

Restoring the Fantasy Literature to Its Former Popularity with the Advanced Digital Technology and Norse Mythology in *The Lord of the Rings Trilogy*

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores J. R. R. Tolkien's fantasy novel, The Lord of the Rings Trilogy in order to analogize two primary sources which enabled the fantasy literature to be restored to its former popularity in 1930's-50's. First source is the cinematization of the original novel, based on the advanced digital technology, and second, the adaptation of Norse mythology to the original novel. The advanced digital technology rendered a distinguished contribution to the resurrection of the fantasy novel today. Peter Jackson, the director of the film trilogy, The Lord of the Rings Trilogy gained an un-heard popularity in the history of the fantasy movie. It was practicable with the advanced digital technology. Nevertheless, it could be realized only with the fact that J. R. R. Tolkien's original novel retains the excellence of plot. The episodes of the novel present the author's broad knowledge of Norse mythology and his attempts to employ it to the novel, The Lord of the Rings Trilogy. Through such two directions, this paper describes that the advanced digital technology and the quality of the original plot are two key elements to succeed in authoring and filming the fantasy literature.

Key words: *The Lord of the Rings Trilogy, cinematization, Norse mythology, adaptation, and authoring and filming.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Norse mythology had been disseminated to the whole Europe at least by the 12th century [4]. Norse men, who have been called Vikings, began to invade almost all the European areas in the 10th century due to population growth, and this resulted in spreading Norse mythology to all Europe. Nevertheless, due to overspreading expansion of Christianity, it already lost its religious function in Europe during that time, and even its archetype was vanished except for Iceland [10]. Only as an epic story, Norse mythology has survived in times and revived through literary works like *the Lord of the Rings* [20]-[22], [24], [31]-[33].

Christianity, Hellenism, and German culture have been widely acknowledged as three axes giving support to Western European culture. Christianity has been the monotheism-based religion of the general Western Europeans. It originates in Judaic Hebraism. Hellenism embraces the legacy of ancient Greco-Roman culture, which developed into the Renaissance in

the 14th century. German culture has been broadly represented through Norse mythology [6].

Among these three elements of Western European culture, Norse mythology (or German mythology) was incubated, and hatched geographically from Northern Europe, in and around the Scandinavian Peninsula, the home place of Germanic people [10]. Their ancestors residing in this area constantly moved to south and expanded their influences finally down to whole European regions. This has made an enormous result that not only varied Germanic countries such as England, Germany, Netherlands, Austria, but also those in the original north such as Norway, Denmark, Sweden, and Iceland have shared basically identical mythological stories [9]. Since passed down from generation to generation in such broad areas, the German mythologies might be widely varied from one place to another. Nevertheless, in the macro-point of view, they are affiliated to the same original epics [4].

J. R. R. Tolkien (1892-1973) adopted a considerable portion of Northern European mythology into his literary masterpiece, *The Lord of the Rings Trilogy: The Fellowship of the Rings* (1954), *The Two Towers* (1954), and *The Return of the Kings* (1955). Upon the basis, he developed his own epic stories through the novel series that swept the world once again in 2000's.

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Fig. 1. Diffusion of Norse Mythology with Movements/Invasions of Vikings



Fig. 2. J. R. R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings Trilogy

The Lord of the Rings Trilogy as a series of novels won the highest level of popularity in mid-1950's immediately after they were published. In 1990's, after 50 years passed since then, however, they have been almost erased, and few people happened to remember them except for those at the age of mid-forty who recognized the past glory. Among young people, Tolkien's fantasy novels were generally unread and forgotten. But, in the early 2000's, they created a great sensation and grabbed the world audiences's minds. This time occurred not in the original form of novel, but as a filmed trilogy directed by Peter Jackson (1961-present), a New Zealand movie director.

Jackson's movies, *The Lord of the Rings Trilogy: The Fellowship of the Rings* (2000), *The Two Towers* (2002), and *The Return of the Kings* (2003) signaled the resurrection of the fantasy literature. With the greatest popularity of the movies, three cultural phenomena were visualized. First, the original trilogy novels returned to the position of the worldwide popularity. Even it was much greater and powerful than before. A large number of world audiences attracted by the movies became maniacs in the original novels and scrambled to purchase them to read. J. R. R. Tolkien was re-highlighted by Peter Jackson through the movies. The novels regained the glory of the highest rank in the bestseller list that they had lost for a half century. Second, there happened a craze that other film producers tried to discover and cinematize fantasy novels. Furthermore, they kick-started authors to produce original

fantasy scenarios which did not developed from the original novels. Thus, in fact, several fantasy scenarios acquired the authenticity without novel. *The Chronicles of Narnia* (1949-1954), authored by C. S. Lewis (1898-1963), the close friend and housemate of Tolkien, was produced as a movie series, as *The Lord of the Rings Trilogy* [31]-[33] was done, and was released in the world. James Cameron (1954-present) directed the fantasy film, *Avatar* (2009) without its original novel, but only with the film script [11], [15], [23], [30]. The movie ended up breaking almost every nations'box-office records that had been made since the Lumiere brothers invented the cinema in 1895. Third, it led to a prompt technology promotion of digital media contents. One of the key elements with which the movie, *The Lord of the Rings Trilogy* achieved a global success was the computer graphics (CG hereafter). This made it possible the fantasy effect to be optimized to realize the mythological atmospheres. All the fantasy movies, recently, adopted CG technology, and in addition, *Avatar* instituted 3D stereoscopy and became the ultimate work of the fantasy movie [23], [30].

Nevertheless, without the magnificence of the original literary work, it will be nonsense for a fantasy movie to achieve a phenomenal success even though there comes the age of the digital content media. In that respect, Tolkien's original novels, *The Lord of the Rings Trilogy*, per se has maintained the substantial potentiality to make such a great success when they turned into a fantasy movie series.

In considering those perspectives, this article analyzes and reconsiders the adaptation of Northern European mythology processed into Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings Trilogy* and how they effectively work when they are cinematized into a fantasy movie series with the identical title. In so doing, this paper, furthermore, discusses cooperative and complementary relationships that the fantasy literature has developed with digital contents technology. As much as the fantasy literature of Tolkien's novels has helped the digital contents technology to enjoy its renaissance in this era, the digital contents technology has repaid to the fantasy literature in the way that it has made its audience turned their interests into reading the fantasy novels.



Fig. 3. The Lord of the Rings Trilogy (Film)



Fig. 4. Typewriter, Symbol of Analogue Culture

2. FEATURES OF THE DIGITAL CONTENTS TECHNOLOGY AND THE ORIGINAL NOVELS FOR RESTORATION OF THE FANTASY LITERATURE TO ITS FORMER POPULARITY

It is unimaginable to grasp and adopt the contemporary cultural contents without digital contents in this age. The words, the digital contents have been used as a pronoun of the contemporary media culture contents, and moreover applied to describe other fields of contents in which they are broadly used such as medical or science technology [13].

These days, all types of cultural contents are produced to become digitized ones, not analogue any longer. Even old cultural records and materials of the past, which were produced around 100 years ago, have been transformed into digital reproduction. Why does this phenomenon that digital contents have kept replacing analogue ones take place?

One primary reason is a big difference between digital contents and analogue contents in the aspect of chronological and spatial limits, which determine to create economic benefits. As an example, in comparing the typewriter, which is a symbol of the analogue age with the advanced computer today, the typewriter's capacity to produce typed or designed documents is extremely lower and much more restricted than the computer's. Any kinds of typewriters cannot surpass the computers in the word process with speedy writing, editing, saving, and filing the documents. In considering distributing and sharing them through the online network services such as email or various types of SNS like facebook, the computers in the 21st century never allow the typewriters to weed them out and predominate the contemporary writing technology. The typewriters can never imitate the computer word process system [8].



Fig. 5. Digital Multimedia, Icon of the Contemporary Culture

In such digital contents-dominating circumstances, the literary genres that have been broadly highlighted and took privileged benefits to grow further are the fantasy novel and the fantasy film. In the past analogue contents atmosphere, the fantasy literature contents could not be effectively cinematized. But, CG crafted with digital technologies makes the virtual reality effects innovative in filming episodes [3].



Fig. 6. The Lord of the Rings (1978) and the Hobbit (1977) Animation Version

Most of all, Tolkien's novels, The Lord of the Rings Trilogy were recreated through Peter Jackson's namesake film trilogy, which was produced with the advanced digital technology [13]. In fact, certain literary works of Tolkien's were remanufactured as animated movies before Jackson's. The reason for such

cartoons were made prior to real cinema products was up to methods to maximize mythological and fantastic effects. For instance, *The Hobbit* (1937) [29], which is pre-work of The Lord of the Rings Trilogy, was made a musical animation and broadcasted in 1977 [7]. The animation production technology substituted the cinema production technology because the digital contents technology was at the primitive stage during that time. Computer graphic technology was not developed enough to be used for film making.

The musical animation version disappointed the audience who already read the original novels. Nevertheless, it suggested a vivid direction through which the future movies, The Lord of the Rings Trilogy and the Hobbit could be cinematized. The characters' appearances and landscapes of towns and forests are widely adapted to the cinema versions. When they were reproduced into cinema with the digital technology, the reality effect was extremely alive. With this, the audience of the world has become fanatical [14], [16].

Like this, the digital contents technology was very excellent on giving body to mythological and heroic epic stories. In particular, along with fantasy literary works like J. K. Rowling(1965-present)'s *Harry Potter*(1997-2007) and C. S. Lewis(1898-1963)'s *The Chronicles of Narnia*(1950-1956) [1]-[2], [5], [25], *The Lord of the Rings Trilogy* has left a deep impression to the audience. Among them, *The Lord of the Rings Trilogy* seemed to gain the broadest interests from the audience because of its heroic spectacle and mythological caliber.



Fig. 7. The Fantasy Movie, Avatar

No matter whether the audience of the movie The Lord of the Rings Trilogy would read the original novel, what they wanted the movie to do was to make them feel satisfied with the presentation of the fantasy features through the movie screen. Compared with other fantasy movies, The Lord of the Rings Trilogy needed more time, energy and financial supports due to its epic proportions of storytelling. Once, however, it was properly completed, the movie would be assured for its artistry and commercial/box-office value.

Such a voluminous storytelling was only possible with Tolkien's omnidirectional adaptation of Norse mythology to his works. He was very well conversant to German and Celtic

myths and legends [6], [26]. Thus he, especially, developed The Lord of the Rings Trilogy centering on the episodes of Norse mythology. In fact they take the most pivotal role to structure the novel.

3. ADAPTATION OF NORSE MYTHOLOGY INTO THE LORD OF THE RINGS TRILOGY

The general episodes of the Northern European mythology are about perpetual wars and struggles between gods and giants. Gods are mostly good, except for Loki, but giants, wicked. Unlike the gods of Greek-Roman mythology, all the gods presenting in the episodes are imperfect and mortal. Thus they are attacked and slayed by their enemies. Even Odin, the greatest god of all, is not exceptional. He was bitten and eaten by the great wolf, Fenrir in the time of Ragnarök, the time of doomsday in the mythology. Such styles of episodes are borrowed to *The Lord of the Rings Trilogy*. Odin has been derived in several different names. In Germany, he has been called Wōtan, and in Old English, Wōden. In every part of Europe settled by German, Odin was worshiped as the greatest god, whose name was localized in such varied forms.

Most of all, *Ring of the Nibelung*, part of the Northern European Mythology and later recomposed by the German Romanticism musician, Richard Wagner (1813-1883), and the novel, *The Lord of the Rings Trilogy* share many similar characters and the episodes, which are developed by the characters. Both of them even use the identical word, "ring," which indicates that the two works stem from Norse mythology. A certain ring was believed that it gives the greatest power and the curse at the same time to the ring holder.

In the stories, that the ring owners and its holders are different from each other reveals its significance. In order to return to the owner, the ring attracts its holders with its absolute powers. In this way, it makes use of them as intermediate or definitive hosts. But their ultimate destiny is a tragic destruction totally with main characters, who could be their brides, kings and spouses, around them. Therefore, the ring itself is a great evil power and the other self of the absolute evil.

In *Ring of the Nibelung*, the ring is made by the dwarfs, Nibelung, but they lose it to the dragon. However the dragon is killed by Siegfried, the hero of the story because the dragon becomes destined to death immediately after it has the ring with it. After it falls down, the hero takes the ring with a welter of jewelry. However the ring with the curse of death makes him cursed to be killed in the future.

In *The Lord of the Rings Trilogy*, the ring is portrayed to become more active and powerful than that of *Ring of the Nibelung*. It works like a living being with the absolute will to return to its creator. The ring has been sunk at the bottom of the river for thousand years, but when the time to return is ripe, the ring attracts several hobbits and humans to find it and sets them as its vehicles to transport it to Sauron. While having it with them, the vehicles become whole-preoccupied by it even though a variety of tragic sufferings come to them.

In regarding such nature of two rings, both of them take the initiative position which makes every episode begin. However

the ring in *The Lord of the Rings Trilogy* shows more upgraded aspects than the ring in *Ring of the Nibelung* [12].

Second, the superb god in Norse mythology is Odin. His imagery is broadly borrowed not only to the good but also to the evil sides in *The Lord of the Rings Trilogy*. In describing his appearance, he is a one-eyed god. He throws the left eye into Mimir, the spring of eternity which is located under the roots of Yggdrasil, the giant ash tree growing in the center of the earth and he gains wisdom. Thus Odin becomes the god of wisdom.

He is also titled Hrafn, the god of raven. In Norse mythology, the raven represents wisdom. Thus, Odin has two ravens which work as his subordinates, Huginn and Muninn. Huginn means thoughtful and Muninn means eager for something. Thus, when the two words are combined to become one, it means eager for thoughtfulness, and it indicates Odin. Because he is the god of wisdom, Odin can use and translate Rune, the legendary letters that have been believed to have prophecy and magical ability [27].

Such an archetypal appearance as a one-eyed god with two ravens is adapted to the resurrected evil, Sauron in *The Lord of the Rings Trilogy*. He in the form of the blazing one eye on top of fortress, Barad dur, watches the world and encourages his army to march toward the Middle Earth. Barad dur means a dark tower in Sindarin, the Elfish language coined by Tolkein in *The Lord of the Rings*. Odin has been called with many different nicknames. A few of them are Bileygr and Baleygr.

They mean They are related to his one eye. Sauron also communicates with his subordinate Saruman residing in the other tower, Orthanc.

Other than such an image, Odin presents himself in other different appearances. In Norse mythology, he is the oldest of all the gods. Thus, he becomes the father of all the gods and human beings, and has been depicted with the appearance of scraggly grown beard, a wide-brimmed hat, and a long cane named Ganbantein. The cane, Ganbantein neutralizes the enemy's magic powers. Odin protects himself with the cane and the javelin, Gungnir. Such figures are adapted to Gandalf in their integrity, who is one of the most powerful leaders to the good side in *The Lord of the Rings Trilogy*.

The ability to interpret the Rune words is endowed to both Sauron and Gandalf. The Rune alphabet was practiced among Germans until the 15th century. Rune, which means secret, is the old Norse alphabet. Ancient German people called it Rune because they believed that miraculous powers indwelled in it.

Sauron, the maker of the ring, inlaid certain Elvish words into the ring, but only when it takes warmth by fire, they appear on the surface of the ring.



Fig. 8. Odin(left) and Gandalf(right)

The words are, “One Ring to rule them all, One Ring to find them, One Ring to bring them all and in the darkness bind them (75).” Such a catastrophic and prophetic substance is realized in Norse mythology. In the last days of the world, Jotnar delivers the deathblow to Odin and all the other gods except for Loki, and in the end, Loki's children, the great wolf Fenrir, the biggest serpent Jörmungandr, and the queen of the hell Hel destroy and imprison them all into darkness. Jotnar is the generic term of the giants and giantess in Norse mythology. They are the enemies of the gods, and thus, the Mythology is plotted with the struggles between the gods and Jotnar. Loki seems originally one of the gods in Norse mythology, but he has three children, Fenrir, Jörmungandr, and Hel with the giantess, Angrboða. Consequently Loki has been identified either a god or a giant.



Fig. 9. The Ring in the Lord of the Rings (left) and The Ring in Ring of Nibelung (right)

Third, Gondor king Aragon's image is widely borrowed from that of Siegfried in *Ring of the Nibelung* [17]-[19]. Aragon's destiny as a wanderer has much analogy with Siegfried's. He is a ranger who has been wandering around his kingdom wholly destroyed after his grandfather and father were shot to death by a group of Orcs's arrows. Siegfried's father, Sigmund is also attacked and killed by King Lyngi and his kingdom is effectively collapsed. Then as posthumous children, both of them were born after their fathers' death.

In this laborious circumstance, Aragon is not able to reveal himself as the rightful heir of Arthedain and Gondor because the kingdoms have been devastated and people have lost their king for thousand years. Siegfried is also separated from his mother by her new husband, Alf, and he is grown in the hand of the dwarf smith, Regin as his foster son. Until he finds that Sigmund is his real father, Siegfried falls into obscurity and works as a smith like Regin.

The episodes of the broken swords that their fathers owned are very similar. At the moment of death, Sigmund tells his wife, Hjördís that their child Siegfried will cast a mighty weapon with the fragments of his sword which was smashed in pieces. In *The Lord of the Rings Trilogy*, Isildur cuts Sauron's ring finger with Narsil the great sword, and returns him to the shadowland. But Narsil was broken down into two pieces at that moment. Aragon, as what Siegfried did in *Ring of the Nibelung*, puts the two pieces together into one complete weapon, when Sauron resurrects to the world and expands his power to regain the ring.

4. CONCLUSION

It was possible for the fantasy literature to regain its popularity in the present day when the trilogy movies, The Lord of the Rings Trilogy swept the world with the digital technology. It was an event un-heard of in the movie history that highly developed digital technology made the return of the obsolete literature to the world [13], [28].

As described in the early part, however, the fantasy literature was not always popular with the digital technology. The value of the fantasy literature as software is determined by the quality of content. However important in the present time, the digital technology is essentially hardware to ornament software. Without the quality of software, the success cannot be assured only with hardware. The audience is widely affected by firmly structured storylines. Thus, only when they are well developed and organized, the digital technology as hardware takes its role to make them much polished.

The author of *The Lord of the Rings Trilogy* Tolkien was well-versed in Norse and even Celtic mythologies [24]. In working on his masterpiece, he was able to employ their plots to develop his own mythological literary work. From then on Norse mythology has become a precursor of the resurrection of the fantasy literature. Compared with Greek-Roman mythology, Norse mythology is the heroic epic of the struggles between German gods and giants, and thus, it is more violent, breathtaking, and full of feeling of tension. These make the storylines of the novel and the movie panoramic and magnificent.

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