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What it Means to be a Monster: The British Raj, Race Science, and “The Other” in Fantasy and Folklore

Adam Majid

Abstract

J.R.R. Tolkien wrote *The Fellowship of the Ring*, the first entry in the culture-defining *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, from his cottage on Northmoor Road, nestled comfortably in the sleepy streets of North Oxford: the intellectual heart of the British Empire, during the last decade preceding the nation’s imperial decline. British rule over an entire quarter of the planet maintained itself not by force alone, but by the imposition of the ideology of white supremacy on commonwealth citizens, first implemented through Christian thought¹ and later through the “scientific” study of race in the 19th and 20th centuries^{[2][3]}. While being a thoughtful opponent of the status quo in his time, this paper argues that Tolkien’s background both as a catholic and a scholar among the British elite undoubtedly introduced the illogics of race science into his work, specifically the *Lord of the Rings* saga which in turn became the groundwork for all fantasy literature and media in the West that came after. Focusing on Tolkien’s use of the term “race” to delineate separate species of independent origin and the formation of “orcs” as a society of dark-skinned, evil-natured, “mongol-types” positioned as inherently disposable and deserving of total annihilation presents troubling implications for the genres of storytelling which adopted Tolkien’s language without question. This legacy has produced two tropes that have pervaded decades after, first the association of the word “race” with immutable biological difference as well as alien otherness, and second the conclusion that the answer to evil is genocide. In response I present the history of race as a fictional narrative that begins in Europe⁴ and has persisted in maintaining the illusion of innate difference resulting in western-dominant racial hierarchy across the globe. Drawing on cultivation theory I argue that decades of storytelling which concludes with the annihilation of a racial or alien “other” has preserved the logic of imperial extermination and bolstered death drive junkies who beg and plead for a modern thermonuclear crusade against those they’ve decided are monsters worth slaying.

¹ Terrence Keel, *Divine Variations: How Christian Thought Became Racial Science*

² Johannes Blumenbach, *On the Natural Varieties of Mankind*

³ Folkmar et al., *Dictionary of Races or Peoples*

⁴ Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*

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Adam Majid is a senior in the American Studies department from Evanston, Illinois. They enjoy the woods, good science-fiction, and cooking for other people, they dislike fossil fuels, imperialism, and living on stolen land

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