1904: Tolkien, Trauma, and its Anniversaries

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Abstract
A controversial speculative reading of J.R.R. Tolkien's early years with his mother Mabel and brother Hilary. Applying our current understanding of childhood trauma and its later effects, definitions of abuse, and knowledge of the history of childrearing to a close reading of underused material from Hilary's memoirs and Ronald's artwork, among other documents, Bunting proposes a far less rosy picture of Tolkien's early childhood than usually seen. However, statements from Tolkien's official biographer, Humphrey Carpenter, hint at a great deal of suppressed material; it's possible this interpretation may turn out to be closer to the truth than one might expect as more material becomes available.

Additional Keywords
J.R.R Tolkien

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While a number of writers have examined Tolkien’s reactions to the “animal horror” of life and death in the trenches, I would like to propose that the traumatic events of 1904 were far more important to Tolkien’s thinking and writing than his experience of World War I. In 1904 Tolkien, age twelve, and his younger brother, Hilary, nearly died, and their mother did die. Psychic trauma occurs when a sudden, unexpected, and overwhelmingly intense emotional blow or blows assaults the individual. Traumatic events are external. However, a person probably will not become fully traumatized unless he or she feels utterly helpless during the event or events. This is documented in the pioneering work of Lenore Terr (8). Traumatic memories in childhood are “far clearer, more detailed, and more long-lasting than is ordinary memory” (171). Like Frodo’s annual reaction to the anniversaries of his woundings by Shelob and at Weathertop, I will argue that Tolkien had delayed, recurrent reactions to his childhood trauma at the ten and twenty year anniversaries in 1914 and 1924. Anniversary reactions to trauma do not require conscious thought but are manifested in the need for people to memorialize important dates like 9/11 and Pearl Harbor Day (Inman). Because the death of Tolkien’s mother, Mabel Tolkien, was part of this series of events in 1904, what we know about her and what is revealed about Tolkien’s relationship with his mother are an important part of the anniversary reactions. I rely on some biographical sources that have not been previously utilized to their full potential.

Tolkien’s official biography gives a sketchy history for the first part of 1904. In January, 1904 the twelve-year old Ronald Tolkien and Hilary, his almost ten-year old brother, became bedridden with first measles and then whooping cough. Next, Hilary contracted pneumonia. Their mother, Mabel, had been ill since the preceding December, and by April 1904 she was hospitalized with diabetes, which was incurable at the time (Carpenter 29).

1 For examples, see Letters 72; Garth; Croft; Shippey; Brogan; Heberle.
Mabel Tolkien's letter of July 1904 documents the gravity of the boys' illnesses. She wrote during her post-hospital convalescence about her reunion with her two sons, stating that they were so "ridiculously well compared to the weak white ghosts that met me on train 4 weeks ago" with Hilary now looking "immense" (Carpenter 29; all italics are in the original). If in June 1904 they were "weak white ghosts" and Hilary at age ten now looks "immense," then what did they look like "by April" when she was placed in the hospital? Clearly they were quite sick, and this was particularly true of the younger Hilary. In a photograph in the Carpenter biography from May 1905, taken almost one year later, Hilary is clearly of average weight, certainly not chubby or plump or immense (Priestman 16). Therefore, Hilary must have been quite underweight, if not emaciated, in April 1904.

In addition, Tolkien independently indicates that he had believed he and/or his brother might die. In a sketch that was mailed to his mother 27 April 1904, twelve-year old Ronald Tolkien drew a sketch of himself and his soon-to-be uncle, Edwin Neave, sleeping in a shared bed in Edwin's lodgings. The picture is titled They Slept in Beauty Side by Side. This title probably comes from the first line "They grew in beauty, side by side" from the poem "The Graves of a Household" by Felicia Hemans, a very popular and well known poet of that time (Hammond and Scull, J.R.R. Tolkien: Artist and Illustrator [A&I] 12). The poem is about three brothers and a sister who grow up happily in a home where their "smiles lit up the hall" and "cheer'd with song the hearth." Perhaps most importantly for Tolkien, whose mother had converted to Catholicism and made sure her boys became Catholics, the children's "voices mingled as they prayed / Around one parent knee." Then the poem acknowledges that now the children's graves are "sever'd far and wide" in America, at sea, in Spain, and in Italy. This drawing could be a joke—as few would consider Ronald and Edwin beauties and Edwin was certainly no longer growing, and Tolkien was known for his humor (Burns 11, Carpenter 130). However, Tolkien may also be recalling sleeping in the same bed with his brother, which is almost certain, and thinking about brothers who may lie separated in their graves.

After her hospitalization in April 1904, Mabel Tolkien knew she was under the then death sentence of diabetes. Her delight in the recovery of her two sons when she was reunited with them in the summer of 1904 at Rednal is quite evident in her letter of July 1904 (Carpenter 29). Her sons were all that were left to Mabel Tolkien, as her husband was dead and she had been shunned by her relatives for becoming a Catholic. The reunion with their mother in the summer of 1904 was also a special time for both of the boys. In Black and White Ogre Country: The Lost Tales of Hilary Tolkien (2009), three pages of text clearly refer to this special reunion in the summer of 1904 at Rednal.
That it was a special time for Hilary is indicated by the fact that he had not used his notebook for four to five years. Hilary’s text states he would drive into town for Sunday Mass with Mrs. Church (26). In the biography, Carpenter explicitly states that at Rednal in the summer of 1904, Mr. and Mrs. Church drove the boys and their mother to mass some Sundays (Carpenter 30). Carpenter also reports that Father Francis kept Lord Roberts, a dog, there whom Hilary recalls (30). Ronald Tolkien would maintain a reminder of this time at Rednal with his pipe. Only there did Father Francis Morgan smoke a pipe, and Tolkien acknowledges “Possibly my own later addiction to the Pipe derives from this” (Carpenter 30).

Hilary recalled at Rednal “we used to live a big part of the summer up trees, particularly a certain sycamore, where we collected all our squirrel supplies of nice things to munch, let down and pulled up in a basket with some sort of contrivance of double string” (Black and White Ogre Country 28). Living in trees must have been a treasured memory for both boys as Ronald Tolkien, in his own special fashion, used this motif with the Galadrim elves of Lothlórien living in trees in The Fellowship of the Ring. Galadriel, the Lady of the Galadrim, lives within a great circle hedge or “korin” of golden mallorn trees with a lawn watered by a stream. These tall trees may recall the sycamore of 1904, as sycamores are noted for their height.

Garth notes how Galadriel is very similar to the elven queen of the Lonely Isle, Meril-i-Turinqui, who lives among her maidens in a ceremonial circle of tall elm trees that rise in “three lessening storeys” in one of Tolkien’s earliest stories, the February 1917 version of the “Cottage of Lost Play” (Book of Lost Tales I [BoLTI] 95). Garth notes how both Meril and Galadriel, Lady of the Galadrim, are descendants of Inwe and full of ancient knowledge and sources of vitality: Meril with her ‘limpé’ drink and Galadriel with her ability to stop the passage of time and the gift of lembas (228).

Fairy or elven queens are associated with Mabel Tolkien. She was called Mab by her husband and signed her name as ‘Mab’ (Carpenter 10, 29). Mab was the queen of the fairies in Act I, scene IV of Shakespeare’s The Most Excellent and Lamentable Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet. Mabel Suffield’s identification with this role of fairy queen is seen in her describing the infant J.R.R. Tolkien as looking like “such a fairy” and undressed “looks more of an

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2 Simon Tolkien at www.simontolkien.com/mygrandfather.html reports that his grandfather, J.R.R. Tolkien, never inhaled except by accident. This indicates that any ‘addiction’ was not due to tobacco but to the habit that Tolkien chose to continue with its associations to the summer of 1904 at Rednal. Aragorn and Bilbo both advocate smoking as a way of remembering people (LotR V.8.869, VI.6.987).
elf still” (Carpenter 14). Further, Carpenter explicitly identifies Mabel Tolkien with Belladonna Took, the mother of Bilbo Baggins (Carpenter 175). Belladonna means ‘beautiful lady’ which Mabel Tolkien certainly was from Hilary’s picture of her (65). Belladonna was also the name of the queen of the fairies in the story “Rosanie or the Inconstant Prince,” with which Tolkien was probably familiar (A&I 57). While Galadriel is not technically a queen, being beautiful and a powerful ruler fits the image of an elven queen (Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien [Letters] 274). The consistent cluster of imagery around Galadriel, Belladonna, and ‘Mab’ suggests that parallels were being drawn with Tolkien’s mother.

The idyllic summer of 1904 was never to be repeated as Tolkien’s mother died in November, 1904. Carpenter notes that after her death, Ronald Tolkien’s character changed. Death, combined with trauma in children, will be followed by depression and/or character change (Terr 107). Further, psychic trauma also destroys a child’s sense of the future, especially that comfortable trust that things will turn out well. Childhood survivors of trauma become pessimistic (Terr 163-4). The change in Ronald Tolkien’s character and his pessimism are documented by Carpenter:

[I]t made him into two people. He was by nature a cheerful almost irrepressible person with a great zest for life. [...] But from now onwards there was to be a second side, [...] capable of bouts of profound despair. More precisely, and more closely related to his mother’s death, when he was in this mood he had a deep sense of impending loss. Nothing was safe. Nothing would last. No battle would be won for ever. (Carpenter 31)

Carpenter adds:

[O]ne can see his love for her [his mother] as a governing motive throughout his life and writings. Her death made him a pessimist; or rather, it made him capable of violent shifts of emotion. [...] [H]is natural optimism was balanced by deep uncertainty. [...] He was thus a man of extreme contrasts. When in a black mood he would feel that

3 ‘Elf’ and ‘fairy’ were interchangeable terms in Tolkien’s early writings, and evidently for his mother, so a fairy queen like Belladonna or ‘Mab’ could also be an elven queen (Rateliff 59; Carpenter 29, 14). Further possible parallels between Mabel Tolkien and Galadriel may be found in my 2015 unpublished paper, Bunting, “Fairies, Fairy Queens, and the Character of Guinevere in The Fall of Arthur.”

4 This story is included in the collection In Powder and Crinoline by Quiller-Crouch, a source for illustrations which influenced Tolkien’s artwork. It also includes the story “Minon-Minette,” a likely source for the special properties of elven rope (38-59).
there was no hope, either for himself or the world; and [...] that drove him to record his feelings on paper [...] (Carpenter 129)

Writing in 1977, Carpenter would not have been familiar with our more recent understanding of clinical signs of trauma in childhood, so he can serve as an impartial and unbiased informant of this change. Lenore Terr’s groundbreaking research on trauma in children was based on work with the victims of the 1976 Chowchilla bus kidnapping in California combined with a follow-up that continued for several years. Though there were prior reports of trauma in childhood, these were all based on retrospective accounts by adults long after the events. The fact that symptoms are reported only after Mabel Tolkien’s death may partly be due to the significant and positive reunion in Rednal in the summer of 1904. Death, in and of itself, is not necessarily traumatic, but something in the circumstances and/or combination of Tolkien’s own near death, his brother’s near death experience, and his mother’s death was traumatic.5

There is a third marker for psychic trauma in children, paranormal thinking, and there is some evidence that Tolkien showed this sign (Terr 107). Paranormal thinking can include experiences such as seeing ghosts, having intuitions about the future or seeing ‘omens,’ and “uncanny experience” (Terr 155). Flieger has argued that although Tolkien’s Catholic faith was central to him, “at a level beyond doctrine he also believed in fairies, and might have, like Frodo and Looney and Ramer, had direct experience of the ‘strong potion’ of Faërian Drama” (“But What Did He really Mean?” 164). This seems to have been especially true for trees. From the time he lived in Sarehole he had a special relationship with trees: climbing them, leaning against them, and would “even talk to them” (Carpenter 22). Sayer reports that as an adult on their country walk Tolkien’s “greatest love seemed to be for trees. He had loved trees ever since childhood. He would often place his hand on the trunks of ones that we passed. He felt their wanton or unnecessary felling almost as murder” (6). Kilby reports Tolkien arguing that people who lived for generations on the same land, as Tolkien believed his family had, and eating the local produce “perhaps” “saw nymphs in the fountains and dryads in the wood—they were not mistaken for there was in a sense real (not metaphorical) connections between them and the countryside” (70; italics in the original). In the summer of 1973, shortly before Tolkien’s death, when walking with Lord Halsbury, Tolkien said, “this is how you must communicate with a tree.” Then “he stood up to the tree, put his forehead against the bark, put both hands on

5 Terr also documents that a singular instance of trauma does not in fact affect a child’s ability to perform well in school, much to the surprise of common sense (191-2).
either side of the bowl [sic] of the tree, and was absolutely silent with his eyes shut, for a little while.” Afterwards, he turned to Lord Halsbury and told him the “message” that the tree gave him (Grotta-Kurska 226).6 This would be an experience that would be “uncanny” for many people, but Tolkien certainly felt that trees, at least, were inhabited by sentient, intelligent beings, which might be called ‘fairies.’

The tenth-year anniversary of Tolkien’s trauma and his mother’s death was in 1914. First, we will review some of Tolkien’s art work from that year which reveals a range of intense feelings that could be associated with trauma. Tolkien’s 22nd birthday was on 3 January 1914. On 8 January his fiancé, Edith Bratt, was received into the Catholic Church and they were betrothed. Tolkien celebrated this occasion with the poem *Magna Dei Gloria* (Warwick) dedicated ‘To EMB’ (Edith Mary Bratt) (Scull and Hammond, *Companion and Guide* [C&G] I.49). On 6 January, in anticipation of the reunion with his soon-to-be-betrothed, he drew a romantic fantasy house with rounded walls, an ornamental door, windows, and a seashell roof in a forest with a shaft of moonlight beaming down (A&I 43). What a delightful hideaway for a newly united couple! However, ‘The Shadow of the Past’ intruded into Tolkien’s happy present and promising future plans.

Between 6 January and 12 January 1914, Tolkien painted a watercolor entitled *Eeriness*. In this scene “tall, straight trees that line and shade the road appear to stretch out menacing arms toward a wizard-like figure with a staff, who seems to cast a circle of light upon the ground around him. [...] [There is] a cat design [...] on the back of the robe” (A&I 44). This cat, given the ominous presence of the faceless ‘wizard,’ should be linked with the cat lurking between the curtains in the drawing of *Wickedness* (A&I 37). The cat in *Wickedness* looks like it could be Siamese and that would certainly fit with Tolkien’s remarkable characterization of Siamese cats as belonging to “the fauna of Mordor” (*Letters* 300).7 Consequently, the cat’s associations with evil and death and the fact we cannot see the ‘wizard’s’ face reinforce the threatening quality of the figure. ‘Eerie’ is defined as ‘inspiring fear, weird, uncanny.’ That is, something both familiar and strange.

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6 See fn. 13 for a fuller discussion of Grotta-Kurska as a source.
7 ‘Mordor’ has an impeccable Elvish derivation, but it is also quite close to the original Anglo-Saxon word, ‘morthor’ for murder. Tolkien would have appreciated this, and Mark Hooker comments on this word play (xxii).
Part of what makes this picture so disturbing is how it combines two other notable and discordant elements. On the ground just outside the circle of light, seemingly the range of the wizard’s power, there is a blue form. When inspected carefully this is the silhouette of an angel with the wings on the right and hands raised in prayer on the left. The ‘wizard’ would not be aware of this angel praying for it because the angel is behind the wizard. To the left of the ‘wizard’ is a hill with three trees. Given the presence of the praying angel this is almost certainly a representation of Calvary, as the three crosses are referred to as ‘trees’ in the New Testament, i.e. Acts 5:30. This striking juxtaposition seems to indicate a choice of which road to take, either the open, wide, easy road to perdition that the ‘wizard’ is on or climb to the distant hill of Calvary with its redemption. I believe this is Tolkien’s way of portraying his mother, Mabel Tolkien, because we know that she converted to Catholicism which Tolkien considered the one true religion.

Further, this picture has links to an illustration from Kipling’s story *The Cat that Walked by Himself*, in the avenue of trees and Tolkien’s variant on Kipling’s monogram (*A&I* 44). This allusion to Kipling’s story might be understood as commenting on Mabel Tolkien’s proud refusal to give up her Catholicism even when faced with the loss of financial support from her family. Mabel Tolkien, like Kipling’s independent and ‘clever’ Cat, refused to be bribed with material security. An additional consideration also indicates this might be Mabel Tolkien. That is, wizards in fairy tales are the male counterparts of fairies, and Tolkien’s mother identified with Mab, the queen of
the fairies (Bettelheim 10). As discussed above Tolkien’s mother was called Mab and identified with the role of ‘Queen Mab.’ This picture may express Tolkien’s ambivalent feelings about his mother, of which he may not have consciously been aware. One might wonder if unpublished or additional letters, diary entries, and other material may yield further clarification, though this is speculative.

If the ‘wizard’ figure in Eeriness is a representation of Mabel Tolkien, then somehow death and evil, as well as salvation and redemption, are associated with her. This very complex and discordant set of associations would make psychological resolution of any memories difficult, especially for a child of twelve. Seen in this way, Mabel Tolkien would have been ‘eerie’; that is, both familiar and strange. The contrasting associations depicted in Eeriness would create a need to return to painful memories in hopes of finding a way to make sense of this paradox. Tolkien said, when talking about himself and his wife, that “someone close in heart to me should know something about the things that records do not record: the dreadful sufferings of our childhoods, from which we rescued one another, but could not wholly heal the wounds that later often proved disabling” (Letters 421). If there was a personal, painful trauma associated with “the dreadful sufferings” of Tolkien’s childhood, then Tolkien’s notable reticence, if not ‘caginess,’ in talking about himself in interviews and his repeated denials of the relevance of biography to appreciating or “explaining” literary works and especially his own, would not be surprising (Brace; Carpenter 288).

After being immersed in thoughts of the past portrayed in Eeriness, Tolkien tried to regain his perspective and focus on his positive future relationship with Edith. In his 12 January watercolor, Beyond, the “elements are reduced to basic forms and are brightly painted by category: pink star, purple moon, indigo mountains, pink road, black mushroom-like trees” (A&I 43-44). The narrow road in Beyond rises into the air and may recall the Olórë Mallë, the Path of Dreams, in The Book of Lost Tales (BoLT1 18). It also resembles the frontispiece of East of the Sun and West of the Moon, Old Tales from the North (1914), done by Kay Nielsen, an illustrator Tolkien liked. This depicts the title story’s happily united couple successfully escaping the castle of the Trolls as a result of their being aided by Christians and the girl’s being a Christian (A&I 8 9)

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8 Bettelheim (1903-1990) does not explain or justify this statement. Whatever the controversy about the man, his possible fabricated history, and his treatment of students at his school, he certainly knew psychoanalytic theory and Old World fairy tales.

9 Tolkien’s 1915 poem, “The Shores of Faery” (BoLTIII 271-272), which starts with the line, “East of the Sun/West of the Moon” plays with this language and shows his familiarity with this story.

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66 Ⓚ Mythlore 127, Fall/Winter 2015
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This theme would certainly fit with Edith’s recent conversion to Catholicism and their betrothal.

However, Tolkien’s attempt at literally and figuratively getting ‘beyond’ the shadow of the past, as seen in Eeriness and its associations with his mother, fails as there is a rubbed inscription: “Alas! In dreadful mood” (A&I 44). This mood makes little sense in relation to the painting, Beyond, but this despair makes total sense in relation to Eeriness and the powerfully charged emotions associated with the ‘wizard,’ who may be Mabel Tolkien.

This contrast of the past, as seen in Eeriness, and the present with its projected alternative and positive future, may be continued in the closely related drawings, There, Here, and Everywhere as suggested in their titles (These pictures have never been published [C&G I.49]). In March 1914, in his sketchbook he did a watercolor of the sea which may be a representation of the Great Wave. The Great Wave was associated with the earlier trauma of his brother nearly drowning (Bunting, “The Shadow of the Past part one” 5). Tolkien was present around the age of eight when his younger brother, Hilary, almost drowned in the mill pond at Sarehole, and at that time he began to have a repetitive dream of drowning in a “great wave,” which Tolkien referred to as his “Atlantis complex” (Carpenter 23). This motif appears in his children’s story, Roverandom, written in 1925, and Faramir in The Lord of the Rings also has this dream. Even more importantly is the fact it is the source of Tolkien’s story of the drowning of Númenor. Being associated with the “sad and troublous” (“On Fairy-stories” [OFS] 135) time at Sarehole and his brother’s near drowning, it is understandable that Tolkien remarked that Atlantis “is very real to me” and that “to me Atlantis is a myth of regret” (C&G I.483). In a letter to Christopher Bretherton in 1964 Tolkien wrote: “In sleep I had the dreadful dream of the ineluctable Wave […]. It still occurs occasionally, though now exorcised by writing about it” (Letters 347).

In a similar manner, if there were a traumatic experience that was associated with his mother as suggested by his painting, Eeriness, Tolkien’s likely method of dealing with it would be to ‘exorcise’ it by expressing his feelings either by writing about it or by painting as in the Great Wave painting of 1914.10 Carpenter, who had unfettered access to all of Tolkien’s papers,

10 Repeated dreams, especially in children, are not likely to be the usual combination of fantasy/wish /defense, but rather they repeat terrifying experiences that derive from actual, outside events (Terr 209-210). Traumatized children, and even their parents, do not usually recognize that the children are dreaming their old traumas. Children of Holocaust survivors are known to dream their parents’ dreams, and siblings of trauma victims can begin to have some of the same fears, behaviors, play, or dreams as their traumatized siblings (Terr 311, 25). We know that Tolkien’s son Michael had this dream, and in 1956 Tolkien speaks of only learning of it “recently” (Letters 213, 232, 445).
states at the end of the official biography that “[Tolkien’s] real biography is The Hobbit, The Lord of the Rings, and The Silmarillion; for the truth about him lies within their pages” (Carpenter 260). Is it possible that his feelings about his mother were part of this “truth” which he was driven to record, especially when in a “black mood” (Carpenter 129)?

While Tolkien protested to his friend, W.H. Auden, that only God can know the relation between the author’s works and his life, he admitted that his “instinct is to cloak such self-knowledge as he has, and such criticisms of life as he knows it, under mythical and legendary dress” (Letters 211). Here Tolkien is so uncomfortable talking about himself that he refers to himself in the third person and uses such convoluted syntax that it is hard to make sense of the complete sentence. For a writer as fluent as Tolkien this suggests a serious level of discomfort and awkwardness that would be the result of defensiveness. By the age of twenty Tolkien was communicating his thoughts about important events in his life in this indirect manner when he wrote a play, The Bloodhound, the Chef, and the Suffragette. The play concerned his anticipated reunion with his soon-to-be wife, Edith Bratt. This anticipation also led to a series of drawings and paintings expressing his various and complicated feelings about this important event (Carpenter 59; Bunting, “Tolkien in Love”).

The second piece of evidence for the ten-year anniversary reaction is Tolkien’s rewriting of the story of Kullervo from the Finnish epic, the Kalevala. In October 1914, Tolkien wrote his future wife that “I am trying to turn one of the stories [of the Kalevala]—which is really a very great story and most tragic—into a short story somewhat on the line of Morris’ romances with chunks of poetry in between” (Letters 7). The tale of Kullervo occupies only five of the fifty Runos or separate songs in the Kalevala. When Tolkien presented his version of “The Story of Kullervo” in 1914, it was quite different in many ways from the story in the Kalevala.11 A look at the original is enlightening.

In the original Finnish Kalevala’s “Story of Kullervo,” there is an explicit description of how the child Kullervo was orphaned and abused as an infant. Then as very young child three attempts are made on his life, by drowning, burning, and hanging. As Kullervo grows, he repeatedly fails at various jobs because he is too undisciplined and impulsive. He is then sold as a slave to Ilmarinen, the smith, but Kullervo soon flees after killing the smith’s

11 In her introduction to “‘The Story of Kullervo’ and Essays on Kalevala,” Flieger states “Tolkien’s story follows its source closely; its main departure is in the matter of names” (212). However, in “Tolkien, Kalevala, and ‘The Story of Kullervo,” in Green Suns and Faërie: Essays on Tolkien, [Green Suns], Flieger lists significant changes.
wife in retaliation for her destroying his one prized possession, his father’s knife.

Unexpectedly, Kullervo finds his parents are alive, but learns his brother has been killed and his sister has been lost in the woods. This leaves one younger sister and one younger brother at home. In Runo 35, the Kalevala poet explicitly comments that though living now with his parents’ guidance, it is not enough:

But his mind was not mature,
Could not get the knack of things
Since he had been nurtured badly,
Cradled wrongly as a child
By the wicked foster-parent (278, ll.5-9)\(^\text{12}\)

Although Kullervo is given another chance to be productive, he leaves a trail of destruction due to his undisciplined strength, though now he asks if he should use the strength “only as is needed” (l.20). On his way home from paying taxes, he recklessly abducts and seduces a girl who turns out to be his lost sister. Learning that he is her brother, she commits suicide. Kullervo returns home to tell his mother. In order to avenge his father’s wounds, repay his mother’s tears, and forget his “own delightful treatment” (l. 371), he then decides to seek death by attacking Untamoine, his childhood abuser and previous owner. In Runo 36, after he achieves this revenge, he returns home to find all his family dead. He then commits suicide. The poet of the Kalevala, Vainomoinen, sums up his life:

Children brought up crookedly,
Any infant cradled wrongly,
Never learns the way of things,
Never acquires a mind mature
However old he grows to be
Or however strong in body. (287, ll. 354-359)

In the Finnish Kalevala this very unattractive story of abandonment and abuse is quite a contrast to the other stories of adventure, creation, and courting, typical to mythological literature, but it held Tolkien’s attention. What is most striking about this story is the unexpectedly modern attitude

\(^{12}\) Contrary to Flieger, the function of the second family is to show that even finding oneself in a new family and having the hope of belonging again cannot ‘fix’ or ‘cure’ the effect of child abuse (“Tolkien, Kalevala” 193). The poet is remarkably perceptive and truthful here as opposed to Flieger’s view that the family is merely there to provide a sister whom Kullervo has not seen for the act of incest.
toward child abuse. That is, the *Kalevala* poet bluntly and repeatedly states that childhood abuse has a life-long impact. This poem would have been a completely new and unique presentation of this idea for Tolkien. Nowhere in Tolkien’s nineteenth-century culture would he have found such a condemnation of childhood abuse. Rather the common, socially sanctioned abuse of children rested on the belief that abuse was never emotionally, psychologically, or mentally injurious to a child and would have no life-long sequelae. This view dates from at least the Middle Ages, as we discover in John Thrupp’s *The Anglo-Saxon Home, A History of the Domestic Institutions and Customs of England from the Fifth to the Eleventh Century* (1862) with its catalogue of abuse, including a frank and well-documented discussion of infanticide and the regular beatings and floggings of boys in school. This was still the prevalent view in Tolkien’s childhood, though the occurrence of infanticide was now unacceptable (97-101).

Physical abuse and beating of children by strangers and parents was common, acceptable, and unremarkable at the turn of the 20th century. These ‘thrashings’ or beatings should also be seen in the context of the casual and frequent physical discipline of boys, particularly in public schools (Rose 179). The widely existing, accepted belief was that this practice was not only for the child’s good, but also necessary for education (Rose 180). The physical abuse and exploitation of children was supported by Biblical authority and custom, i.e. “Spare the rod and spoil the child,” and was even applied to infants. Physical abuse was not necessarily an indication of maltreatment or dislike of a child. People could see themselves as good parents, and be seen by others as good parents, and still beat their children. Certainly, a good deal of this abuse was a function of the fact that there were so many unwanted children due to the lack of any reliable birth control except abstinence. The childhood suffering of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse was just a fact of life for many, if not the majority, of children in the late nineteenth century. This was because children were seen as little adults and the “indifference to what we should now see as cruelty to children sprang from […] ignorance of the consequences of maltreatment in youth on the physique and character of the grown man” (Pinchbeck and Hewitt 350). In middle-class homes the cane or birch was used by mothers, fathers, as well as nannies by permission, and well into Edwardian times there was a trade in birch rods.

Before her marriage Mabel Tolkien had been a governess (Grotta-Kurska 29).\(^{13}\) Governesses often had a reputation for “viciously strict”

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\(^{13}\) While Grotta-Kurska’s biography is generally considered highly unreliable, Hammond confirms this is from a communication from Priscilla Tolkien (under March 17, 2010 1018-1020) (2/09/2014), www.hammondandscull.com/addenda/guide-by-date.html.

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discipline (Rose 165). Hilary Tolkien is quite matter-of-fact in his old diary that he would get a “good thrashing” if he went to the local farmer’s house to get back the shoes and stockings that he had left on the banks of this farmer’s stream and that “might also have happened if you went home shoeless” (2). During the time he lived in Sarehole, Hilary was only 2½ to 6½ years old. He was ill equipped at that age to resist the temptation of pretty flowers, mill ponds, etc.

What we might now see as abuse, as suggested in Hilary’s notebook, fits with the threatening ‘wizard’ figure of Eeriness. We have only two statements from Tolkien about his mother, both from his letters. First, she was “a gifted lady of great beauty and wit, greatly stricken by God with grief and suffering, who died in youth (at 34) of a disease hastened by persecution of her faith.” Second, his mother’s death was seen as the result of “persecution, poverty, and, largely consequent, disease, in the effort to hand on to us small boys the Faith” (Letters 54, 354). His description is quite a contrast to Tolkien’s report of his later guardian, Father Francis Morgan. Tolkien states that he “first learned charity and forgiveness from him” and recalled Father Francis’s “astonishing charity.” Further, “in 1904 [Hilary and I] had the sudden miraculous experience of Father Francis’ love and care and humour” (Letters 340, 354, 417). ‘Charity,’ ‘forgiveness,’ and ‘love’ are not given as characteristics
of his mother, especially if charity and forgiveness were first learned from Father Francis Morgan. This would not be surprising if Mabel Tolkien had been a governess who fit the stereotype of a “viciously strict” disciplinarian, and someone who needed to turn to the charity and forgiveness as offered in the prayers of an unknown angel so that she might be led to the salvation of Calvary.

The likelihood of harsh punishment during the time in Sarehole may also be supported by two other considerations. Tolkien’s spring 1915 poem You and Me and the Cottage of Lost Play features the two children of the title who are described as “a dark child and a fair” (BoLT1 28), and fairies who visit “lonely children and whisper to them at dusk in early bed by night-light and candle-flame, or comfort those that weep” (BoLT1 20). While Ronald remained fair like his early picture, Hilary changed to “look more and more like his father” (Carpenter 23). This must partly refer to Hilary’s darker hair because Arthur Tolkien, his father, has dark hair in the picture in the Carpenter biography (149).14 Hilary’s dark hair can be seen in the adult picture that was included with his notebook (67, 68). Also, Tolkien refers to the “sad and troublous” time between the age when he began to read at four and his beginning school at the age of eight in 1900, i.e. the years at Sarehole (OFS 135; Carpenter 21, 24).15 According to Tolkien, this was “the longest seeming and most formative part of my life,” and it was not ‘happy’ or ‘golden’ (Carpenter 24). The unpleasantness of this time cannot have been due to financial insecurity as Mabel Tolkien was living in subsidized housing provided by her brother-in-law, Thomas Evans Mitton, who had married his late father’s [Arthur Tolkien’s] sister, Mabel. Further, his mother’s income was supplemented by financial support from another brother-in-law, Walter Incledon, who was married to Mabel’s older sister, May. Tolkien, his brother, and mother lived in “genteel poverty” such that his mother could still afford to dress him in “the finery of the day: short black velvet coats and knee-length trousers, large round hats with drawstrings, frilly white satin shirts with wide collars and huge red bow ribbons loosely tied at the neck” (Grotta-Kurska 28; Bunting, “5 Gracewell, Sarehole” 8).

Further, the surprising salience of child abuse for Tolkien is also indicated by his noticing casual abuse that was completely typical and unremarkable. Fifty years later in a letter of 1967 or 1968 to his son, Michael,

14 Garth suggests that the dark-haired child is Edith Bratt, Tolkien’s fiancé, but the reference to Hilary living in the cottage in Sarehole may be a better fit (72).
15 But see Tolkien on Fairy-stories, Expanded Edition, with Commentary and Notes, where there is confusion (108).
Tolkien remembered being present at the parade route for George V’s coronation in 1911 where he witnessed:

one little scene (unnoticed by my companions): as the coach containing the royal children swept in on return the P[rice] of W[ales] (a pretty boy) poked his head out and knocked his coronet askew. He was jerked back and smartly rebuked by his sister. *(Letters 391)*

His 1914 story of Kullervo may have allowed Tolkien to revisit a likely history of physical abuse for both himself and his brother at the hands of his mother, a former governess, and it also allowed him to understand its lasting effects. Tolkien was a ‘golden boy,’ not only the first one on either side of his middle-class family to “go up” to university, but also a child his mother could be proud of as he was reading at the age of four and soon writing *(Carpenter 21)*. In Mabel Tolkien’s December 1903 letter she mentions in passing she is sending drawings from both boys, but then spends the rest of the letter singing the praises of Ronald with not a word about the disappointing, lackluster Hilary *(Carpenter 28)*. By 1914 his younger brother, Hilary, like Kullervo, had repeatedly failed: not passing the entrance exam for King Edward’s School in 1903 when Ronald won a Foundation Scholarship, finally entering King Edward’s in 1905 but leaving school in 1910 after turning sixteen and without graduating, not keeping a job with his successful uncle Walter Incledon, and then becoming a farm hand on his Aunt Jane Suffield Neave’s farm *(C&G II.1017)*. Like Kullervo, even after the abuse had stopped, Hilary struggled to be productive. It is hard to think of a greater contrast than the precocious Ronald writing poetry at the age of six or seven and going to Oxford while his younger brother becomes a farm worker.

While Ronald Tolkien was four when he and his brother and mother moved to Sarehole, he was an intelligent child with an excellent memory and good verbal skills which would allow him to follow his mother’s probably strict rules much more quickly and effectively than his two-year old brother, Hilary. Mabel Tolkien would have had much more need to discipline Hilary, and Ronald Tolkien would have witnessed these ‘thrashings.’ If Tolkien “first learned charity and forgiveness” from Father Francis Morgan, it may imply that there was little mercy or forgiveness when they were living with his mother, especially during the “sad and troublous time,” the years at Sarehole *(emphasis added)*. Hilary’s history of being the target of harsh discipline, coupled with a history of repeated failures, would have matched the pattern of the Kullervo story. This could have triggered Tolkien’s interest. With the starting point of the ‘hapless’ Kullervo and his brother, Tolkien, again “cloaking” any criticism “under mythical and legendary dress” *(Letters 211)*
could transform this character into Túrin Turambar, slayer of the great dragon, Glaurung. In the story’s earliest 1919 form, Turin’s special role at the Last Battle was striking down Morgoth, the Dark Lord, who had cursed him, and to have revenge on his abuser (*Sigurd and Gudrun* 185). The wish for revenge on an abuser would fit with a history of likely physical abuse. Tolkien began rewriting the Kullervo story in 1914, and his investment in elaborating this tale through numerous forms and revisions continued through the late 1950s. Christopher Tolkien notes that the centrality, importance, and complexity of this story set it apart (*C&G* II.1056-1062). The continued reworking of this story would be consistent with an attempt to contain conflicting experiences associated with trauma which Tolkien may have witnessed with his brother.

The most striking and unexpected finding that emerges from Tolkien’s art work and writings of 1914, the ten-year anniversary, is a picture of his mother completely different from, if not at odds with, the public portrait of his mother that Tolkien and his heirs have presented. Not only was Mabel Tolkien Ronald Tolkien’s valued teacher, a martyr for the true religion of Catholicism, beautiful, and witty, but also more. Independent and converging sources create a new larger picture, which may help us to better understand Tolkien and his writings, even though we may not have complete documentation. “Cloaking” “under mythical and legendary dress,” Tolkien appears to be expressing intimate feelings about his mother and her treatment of his brother, Hilary.

In trying to understand Tolkien’s relationship with his mother perhaps one clue may be how she might resemble her younger sister, (Emily) Jane Suffield Neave, who was a teacher. Jane was described as “endlessly interesting,” and “could be very funny, although not in a giggly sort of way,” but “was capable of taking a stern view of matters concerning domestic order” (Morton and Hayes 23, 22). Moreover, a larger social and cultural context,

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16 Tolkien was very clear that he identified himself with the character Beren, found in *The Silmarillion*, and his wife with Beren’s love, Lúthien Tinúviel, to the point of having these names carved on their tombstones. Tolkien was known for his very traditional and conservative views on social issues, including the role of women. However, Lúthien repeatedly protects and rescues Beren from Morgoth and his henchmen. This active role is rather surprising. However, if Hilary is the kernel for Túrin, who opposes Morgoth, then Lúthien may express how Tolkien felt his wife’s love helped him to surmount the effects of any possible abuse from his mother. This would link Morgoth to the ‘wizard’ of Eeriness, leading to new questions and views.

17 It is important to consider that both a thirteen-year old Christopher Tolkien and his sister, nearly eight-year old Priscilla, were present and witnessed their father’s “collapse” and near nervous “breakdown” in July-August, 1938 (*Letters* 40; Bunting, “The Shadow of the Past and the Birth of *The Lord of the Rings* part two,” 7). As part of their filial duty, they have honored their father’s wishes about veiling his relationship with his mother.
besides the acceptability of physical abuse and the problem of unwanted children, needs to be taken into account. During the late Victorian period women lacked economic or political power. Consequently, teaching and the “cult of motherhood” were nearly the only areas where women could have control or power. Motherhood could function as an outlet for women’s energies in “psychological, emotional, what they called ‘moral’ or ‘religious’ control over the minds of their actual or symbolic offspring” (Douglas 76). In America the widely popular *Letters to Mothers* (1838) by Lydia Huntley Sigourney expressed this powerful maternal influence:

> How entire and perfect is this dominion over the unformed character of your infant. Write what you will upon the printless tablet with your wand of love. Hitherto your influence over your dearest friend, your most submissive servant, has known bounds and obstructions. Now you have over a new-born immortal almost that degree of power which the mind exercises over the body . . . . The period of this influence must indeed pass away; but while it last, make good use of it. (qtd. in Douglas 75)

This philosophy of demanding total control and obedience over infants, toddlers, and preschoolers was well-received and accepted practically as gospel on both sides of the Atlantic in the 1800s. For example, toilet training should be done by one year of age. Before the summer of 1904, Mabel Tolkien, while chaste and charming, seems not to have been ‘the Angel in the House’ as described by Virginia Woolf:

> She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. If there was chicken, she took the leg; if there was a draft she sat in it—in short, she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of theirs. Above all—I need not say it—she was pure.18 (Woolf 59)

However, I believe that this new and complicated picture of Mabel Tolkien is still not the full story and specifically not the full story in the eyes of Tolkien. More important to him than any past trauma or abuse that might have been associated with his mother as well as any attendant emotional pain and turmoil, was the change in his mother and their new relationship that

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18 It is interesting to note in this context that Virginia Woolf was a victim of sexual abuse by her two older step-brothers. The Stephens family certainly knew of this abuse and could do nothing to intervene or protect her (Terr 230-231).
blossomed at Rednal in the special summer of 1904. Tolkien, in his drawing *They Slept in Beauty Side by Side*, shows that he had every reason to expect that neither he nor Hilary would survive or would ever see their mother again. Surely, he must have felt a joy at this almost miraculous and unexpected reprieve, being reunited with the two people he loved most in that summer. Could this be his experience of *eucatastrophe* (OFS 153)? This joy was clearly shared by his mother, who savored her sons’ happiness during their 1904 summer holiday (Carpenter 30). The mother who could enjoy both of her sons was the woman Tolkien chose to remember. I believe Tolkien focused on a mother who, in the face of poverty, suffering, social isolation, and her own imminent death, chose the salvation and charity offered by Catholicism. This would have been the view fostered by Father Francis’s “astonishing charity and forgiveness.” Could Mabel Tolkien, the former ‘Mab’ and Belladonna, queen of the fairies, have changed in a way that could be viewed as repentance in a way analogous to Galadriel, another fairy/elfen ‘queen,’ ruler of the Galadrim, who may be associated with the tall trees of Rednal in 1904 and who “was a penitent” (Letters 407)?¹⁹ I believe Tolkien was always loyal to this memory of the summer of 1904. This view of his mother, whatever his suffering over the pain of the past, was the image that he wanted her to have in relation to the public. However, containing these intense and clashing feelings would lead to Kilby’s recalling what C.S. Lewis wrote to his brother as early as 1939 that “Tolkien’s trials, besides being frequent and severe, are usually of such a complicated nature as to be impenetrable” (33).

The twentieth anniversary of the traumatic event would have been in 1924. In April, 1944, in a letter to his son Christopher, who was born November 21, 1924, Tolkien wrote:

> And you were so special a gift to me, in a time of sorrow and mental suffering, and your love, opening at once almost as soon as you were born, foretold to me, as it were in spoken words, that I am consoled ever by the certainty that there is no end to this [i.e. the apparent success of evil is only temporary and always prepares “only the soil for unexpected good to sprout in”]. *(Letters 76)*

This is quite a remarkable comment as the period of time both before and after Christopher’s birth was busy and filled with successes. In January, 1924, Tolkien’s son Michael had an unexpected, last minute recovery from appendicitis and in March, 1924 the Tolkiens bought a new home. In July, 1924, Tolkien was confirmed in the new Professorship of English Language at

¹⁹ In relation to Galadriel being a penitent, it is interesting that Hilary Tolkien at the age of thirty-four married Magdalen Matthews, named for the most famous penitent.
the University of Leeds, and he was writing and publishing poetry. Tolkien was also finishing his share as co-author of *Sir Gawain the Green Knight* which was finally published in July, 1925 (*C&G* I.124-6, 131-135). However, to recall this as “a time of sorrow and mental suffering” could only have been from internal preoccupations. That is, the 20th anniversary of Tolkien’s trauma which, based on his writing and art work of 1914, centered around his loved, but possibly unredeemed, mother, Mabel Tolkien.

Tolkien also wrote the poem, “The Nameless Land,” in May 1924 “inspired by reading *Pearl*” (*Lost Road* 109fn) which he knew well due to his specialization in Anglo-Saxon literature. *The Nameless Land* is patterned after the poem, *Pearl,* with Tolkien copying the meter, its poetic devices, and the motif of the author dreaming. In Tolkien’s dream, he sees the land of the elves in the True West, a beautiful, timeless land “where fades nor falls the endless year” (109). His character, the mariner Earendel (Earendil), sails the heavens as a wandering star. This land of “lost things” and “longing” resembles the beautiful garden of *Pearl* where a father meets his beloved, but now dead, child. The *Pearl* poem portrays a father grieving over a little girl who died before she was two. In that poem the father, through “a long process of thought and mental struggle” progresses to the “gentle and serene resignation of the last stanza” because he is convinced that his Pearl, as a baptized infant and an innocent, undoubtedly redeemed and saved, has become a queen in Heaven (*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* 22-23). Analogously, Tolkien would have seen his mother as just such a young soul because she had only been a baptized Catholic a short time. Having been redeemed from whatever her deeds might have been as suggested in *Eeriness,* she would be transformed and welcomed as a queen of Heaven. Like the father in *Pearl,* Tolkien knew only through resignation to the will of God could he rejoin her. Here he revisits his concerns with his mother’s salvation suggested in the 1914 painting, *Eeriness.*

Although it is not clear exactly which experience or experiences were traumatic during that eventful year of 1904, Tolkien showed at least two, if not all three, of the distinct symptoms seen in the pattern associated with trauma in children. In addition he had distinct ten and twenty year anniversary reactions. The evidence from the ten year anniversary in 1914 as found in the painting, *Eeriness,* and Tolkien’s fascination with the story of violent child abuse in tale of Kullervo points to something about Tolkien’s mother. There may have been a pattern of harsh discipline grounded in her history as a governess that was exacerbated and magnified by her increasing desperation and poverty, her own and her sons’ illnesses, and their social isolation after becoming Catholic in 1900. Further, a culture that found frequent physical discipline of infants, toddlers, and preschoolers socially acceptable, plus the belief that complete “moral” or “religious” control over a child’s mind and
behavior was a mother’s duty, create the probable background of this story. While the pattern exists, only further documentation from Tolkien’s diaries and letters can establish what really happened.

However, Tolkien was of a generation for whom child abuse was common and expected. His fellow Inkling, C.S. Lewis, who was from a middle-class family with a father who was a lawyer and a mother who was the daughter of a pastor, suffered so much at his public schools that near the end of his life his life he wrote to a child, “I was at three schools (all boarding schools) of which two were very horrid. I never hated anything so much, not even the front line trenches in World War I. Indeed the story is far too horrid to tell any one of your age” (Jacobs 20). No one in that generation would think to talk about abuse or find abuse remarkable. While Tolkien, like Lewis, experienced the horrors of World War I, Carpenter stresses that Tolkien relied “almost exclusively upon early (emphasis in original) experience” to nourish his imagination (Carpenter 126). This would indicate that any early childhood tragedy or trauma would outweigh the impact of the experiences in early adulthood during the war.

The pain of unresolved feelings was still evident in Tolkien’s description of his depression in 1924, the twenty-year anniversary. However, his continuing concern at that anniversary for the salvation of his mother, previously portrayed in the unknown angel praying for his mother to turn to the Cross in Eriness, returns in the poem, The Nameless Land. In the poem, his mother would be transformed and welcomed not only as a queen of Heaven, but a queen-like ruler of the elves, like Galadriel, who returns to the timeless land in the True West. His mother’s change in the summer of 1904 allowed him to forgive and feel charity toward the past, whatever it might have been.

The twenty-five-year anniversary would have been in 1929. However, I believe that Tolkien’s likely anniversary reaction was attenuated and contained by the discovery of the Gudrún story and the birth of his daughter. Tolkien saw his life in terms of stories, and this is consistent with the recent psychological literature documenting how people construct life stories about themselves (McAdams, Josselson, and Lieblich). Tolkien’s unique version of the story of Gudrún, which he wrote around 1930 at the age of 38, later published as The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún (2009), was created to understand himself and his complex, discordant experiences. The story was pivotal in changing Tolkien’s understanding of his own life and in releasing his creativity. Its importance is marked by the very odd circumstances surrounding his writing of it. But this is a subject for another paper.
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