published Russian translations of The Lord of the Rings emerged only in mid-1980s compared to its public release in Great Britain in 1954-1955. However this delay didn`t influence popular readers acclaim that J. R. R. Tolkien`s books won on Russian cultural and literary ground. This acclaim is implemented through a number of manifestations, such as the emergence of Tolkien-related subculture, vast media coverage, etc. All of those indicate J. R. R. Tolkien`s work being relevant and of high demand for Russian readers. In terms of literary studies this particular research is conducted within, it is appropriate to address the most significant aspect of wide audience reception, namely numerous written responses, the authors of which are the readers who are not engaged in literary criticism professionally.

In this paper Russian reader-response criticism is viewed as Tolkien-related writings of non-professional kind. They clearly reveal the dynamics of wide readership attitude towards the writer`s books. Besides, they indicate readers` interests and mindset. Individual approaches altogether constitute public interpretation conditioned by general social and cultural background and personal literary investigation.

2. Methodology

The methodological concept of the aesthetics of reception is regarded as the most suitable for conducting this research. It places special emphasis on individual readings, which being generalized altogether, constitute public meaning of a work and to some extent determine its further reception. The methodological basis of the study includes writings of the aesthetics of reception concept authors, namely (Jauss, 1995; Naumann, 1984). Modern interpretation of cross-cultural reception proposes introduction of adopting literary and cultural context. Thus works of Russian academics are regarded as valuable part of the methodological framework alongside with ones mentioned above.

3. Results and Discussion

The specificity of reader-response criticism is connected with the perception of the text of J. R. R. Tolkien as a riddle and with an attempt to solve this riddle by means of comprehension of aspects that are not detailed enough, to

which, according to the analysis of readers' responses, one can relate the issues of history, geography, ethnography, economy, law, flora and fauna, etc., of J. R. R. Tolkien's imaginary world. These texts are of interest to readers who see entire secondary world in J. R. R. Tolkien's works. They are indicant since they show a genuine interest in the writer's work not only among critics, but also among ordinary readers (Mussabekova *et al.*, 2018).

3.1. Generalizing and Clarifying J. R. R. Tolkien's Legendarium

The emergence of texts devoted to the aspects briefly described in J. R. R. Tolkien's works seems logical, taking into account that his world building possesses some gaps. The author himself admitted certain incompleteness of the imaginary world he created: "*Its economics, science, artefacts, religion, and philosophy are defective, or at least sketchy*" (Alekseev, 2013). Some of these responses are fact-oriented and characterized by the aspiration to explain the events described in J. R. R. Tolkien's books from the standpoint of common sense, however it is provided by textological study. For example, (Ostoger, 2000) in his work *Write-ups on the history of* describes the geography, population, weapons of this state, detailing its history. He analyzes fictional historical events from a logical point of view, applying the experience of real life. The function of texts of this kind is to order the information about the world view created by the author and to make it actually more understandable. Personal nature of reader-response criticism determines discussion being its essential form of operating. Many discussions are available on the Internet. For example, one can find a list of discussions on the Tol Eressea website – one of the largest, according to Kovtun (2010), Russian Tolkien-themed portals, which additionally includes fan fiction, games, non-textual staff, etc. Alekseev notes the diversity of discussions topics: "*That may be issues of geography or linguistics of the imaginary world, which are of little interest to outsiders, and may be even the most fundamental ones, such as the author's worldview*" (Alekseev, 2013).

The discussion about nature and Fëa of Orcs exemplifies progressive development of the readers' reception of J. R. R. Tolkien's texts. According to Arda-na-Kulichkah, the largest Tolkien-themed hub in Russia, it consists of four articles: Orcs (who they are and where they are from) by Ostoger (1998), Do Orcs have Fëa by Galadin (1998), The Textual Basis of the Dispute about Orcs' Spirituality in Tolkien's Works by Elenhil (2002). They demonstrate the development from descriptive approach to analytical one. The authors turn to a number of J. R. R. Tolkien's texts, including ones beyond popular reading; later on, when Russian texts devoted to the matter multiply, it appears to be necessary to generalize them. As a result, complex analytical approach is being formed. It is noteworthy that Elenhil (2002) draws attention to the evolution of the views of J. R. R. Tolkien. This approach corresponds to the tendency of the turn of the centuries to consider the author's work in its dynamics. Reader-response criticism here demonstrates a competent understanding of it.

3.2. The Reception of Religious and Philosophical Components of J. R. R. Tolkien's Legendarium

In accordance with the concept of the aesthetics of reception, it can be argued that reader-response criticism reflects the current state of the readership, its interests and searches in the field of literature. Talking of the reception of J. R. R. Tolkien's works, readers' texts of a descriptive kind reflect the aspiration to fill the gaps of primary sources. Analytical texts illustrate readers' reflections on abstract categories and their representation in J. R. R. Tolkien's world building, such as religion and philosophy, the opposition of good and evil, etc. They indicate the trends of the readers' ideological search. Texts devoted to the religion and philosophy of J. R. R. Tolkien's secondary world reveal an ambiguous perception of these aspects by Russian readers. Kamenkovich writes about quite serious and somehow concerning feature of Russian Tolkienism: In Russia, there is a separate virtual world around Tolkien, where the question of renaming Tolkienism into religion is raised for real (Kamenkovich, 2012). The religious component was widely discussed in Russian reader-response criticism. According to the letters of J. R. R. Tolkien, there is a characteristic given to his imaginary world by one of his readers: "*a world in which some sort of faith seems to be everywhere without a visible source, like light from an invisible lamp*" (Tolkien, 1981). Taking into account J. R. R. Tolkien's opinion about the absence of religions in his texts, it was ultimately agreed to distinguish religious representations as forms of faith and religious worship (Ostoger, 1998).

For the Russian readership, the issue of the religious component is closely related to the discussion of the correlation of the imaginary world of J. R. R. Tolkien and the Christian dogma. Following the results of the dispute, the view prevailed is that the work of J. R. R. Tolkien is primarily literary writing, not an allegory or paraphrasing of the Holy Scripture. A. Kondratev notes:

From time immemorial the Christian Church preached the same truths, but through the books of Tolkien this message sounded more convincing for our contemporaries. Deeply rooted in the faith, this message, however, is presented in Tolkien [world] not in religious terms or in the form of some descriptive belief system; it is given in experience (Kamenkovich, 1998).

The idea of death in J. R. R. Tolkien's legendarium is closely related to its religious component, and in Russian reader-response criticism it is interpreted as both religious and philosophical category. Vinokhodov examined this issue in his report the truth that even a liar does not dare to deny: the category of death in the metaphysics of J. R. R. Tolkien delivered at the Third Tolkien Seminar in St. Petersburg. He concludes that the categories of death represented in J. R. R. Tolkien's books and in Christianity are not identical, therefore, Tolkien's metaphysics is not identical with Christian metaphysics and is not reduced to it (Vinokhodov (2003). The Counterdict article was written by O. Belokonin response to the report by Vinokhodov (2003). It offers more versatile interpretation of the metaphysical system of J. R. R. Tolkien. Belokon focuses on the changes that the conception of J. R. R. Tolkien undergoes over time, and draws attention to some of its contradictions. Analyzing the reincarnation of the Elves and

the concept of the death of Men, the author draws attention to the gradual approach of the religious system of J. R. R. Tolkien's secondary world to Christianity (Belokon, 2003; Isaaks, 1968).

To sum up, static understanding of the category of death in J. R. R. Tolkien's imaginary world and its being christianized is replaced by the dynamic understanding. The fact that the concept of this secondary world was being created by the author throughout all his life and has undergone certain changes, was taken into account. It is noteworthy that not only well-known works, but also letters, drafts, fragments of the History of Middle-earth, etc., were used as an evidential base by Russian readers. It is worth saying that reader-response criticism of J. R. R. Tolkien's work in Russia is not limited to aspects mentioned in this article. It is impossible to cover all of them within one paper, but those selected outline key trends and appear to be the most prominent for the phenomenon studied. The phenomenon of wider public reception of J. R. R. Tolkien's books is clearly associated with their popularity, which has been extensively discussed by Tolkien scholars worldwide. One of the first scholars handling the topic was N. D. Isaaks. He noted that the Tolkien mass popularity was not fostered by the mass media; it grew from the excellences and appeals of the work itself and was simply reported in the media (Isaaks, 1968). Thus, he distinguishes J. R. R. Tolkien's writing from mass-produced culture. Reader-response criticism of both professional and amateur kind was covered in literary studies in relation to the reader's position towards the text. As far as the scope of this research is limited to the second kind mentioned above, it is worth mentioning that special emphasis is placed on this type of reception (Villalobos, 2015).

3.3. Reader-Response Criticism in Terms of the Aesthetics of Reception Method

Since the aesthetics of reception is considered as basic method for this research, it is necessary to outline how reader-response criticism is viewed within this methodological concept. The aesthetics of reception approach places special emphasis on interaction of the author, his work and its readers. Jauss (1995) considers the history of art as a process among author, work, and public (Jauss, 1995). In accordance with his concept, it is public that contributes to historical and aesthetical perception of the literary work and determines its further reception. He argues that initial reception might differ from one that occurred later in time or in another aesthetical setting; thus literary work might acquire new meanings, conditioned by temporal and cultural shifts. This provision appears to be relevant for intercultural reception case studied in this research. Jauss also mentions societal function of literature. Jauss (1995) which is connected with the reader's literary experience being related to their life, i.e. reading influences the reader's idea of life and social behavior. This provision corresponds to the emergence of the Tolkien-related subculture, which is viewed as vibrant response of wider public to J. R. R. Tolkien's books introduced.

In the framework of the aesthetics of reception methodology, readers' activity appears to be productive for the literature as it gives an idea of the recipient. Also, it vividly illustrates the current receptive process and denotes feedback: "*Being put into writing, information about the perception, evaluation and influence of literary works or literature in general<...>illustrate the social and individual impact of literature*" (Naumann, 1984). Readers' responses to the works of J. R. R. Tolkien illustrate the reception of non-professional readers, which is the result of a distant reading (Naumann, 1984). The reader takes a position outside of the text and formulates a third-party view of it, realizing the distance and moving away from the purely emotional approach towards it. Consequently, the reader's reception in this case is not reduced to a personal impression at the level of emotional acceptance or rejection of the text because of the reasons not always clearly formulated by the reader. According to Naumann (1984), distant reading is characterized by introspection implying that the literary work correlates with historical and literary process, with philosophical and aesthetic concepts (Ibid.). The nature of this reader's introspection allows to identify the most relevant aspects of the reception of J. R. R. Tolkien's books by wide readership (Carpenter and Tolkien, 1981).

3.4. Reader-Response Criticism from the Perspective of Russian Literature Studies

Reader-response criticisms regarded as important not only within the aesthetics of reception concept. Furthermore, authors themselves acknowledge its significance and at the same time its vague. Talking of readers' correspondence, Russian author and editor-in-chief of The New World journal Tvardovsky wrote:

Truth be told, not everything is clear and evident here. There are letters striking in their depth and accuracy of the evaluation of literary phenomena; there are those of formal kind, conventional comments to which people are accustomed by newspapers, arranging such stuff from time to time; there are just silly ones, etc., but on the whole this flow cannot be ignored" (Tvardovsky, 1983).

One of the manifestations of the reception of J. R. R. Tolkien's work by Russian wider public, along with the emergence of the Tolkien-related subculture, was the creation of numerous and thematically and typologically diverse written responses, the authors of which were readers who did not inscribe themselves into literary studies professionally. Vinokhodov took note of this point: "*In Russian cultural area, interest in the books of J. R. R. Tolkien is especially common among people who do not major in literary criticism*" (Vinokhodov, 2003). Readers' opinions of this kind do not claim to be academic; nevertheless they represent a significant data on the reception of J. R. R. Tolkien's books by wide audience and indicate the most relevant aspects of readers' perception.

Reader-response criticism of J. R. R. Tolkien's books in Russia is largely (but not completely) operating on the Internet. Many authors use pen-names, which are often composed in accordance with the rules of Tolkien-invented languages. The texts themselves are very diverse. Among them there are both simple sketches and literate works, the authors of which often turn to reputable sources for the argumentation of their judgments; they are highly competitive with scientific articles at times. This feature of modern Internet-based Tolkienian responses is noted by Alekseev: "*In the new century, the Internet finally equalized the myriad of passionate enthusiasts with authors of*

books, and interpretations of J. R. R. Tolkien's work freely dwelling on the World Wide Web are often really of equal value to those published in print" (Alekseev, 2013).

4. Summary

The diversity of reader-response criticism of J. R. R. Tolkien's work in Russia at the turn of XX-XXI centuries is connected with the approach towards his legendarium. Descriptive texts reflect the desire of readers to fill its gaps. The texts of analytical nature, which set forth the reader's introspection on abstract categories and their realization in the fictional world of J. R. R. Tolkien, such as, for example, representations of religion, philosophical issues, etc., reflect the trends of ideological and moral searches relevant for the wide readership (Ahmadi *et al.*, 2018).

4. Conclusion

The wider public reception of J. R. R. Tolkien's books in Russia is a dynamic phenomenon. The process of its evolution is determined by gradual mastering of his legacy and the comprehension of his legendarium as an integral structure. From the understanding of the J. R. R. Tolkien's texts as riddles and their ontological identification, the receptive process develops towards the interpretation of the author's works as a structure that undergoes certain transformations as his idea of the imaginary world changes over time. The pronounced discussion-based nature of reader-response criticism contributes to the emergence of new interpretations and actualization of J. R. R. Tolkien's legacy in non-professional reading audience. Material in this paper will be of interest to university professors of literature, graduate students, as well as for anyone interested in cross-cultural studies and the work of J. R. R. Tolkien.

Acknowledgements

The work is performed according to the Russian Government Program of Competitive Growth of Kazan Federal University.

References

- Ahmadi, J. S., Taghizadeh, E. and Sefiddarban, A. A. A. (2018). The rules of efficient economics in interpretation of inconclusive (incomplete) contracts. *Astra Salvensis*.
- Alekseev, S. V. (2013). *J. R. R. Tolkien.*: Veche: Moscow.
- Belokon, O. (2003). The counterdict. A response to the report by dmitry vinokhodov the truth that even a liar does not dare to deny, The category of death in the metaphysics, J. R. R. Tolkien. *Palantir*. 10: 15–26.
- Carpenter, H. W. and Tolkien, C. (1981). *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*. George Allen & Unwin, Houghton Mifflin: London, Boston, Sydney. 480.
- Elenhil, L. (2002). The textual basis of the dispute about Orcs' spirituality in Tolkien's works. . Available: http://www.kulichki.com/tolkien/arhiv/manuscr/el_orcs.shtml.
- Galadin (1998). Do orcs have fëa. Available: <http://www.kulichki.com/tolkien/arhiv/manuscr/orkvl.shtml>.
- Isaaks, N. D. (1968). *On the possibilities of writing Tolkien criticism, Tolkien and the critics*. University of Notre Dame Press: Notre Dame. 296.
- Jauss, H. R. (1995). Literary history as provocation of literary theory. *The New Literary Review*, 12: 34-84.
- Kamenkovich, M. V. (1998). The Trojan horse. *Palantir*. 10:22-26.
- Kamenkovich, M. V. (2012). The road from middle-earth. *Kreshchatik*, 1: Available: <http://magazines.russ.ru/kreshchatik/2012/1/k35.html>.
- Kondrateva, I. G. and Fakhrutdinova, A. V. (2016). Modeling teacher's multicultural identity through studying a foreign language. *The European Proceedings of Social & Behavioral Sciences*, 7: 245-50. Available: <http://www.futureacademy.org.uk/files/images/upload/39IFTE2016F.pdf>.
- Kovtun, E. N. (2010). *Continuing j. R. R. Tolkien, The tradition of narratives about middle-earth in the newer russian fantastic fiction. The other times, The evolution of russian fiction at the turn of the millennium*. Encyclopedia LLC. : Chelyabinsk. 69–85.
- Mussabekova, G., Issayeva, K., Oralova, Z., Saparbayeva, U., Faiziyev, N. and Mutaliyev, B. (2018). Hypothetical model of the development of a future teacher as a humanist (on the basis of humanitarian subjects. *Opción*, 34(85).
- Naumann, M. (1984). *Literary work and history of literature, collection of selected texts*. Raduga; Moscow.
- Ostoger, B. (1998). Orcs (who they are and where they are from). Available: <http://www.kulichki.com/tolkien/arhiv/manuscr/orkost>
- Ostoger, B. (2000). Write-ups on the history of Cardolan. Available: <http://www.kulichki.com/tolkien/arhiv/manuscr/cardolan.shtml>
- Tvardovsky, A. T. (1983). *Collected works in six volumes*. Khudozhestvennaia Literatura: Moscow. 6: 671.
- Villalobos, A. J. V. (2015). Las ciencias sociales y las luchas por el derecho. *Opción*, 71(33).
- Vinokhodov, D. O. (2003). *Truth that even a liar does not dare to deny: the category of death in the metaphysics of J. R. R. Tolkien*. *Palantir*. 38: 21–31.