

Tolkien's Swan Song: *Smith of Wootton Major*

“An old man's book, already weighted with the presage of bereavement. . . “
—Tolkien on *Smith of Wootton Major*

Tolkien on Faery

“The truth is that *faery* did not originally mean a ‘creature’ at all, small or large. It meant enchantment or magic, and the enchanted world or country in which marvelous people lived, great or small, with strange powers of mind and will for good and evil. There all things were wonderful: earth, water, air, and fire, and all living and growing things, beasts and birds, and trees and herbs were strange and dangerous, for they had hidden powers and were more than they seem to be to mortal eyes. . . . It means powerful, magical, belonging to Fairy or coming from that strange world.”—Introduction to *the Golden Key*

“It is plainly shown that Faery is a vast world in its own right, that does not depend for its existence upon Men, and which is not primarily nor indeed principally concerned with Men. The relationship must therefore be one of love: the Elven Folk, the chief and ruling inhabitant of Faery, have an ultimate kinship with men and have a permanent love for them in general. Though they are not bound by any moral obligation to assist Men, and they do not need their help (except in human affairs), they do from time to time try to assist them, avert evil from them and have relations with them, especially through certain men and women they find suitable. (It is of course possible that they *have* a ‘moral’ obligation . . . It may be contained in the word ‘kinship’, and also be due to the fact that in the last resort the enemy (or enemies) of Faery are the same as those of Men. . . .) . . . Their good will is seen mainly in attempting to keep or restore relationships between the two worlds, since the Elves (and still some men) realize that this love of faery is essential to the full and proper human development. The love of Faery is the love of love: a relationship towards all things, animate and inanimate, which includes love and respect, and removes or modifies the spirit of possession and domination. . . .”

“Faery represents at its weakest a breaking out (at least in mind) from the iron ring of the familiar, still more from the adamant ring of belief that is known, possessed, controlled, and so (ultimately) all that is worth being considered - a constant awareness of a world beyond these rings. More strongly it represents love: that is, a love and respect for all things, 'inanimate' and 'animate', an unpossessive love of them as 'other'. This 'love' will produce both *truth* and *delight*. Things seen in its light will be respected, and they will also appear delightful, beautiful, wonderful even glorious. Faery might be said indeed to represent Imagination (without definition because taking in all the definitions of this word): esthetic: exploratory and receptive; and artistic; inventive, dynamic, (sub)creative. This compound - of awareness of a limitless world outside our domestic parish; a love (in truth and admiration) for the things in it; and a desire for wonder, marvels, both perceived and conceived- this 'Faery' is as necessary for the health and complete functioning of the Human as is sunlight for physical life: sunlight as distinguished from the soil, say, though it in fact permeates and modifies even that. “
—“Smith of Wootton Major (essay about the story)

Discussion Questions

1. What purpose does the Forest serve in the story, and how is it connected to the realm of Faery?
2. How are love and kinship present in Alf's actions towards the town? Is this faery?
3. How is the village in danger of losing its gifts of craft and enchantment?
4. Why does Tolkien omit religion and church in Wootton Major? How does the Master Cook and the Great Hall substitute for them?
5. What is the meaning of the fey-star?
6. Roger Lancelyn Green wrote of *Smith of Wootton Major* that "to seek for a meaning is to cut open the ball in search of its bounce." What did he mean, and do you agree?
7. Is Smith Tolkien? Why and/or why not?
8. How does *Smith of Wootton Major* compare with LOR or *The Hobbit*?

