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A Ring of Power:

J.R.R. Tolkien and the Mythical Sub-Creation

by

Andrew Chen

Peter Murphy, Advisor

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of Bachelor of Arts with Honors in English

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*“An author cannot remain
wholly unaffected by his experience,
but the ways in which a story-germ
uses the soil of experience are
extremely complex, and
attempts to define the process are
at best guesses from evidence that is
inadequate and ambiguous.”*

-J.R.R. Tolkien

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Introduction: On Fairy-Stories (and Fairy-Scholars)

J. R. R. Tolkien's fictional universe of Middle Earth is unquestionably a massive feat of the imagination – the sheer number of characters, factions, invented languages, and cultures present in his writing is staggering. Equally impressive, it often seems, are the number of Tolkien fans: *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* have sold over a hundred million copies each worldwide. Many of these fans, myself included, will tell you that despite his book's daunting, complex web of foreign names and places, the book gives a reader what C.S. Lewis called “[a] joy, excitement, a lift of spirits... the kind of wisdom... which, if applied to the world we inhabit, might help our... race to hang on through the present shadows of modern Mordor into yet another age.”¹ W.H. Auden noted that “by the time one has finished [the book]... one knows the histories of Hobbits, Elves, Dwarves... as well as one knows one's own childhood.”² The storytelling has the nostalgic feel of a childhood half-memory, the sort that one remembers as an emotion - an almost subconscious relationship that is difficult to separate from the text itself as an object of analysis. This difficulty of leaving Middle-Earth shows itself in much of the current scholarship on Tolkien. Simply put, there is some quality of Tolkien's imaginative fiction that seems to make it difficult to extract oneself from fan-ship. When some of the most astute scholars of the novels cannot help but pen such obvious declarative constructions of adoration as, “it seems a miracle that a masterpiece can be born out

¹ Neil David Issacs and Rose A. Zimbardo, *Tolkien and the Critics; Essays on J.R.R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame, 1968)

² W.H. Auden, “The Hero is a Hobbit,” *New York Times Book Review*, Oct. 31, 1954, 37.

of such... order and chaos,"³ it is, to say the least, thought provoking. What quality of Tolkien's writing invites the reader to become so heavily invested in its structures that participation in the narrative could so threaten scholarly objectivity? One senses that participation in the world of Middle-Earth, this visceral imaginative transportation, is a fundamental part of its narrative mechanism.

Tolkien's stated authorial project in writing *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Hobbit*, and *The Silmarillion* was to create "a body of more or less connected legend." He "would draw some of the great tales in fullness, and leave many only... sketched. The cycles should be linked to a majestic whole, and yet leave scope for other minds and hands, wielding paint and music and drama. Absurd."⁴ The humble "absurd" beside, Tolkien clearly intended to create an imaginatively mobile world that could be inhabited and understood by its readers as an object independent of its author. This desire is penned perhaps most strongly in *The Two Towers*, in which Samwise Gamgee and Frodo Baggins, hobbits journeying to destroy the Ring of Power, reflect on their own legacy in Middle-Earth's history:

"The brave things in the old tales and songs, Mr. Frodo: adventures, as I used to call them. I used to think that they were things the wonderful folk of the stories went out and looked for, because they wanted them, because they were exciting and life was a bit dull... But that's not the way of it with the tales that really mattered, or

³ Richard E. Blackwelder, Wayne G. Hammond, and Christina Scull, *The Lord of the Rings, 1954-2004: Scholarship in Honor of Richard E. Blackwelder* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette UP, 2006), 111.

⁴ Jonathan Ronald Reuel Tolkien and Christopher Tolkien, ed., *The Silmarillion*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001), xii.

the ones that stay in the mind. Folk seem to have been just landed in them, usually ... Beren now, he never thought he was going to get that Silmaril from the Iron Crown... and yet he did... And why, sir, I never thought of that before! We've got – you've got some of the light of it [the Silmaril] in that star-glass that the Lady gave you! Why, to think of it, we're in the same tale still! It's going on. Don't the great tales never end?"⁵

However, while *The Lord of the Rings* and its associated texts have been translated into almost forty languages, and have become some of the “great tales” in their seemingly universal popularity, Tolkien was clearly *not* trying to create a mythology for a global audience as we acolytes of multiculturalism would understand it, but rather one specific to his own ethnic and cultural allegiances:

I had a mind to make a body of more or less connected legend, ranging from the large and cosmogonic, to the level of romantic fairy story... which I could dedicate simply to England; to my country. It should possess the tone and quality that I desired, somewhat cool and clear, be redolent of our ‘air’ (the clime and soil of the North West, meaning Britain and the hither parts of Europe: not Italy or the Aegean, still less the East), and

⁵ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002), 696-697.

while possessing (if I could achieve it) the fair elusive
beauty that some call Celtic (though it is rarely found in
genuine ancient Celtic things), it should be ‘high’,
purged of the gross, and fit for the more adult minded
of a land long now steeped in poetry.⁶

Tolkien lamented England’s lack of a cohesive legendary history similar to the myths of the Greek, Norse, and Celtic traditions. To fill this void, he created Middle-Earth to be a distinctly and *exclusively* English fantasy world, to such a degree that it should reflect the elemental qualities of its land and people. The uncomfortable inference that readers across the Pond or the Channel must confront is that the process of reading Tolkien’s work somehow condones or assimilates a fundamentally Anglo-specific identity. Now, I have used the word *Mythology*, which for some readers immediately raises eyebrows and index fingers. Tolkien obviously is not creating a credible religion in Middle-Earth – it would be highly pretentious to bookend an obvious work of creative fiction and a real, if out of use, religion together on the same shelf. Perhaps it is more efficacious to call Tolkien’s ambition a “mythological project,” an experiment of imaginative literature that has aspects of the myth: a central struggle between good and evil, the distinct, associated moral circulatory system, and appeals to a shared, testified cultural experience. This thesis will attempt to examine this “mythological” project, its successes and its failures, and especially the curious tension between Tolkien’s personally intimate, highly laborious writing process and his simultaneous desire for Middle-Earth to represent a “complete” Fantasy that transcends his authorship. Despite its relative obscurity

⁶ *The Silmarillion* xii.

compared to *The Lord of the Rings* or *The Hobbit*, *The Silmarillion* will be an important text in this critical inquiry. In many ways *The Silmarillion* is Tolkien's most personal text – it shows the reader both the full-throated scale of his ambition, and the shortcomings of its vision. Most importantly, it, along with *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, will help shed light on the complex nature of this mythological project, and the types of relationships between text, author, and reader it creates. By examining Tolkien's philosophy of creative fiction, as well as the sometimes-subtle ways in which he must violate his own rules of narrative and authorship, a clearer picture emerges of how these stories function. As a philologist, Tolkien's writing is rooted in the conviction that language (and thus storytelling) contains concrete and objective historical truths. Yet, as an author, he must use this language as a tool to craft a singular and in many ways profoundly personal vision of "mythological Britain." Moreover, a culture's narrative history is not simply an imaginative creation, but also a cumulative memory, the slow evolution of many centuries of storytelling. How, then, could a single voice shoulder the burden of creating a lost legendary history? In order to understand this question, one must first understand the way Tolkien understands his own role within his "legendarium."

Part One: The Mystery of the Vanishing Author

The unusual status of *The Silmarillion* as a text in Tolkien's body of work belies important clues to Tolkien's role as an author: specifically, its nature as a text that attempts to live within the fiction it creates. It differs in many ways from the tone and form of *The Lord of the Rings*, or even more egregiously, *The Hobbit*. While *The Lord of the Rings* features no instances of explicit religious worship at all and only a handful of references to a power above, *The Silmarillion* takes two whole chapters to enumerate the creation of Middle-Earth and the Fall of Morgoth in a fashion reminiscent of the Biblical Genesis. Like the Abrahamic deity, God is given both a mind and a voice – the being Eru Ilúvatar, “The One,” sings the world into being and speaks explicitly to the angelic Valar. Instead of beginning *in media res*, like *Rings* and *The Hobbit*, with a bumbling protagonist being swept away by a calling adventure, *The Silmarillion* reads like a historical text, spending less time detailing its characters than it does explaining geopolitical intricacies. *The Silmarillion* thus seems to be less concerned with telling an entertaining story so much as embodying a testament to a fictional history. It is also paradoxically both the latest and the earliest of Tolkien's texts – while it wasn't compiled and published until 1977, some four years after his death, its origins lie in Tolkien's hospital bed, as a soldier returning from World War I. According to his son, editor and biographer Christopher Tolkien, “in battered notebooks extending back to 1917 can still be read the earliest versions... But it was never published.”⁷ Occupying this peculiar time frame, it is both the prequel of and addendum to *The Lord of the Rings*. While many of these early stories were left unfinished, and the earliest drafts differ significantly

⁷ *The Silmarillion* vii.

from later ones, the stories that became *The Silmarillion* indisputably precede *The Lord of the Rings* as an act of imagination. Yet, despite its historical precedence, *The Silmarillion* as a compilation remains dependent on *The Lord of the Rings* for much of its narrative momentum - the former is in many ways a response to the latter. *The Silmarillion* explicitly details questions of origin and history that are left untold in *The Lord of the Rings*. Moreover, the types of references that exist in *The Silmarillion* seem structured specifically to evoke memories of *Rings*, and would be strange without that foreknowledge. This circularity, the self-sufficient nature of the narrative, is crucial in understanding Tolkien's role as an author in his texts.

The enigmatic nature of Gandalf the wizard is one example of this strange circular dependence. For the majority of Tolkien readers, who usually begin the saga with *The Hobbit* or *The Lord of the Rings*, Gandalf is a magical, mysterious man, of a provincial variety that, in the Shire, is known for "his skill with fires, smokes, and lights."⁸ The Gandalf of *The Hobbit* is particularly quaint – he seems little more than a traveling magician with a keen but simple wisdom borne of age of experience, ripened and wizened into caricature:

He had a tall pointed blue hat, a long grey cloak, a silver scarf over which his long white beard hung down below his waist... immense black boots... [and] long bushy eyebrows that stuck out further than the brim of his shady hat.⁹

⁸ *The Lord of the Rings* 25.

⁹ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit, Or, There and Back Again* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001).

The picture Tolkien paints of Gandalf the Grey in *The Hobbit* is a precise stereotype evocative of the Arthurian Merlin, heavily bearded and pointy-hatted all the way back to 15th century woodcuts.¹⁰ Certainly, like Merlin, this Gandalf seems to have some qualities of the otherworldly, and yet he seems to have come from a distinctly earthly place. It is a simple imaginative feat to take the Gandalf of *The Hobbit* and place him seamlessly within T.H. White's *The Sword in the Stone*, for example -- nothing about the wizard's incarnation suggests his actual nature as an angelic spirit closer to the divine Valar than even the immortal Elves. *The Lord of the Rings*, meanwhile, reveals Gandalf's true self more directly. Compare *The Hobbit*'s humble wandering conjuror to the supernatural "Gandalf the White," the resurrected wizard who meets Aragorn, Gimli, and Legolas in Fangorn Forest:

They all gazed at him. His hair was white as snow in the sunshine; and gleaming white was his robe; the eyes under his deep brows were bright, piercing as the rays of the sun; power was in his hand. Between wonder, joy, and fear they stood and found no words to say.¹¹

If one were to read these descriptions of wizards independently, with no foreknowledge of whom they referred to, it would be highly difficult to deduce that these two depictions could belong to the same character. While *The Lord of the Rings* foreshadows this new, potentially tempered form of the wizard¹² in small ways,

¹⁰ Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia, *File:Nuremberg Chronicles - Merlin (CXXXVIIIr).jpg*, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Nuremberg_chronicles_-_Merlin_\(CXXXVIIIr\).jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Nuremberg_chronicles_-_Merlin_(CXXXVIIIr).jpg) (Dec. 14, 2010).

¹¹ *The Lord of the Rings* 484.

¹² In a scene (p. 33) where Bilbo is struggling to let go of the Ring, Gandalf, growing angry, threatens Bilbo that he will be "uncloaked," at which point "he seemed to grow tall and menacing, and his shadow filled the room."

Gandalf's transformation is nevertheless remarkable and wholly unexpected. The surprise of this "revealing" forms a key component in the philosophy of *The Two Towers* and *The Return of the King*, where old things are made new again and ancient powers long dormant are reawakened. But as plot devices, events such as the reforging of Narsil, the March of the Ents, or Gandalf the White depend on the element of surprise, the subversion of the reader's expectations. Gandalf the White only functions, in other words, if Gandalf the Gray is assumed to be the character's default personality. In this way, taking *The Silmarillion* as a solely preceding text to *Rings* becomes problematic, as Gandalf's truly supernatural origins would be revealed from the very beginning, and the surprise ruined:

Wisest of the Maiar was Olórin... In later days he was a friend to all the Children of Ilúvatar, and took pity on their sorrows, and those who listened to him awoke from despair..."¹³

... It was said among the Elves that they were messengers sent by the Lords of the West [Valar] to contest the power of Sauron... Chief among them were those whom the Elves named Mithrandir and Curunír, but Men in the North named Gandalf and Saruman.¹⁴

The character would, in effect, be "Olórin," not Gandalf. If someone were to read the books in "chronological" order beginning with *The Silmarillion* and ending with *The Return of the King*, Gandalf's transformation would be an anticipated return to form

¹³ *The Silmarillion* 30.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 300.

instead of a surprising testament to hope. In a similar way, the significance of the above passage in *The Silmarillion* is also lessened if the reader is not already aware of Gandalf from *The Lord of the Rings*. The text assumes the reader already knows that Olórin is Mithrandir is Gandalf – otherwise events such as the gathering of the White Council or the details of Gandalf’s life as a Maia, events hinted at in *The Lord of the Rings*, seem irrelevant or explicatively unnecessary. Simply put, without Gandalf the Grey in the reader’s memory, there seems little reason to care about who this Olórin, Gandalf the White, is at all – Tolkien’s references to the wisdom of Mithrandir or the supreme kindness of Olórin are written in order to trigger familiar associations with Gandalf, but have a completely different effect without that prior engagement. Thus, while chronologically “Olórin” precedes “Gandalf” and is, in a historical sense, the “true” form of the wizard, the old, familiar, Gray “Gandalf” is necessary for “Olórin” the White to be understood at all.

As Gandalf illustrates, *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion* have a reciprocally constructive, symbiotic relationship. While *Rings* is narrated directly, with an omniscient, consistent narrator or storytelling voice, *The Silmarillion* seems to position itself as a historical text existing interior to that narrative. Tolkien himself validates this notion: “As I say, the legendary *Silmarillion* is peculiar, and differs from all similar things that I know in not being anthropocentric. Its centre of view and interest is not Men but ‘Elves’. Men come in inevitably: after all, the author is a man... But they remain peripheral – late comers, and however growingly important, not principals.”¹⁵ Even the author is himself a creation of the narrative, a citizen of Middle-Earth, severing the fictional world from the real one that inspired its creation.

¹⁵ Ibid. xv.

Tolkien thus characterizes his stories as existing within themselves, a sort of literary Möbius strip with no clear boundary between the “Primary World” and the “Secondary.” Adopting Elvish perspective is not a mere stylistic choice, but rather a wholesale immersion within a worldview concerned “rather with the griefs and burdens of deathlessness in time and change, than with death.”¹⁶ In a peculiarly logical fashion, it makes sense that a tale largely about Elfin political intrigue, were it to be “authentic,” would have to come from a historical perspective in which the world of Men is a peripheral theater. The narrative and its language are thus ostensibly part of the fiction they create; in writing its history, the story attempts to commandeer its authorship. As a result, Tolkien’s explicit voice or presence in the narrative seems to vanish. In such an existentially self-sufficient world, the earthly author becomes irrelevant.

This desire of Tolkien’s to disconnect himself from the text is directly and intimately related to his ambition to create a distinctly “English” body of “more or less connected legend.”¹⁷ If he, the author, is removed, ostensibly what remains is the distilled English “mythology,” a part of the larger cultural legacy of England rather than the product of a single man’s imagination. Yet, despite Tolkien’s attempts to establish Middle-Earth as a wholly independent world without a need for an author in the “real world,” the simple fact remains that his text will always and irrevocably be the product of a single imagination writing in the very Earthly British Isles. Creating an independent Middle-Earth and creating a “mythology for England” are thus seemingly two contradictory aims. Moreover, as one looks closely at some of

¹⁶ Ibid. xiii.

¹⁷ Ibid. xii.

Tolkien's stories more closely, the author's voice reemerges in the cultural biases and tropes his narratives adopt. Indeed, rather than removing himself entirely, Tolkien seems to be disguising himself from the reader much as Bilbo Baggins dons the One Ring to become invisible. Thus, terminologically, it seems more appropriate to characterize Tolkien's disappearing act as a dispersion, a method of atomizing his authorial consciousness into a body of story and legend that would be memorized and propagated by others, imbuing it with the impression of his thought but not his explicit presence.

The section of the *Silmarillion* that most clearly demonstrates this sort of "authorial dispersal" lies in its first view pages, within the section called the "Valaquenta," or "The Tale of the Valar." This is Tolkien's origin story, his Genesis. In it, a host of divine creatures gives birth to the world through song. In addition to the aforementioned supreme being Eru, this Pantheon of Middle-Earth is composed of a variety of demigods, the Valar, that each have a certain philosophical or geographical dominion: Manwë, Lord of the Valar, rules the skies, Mandos the Grave is master of the Dead, Ulmo rules the seas, Yavanna is the steward of plant and animal life, et cetera. Particularly privileged are those of the Valar who have an affinity for the natural world. They are often the most powerful, and are also usually afforded the greatest knowledge or highest beauty. There is a tangible, deep love of the land in this creation story, reminiscent of Tolkien's pledge to capture the "air" and "clime" of his native land, and exemplified by the privilege its patron saints accrue in the Pantheon. Accentuating this love for the land, the story feels scriptural in its use of formal, "high" English. Despite his use of Biblical-sounding syntax, Tolkien

strongly desired to step away from the explicit repetition of Christian structures in his writing, as is apparent in a 1966 interview with *Diplomat Magazine*:

It is not ‘about’ anything but itself. Certainly it has *no* allegorical intentions general, particular, or topical; moral, religious, or political. The only criticism that annoyed me was one that it ‘contained no religion’ (and ‘no women,’ but that does not matter, and is not true anyway). It is a monotheistic world of ‘natural theology.’ The odd fact that there are no churches, temples, or religious rites and ceremonies, is simply part of the historical climate depicted. It will be sufficiently explained – if (as now seems likely) *The Silmarillion* and other legends of the First and Second Ages are published. I am in any case myself a Christian; but the “Third Age” was not a Christian world.¹⁸

Furthermore, in describing the aims of his mythological project, and, as a consequence, listing the shortcomings of other English stories of the type, he claimed that the Arthur tales were marred by the fact that they “explicitly contain the Christian religion.”¹⁹ Indeed, despite the biblical verbiage, the narrative, at first glance, seems to be more generally mythological, and even pagan in its multitude of personalized gods and literally world-shaping inter-deity warfare. Tolkien’s creation story does not

¹⁸ J.R.R. Tolkien, quoted in Willis B. Glover, “The Christian Character of Tolkien’s Invented World,” *Criticism: A Quarterly for Literature and the Arts* 13:1 (1971): 39-55.

¹⁹ *The Silmarillion* xii.

solely draw on Christian tradition to fill in the details of its gods and creatures; it also incorporates notions of world structure and time common to many Western civilizations, especially Norse mythology. The linear progression of time in Middle-Earth, for example, is a quality both the Abrahamic tradition and Norse mythology²⁰ share. Unlike, for example, the cyclical conception of time in Hinduism, the Ages of the World pass in a distinctly chronological order from first to last, from the beginning of the world until the end of time. There are other token similarities to particularly the Norse mythology within Middle Earth – the Two Trees, which are the second means by which the Valar attempt to bring light to the world, are directly reminiscent of the Norse Yggdrasil, the World Tree, both being pillars by which strength the universe's existence is supported. Moreover, the separation of the divine realm, Arda, from the rest of Middle-Earth and the mysterious process of bridging the gap also bear resemblance to Norse belief. In the Norse cosmology, the universe contains nine worlds distinct from one another, such as Midgard, the Earth as humans experience it, and Hel, the underworld. Although these worlds are separate, they are navigable by people with the appropriate wisdom. This is quite similar to how Frodo and the Ringbearers must trust the ancient expertise of the Elves to guide them to Arda at the end of *The Return of the King*.

Hence, in this pseudo-pagan atmosphere, Tolkien could claim, in a strictly aesthetic sense, to have written about a Creation independent of the Biblical narratives they may resemble.

²⁰ See John Lindow, *Norse Mythology: a Guide to the Gods, Heroes, Rituals, and Beliefs* (Oxford: Oxford UP 2002).

Despite this, creating legend without involving the explicit repetition of religious (for Tolkien, Roman Catholic) forms would prove difficult. In a 1951 letter to Milton Waldman, Tolkien wrote that he “dislike[d] Allegory – the conscious and intentional allegory – yet any attempt to explain the purport of myth or fairy tale must use allegorical language.”²¹ Tolkien was no doubt fully aware of friend and contemporary C.S. Lewis’ Narnia stories, the first of which, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, was published some four years before *The Lord of the Rings* and thirteen years after *The Hobbit*. He was also cognizant of Lewis’ feelings about Fantasy writing, that such narrative divorced of religious doctrine (explicit Christianity) was essentially “breathing a lie through silver.”²² Speaking about religious stories and his characterization of the Bible as a sort of “true myth,” Tolkien argued, “‘doctrines’ which are extracted from the ‘myth’ are less true than the ‘myth’ itself.”²³ Thus, understandably, in his creation of a fictional world intended to be apart from our own, he sought to create a narrative that deterred allegorical inquiry and the extraction of doctrine, especially through an explicitly Christian lens. Yet, while Tolkien’s world may not be as baldly Christian as Narnia, its “character,” as Glover explains, retains a highly Christian view of the purpose of Creation and humanity’s role within it. Moreover, in some of the early stories in *The Silmarillion*, Tolkien borrows explicitly from one of Christianity’s most famous storytellers, John Milton. Thus, neither the Third Age of *The Lord of the Rings* nor the First and Second Ages of *The Silmarillion* are able to break free from exactly what Tolkien sought to evade –

²¹ *The Silmarillion* xiii.

²² John Ronald Reuel Tolkien, *The Monsters and the Critics*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (London: Harper Collins, 1997), 143.

²³ A.N. Wilson, *C.S. Lewis: a Biography* (New York: Norton, 1990), 126.

explicitly Christian cosmology and the threat of allegorical doctrine-pulling interpretation.

The story of the Fall of Satan as it appears in Milton's *Paradise Lost* has a direct and particular relevance for *The Silmarillion*. While obviously John Milton's epic poem is not Scripture in the strictly definitive sense, its conception of the Devil as a "fallen angel" has been assimilated into Christian convention. Milton's poetic account is not just the most famous account of this belief, but also a compelling example of Christian narrative history. Tolkien's appropriation of Milton thus places his writing in a long tradition of such storytellers. The story of Melkor not only has a highly similar narrative to the Fall of Satan, but in its resemblance, it also makes equivalent assumptions about the essential goodness of Creation and the role of man within it. The character of Melkor, the corrupted Valar, has direct resemblance to Milton's rebellious Satan, and the two characters' respective "falls" chart similar trajectories. Compare the following passage from *The Silmarillion* with the beginning of Book 1 of *Paradise Lost*:

...It came into the heart of Melkor to interweave matters of his own imagining that were not in accordance with the theme of Ilúvatar... *for desire grew hot within him to bring into Being things of his own... From splendour he fell through arrogance to contempt for all things save himself, a spirit wasteful and pitiless... Light, but when he could not possess it for himself alone, he descended through fire and wrath into a great burning, down into Darkness.*

And now Milton's epic poem:

Th' infernal Serpent; he it was, whose guile
Stir'd up with Envy and Revenge, deceiv'd [35]
The Mother of Mankind, what time his *Pride*
Had cast him out from Heav'n, with all his Host
Of Rebel Angels, by whose aid aspiring
To set himself in Glory above his Peers,
He trusted to have equal'd the most High, [40]
If he oppos'd; and with ambitious aim
Against the Throne and Monarchy of God
Rais'd impious War in Heav'n and Battel proud
With vain attempt. Him the Almighty Power
Hurl'd headlong flaming f
With hideous ruine and combustion down
To bottomless perdition, there to dwell
In Adamantine Chains and penal Fire,
Who durst defie th' Omnipotent to Arms.²⁴

Melkor, like Satan, was originally one of God's (Eru's) lieutenants, the most powerful and gifted of the angels (Valar), who falls as a result of his ego, desire for independence, and resultant anger at God's restrictions upon him. Also much like Satan's relationship with Gabriel, Melkor runs afoul of his counterpart, Manwë, and the two lead their respective armies of darkness and light against each other in titanic conflict. In both Middle-Earth and Earth respectively, Melkor and Satan are the

²⁴ John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005), 4-5.

embodiments of absolute evil and corruption. This fact itself is not particularly remarkable. Many religions have such avatars of malevolence. What makes the Melkor-Satan comparison significant is that they both represent evil not as a reciprocal counterpart to virtue, but a corruption of it. Even the Orcs, the peons of Evil, were not wholly creations of evil, since Melkor and his lieutenants "...can only mock; it cannot make: not new real things of its own."²⁵ In the words of Elrond, "Nothing is evil in the beginning. Even Sauron was not so."²⁶ – Tolkien's creation is the "Biblical world of the good creation."²⁷

The story of the separation of Valinor and Arda also reinforces the "good creation" in how it reflects the Christian moral rationale behind the act of distancing the divine from the mortal. Originally, Valinor, the land of the gods, was merely distant from Middle-Earth – they occupied the same planet, but were separated by distant oceans. However, a race of men called Númenóreans, renowned for their wisdom and strength of arms, coveted the immortality of the elves and the splendor of the Elvish life among the gods in Valinor. They resided on the isle of Andor, which lay on the great sea between Middle-Earth and Valinor. Yet despite their greatness and especially their maritime expertise, Manwë forbid them to sail to the land of the Valar, so "that the Númenóreans should not be tempted to seek for the Blessed Realm, nor desire to overpass the limits set to their bliss, becoming enamoured of the immortality of the Valar and the Eldar and the lands where all things endure."²⁸ While initially acquiescent, over time the Númenóreans become resentful of what

²⁵ *The Lord of the Rings* 893.

²⁶ *Ibid.* 261

²⁷ Glover 40.

²⁸ *The Silmarillion* 262.

they perceive as the Valar's condescension, and as "the fear of death grew ever darker upon them,"²⁹ they increasingly sought to break the Ban and pursue the secret of immortality: "... they began to build great houses for their dead, while their wise men laboured unceasingly to discover if they might the secret of recalling life... Yet they achieved only the art of preserving incorrupt the dead flesh of Men, and they filled all the land with silent tombs in which the thought of death was enshrined in the darkness."³⁰ The story then relates how Sauron, the right-hand man of the now-banished Melkor/Morgoth, manipulates this fear of death to coerce the Númenórean king to create a cult dedicated to the worship of Melkor.

The special Abrahamic privilege of Man as a purposefully mortal creature made in God's image also appears in Tolkien's stories. In Chapter Twelve of *The Silmarillion*, Tolkien directly contrasts the mortality of Men with the illustrious immortality of Elves, and finds the latter not necessarily preferable to the former:

Immortal were the Elves, and their wisdom waxed from age to age, and no sickness nor pestilence brought death to them... But Men were more frail, more easily slain by weapon or mischance, and less easily healed; subject to sickness and many ills; and they grew old and died. What may befall their spirits after death the Elves know not.

Some say that they too go to the halls of Mandos; but their place of waiting there is not that of the Elves, and Mandos under Ilúvatar alone save Manwë knows whither they go

²⁹ Ibid. 266.

³⁰ Ibid. 268.

after the time of recollection in those silent halls beside the outer sea... The fate of Men after death, maybe, is not in the hands of the Valar, nor was all foretold in the Music of the Ainur.³¹

The implication, then, is that the souls of Men are not tethered to the land of Middle-Earth the way Elves, Dwarves, and ostensibly Orcs are. Men have a special right above these races, the gift of essentially superseding the Valar, the gods of Middle-Earth, after death by leaving it entirely. Although Men, of all the races, may be the most frail, Tolkien seems to be implying that their relative fragility almost enables their ascendance after death into realms that the wisdom of the Elves is fundamentally incapable of understanding, for “the Elves die not till the world dies... but the sons of Men die indeed, and leave the world, wherefore they are called the Guests, or the Strangers.”³² Death for Men is called a “gift of freedom,” the purpose of which even Melkor has not discovered. Like human beings in Christian cosmology, the Men of Middle-Earth are frail and mortal precisely because God (Ilúvatar) has destined them to be taken from the world entirely. The concept of an ulterior plane of existence, ruled by God, and occupied exclusively by human souls is a near facsimile of the Christian afterlife. In addition, the idea that Middle-Earthly existence is both a labor of virtue³³ and a stepping-stone to exclusive communion with the divine practically defines a Christian perspective – specifically, the Catholic doctrine of salvation (Tolkien’s own religious background). Moreover, Tolkien’s

³¹ Ibid. 104-105.

³² *The Silmarillion* 42.

³³ “Therefore [Ilúvatar] willed that the hearts of men should seek beyond the world and should find no rest therein; but they should have a virtue to shape their life... beyond the Music of the Ainur.” *The Silmarillion* 35.

admission that “it seems to the Elves that Men resemble Melkor most of all the Ainur,”³⁴ seems to be a rephrasing of original sin. Melkor’s distinction from the Ainur lay in his desire to separate himself from the local cosmological power structure. Insofar as this temptation is the same as Milton’s Satan’s, as previously discussed, it is by narrative extension a quality that the Men of Middle-Earth share with Adam and Eve.

If Middle-Earth can thus be said to rotate about a moral axis at least reminiscent of and at most collinear with Christian cosmology and philosophy, one can also suggest that Tolkien’s Christian bias is also Anglocentric and local to the first half of the twentieth century. Perhaps most notably, in the pantheon of Valar under Eru there is no explicit God of War, no divine berth allotted to military might. The closest figure to a deity of combat in *The Silmarillion*, Tulkas, exults more in wrestling and feats of contestation than actual bloodshed. The fact that the delight of warfare has no place in the minds of Gods places it apart from the Greek conception or the Norse cosmos, or the majority of ancient mythological pantheons. By excluding war from the auspices of the Valar, Tolkien asserts that war has no place in divine (ideal) society. While the armies of Middle-Earth’s goodly peoples still value soldiery and battlefield gallantry, war is nevertheless characterized as a tragic burden to be courageously shouldered, not a stage for masculine glory such as in the Spartan tradition. This mindset parallels the West’s shifting attitudes towards war in the wake of World War I, in which young men who joined the army out of a nationalistic spirit or for the abstract execution of justice found themselves helpless against the new military machines turned against them. The weapons of Sauron and Morgoth’s armies

³⁴ Ibid. 42.

in Tolkien's narratives mimic some of these brutal martial innovations. For example, in the great Wars of Beleriand in the Second Age, Melkor's advance on the Elvish armies is heralded by clouds of toxic gas and fumes:

Then suddenly Morgoth sent forth great rivers of flame
that ran down... and the Mountains of Iron belched forth
fires of many poisonous hues, and the fume of them stank
upon the air, and was deadly.³⁵

Morgoth seems to emit this gas or cloud as a consequence of his evil, using it to shield himself from the light of the sun: “[Morgoth] descended into the uttermost depths of Angbad, and withdrew his servants, sending forth great reek and dark cloud to hide his land from the light of the Daystar.”³⁶ The use of poison gas as a weapon of war was one of the Great War's most infamous inventions. While the gas caused relatively few direct casualties, its use became a potent symbol of the horror of this new, modern, warfare. As a rifleman in the trenches, Tolkien would have dealt with firsthand the panic of gas attacks.

The dragons and other scaled, reptilian beasts that Morgoth (and, to a lesser extent, Sauron) deploy echo the overwhelming power of another Great War invention: the armored tank. In a version of “The Fall of Gondolin” found in *The Book of Lost Tales*, Tolkien describes what would eventually become dragons “of Glaurung's brood” as being closer to mechanical monsters than creatures of flesh and blood:

³⁵ Ibid. 151.

³⁶ Ibid. 100.

Some of them were all of iron so cunningly linked that they might flow like slow rivers of metal... and these were filled in their innermost depths with the grimmest of the Orcs... others of bronze and copper were given hearts and spirits of blazing fire, and they blasted all that stood before them... or trampled whatso escaped the ardour of their breath.³⁷

These weapons represented a total paradigm shift in the way war was waged. The killing power of the machine gun, long-range artillery, tanks and poison gas together created battlefields where a typically heroic charge became irrevocably, foolishly suicidal – the military power of industry had finally and forever eclipsed the strength of men alone.

Under such terrifying conditions, for Tolkien and other survivors, World War I became in retrospect not an honorable adventure nor a game to be won, as many young soldiers had imagined it would be, but a traumatizing horror to be confronted and borne for the sake of peace. This emotion is captured precisely in one of *The Lord of the Rings*' most significant battle scenes, the Battle of the Pelennor Fields. King Théoden's speech describes an intense hopelessness in the wake of heroic sacrifice, the rueful acknowledgement that in order to preserve the nation of Rohan, its best men would have to perish:

Arise, arise, Riders of Théoden!

Fell deeds awake: fire and slaughter!

³⁷ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Book of Lost Tales*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (Boston: Houghton Mifflin 1984), 181.

Spear shall be shaken, shield be splintered,

A sword-day, a red day, ere the sun rises!

*Ride now, ride now! Ride to Gondor!*³⁸

Théoden's speech does not characterize the coming battle as a glorious feat, but rather acknowledges a grim and bloody reality, in which even their ostensibly heroic actions are marred by their inherent violence. When Théoden says that "fell deeds awake," he suggests that their battle itself has no redeeming virtue of its own, that war is, in this case, a necessary evil. Prince Éomer's anguish upon Théoden's death expresses a similar sentiment – the loss of his kin prompts him to lead the Rohirrim into a hopeless, suicidal charge. The riders' wild despair, their resignation to life in the face of great personal loss, is chillingly palpable:

"Éowyn! Éowyn!" he cried at last. "Éowyn, how come you here? What madness or devilry is this? Death, death, death! Death take us all!... Death! Ride, ride to ruin and the world's ending!"

And with that the host began to move. But the Rohirrim sang no more. Death they cried with one voice loud and terrible...³⁹

In the preface to the Second Edition of *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien makes a chilling observation: "By 1918, all but one of my close friends were dead." The great battles of *The Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings* are filled with this raw, uncompromising anguish, the brutal psychological aftermath of war. Indeed, Tolkien

³⁸ *The Lord of the Rings*, p. 820

³⁹ *The Lord of the Rings*, p. 826

exhibited frustration towards critics claiming links between World War II and his narratives precisely by calling attention to the horror of his experience in the First World War:

It is also false, though naturally attractive, when the lives of an author and critic have overlapped, to suppose that the movements of thought or the events of times common to both were necessarily the most powerful influences. One has indeed personally to come under the shadow of war to feel fully its oppression; but as the years go by it seems now often forgotten that to be caught in youth by 1914 was no less hideous an experience than to be involved in 1939 and the following years.⁴⁰

Clearly, and understandably, living through the battlefields of World War I greatly impacted Tolkien's conception of war as a reality and War as a moral policy. While it may be presumptuous to claim knowledge of Tolkien's psychological state *vis a vis* his wartime experiences, the scars World War I left on the cultural memory of European nations are well documented. As a war that began pitting 19th-century tactics against 20th-century technology, the number and rate of casualties was exponentially higher than in any other previous armed conflict. Nations that entered the war in a fevered spirit of nationalism were abruptly forced to confront the brutal reality of modern industrial warfare. Tolkien's writing about war in Middle-Earth reflects the horror of comprehension Britain faced in the aftermath of World War I, in realizing how many young men of that generation had died. As Gandalf tells Frodo,

⁴⁰ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* (Harper Collins, 2009).

“Many that live deserve death. And some that die deserve life. Can you give it to them? Then do not be too eager to deal out death in judgement. For even the very wise cannot see all ends.”⁴¹

Perhaps most of all these examples, the Dead Marshes through which Gollum leads Frodo and Sam in *The Lord of the Rings* are powerfully reminiscent of the corpse-strewn battlefields of World War I. In particular, the Marshes recall the Battle of the Somme, in which Allied soldiers slogged through muddy, boggy terrain only to advance by inches or be cut down by German machine gun fire in the attempt. Tolkien himself was a veteran of this battle, where over one million men total died over only a little more than seven miles of territory. As one French infantryman described the scene, “We live in a world of Somme mud. We sleep in it, work in it, fight in it, wade in it and many of us die in it. We see it, we feel it, eat and curse it, but we can’t escape it, not even by dying...”⁴² The Dead Marshes embody this inescapable muck, a soggy mass grave from which even the dead cannot find respite.

They lie in the pools, pale faces, deep deep under the dark water. I saw them: grim faces and evil, and noble faces and sad. Many faces proud and fair, and weeds in their silver hair. But all foul, all rotting, all dead... They fought on the plain for days and months... But the Marshes have grown since then, swallowed up the graves.⁴³

⁴¹ *The Lord of the Rings* 58.

⁴² E.P.F. Lynch and Will Davies. *Somme Mud: the War Experiences of an Infantryman in France 1916-1919*. (North Sydney, N.S.W.: Random House Australia, 2008), 190.

⁴³ *The Lord of the Rings* 614.

Thus both in its attitude towards war in general as well as some of the specific mechanisms of its evil, Tolkien's narrative becomes tied even more tightly to his specific background, that of an English Catholic veteran of World War I. Tolkien's dispersal of himself into the text is thus thorough enough that his narratives embody not only his specific religious and cultural values, but also contain the ghosts or traces of his personal experiences. Tolkien clearly *desired* to create a world that echoes our own and pays homage to his native soil without consciously recalling the Anglo-Christian idioms it emulates. However, stories such as the *Valaquenta*, *The Fall of Númenor*, and scenes such as the Battle of the Pelennor Fields and the Dead Marshes suggest that he was not entirely successful in divesting his religious and socio-historical background from the text. In fairness, when Tolkien criticizes the Arthurian tradition as inadequate as a "mythology" for Britain, he places emphasis on the "explicit" use of "the Christian religion," that is, its rituals and exact cultural idioms, which are indeed absent from his narratives. And yet, while Tolkien may have changed names and places in order to avoid this replication, the moral lens through which these stories are told is unavoidably those of J.R.R. Tolkien. Despite this seeming contradiction, dismissing Tolkien as a creative hypocrite is too simple. Doing so avoids the much more interesting inquiry, that is, finding the specific method of Middle-Earth's construction that Tolkien believes allows his narrative to exist in a space and time independent of its author's will.

Part Two: The Bones of the Ox

Although Tolkien's stories may mimic or emulate specifically Anglo-Christian forms, Tolkien believed that a specific method of constructing the narrative could refresh the traditional forms the story mimics, or at least disguise their age. Through this process of creating something imaginary, the fiction itself would become (depending on one's point of view) a fresh stage for the repetition of basic human struggles, or a smokescreen for the transmission of cultural biases. Something Tolkien would call Fantasy, an illusion, is thus ostensibly created from the bones of the *real*, retaining the structure of its traditional ancestors while simultaneously hiding these same narrative origins through imaginative device.

As Tolkien notes in his essay *On Fairy Stories*, pulling off this illusion sufficiently is a difficult achievement, as "commanding Secondary Belief... require[s] labour and thought, and will certainly demand a special skill... Few attempt such difficult tasks." While many authors have sought to mimic Tolkien's project, few, if any, have had the same popular or imaginative success. The dozens of *Forgotten Realms* novels, based on the *Dungeons and Dragons* role-playing games, borrow shamelessly from the Tolkien bestiary. From the tall, immortal, wise elves to creatures as specific as the Hobbit, or Halfling, without *The Lord of the Rings*, these books as they are would certainly not exist. In terms of sheer scale and biodiversity, these books and the manifold authors who pen them have created fictional worlds far beyond Tolkien's project, employing a variety of races and creatures much vaster than Middle-Earth's, expanding the world to include ettin (two-headed ogres), drow (dark elves), duergar (gray dwarves), illithids (mind-invading psychic octopi), inter-

dimensional demons, talking enchanted crystals, pseudo-Buddhist fighting monks, and many other types of fauna beyond Tolkien's original, simpler conception of Men, Elves, Dwarves, and Hobbits. Yet, despite these stories' aesthetic similarities to Middle-Earth, their fictional constructions are incomplete in crucial ways. Perhaps most importantly, the borders of their imaginative worlds are bounded strictly between the front and back covers. It could be that Tolkien is simply a better writer or a more learned author than many of his modern "descendants," or that Middle-Earth's status as the grandfather of this literary tradition lends it a certain significance of seniority. These arguments may have some objective merit, but ultimately are insufficient in their reliance on popular subjectivity or nostalgic bias. Moreover, while questions of popular success, as we will see, are highly important to the functioning of Tolkien's narrative, they do not adequately address the nature of the mechanism that Tolkien uses to achieve that popularity. What, then, sets Middle-Earth apart?

Modern fantasy stories such as the *Forgotten Realms* series could be described as, in a way, having many characteristics similar to the travelogue. The reader is treated as a foreigner to the fictional creation. The narrative unfolds with the implicit assumption that the reader exists in modern Earth – unfamiliar names and places are explicated systematically with the goal that, by the end of the story, the reader will have acquired a knowledgeable familiarity with the narrative's fantasy "concepts" or "gimmicks." Tolkien struggled against this mode of storytelling. Rather than simply creating narratives with a "fantasy context," Tolkien desired to create the world first, a literally "complete fiction," independent of ours and subject

to its own rules. The reader's participation, then, within the imaginative world would not be that of a tourist, but rather as a citizen, in which the consequences of narrative action and the (often "Elvish") cultural context thereof are implicitly understood, a fully inhabitable alternate reality. Tolkien's desire to create this body of what he called "Secondary Belief" is most obviously expressed through his storytelling rigor and painstaking attention to detail. The invented languages of Middle-Earth are great examples of this thoroughness. While the silent hand-signals that the Dark Elves use in *Forgotten Realms* novels are ostensibly more original and complex than any form of communication Tolkien imagined, the reader is never told exactly what these hand signals look like, only that the natural dexterity of Drow fingers makes them able to relate complicated conversations with only slight movements of the fingers and upper arm. On the other hand, in Tolkien, for both the Elf and Dwarf languages of Middle-Earth, Tolkien not only provides an alphabet, but an entire grammar and syntax structure and a phonetic pronunciation guide. So *comprehensive* was Tolkien with his linguistic creations that today, an entire "Elvish Linguistic Fellowship" exists for the scholarship of these fictional languages, adding words to its lexicon as they are discovered in Tolkien's unpublished writings and updating its grammatical rules, to such extent that the "E.L.F." has published dozens of volumes of correspondence and scholarship on these languages.⁴⁴

These fictional languages are more than imaginative improvisation – they are an intimate part of the narrative fabric. Indeed, Tolkien considered his fictional languages an integral part of his narratives, the foundation, in essence, of his imaginative work:

⁴⁴ The Elvish Linguistic Fellowship, *Vinyar Tengwar*, <http://www.elvish.org/VT/> (March 9, 2011).

The remark about ‘philology’ [in the excerpted letter, ‘I am a philologist, and all my work is philological’] was intended to allude to what is I think a primary ‘fact’ about my work, that it is all of a piece, and *fundamentally* linguistic in inspiration ... The invention of languages is the foundation. The ‘stories’ were made rather to provide a world for the languages than the reverse. To me a name comes first and the story follows.⁴⁵

Yet, like the *Valaquenta* and many other of Tolkien’s stories, these language owe a significant debt to earthly analogues – for Quenya, the “high language” of Elves who had Valinorean descendants, Finnish was a major initial influence on Tolkien’s imagination:

The ingredients in Quenya are various, but worked out into a self-consistent character not precisely like any language that I know. Finnish, which I came across when I first begun to construct a 'mythology' was a dominant influence, but that has been much reduced [now in late Quenya]. It survives in some features: such as the absence of any consonant combinations initially, the absence of the voiced stops b, d, g (except in mb, nd, ng, ld, rd, which are favoured) and the fondness for the ending -inen, -ainen, -oinen, also in some points of grammar, such as the

⁴⁵ Perry C. Bramlett and Joe R. Christopher. *I Am in Fact a Hobbit: An Introduction to the Life and Works of J.R.R. Tolkien*. (Macon, GA: Mercer UP, 2003), 71.

inflexional endings -sse (rest at or in), -nna (movement to, towards), and -llo (movement from); the personal possessives are also expressed by suffixes; there is no gender.

Just as a word may differ in sound from one tongue to another but recall the same object, Tolkien inevitably must use language's unifying power to create symbolic *linguistic* connections of explicit qualitative similarities between the primary world and that of "Secondary Belief". For example, when reading a story like the Fall of Melkor, the story resembles the analogous Catechistic tradition not only in its narrative substance, but also the Scriptural language it uses, making the implicit assumption that the reader will inherently associate "high" language with stories about the Divine. In this way, even language cannot help but establish seemingly irrevocable connections between the real world and Tolkien's fictional creation.

Yet, not every story in this fictional world carries its symbolism as heavily and obtrusively as, for example, the *Valaquenta* does. Although Quenya may have been heavily sourced from the Finnish language, it has been so heavily changed and disguised that the roots of its inspiration are difficult to see. Similarly, as we shall see, although the story of Beren and Luthien in *The Silmarillion* is in many ways a highly stereotypical narrative, it is not as directly reminiscent of the Anglo-Christian mindset – indeed, in many ways its narratives' moral ideals are compromised and qualified at every turn. Clearly, Tolkien was trying to avoid the real-world roots of his narratives' moral and linguistic circulatory system. For if Middle-Earth can convince the reader of its existence as a place wholly separate from the "real world,"

then maybe the process of symbolic recall, whereby the reader is tethered to reality, never takes place. Tolkien's narrative could thus create an imaginative and literary space between the story being told and the earthly personage telling it. In such a space, if the creatures, peoples, and places of the world are interpreted as "whole" enough to be imaginatively self-sufficient, then the reader could immerse himself within the fiction and believe in its "reality" without needing to recall the Primary World for comprehension. It would be, in many ways, a Compromise between the real world and the narrative. For Tolkien, this space and its process was a specific type of narrative niche aptly called the "sub-creation."

If the narrative, that is, the explicit story being told, can be said to exist interior to the "Primary" or "real" world, the "sub-creation" is a membranic structure bounded between the real world and the fictional creation. As a space that exists between the real and the fictional, its nature is fundamentally "derived from Reality, or flowing into it."⁴⁶ However, its "essential power" is "the power of making immediately effective by the will the visions of 'fantasy'."⁴⁷ The sub-creation takes the place of reality and becomes the existential context from which the narrative is understood, an intermediary layer between fiction and reality that the reader (and, as we will see, the author) can occupy in order to avoid the explicit osmosis of forms (i.e. Christian idioms) from the Primary World. Perhaps a visual depiction would be helpful in imagining, conceptually, how this sub-creation functions as an intermediary space. As one can see in the diagram⁴⁸ below, the "sub-creation" supersedes the narrative in the sense that interpretation of the "narrative" is always mediated through

⁴⁶ *The Monsters and the Critics* 140.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 122.

⁴⁸ Much thanks, and heavy debt, to Professor Peter Murphy.

the sub-creative space. In turn, the “primary world” supplies the tropes, forms, and cultural idioms that are eventually introduced into the narrative, but this transmission is first filtered through the Fantastical space. Note that the reader resides not in the primary world, but must enter the secondary sub-creation in order to have direct access to the narrative. Also note that the “author” is currently placed within the sub-creation as well. As long as the reader and the author occupy the sub-creative niche together, the “tropes, forms, and cultural idioms” coming to the reader from the primary world (and the author’s pen) are disguised from direct identification with the author himself.

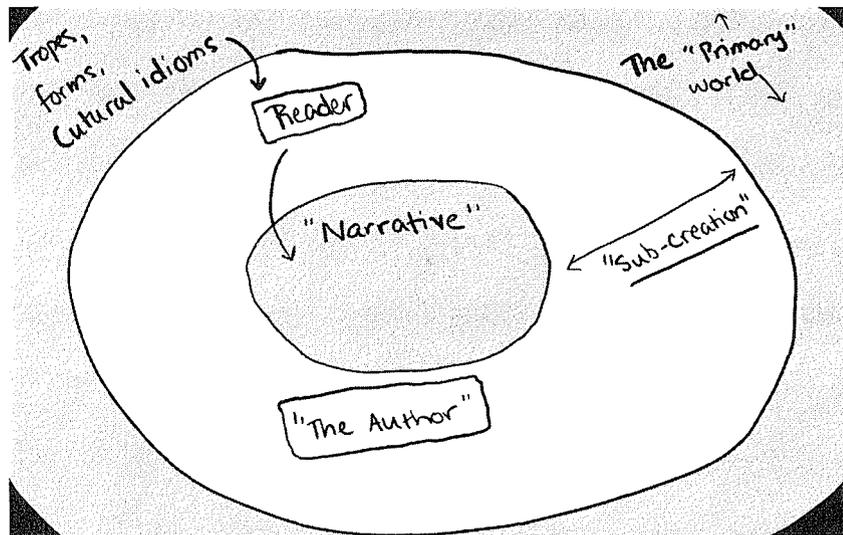


Figure 1: The Niche of the “Sub-Creation”

Tolkien’s authorial self-conception is fundamental to the existence of the sub-creation. Tolkien effectively “mythologizes” himself and his process of authorship, placing himself within the sub-creative space. Should Tolkien successfully become part of his own creation, the world could be perceived as entirely self-sufficient, needing no earthly author to self-perpetuate. The idea of the vanishing or dispersing author thereby reappears, this time not as a vehicle of moral imbuement, but as a

mechanism of rescuing the Secondary World from the clutches and tethers of the Primary.

Tolkien's portrayal of his authorial process as emerging almost subconsciously goes all the way back to the story of how *The Hobbit* grew into a story: "All I can remember about the start of *The Hobbit* is sitting correcting School Certificate papers in the everlasting weariness of that annual task forced on impecunious academics with children. On a blank leaf... I scrawled: 'In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit.' I did not and do not know why."⁴⁹ Notably, this type of experience is more than simple inspiration. There was no conscious intention in the creation of that sentence; something beyond Tolkien's perception has compelled him to write it. Indeed, Tolkien seems to relinquish control of language itself. Recall how Tolkien felt that his stories were "made rather to provide a world for the languages." If the narrative proceeds from language in a begotten fashion, and language has primacy over the process of storytelling, by giving up his power over language and especially over naming, Tolkien necessarily gives up power over the narrative as well. In doing so, he thus claims to experience Middle-Earth as an observer, not as a creator. He not only gives up the author's primary tool in shaping a narrative, but also withdraws his claim of ownership over the fictional world.

Importantly, the final success of this illusion is not dependent on Tolkien. While his style and depth of imagination may make it easier for a reader to lose track of the dispersed author and embrace Middle-Earth as a real and persistent sub-creation, the decision to accept the terms of this agreement is ultimately the reader's

⁴⁹ Bauman Rare Books, *The Hobbit - Bauman Rare Books*. <http://www.baumanrarebooks.com/rare-books/tolkien-j-r-r-/hobbit/70855.aspx> (Feb. 2, 2011).

prerogative. The decision to accept the sub-creation may not be a conscious one – indeed, for many the attraction to *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion* is not a careful process of discernment at all. In many ways, this judgment is subjective – not all authors will be equally successful in their craft, and not all audiences will be equally willing to suspend their disbelief. However, if the reader consciously or subconsciously comes to believe that the author has given up his power as the Creator, the reader and the author come to exist at some equitable level as observers within the sub-creation. It is in this crucial step that the reader comes to fully accept Middle-Earth as a self-perpetuating Fantasy. Even assuming that the “primary world” can be objective, and that the “inner consistency” Tolkien diffuses into the sub-creation addresses “reality” as referring to morals and laws rather than the individual “experience” of life, the sub-creation cannot exist without the energetic potential of its primary inhabitants, the readers. By diminishing his role as Creator within his work, Tolkien gives tremendous power to the reader as a citizen of Middle-Earth.

The necessity of the reader’s “citizenship” is notably confirmed in Tolkien’s essay *On Fairy Stories*. The sub-creation, or, as Tolkien terms it, the Perilous Realm, or Faërie, is both a world distinct from our own but interactive, symbiotic with humanity’s natural sense of curiosity, for “in [the Faërie] realm a man may, perhaps, count himself fortunate to have wandered, but its very richness and strangeness tie the tongue of a traveler who would report them.”⁵⁰ A land of “shoreless seas and stars uncounted,” it is also a land of emotional extremes, “both joy and sorrow as sharp as swords,” of both astounding beauty and constant peril. Tolkien evokes the Perilous Realm as a wellspring of narrative horizons and expansive imaginative potential. He

⁵⁰ *The Monsters and the Critics* 109.

imagines it as a wilderness that both innately attracts the curious and puts them in danger. And yet, it is also a realm where the visitor is excluded from this creative agency, for “while he is there it is dangerous for him to ask too many questions, lest the gates should be shut and the keys be lost.”⁵¹ The readerly state of the visitor’s consciousness thus must surrender itself in some capacity to the “enchantment” of Faërie. In making this assertion Tolkien inherently distances himself from more historical schools of mythological analysis, which would attempt to look past the “illusion” of the narrative’s explicit details to see the ontological origins of the story in its fundamental mechanics. Indeed, Tolkien explicitly criticizes such efforts:

... Students of folklore are apt to get off their own proper track, or to express themselves in a misleading ‘shorthand’... They are inclined to say that any two stories that are built round the same folklore motive... are ‘the same stories’... [But] it is precisely the colouring, the atmosphere, the unclassifiable individual details of a story, and above all the general purport that informs with life the undissected bones of the plot, that really count. Shakespeare’s *King Lear* is not the same as Layamon’s story in his *Brut*.⁵²

More simply, Tolkien believes that one should “be satisfied with the soup... and not desire to see the bones of the ox out of which it has been boiled.”⁵³ As it is a direct and opaque obstacle to criticism, such an imperative doesn’t seem fair – indeed, it smacks of bad faith! Yet despite the professorially patronizing tone of such a parable, it is nevertheless clear that Tolkien considers this analytical blindness a

⁵¹ Ibid. 109.

⁵² Ibid. 121.

⁵³ Ibid. 120.

rational tool necessary for the *experience* of Faërie. The process of sub-creation, then, is one that allows or, perhaps more accurately, *promotes* the illusion of a Secondary Reality. Tolkien correctly notes that the accomplishment of this illusion is difficult, an “essential drawback” that makes the “‘inner consistency of reality’... more difficult to produce.”⁵⁴ The theater, for example, is excluded from the possibility of sub-creation entirely, as Tolkien recognizes that the individual act of private imagination is crucial to the functioning of the sub-creation. As such, the explicit visual imagery of the theater impedes the self-originality of the imaginative inhabitation of the sub-creative membrane. Sub-creation is thus held in opposition to simple “representation or symbolic interpretation.” This opposition is also intertwined with the notion of Fantasy as a form of “pure art,” that is, in Tolkien’s mind, the untainted expression of a fundamental human desire, a “human right” to create that arises from our own status as created beings “made in the image and likeness of a Maker.”⁵⁵ Thus the process of sub-creative Fantasy is one that draws on ideal (even Divine) aesthetic forms that have an “arresting strangeness,” but imbues them with the bones of reality and subsequent familiarity.

In order to create such a compelling sub-creation, the detail of the world, the functional aesthetic, is fundamentally important to the integrity of the mythological project. *The Hobbit*, compared to *The Lord of the Rings* (and *The Silmarillion* as the prehistory of *Rings*), is largely less successful at creating a smooth sub-creation. By reading *The Hobbit* closely and examining its narrative and character tropes critically, one begins to sense the tenuous balance that maintains Tolkien’s disappearing act, his

⁵⁴ Ibid. 141.

⁵⁵ Ibid. 145.

“self-mythologization.” In particular, by examining the way that Tolkien’s ideas evolve, even within the same story, the notion that the author of the sub-creation has relinquished power over language and the narrative becomes impossible to maintain even as an illusion generated by the act of reading. The more a reader is aware of the author’s explicit process of writing, the expanding vision, that is, the process of inspiration and its associated *revision*, the less “whole” the sub-creation becomes, and the more obvious Tolkien’s illusion of “self-mythologization” becomes. This seems like an inherent problem with sub-creation: the process of “creating Fantasy” itself undermines the existential independence of the created object. In her essay “What Did He Know and When Did He Know It?” Christina Scull details numerous ways in which the “Hobbit sequel” Tolkien was writing that eventually became *The Lord of the Rings* was quite a different project at first. Scull details how Tolkien wrote to his publisher in 1938 that he “had only the vaguest notions of how to proceed.” Originally, the sequel was going to be the story of Bilbo’s son, “Bingo,” who, together with two of his cousins, would have “troll-like” adventures in the Old Forest with “Willowman and [the] Barrow-wights... [and] T Bombadil.”⁵⁶ Such a story would be a significantly humbler vision than what *The Lord of the Rings* turned out to be! With such knowledge, how could it be possible to ever believe, even within the temporary act of reading, that the author and the reader were both merely observers within a stable sub-creation?

The nature of the Elves from *The Hobbit* to *The Lord of the Rings* (and in *The Silmarillion*), immortal, wise, mystical, arguably Tolkien’s most enduring contribution to Fantasy literature, is but one example of an idea that grows not

⁵⁶ Scull 102.

according to the laws of Middle-Earth, but to Tolkien's maturing sense of the role he wanted his stories to fulfill. In *The Hobbit*, the Elves are peripheral characters to the Quest, observing, in the case of Elrond, and, in the case of the Mirkwood Elves, sometimes impeding Thorin, Bilbo, and Co. but never engaging themselves in the politics of the shorter-lived races. They are a secretive, jubilant, and seemingly insulated race of beings that, though theoretically wise and formidable, seem content living with little care for greater world events. Indeed, the Elves of *The Hobbit* are more similar to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* than to *The Silmarillion* or even *The Lord of the Rings* – they are impish merrymaking magic-wielders, noble but with an undercurrent of savagery and violence. The character of the Elvenking, only later given the name Thranduil, represents the apex of this character type. Garbed in seasonally festive attire akin to one of Dickens' Ghosts or a sort of Northern Bacchus, the King appears not so much as the leader of a race of elves, but rather as an extension of the wild forest he resides within:

In a great hall with pillars hewn out of the living stone sat the Elvenking on a chair of carven wood. On his head was a crown of berries and red leaves, for the autumn was come again. In the spring he wore a crown of woodland flowers. In his hand he held a carven staff of oak.

The prisoners were brought before him: and though he looked grimly at them, he told his men to unbind them, for they were ragged and weary.

“Besides they need no ropes in here,” said he. There is no escape from my magic doors for those who are once brought inside.”⁵⁷

The Elvenking here is fashioned as a servant of nature, one with the Middle-Earth. The character projects a distinct aura of natural, animal power bordering on the inhuman. The magic of his people, while subtle, is beguiling and more than a little sinister. An earlier scene in *The Hobbit* recounts the dwarves’ vain attempts to find shelter with the elves, in which Bilbo, Thorin, and Co. stumble repeatedly towards lights and music in the distance that vanish as they approach. There is a certain quality of the Elvenking’s proclamation about his “magic doors” that suggests a child’s story or a fable: the Wood-Elves do not feel like actual residents so much as a necessary obstacle for Bilbo and the Dwarves. Compare the carefree frivolity of the Wood-Elves in the previous passage to their brief description in *The Silmarillion*:

“Now of old that forest was named Greenwood the Great...and there was the realm of King Thranduil under the oak and the beech...Then the name of the forest was changed [because of the evil within it] and Mirkwood it was called... and few dared to pass through, save only in the north where Thranduil’s people still held the evil at bay.”⁵⁸

Here the Elvenking is not an isolated merrymaker or a xenophobic fairy, but he and his people are characterized as a stronghold of virtue holding off an encroaching

⁵⁷ *The Hobbit* 172.

⁵⁸ *The Silmarillion* 299.

darkness. Perhaps most notably, the Elvenking is given a name, Thranduil. The name allows the character to function not as a device or obstacle (“The Elvenking’s magic walls”) but rather to attempt to transcend folkloric stereotype and exist as an independent willed being within Middle-Earth.

Tolkien does attempt to give an explanation of sorts for the disparity between these elves and the ones he writes about later in *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion*, however:

The feasting people were Wood-Elves of course. These are not wicked folk. If they have a fault it is distrust of strangers... They differed from the High Elves of the West, and were more dangerous and less wise... descended from the ancient tribes that never went to Faerie in the West.⁵⁹

Thus Tolkien in a way explains the strangeness of the Wood-Elves when compared with, for example, Galadriel or Elrond. These Elves have ostensibly never seen Valinor in the West and are thus understandably less educated, civilized and naturally inclined to paranoid violence. Ignoring the geographical parallels of that statement for a moment, despite these Elven apologetics, the High Elves in *The Hobbit* are also similarly diminished. Take Elrond and the Elvish sanctuary of Rivendell – in *The Lord of the Rings*, the Elves of Rivendell are introduced as agents of power and stewards of Valar-borne wisdom:

And here in Rivendell there live still some of his chief foes: the Elven-wise, lords of the Eldar from beyond

⁵⁹ *The Hobbit* 67.

the furthest seas. They do not fear the Ringwraiths, for those who have dwelt in the Blessed Realm live at once in both worlds, and against both the Seen and the Unseen they have great power... Indeed there is a power in Rivendell to withstand the might of Mordor, for a while.⁶⁰

Elrond, meanwhile, is described in close detail, with a tangible weight and seriousness:

His hair was as dark as the shadows of twilight... Venerable he seemed as a king crowned with many winters, and yet hale as a tried warrior in the fulness [sic] of his strength. He was the Lord of Rivendell and mighty among both Elves and Men.⁶¹

While in *The Lord of the Rings* the Council of Elrond⁶² is marked by the recitation of solemn verses, silly, nonsensical songs sung by Elves perching in the trees punctuate Bilbo's visit to the "happy valley" in *The Hobbit*. Elrond, in turn, is painted in broad and whimsical strokes. The language used to describe "The Last Homely House" (Rivendell) in *The Hobbit* describes Rivendell as more of a bed and breakfast than a stronghold of Western virtue.

...Elrond the master of the house was their chief.

⁶⁰ *The Lord of the Rings* 216-217.

⁶¹ *Ibid.* 221.

⁶² A meeting of various factional leaders of Elves, Dwarves, and Men in *The Lord of the Rings* in order to determine the fate of the One Ring.

He was as noble and as fair as an elf-lord, as strong as a warrior, as wise as a wizard, as venerable as a king of dwarves, and as kind as summer... His house was perfect, whether you liked food, or sleep, or work, or story-telling, or singing, or just sitting and thinking...⁶³

One might argue that these differences between *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion* are not meaningful beyond a shift in tone. After all, it could be said that *The Hobbit* is intentionally limited by the naïve perspective of its protagonist. Insofar as Bilbo Baggins is the originator of *The Hobbit*'s "legend," as a story potentially passed down from Hobbit grandparents to Hobbit grandchildren, at some level it makes sense that the story is marked by a tailored provincialism. And indeed, *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion* are written in a fundamentally darker, more serious voice than *The Hobbit*. An even more pointed criticism of this analysis might simply say that Tolkien was trying to encompass a range of cultural perspectives and values. Yet, it would be careless to assume that the aesthetic differences in tone between these books are merely the result of stylistic whim. Rather, the shift in tone is accomplished precisely because the characters, locations, and narratives of *The Hobbit* are diminutive forms of similar stories told in *The Lord of the Rings*. The variance between Wood-Elves and High Elves, Bilbo's trolls and Sauron's trolls, Goblins and Orcs, do not reflect simply the spectrum of Tolkien's fictional societies, but rather the emergence of a larger-scale project. The Elrond of *The Hobbit* is primordial, formed according to the pastiche of conventional folkloric

⁶³ *The Hobbit* 51.

forms: warriors, wizards, and kings, stenciled into the narrative out of a body of broad and familiar types. The Elrond of *The Lord of the Rings* is a Master of Ceremonies, renowned for his stewardship of the precious wisdom of his people, marked with a grave seriousness and the burden of the knowledge that his daughter would leave him, become mortal, and die. The Elrond of *The Silmarillion* is meanwhile a great military hero, who witnesses himself the betrayal of Isildur⁶⁴ and thus the genesis of the process that would lead to Bilbo's discovery of the Ring of Power in Gollum's cave. The Elrond of the latter two novels is not defined by the terms 20th-century humans might use to describe him, but rather through his own agency as a character within a world.

One could question the usefulness of *The Hobbit* as a comparative text in this scenario. After all, wasn't *The Hobbit* along with *Farmer Giles of Ham* and *Roverandom*, just a story written to entertain Tolkien's children? Isn't *The Hobbit* more whimsically youthful in its style because its audience is different? One cannot use *The Hobbit* in conjunction with *The Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings* because the world in *The Hobbit* is not Middle-Earth. To a certain extent, this perspective has objective merit. The fantasy world in *The Hobbit* is indeed, in many ways, a testing-ground for *Rings* – the scale of the world and the adventures therein are humbler, and the narrative certainly lacks the weight of what Tolkien would call “Doom,” the emotional atmosphere and primary dramatic thrust of *The Lord of the Rings*. However, a belief that the world of *The Hobbit* is completely separable from Middle-Earth assumes that Tolkien believed that writing “fairy-stories” for children

⁶⁴ Son of Elendil, a great King of Men, who, by refusing to destroy the One Ring in the fires of the volcano Mount Doom, allowed Sauron's spirit to endure inside the Ring instead of being destroyed utterly.

was a significantly different project than writing *The Lord of the Rings*, an “epic fairy story,” if you will, for “adults.” Yet, if one looks at Tolkien’s writing on the nature of fairy-story as it pertains to children, this notion becomes complicated. While there is a strong and likely possibility that Tolkien’s style within the *Hobbit* was modulated for the relative youth of its audience, on a fundamental level the *kinds* of narrative that Tolkien sought to tell, were not intimately connected with a childlike demeanor – they were not, in other words, separate from the “adult stories” as a result of condescension towards the “immature”:

Among those who still have enough wisdom not to think fairy-stories pernicious, the common opinion seems to be that there is a natural connection between the minds of children and fairy-stories, of the same order as the connection between the minds of children and bodies and milk. I think this is an error; at best an error of false sentiment... made by those who, for whatever private reason (such as childlessness), tend to think of children as a special kind of creature... rather than as normal, if immature, members of a particular family, and of the human family at large.⁶⁵

Tolkien goes further to suggest that the child’s “suspension of disbelief,” or what he would call a successful “sub-creation,” is a natural and immutable human quality, as “children are human and fairy-stories are a natural human taste... Let us not divide

⁶⁵ *The Monsters and the Critics* 131.

the human race into Eloi and Morlocks⁶⁶... If fairy-story as a kind is worth reading at all it is worthy to be written for and read by adults. They will, of course, put more in and get more out than children can.”⁶⁷ As such, the *style* of the *Hobbit* itself cannot be taken as a rejoinder to the proposition that it represents a project wholly separate from the greater “mythological project” of tales for England. Therefore, whatever elements *The Hobbit* may borrow to place itself adjacent to or within Middle-Earth cannot be excised from *The Silmarillion* and the larger idea Tolkien was learning how to build.

Thus as the sub-creative membrane of Middle-Earth is pierced by inconsistencies, and the integrity of the inhabitable space for the reader is similarly disturbed, the functioning aesthetic of the work is also threatened. This apparent weakness could explain the intense critical division surrounding Tolkien’s work; as Thomas Shippey notes, Tolkiens’ work as serious literature has encountered a “general phenomenon of intense critical hostility.”⁶⁸ While Shippey chalks such (to him, obviously unfounded) criticism up to ignorance or some other vacuum in these critics’ mental acumen, perhaps it is more accurate to say that such critics simply view the primacy of texts differently than Tolkien seems to. Yet, obviously, purely internal analysis has its own significant problems. Tolkien’s self-mythologization, and especially his sentiment of organic textual creation, must be, in some sense, constructed illusions. While ‘inspiration’ in its most random sense is a real and

⁶⁶ Here Tolkien is referencing *The Time Machine* by H.G. Wells. In the novel’s latter stages, the Time-Traveler visits the year 802,701 A.D., in which time the human race has subdivided into the peaceful, innocent, but technologically hapless Eloi and the mechanically advanced but morally brutal subterranean Morlocks.

⁶⁷ *The Monsters and the Critics* 137.

⁶⁸ T.A. Shippey, *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001), 306.

powerful imaginative factor, a world as consistent and fleshed out as Middle-Earth is definitively the product of strenuous authorship. The texts that would eventually be published as *The Silmarillion* and *The Books of Lost Tales* were “chaotic palimpsest[s] with layer upon layer of correction.”⁶⁹ Conflating Tolkien’s desire for a wholeness of concept with his literal process of creating that rigorous structure is thus a contradictory exercise, as the integrity of said concept relies inherently on the illusion of the author’s location inside the sub-creation. This fallibility seems to affect the “wholeness” of the world in two different ways: in one way, the process of revision and careful planning is essential to maintaining the structural integrity of the fictional world, making sure that chronologies and genealogies agree with each other and character continuity is maintained. At the same time, the “wholeness” of the world’s structure also relies on the illusion of self-perpetuation, of being “self-sufficient.” The authorial process threatens the sub-creation through its irrevocable connection with the Primary World. “Revision” keeps the sub-created Secondary World subject to the desires and vacillations of the Primary.

If Tolkien’s Great Compromise between the primary world and the narrative is possible, the world it creates must be able to avoid tethers to reality and, in Tolkien’s words, exist “not primarily concerned with us [humans].”⁷⁰ As discussed earlier, in many ways Tolkien’s narratives fail this test as the influence of their author becomes increasingly visible. Yet, in many ways the *Valaquenta*, the early *Hobbit*, and their contemporaries in direct signification are exceptions. For many of Tolkien’s stories, the earthly (Anglo-Christian) forms from which they are sourced

⁶⁹ Ibid. 229.

⁷⁰ Ibid. 113.

are qualified or disguised. The story of Beren and Lúthien from *The Silmarillion* is an apt example of this process of narrative shading.

The union of a man and an elf in Beren and Lúthien (and later, Aragorn and Arwen) represents the direct symbolic representation of an ideal: in this case, the blending of the mortal and the immortal, the combination of two seemingly immiscible spheres, the creation of something logically impossible, the idea that something eternal and something temporary could ever become one. And yet this ideal form is qualified within the story – it is not a perfect union, nor usually a happy one. For example, in order to remain with Beren in union, Lúthien must herself become mortal. The union of the immortal and the mortal privileges the latter as a state of being. “True (ostensibly Everlasting) love” is thus subject to a human, mortal, and thus temporary lifespan. The impossible becomes possible, but only for so long. This virtue of mortal existence, through their love, thus acts as a foil against their foes’ immortality, of both Morgoth’s unending evil and the eternal greed of the sons of Fëanor. In addition, while the narrative of Beren and Lúthien is practically defined by increasingly fantastic supernatural events and obstacles, the story retains the crucial “inner consistency of reality” in its choice of detail and, ultimately, its fidelity to mortal (and thus human) temporality.

Beren is the son of Barahir, who in turn is a great-great-great-great-grandson of Bëor, the founder of the “good” line of men who resist the Dark Enemy. When he first encounters Lúthien, the narrative advances a highly idealized series of events in which the two children of royalty irrecoverably fall in love with one another. Beren “fall[s] into an enchantment, for Lúthien was the most beautiful of all the Children of

Ilúvatar...” As she sings, “keen, [and] heart-piercing,” Beren falls into a magical state of silence, the breaking of which (calling out to her) causes Lúthien to look on him and immediately fall in love as well. Thus the rapid development of this couple’s relationship from complete ignorance to total bliss at first blush directly symbolizes an idealized Christian form of love in its unconditionality, emotional purity, and especially chastity. Yet, while the couple form two halves of an ostensibly ideal state, their happiness is qualified and marked by “doom” and suffering. Indeed, their very meeting (and subsequent love) is the ironic product of trial, death, and loss.

After the Battle of the Sudden Flame, in which Morgoth conquers the majority of Northern Middle-Earth, by unleashing the dragon Glaurung, Barahir, Beren, and ten loyal followers are displaced from their homeland and begin a guerilla war against Morgoth’s army. Because their base is well-hidden, Sauron must resort to guile in order to discover the hiding-place of his enemies. He beguiles one of Barahir’s companions to betray their group, and the prince Beren returns to camp from a scouting expedition to find what was left of his family and friends cruelly slaughtered. Stricken by grief, Beren wanders in a stupor of rage and sorrow into the elf-kingdom of Thingol and Melian, and thus into the auspices of their daughter, Lúthien. Thus while Beren and Lúthien symbolically represent something close to perfect love, Tolkien still asserts that such values are not incorruptible nor sourced entirely from the ideal forms. Nor are these forms necessarily “happy,” as one would expect in a fable, or inclined towards creating happiness. Indeed, Beren and Lúthien’s relationship is tragic and marked by death and strife - as Tolkien explicitly relates, Beren is allowed to pass into the realm of Melian (and thus Lúthien) because “a great

doom lay upon him”⁷¹, and as he and Lúthien fall in love, she is “caught” in his fate, and “being free [to love him] receives his chain of mortality, and her anguish was greater than any other of the Eldalië [Elves].”⁷² The two lovers are by no means realistic representations of an Earthly relationship, but neither do they become trapped in the hazy moral equivalence of virtue and worldly happiness or the splendor of their own ideality, thus creating a Compromise between reality and the ideal, in the same way that a sub-creation represents a space between the primary world and the narrative. One could thereby say that, for Beren and Lúthien, the qualification of the ideal is precisely the ostensible accomplishment of the sub-creative method.

Yet while theoretically the story of Beren and Lúthien avoids the obvious, blunt intrusions of the primary world that plague the *Valaquenta*, the narrative’s values, even compromised, suggest a historical, geographical, and/or religious bias and thus in a sense are only “ideal” from the author’s perspective. For example, in the story of Beren and Lúthien, one must qualify all the nuanced moral expressions Tolkien embeds by noting that their marriage, although “taboo” in the sense of lifespan and culture nevertheless still occurs between two members of a royal family. Beren is the son of a line of noble human kings, while Lúthien is one of the most genetically desirable beings on Middle-Earth, being part immortal Elf, and part *truly* immortal (seraphic, almost divine) Maia. While Lúthien certainly belongs to a “higher” race of beings than Beren’s humanity, the integrity of their love-bond is validated by the relative equity between their social classes. The Aragorn-Éowyn

⁷¹ *The Silmarillion* 165.

⁷² *Ibid.* 166.

relationship⁷³ in *The Lord of the Rings* seems to inversely corroborate this intuition – while Éowyn is a noblewoman, she is not royal offspring, unlike Aragorn. While within the plot, Aragorn must reject Éowyn because he is already committed to Arwen, the fact remains that Éowyn in a fatalistic sense *cannot* be paired with Aragorn. Éowyn, as Aragorn puts it, loved “but a shadow and a thought,” implying that her substance as a person cannot fundamentally understand his. Éowyn loves the idea of loving Aragorn, but cannot fully commune with him the way an equivalent figure, such as Arwen, can. In this way their class is fundamentally associated with their worldview, and to the extent that those perspectives (Tolkien sometimes refers to these as *fates*) cannot mix, the classes cannot either in marriage. So while Beren and Luthien, as the historical template for Aragorn and Arwen, cannot be strictly characterized as evangelistic devices, they do seem, to some extent, to assume a class structure that defines the way people of different walks of life are able to relate to one another. While it may be overbold to suggest that Tolkien believed in class boundaries as the embodiment of differences in human *nature*, it is important to note that Britain, historically, is a nation that has partitioned (and, potentially, continues to divide)⁷⁴ its citizenry along strict class lines. Hence, even the story of Beren and Lúthien, with all of its qualification and shading of ideal forms, cannot fully escape the primary world’s influence.

⁷³ Éowyn is the niece of King Théoden of Rohan, the horseman’s kingdom. She falls in love with Aragorn, but eventually finds and weds Faramir, son of Denethor, Steward of Gondor. Just as Aragorn/Beren and Arwen/Lúthien are of equitable class, Éowyn and Faramir are both related tangentially to the royal families of their respective kingdoms. As such, it is presented as being inevitable (fatalistic) that these people would end up together, further corroborating the relationship between class and marriage in *The Lord of the Rings*.

⁷⁴ The British Broadcasting Company, *The Great British Class Study*, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/labuk/experiments/class/> (Mar. 16, 2011),

If and when such inconsistencies in Fantasy should appear, the reader's interpretive perspective shifts back towards the author; if the structure of the world, or perhaps more accurately, the *manner* in which it reflects the "inner consistency of reality" changes fundamentally, the supposedly dispersed author is now thrown into sharp relief. Subsequently, if the rules of the Secondary World are not self-sufficient but rather obtrusively watermarked by the imaginative vicissitudes or ethno/national-centric perspectives of the author, then the Compromise cannot be interpreted as a "sub-creation," but rather only as a "sub-illusion" that is not capable of existence as a distinct space within the world that birthed it.

Part Three: “A Far Green Country”

Whether for pleasure or scholarship, the reader of these stories is presented with a stark and absolute choice: to step into the sub-creation and reside there, or to continue exterior to the inner membrane and, according to Tolkien, lack full and fundamental access to the story being told. To some extent the text discourages analysis, as attempts to deconstruct Middle-Earth’s characters, politics, or spirituality could damage the integrity of the mythological project that both the text and the author rely on. At the very least, conceptual analysis of the text and the acceptance of the work as a whole and “true” act of sub-creation seem to be two immiscible spheres— one must be given up in order to fully pursue the other. These are not new complaints; many students of literature have often complained that rigorous analysis of a text puts the possibility of reading the text for pleasure in danger. Tolkien’s stories structuralize this division – they create a world that in order to be fully actualized must have readers that are both willing to internalize and accept the narratives’ moral and imaginative paradigms. Readerly investment in the text is thus not just a goal or consequence of Tolkien’s authorship, but crucially necessary for its function.

Tolkien’s self-conception of his authorial method and the nature of “sub-creation” may be illusory. Yet, despite these “failures” of the mythological project, his success, ironically, may lie in how aptly he was able to structure this illusion within the cultural structures he inhabited. While Tolkien may not have created a Promethean ancestor to “Beowulf,” he did create a body of aspiring legends specific to a more contemporary consciousness, one that survived two world wars and sought

to find emotional and/or spiritual comfort in the midst of unparalleled human suffering. By circumscribing a world that resonates with and responds to the 20th century's postwar legacy, his narrative becomes a touchstone for cultural memory. For a participating reader, the story is thus able to use these cultural-historical allegiances, these "punctures" in the illusion of "Secondary Belief," to actually *complete* the sub-creation as an existentially inhabitable niche.

By making the hero of his narrative and the savior of his world a Hobbit, Tolkien constructs a moral equivalence between pastoral domesticity and absolute, divine virtue. As Frodo boards the boat to the land of the Valar in the far West, Tolkien describes his journey across the sea as an almost eschatological moment, a journey towards an abstract ideal:

And then it seemed to him that as in his dream in the house of Bombadil, the grey rain-curtain turned all to silver glass and was rolled back, and he beheld white shores and beyond them a far green country under a swift sunrise.⁷⁵

The narrative's effectiveness at this moment lies in a specific suspension of disbelief. The land that Frodo ultimately beholds, the divine city of Valinor, is a far cry from the simple town of Hobbiton. Hobbits, after all, except for the few who were chosen to go with Gandalf on his "adventures," are seemingly inconsequential to the greater history of Middle-Earth. In the great struggles between Ilúvatar's children and Melkor's darkness the "Halfling" is notably absent. Thus, it would seem absurd that humble Hobbiton, the epitome of provincial self-sufficiency could be at all

⁷⁵ *The Lord of the Rings* 1007.

comparable to the spiritual nirvana of Valinor. However, by having Frodo carry the burden of the Quest, and thus take his place among Middle-Earth's historical giants on the boat to Valinor, he does not simply assert that Hobbits are important, but also that they are a fundamental, indispensable part of Middle-Earth's moral integrity. In this way, Hobbiton becomes as important a place to preserve as Valinor. Frodo's impetus to undertake the Quest stems from a powerful, consuming need to protect this virtuous intersection that the "far green country" represents as an image of both cities.

The Shire of *The Lord of the Rings* is consistently characterized as an idyllic paradise of innocents, in which Hobbits, unaware of the outside world and its deadly wars and sinister politics, live out simple lives farming, smoking, and celebrating the turn of the seasons. They are eternal gossips whose most pressing trouble is the potential disreputability of their neighbors. A typical quote from Samwise Gamgee's father, the "Old Gaffer," sums up this perspective quite nicely: "*Elves and Dragons!* I says to him. *Cabbages and potatoes are better for me and you. Don't go getting mixed up in the business of your betters or you'll land in trouble too big for you...*"⁷⁶ In many ways the Hobbits fall short of the other races (no pun intended). Found only in and around Hobbiton and the Shire, they do not usually wander and are happily content to exist within their traditional domestic influence. Unlike Elves or Dwarves, they lack an extensive historical role in the shaping of Middle-Earth, having lived almost exclusively in the Shire for centuries, rarely interacting with the outside world. And unlike Men, although they are mortal creatures, Tolkien makes no mention of Hobbits having a special fate in the afterlife. They are both by their nature and the narrative's historical geography a naïve, sheltered people. Yet, despite their

⁷⁶ *The Lord of the Rings* 24.

provincial ignorance, Tolkien nevertheless maintains that the race of Hobbits has a peculiar and particular strength drawn precisely *from* their humble origins and simplicity of character. For Tolkien, this enthusiastic provincialism is the wellspring of their virtue. After Frodo's ordeal at Weathertop, for example, during his convalescence in the halls of Elrond at Rivendell, Gandalf is astonished by the Hobbit's fortitude:

“You were beginning to fade,” answered Gandalf. “The wound was overcoming you at last... But you have some strength in you, my dear hobbit! I had very little hope; for I suspected that there was some fragment of the blade still in the closed wound. But it could not be found until last night. Then Elrond removed a splinter. It was deeply buried, and it was working inwards... And it seems that Hobbits fade very reluctantly. I have known strong warriors of the Big People who would quickly have been overcome by that splinter, which you bore for seventeen days.”

The evil beings that assail Frodo on Weathertop, the Ringwraiths or Nazgûl, symbolize covetous, corrupting greed in the absolute. Once proud kings, they were tempted by Sauron with promises of power and soon fell under his thrall, enchanted by the power of their rings and made slaves to his will. These kings' withering moral consciousness parallels the fading of their physical forms into the moral vacuum of physical invisibility. Thus, the tools of the Nazgûl are fashioned to accomplish

similar corruption - the knife that stabbed Frodo, described only as a “Morgul blade,”⁷⁷ would have turned the hobbit into a wraith as well. In this way, the destruction of the physical and the corruption of the moral are conflated - to be stabbed by a Ringwraith is to be assaulted by forces that attempt to destroy the soul as well as the physical body. When Gandalf describes Frodo as unusually resilient to the blade’s corruption, he also implies it was Frodo’s moral constitution, as well as his physical perseverance, that saved him. In other words, Tolkien strongly implies that the Hobbits are safeguarded from the traps and beguiling devices that ensnare the more intellectually sophisticated races by their own agrarian humility. This unexpected fortitude forms the moral foundation from which Tolkien raises up the humble Hobbits, and the values they represent, to eventually equal the eschatological ideal that Valinor represents in all its Edenic pageantry.

As Tolkien’s intense reliance on Judeo-Christian Scripture in the *Valaquenta* makes clear, the land of Valinor represents a morally and existentially ideal place. From *The Silmarillion*’s tales of its corruption by Morgoth to its character as an Avalon-esque destination for the Ringbearers in *The Lord of the Rings*, Valinor is consistently characterized as a paradise of wisdom and virtue, a place that can heal ailments thought incurable. It is the home of the godlike Valar and the greatest of the Elves, the Eldar.⁷⁸ In many ways, it is an incomparable civilization, an ideal realm. Only exceptional individuals are allowed to pass its threshold – as is related in *The Fall of Númenor*, even the strongest and wisest men to ever live, the Númenóreans, were not allowed to enter. Yet, to a place where no Man has ever set foot, a Hobbit is

⁷⁷ A blade forged in Minas Morgul, Elvish for “The Tower of Black Sorcery,” the abode of the Ringwraiths and their armies.

⁷⁸ The word interestingly means, “star people” in Quenyan Elvish but also “God resides” in Hebrew.

allowed to go. By making Frodo the one to destroy the One Ring, Tolkien is not simply affording Frodo his just reward for saving the world. As Frodo leaves Middle-Earth for Valinor, he is officially inducted as one of the Ringbearers, beings resolute enough to responsibly carry a Ring of Power, an elite cadre that includes some of Middle-Earth's most powerful characters, such as Galadriel, Elrond, and Gandalf.

It could be argued that Tolkien is simply telling an archetypal narrative here, whereby the hero overcomes a difficult past to become the unlikely savior. Frodo's role within *The Lord of the Rings* certainly is that kind of story – however, in a specific sense, by affording Frodo a seat on the boat to Valinor (alongside Bilbo), Tolkien places Hobbits beside Elves and Maia in the moral hierarchy of Middle-Earth. There are no Men or Dwarves in Valinor, but there are two Hobbits. Although Frodo is certainly an exceptional person, as are all those afforded the privilege of boarding the boat to Valinor, the moral corollary to the end of *The Lord of the Rings* implies that the humility and simple virtue of the Hobbit is just as great as the wisdom and craft of the Elves. By establishing this moral equivalence, Tolkien creates a specific framework of understanding in which the nostalgic, personal “home” and the virtuous, eternal “paradise” are conflated. In such a mode of thinking, protecting one's home is the same task as defending one's moral and/or religious virtue – by preventing harm to the former, the integrity of the latter is preserved. Insofar as Valinor and the Shire represent idealized societies, war in Middle-Earth becomes, consequentially, a similarly ideological pursuit, waged to protect a romanticized, pastoral society from an industrial, aggressive militarism.

This interpretive prism bears remarkable and significant resemblance to Western national attitudes in the wake of World War I and through World War II. Modern historians have characterized both World Wars as similar “war[s] of ideals,”⁷⁹ between the “free” democratic societies of the Allied Powers against the imperial aspirations of the Central and Axis Powers. From the Allies’ perspective, war was not about conquest or even reflexive self-defense, but rather the preservation of a distinct cultural heritage and a specific way of life that values individual “freedom” as a component of national identity. War in Middle-Earth is a highly similar endeavor to protect a pastoral ideal of peaceful independence. The armies of Melkor, Sauron, and Saruman are characterized by cruel machinery beyond the virtuous races’ traditional arsenal, from the explosives that sunder Helm’s Deep in *The Two Towers* to the unearthly battering ram Grond in *Return of the King* and the aforementioned venomous gas Melkor employs in *The Silmarillion*. Military innovation is clearly associated with the encroachment of evil, and pastoral simplicity is consequentially revered as a virtue worth protecting. The increased power and efficacy of explosives and machinery as devices of war were major innovations of World War I and II; by placing these weapons in the hands of evil’s lieutenants, Tolkien intimately links this nascent military-industrial power with the downfall of virtuous, pastoral civilization. In this way, Valinor and the Shire are thus not simply abstract societal ideals *within* Middle-Earth, but direct analogs to the “peaceful, civilized West” that the Allied powers sought to safeguard.

Tolkien’s investment in the socio-political turmoil of the 20th-century is perhaps most palpable when taking the long view of Middle-Earth’s history. As the

⁷⁹ Daniel Todman, *The Great War: Myth and Memory* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2005).

Age of Men slowly waxes under the passing Ages, the “scale” of the world diminishes – the wars become smaller, the conflicts, shorter, the heroes and villains no less virtuous but nevertheless reduced in absolute terms of power and sorcery. The absolute scope of the world decreases, and Fantasy and “magic,” literalized by the departure of the Elves, leave the world as history advances and Man’s presence increases.

This slow diminishing of Fantasy is perhaps most evident in Middle-Earth’s many wars. In the First and Second Ages, the great battles are waged primarily between the Eldar, the oldest and greatest lineage of Elves, the vanguard of the divine Valinor, against Sauron’s boss, the Satan-figure, the greatest evil in Tolkien’s cosmos, Melkor (also called Morgoth). The overwhelming scale of these battles compared to the skirmishes (by comparison) during the Third Age is only clearly visible in comparison. In *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*, Balrogs and Dragons represent some of the greatest evils the forces of good will face. Importantly, during the Third Age these creatures seem to only exist in the singular. Smaug is *the* Dragon, just as the Balrog is *the* Balrog as a unique manifestation of higher evil in those stories - vanquishing these foes is thus a once-in-a-lifetime, titanically heroic feat. In contrast, during the Wars of Beleriand in *The Silmarillion* for example, Morgoth literally unleashes *legions* of Balrogs and Dragons: hundreds, if not thousands of them. Moreover, the Elves of this era are practically strong enough to fight toe to toe with Balrogs, and the virtuous Eagles that aid the Elves are an even match against Dragons. Simply put, any battle from the “Quenta Silmarillion” would make the War of the Ring look insignificant in terms of sheer

deployed military muscle. If one was to consider the Valar's battles against Melkor in Middle-Earth's nascent years, the comparison to the world of *The Lord of the Rings* becomes even more lopsided. Sauron, the supreme evil in *Rings* is essentially Melkor's lieutenant: a being orders of magnitude less powerful than his master. Clearly, Tolkien's Middle-Earth grows less magically potent as time passes. Tolkien regards this diminishment as a necessary sadness, a sort of inevitable decline.

This diminishment, the symbol of the departing Elves, in its inverse association with the rise of Man's dominion, is crucially not only heralded with praise, but indeed primarily with a resigned acceptance, a sad but certain knowledge that Middle-Earth loses something precious and irreplaceable as its first-born children leave its shores. Consider Sam's intuitive understanding of the Elves as he and Frodo pass a group of them heading towards the sea:

“[The Elves] seem a bit above my likes and dislikes, so to speak,” answered Sam slowly. “It doesn't seem to matter what I think about them. They are quite different from what I expected – so young and old, and so gay and so sad, as it were.”⁸⁰

Even in his naïveté, Sam is able to immediately ascertain that the Elves represent something beyond his comprehension or his ability to judge and measure their relative worth, in a word, priceless. While the reign of Aragorn and the time of Men is an era of peace, evil has been vanquished at the price of Fantasy. The War of the Ring has thus completed a fundamental reorganization – the dominion of Man is a

⁸⁰ *The Lord of the Rings* 85.

time of new growth and change for the moral better, but that transition is marked by a profound sense of loss, the passing of Fantasy.

The death of Fantasy in Middle-Earth is like a death of innocence. Without the presence of the Elvish Fantasy, Middle-Earth will eventually become like our mundane, ordinary Earth. Indeed, Tolkien explicitly asserts that Middle-Earth is a version of our own planet in the distant past.⁸¹ One could describe the legacy of the 20th-century World Wars as a similar loss of innocence. As military technology advanced through Man's ingenuity, the individual efficacy of the common soldier diminished - in a world of nuclear weaponry and other devices of mass murder, the actions of one man pale in comparison to a single atom's consequence. The War of the Ring, in this sense, represents the last hurrah for heroic narrative, where a single exceptional figure could emerge victorious against overwhelming odds by the strength of his own body. In this way, the long arc of Middle-Earth's history is inclined towards a specific, common view of the 20th century, that is, as a new age in human civilization that did away with the conventions and assumptions of the "Old World." Harnessing the cultural power of these ideas, Tolkien's Middle-Earth becomes a lens on the 20th century's nostalgic history.

In capturing this worldview, Tolkien constructs an interpretive contract to complete his sub-creation. The reader chooses to enter into this agreement, that is, to accept the sub-creation as part of his interpretive "reality," the context through which he reads and understands the text. Through this successful fulfillment of this pact, the sub-creation becomes substantially "whole" as an independent object. Put another

⁸¹ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, eds. Humphrey Carpenter and Christopher Tolkien, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981), Nos. 151, 165, 183, 210, 211, 212, 294, 325.

way, Tolkien's successful sub-creation is mechanically dependent on the flaws in its construction, the leaks that puncture the sub-creative membrane. For although to the critical eye, the Primary World's intrusions into the narrative weaken the text's claim to existential self-sufficiency, it is precisely this 20th-century locality that extends a beckoning hand to the reader. Consciously or unwittingly, those who become citizens of Middle-Earth become participants in a collective worldview. This process is not simply an "appeal" to an audience in the "pandering" sense, but rather, a more complicated, equitable harmonization between narrative, author, and reader. Through this community of "Secondary Belief," Tolkien's stories are able to take the punctures in the sub-creative membrane and turn such supposed weaknesses into the very structure that binds Tolkien, his story, and his audience together. Through this storyteller's web of subtle influence, Tolkien's mythology could indeed take on a life of its own, the existential independence the sub-creation longs for. An objective analysis of Tolkien's world will always reveal the man behind the curtain. Yet, for many readers the interpretive project of his narrative transcends its authorship, in how his stories inspire their collective participants to look past the Bones of the Ox, believe in the existence of the sub-creation, and truly become Citizens pledged to the cultural ideal that is their Middle-Earth.

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