Tolkien's Dialogue Between Enchantment and Loss

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Abstract

Examines the tension between the theme of loss underlying so much of the content of The Lord of the Rings, and the enchantment of the form of the work; the balance between the two generates a melancholy beauty that brings readers back to the book over and over again. Tolkien's own biography is used as an example of this balance of loss and enchantment playing out in real life.

Additional Keywords

Enchantment in J.R.R. Tolkien; Loss in J.R.R. Tolkien; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Biography; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Style

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At the center of Tolkien's enchanted edifice in *The Lord of the Rings* is the idea that the enchantment out of which this edifice is built must fade. Or as Saruman gloats to the elves: "you pulled down your own house when you destroyed mine" (*The Lord of the Rings* [*LotR*] VI.6.983). This simultaneous creation and demolishment of enchantment creates a deep psychological impact: Tolkien reinstates enchantment to broaden and deepen feelings of wonder and relatedness in the reader, while in the same moment he puts enchantment at risk for loss. Tolkien never resolves for his audience whether enchantment or loss "wins," instead leaving them in a dialogue that distills this fundamental uncertainty.

My thesis here is in agreement with previous writers who have indicated that loss is a primary content theme of *The Lord of the Rings* and others of Tolkien's writings. Senior described this theme as "the sustained and grieved sense of loss, of which death is but one form, that floods through the history of Middle-earth" (173). Hannon stated that "the many quick-moving scenes […] are secondary to the sense the book conveys of things slipping into—or already become part of—an irrecoverable past" (37). Parker is close to my approach when he states that "Tolkien's whole marvelous, intricate structure has been reared to be destroyed, that we may regret it" (609). But I am also adding to these readings of the content the idea that this *content* of loss is in constant tension with the enchanting *form* of *The Lord of the Rings* and Tolkien's other works: the loss undoes the enchantment, while at the same time the enchantment undoes the loss. To paraphrase what I have written elsewhere about Rumpelstiltskin, Tolkien gave us enchanting works about disenchantment.

I use the term "enchantment" rather than related words such as "magic" or "fantasy" to align my analysis with Weber's concept of the disenchantment of the world. Weber stated that in traditional society "the world remain[s] a great enchanted garden" (*Sociology of Religion* 270) imbued with meaning and with mysterious spiritual powers. The process of rationalization that defines modernity, on the other hand, "[…] means that in principle, then, we are not ruled by mysterious, unpredictable forces, but that, on the contrary, we can in principle *control everything by means of calculation.*

That in turn means the discenchantment of the world" ("Science as a Vocation" 12-13; italics in original)

Curry identified Tolkien's writings as an effort to re-enchant the world by creating a fictional universe set in pre-modern times that values community and nature and is alive and saturated with meaning. I follow Curry in using Tolkien's own words to define enchantment (although Tolkien did not specifically use the word "enchantment" at this moment): "the primal desire at the heart of Faerie [is] the realization, independent of the conceiving mind, of imagined wonder" ("On Fairy-Stories" 35) Related to this is Tolkien's definition of "recovery," by which he meant "We should meet the centaur and the dragon, and then perhaps suddenly behold, like the ancient shepherds, sheep and dogs, and horses—and wolves […] recovery […] is a re-gaining—regaining of a clear view" (67). And also related is Tolkien's discussion of "consolation," the highest consolation being that which gives "a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief" (75). (In the last statement we approach my thesis as we see loss creeping back in even as Tolkien describes a deeply enchanting experience.)

These descriptions of enchantment are in accord with Freud's analysis in *Totem and Taboo* of the pre-modern, enchanted worldview as being typified by animism and projection (experiencing the nonhuman world as alive in a humanlike way, filled with creatures/spirits/gods that represent parts of our selves). The enchanted worldview also involves crucial affective and object relational qualities:[1] The complex affect of wonder, compounded of pleasure, curiosity, and a sense of meaning, is felt during both magical thinking and animism. The sense of meaning derives from a sense of connectedness to an Other, as in Tolkien's description above. This connectedness takes a special form for the believer in magic and his animistic creations: the spirits both in a sense exist for the believer, and in a sense have an independent existence—they live in transitional space (see Winnicott).

By formulating the elements of the magical worldview in this way—omnipotence of thought, projection, wonder, and connectedness—it can be recognized as a way of being in the world that many people experience and value, at least at times. People who do not believe in magic as something that actually physically affects the material world may nevertheless find much of what is of value in life to be metaphorically enchanted. Curry listed as examples of such metaphorical or ordinary enchantments nature, love, ritual, art, sports, food, and learning ("Enchantment" 101).

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[1] Lake and I have separately discussed this in connection with the Harry Potter books

THE DIALOGUE BETWEEN ENCHANTMENT AND LOSS IN TOLKIEN'S WRITINGS

The enchantment in Tolkien's writings to which I will primarily be referring is that which results from Tolkien working within and extending the traditional fairy tale genre with magical or idealized beings. But I want to point out in passing that Tolkien's style also creates enchantment for the reader; as Bettelheim pointed out, fairy tales are enchanting not only because of the truths they address but because of the art with which they address them. Tolkien uses registers other than ordinary prose—chanting, singing, elvish language, archaic word order, unconventional capitalization—to increase the reader's feeling of enchantment.[2]

The perilous dialogue between enchantment and loss is located at the very heart of *The Lord of the Rings*, in the unbreakable connection between the One Ring of Power created by the Dark Lord Sauron and the Three Rings created by the Elves. Frodo's quest to destroy the One Ring is the common fairy tale and fantasy quest to destroy dark powers. What Tolkien uniquely and crucially adds is the twist that destroying the dark enchantment will also inevitably destroy good enchantment.

The reason Sauron created the One Ring was to control by sympathetic magic other rings of power, especially the three rings of the elves. The elves in Tolkien's writings are the force for beautiful timeless enchantment and the preservation of sublime natural environments, but much of their power is invested in the three rings, and if the One Ring is destroyed the three rings will lose their power and the elves must depart or fade. In the frequent longing allusions in *The Lord of the Rings* to ancient days when elves were stronger and fought in alliance with heroic men, and in the mournful scenes describing elves passing over the sea never to return, the reader is simultaneously confronted with enchantment and its loss. Are readers witnessing the power of enchantment? Or the power of loss?

The loss of Elvish enchantment that must ensue if the Ring is destroyed is mirrored by other losses threatening other enchantments in Tolkien's writings. Frodo's many torments as he strives to destroy the Ring have been thoroughly described by Smol. These include his losing touch with ordinary experiences of enchantment, such as feelings of friendship, safety, and pleasure in food and nature.

Loss in the form of death is always lurking in *The Lord of the Rings*, and even in the supposed children's book *The Hobbit*, where three favorite characters are killed in war. Tolkien referred to "the oldest and deepest desire, the Great Escape: the Escape from Death" ("On Fairy-Stories" 74) and he once

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[2] Flieger and Shippey have both discussed how Tolkien's word choice and styles of prose and poetry evoke archaic and mythic dimensions for the reader.

stated in his correspondence that death and immortality are the main theme of *The Lord of the Rings* (*Letters* 246). Tolkien wants readers to feel the loss, to grieve, when important characters die. Although there are many hopeful moments in the book, Tolkien often represents the importance of fighting to the death even in a hopeless cause

And in addition to the grief and loss we feel about what we might call a normal death, Tolkien weaves in death as a direct challenge to enchantment in the tales of love between elves and humans: When an elf weds a human the elf must surrender her immortality—note the shift in the direction of the ordinary, as opposed to the human becoming immortal.

The Lord of the Rings is also pervaded by the loss or diminution of a comforting and beautiful natural world. Whether looking at fairy-tale nature— Bombadil's shrinking domain, the fading of Lórien, the last march of the Ents—or more "ordinarily enchanted" nature such as the Shire under Sharkey's men, the natural world is increasingly disenchanted.

TOLKIEN AND PSYCHOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT

Fairy tales frequently have a structure in which a child or adolescent encounters Faerie, a world of wonder and peril, and then returns to the ordinary mortal world with a more mature status; e.g. Cinderella, Snow White, and Jack the Giant-Killer all have magical adventures and end up marrying royalty. Many classic modern fantasies also show this structure at least in part; e.g. Dorothy is swept to magical Oz on a tornado and returns with the wisdom that there is no place like home, and Christopher Robin sadly leaves Pooh behind for the adult world. In traditional fairy-tales and many classic fantasies, this transition to and from the magical world is accomplished very quickly, or presented as a minor framing device (Dorothy and Alice were dreaming).

Tolkien, in his posthumously published "Notion Club Papers," expressed his low opinion of these brief transitions when he had characters dismiss such devices and assert the importance of a convincing frame that matches the depth of the story (175 et seq.). In *The Hobbit* and especially in *The Lord of the Rings* Tolkien expanded the transition motif greatly and developed its potential to show the emotional experience of the tension between quotidian life and the enchanted world, and between childhood and adulthood.

Hobbits are effective in manifesting these tensions because they symbolize both childhood and the ordinary, non-magical world. Their childlike qualities include their diminutive size—they are only two to four feet tall—and their habit of going barefoot on their big hairy feet. In addition, Hobbits are simple, carefree, and highly oral: "And laugh they did, and eat and drink, often and heartily, being fond of simple jests at all times, and of six

meals a day" (*LotR* Prologue.2). Their orality even extends to their having invented smoking tobacco. At the same time, hobbits are shown by their character and attitude to fundamentally represent ordinary English people living in a pre-industrial, agricultural England. This can be seen in their love of order, their expectation of decent behavior from themselves and others, their practical commonsense, their clothing, and the types of food and drink they enjoy.

In *The Hobbit*, written for children, much of the transition to the enchanted world is played humorously, but Tolkien nevertheless extended it compared to traditional tales, spending all of Chapter 1 on the transition. In *The Lord of the Rings* Tolkien elaborated the transition to the enchanted world, together with its tensions, a great deal further. "The Shadow of the Past" with Gandalf's description of the meaning and history of the Ring is at the center of this, but all of Book I and the first two chapters of Book II are a gradual enlightenment for Frodo, his companions, and the reader that a deeper and richer world is out there. The chapters set in the Shire and Bree also show other hobbits and rustic men reacting with more or less openness to signs of this wider world. It is not until the Council of Elrond that together with Frodo we find ourselves fully situated in Faerie.

The paired tensions that are symbolized by the hobbits' gradual engagement with the enchanted world—between childhood and adulthood, and between enchantment and the ordinary—can be understood developmentally to be two sides of single tension, because maturing involves surrendering, or at least transforming, childhood enchantments. It is generally accepted in Western thought that the magical worldview is more prominent among children than adults, and that disenchantment of the world is a normal part of maturing. Freud, in *Formulations on the two principles of mental functioning,* described the gradual and ambivalent transformation away from a pleasure ego to a reality ego, a transformation that is never complete and leaves areas where magical thinking can still prevail, such as fantasy, art, and sexuality. Bettelheim held that traditional fairy tales are important for children because they speak the magical language that is natural to children.

One reason that the motif of an ordinary mortal entering a magical world engages us is that it symbolizes the reinstatement or strengthening of these enchantments that have been lost or threatened during the normal course of development. For people are never fully satisfied with the loss of magic; in fact, the interplay between aspects of magical thinking and realistic thinking provides much of the richness of life. Winnicott, in "The Location of Cultural Experience," noted that in addition to being crucial for early development, the capacity to experience transitional space and transitional phenomena remains important throughout life, since part of the human condition is to negotiate the

borders between what is me and what is not-me. Play and then broader cultural phenomena like art and religion are more mature forms of transitional phenomena. Loewald argued in "Ego and Reality" that true maturity is found not by using only advanced forms of thought, but by being able to regress and progress flexibly between advanced and early symbiotic forms. Rationality untempered by wonder, and wonder untempered by rationality, are both problematic (Whitebook). A crucial developmental task throughout life is to attain a partial disenchantment of the world while retaining a sense of enchantment appropriate to adulthood.

And this is the psychological experience that Tolkien's use of enchantment amplifies for the reader. By reinstating enchantment while simultaneously putting it at risk, he provides a powerful metaphor for the developmental task of integrating enchantment with rational life.

In "On Fairy-Stories," Tolkien defended fairy tales from charges of escapism by declaring that they describe appropriate and necessary escape, as though from prison. This is another way of describing the process of re-enchantment, as Curry notes in *Defending Middle-earth.* But Tolkien is actually doing something much more psychologically powerful than simply providing re-enchantment: he is providing re-enchantment while calling it into question; he is providing escape routes from prison while at the same time saying that they may all be closed. This is not escapism, in the sense of indulging in wild imagination to divert one's attention from the real issues. Rather, it is a direct engagement with the real issue: the dialogue between enchantment and disillusionment that is part of life.

As stated above, I think that this is a crucial developmental task throughout life. Fairy tales and fantasies that include the trope of entering and losing a magical world serve children not as avoidance but as a powerful way to connect directly with their most important issues (Bettelheim). Similarly, many adults enjoy what are officially "Young Adult Fantasies," not to mention the works of Tolkien. Yet I also think that this developmental task is especially acute during adolescence, and that this helps us understand why Tolkien's fiction has a special appeal for teens. Tolkien intended *The Lord of the Rings* for adults, and certainly many adults esteem it greatly, but my sense is that many of them originally fell for it as teenagers. Its appeal for teens became very apparent when the first American paperback edition of *The Lord of the Rings* was published in the late 1960s and sales took off among the college counter-culture, with the result that a bemused Tolkien had to endure midnight phone calls from American teenagers asking questions such as whether Balrogs could fly—so much so that he had to have his phone unlisted (Carpenter 235).

The content of fantasy adventure and war with idealized fairytale figures is an obvious surface reason that the books have immense appeal for

adolescents, but on a deeper level *The Lord of the Rings* expresses a primary adolescent developmental issue: Adolescence is optimally the developmental period when the biggest step from childish magic to an adult form of relating to reality is taken. This is when formal operational thought provides the cognitive capacity to more accurately comprehend reality (Inhelder and Piaget), and when a person forms an identity with a recognizable, more or less stable position in the social system and the larger world (Erikson; Levy-Warren). This is when one begins to relativize the family of origin, rather than taking it for granted as the center of the way things are and should be. Many adolescents, and adults who retain access to adolescent experience, may love *The Lord of the Rings* because it engages their age-expectable struggle with disenchantment.

THE DIALOGUE BETWEEN ENCHANTMENT AND LOSS IN TOLKIEN'S LIFE

Tolkien's creativity appears to have served him in the same way it serves many readers: as a way to engage loss with enchantment. This can be seen in microcosm in Tolkien's handling of the recurring dream that he described in his letters, associating the dream with the Atlantis myth: "the dreadful dream of the ineluctable Wave, either coming out of the quiet sea, or coming in towering over the green inlands. It still occurs occasionally, though now exorcized by writing about it. It always ends by surrender, and I awake gasping out of deep water" (*Letters* 347). The exorcism by writing refers to the tale of Númenor being sunk beneath an enormous wave. Tolkien is here describing mastering a symbol of enormous destruction and loss by incorporating it into his enchanted world. And yet Tolkien continued both to be enchanted by the sea and to experience it as having mournful qualities, as we know from his biography (e.g. Carpenter 78) and his poetry. Enchantment and loss intertwined for him in the seductive call of the waves.

As is well known, Tolkien's life was full of losses beginning at a young age, including the deaths of both parents and the horrors of the first World War (Carpenter; Scull & Hammond). Paralleling this, fantasy and writing about fantasy served as enchantments of utmost importance to him beginning in childhood. Tolkien remembered childhood fantasy in the particular form of enchanting otherness as follows:

> I never imagined that the dragon was of the same order as the horse. And that was not solely because I saw horses daily, but never even the footprint of a worm. The dragon had the trademark *Of Faërie* written plain upon him. In whatever world he had his being it was an Other-world. Fantasy, the making or glimpsing of Other-worlds, was the heart of the desire of Faërie. I desired dragons with a profound desire. ("On Fairy-Stories" 55)

Tolkien's first effort to write his own story (about a dragon) came at age seven. Beginning in adolescence, writing was central to his experience of himself. Throughout his life Tolkien formed his deepest friendships with men who critiqued each other's writings, whether within the informal club of companions called the TCBS (Tea Club and Barrovian Society) during adolescence or with the Inklings in later years. The TCBS intended their writings to not only change literature but to change the world by re-imbuing it with their values. Part of the sorrow they felt entering the First World War, and upon the actual death of two of their members, was that this mission would be forestalled. Maturity seems to have tempered Tolkien's hopes that his writing could change the world, but his passion for his writing remained as deep as ever. He stated that the Elves, who are central to his enchanted world, represent the artistic and poetic part of human nature. And upon finishing *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien wrote, "It is written in my life-blood, such as that is, thick or thin; and I can no other" (*Letters* 122).

And Tolkien specifically entwined aspects of his own life with aspects of his created world. Sometimes he did this lightly: he considered himself to be a hobbit (*Letters* 288), and described cruel and destructive people as orcs a number of times in his *Letters* (e.g.64, 78, 82, etc.).

More poignantly, he experienced his love of his wife Edith through the lens of his enchanted world, and vice versa: During a period of their courtship while Edith lived in Warwick, Tolkien wrote a poem inspired by Warwick ("Kortirion Among the Leaves") depicting it as a town where elves still lived (*Letters* 8), and he later developed Kortirion as an important Elvish town in the prehistory behind *The Lord of the Rings.*

The tale of Lúthien and Beren is of course one of the pillars of Tolkien's legendarium, and upon Edith's death, Tolkien had the name "Lúthien" inscribed on her tombstone, and after his own death his children had "Beren" inscribed on his tombstone (Carpenter 260). The tale of Lúthien and Beren was inspired when Tolkien watched Edith dancing, and Curry considered this moment to be one of the clearest examples of Tolkien himself experiencing enchantment ("Enchantment" 102). Here is Tolkien's description of Beren's first encounter with Lúthien, from the *Silmarillion*: "he came upon Lúthien […] at a time of evening under moonrise, as she danced upon the unfading grass in the glades […]. As the light upon the leaves of trees, as the voice of clear waters, as the stars above the mists of the world, such was her glory and her loveliness; and in her face was a shining light" (193-94). Compare this with Tolkien's description of Edith after her death. Tolkien wrote to one of his sons about how she had inspired the myth of Lúthien early in their courtship: "I never called Edith *Lúthien*—but she was the source of the story that in time became the chief part of the *Silmarillion*. It was first conceived

in a small woodland glade filled with hemlocks [...]. In those days her hair was raven, her skin clear, her eyes brighter than you have seen them, and she could sing—and *dance*" (*Letters* 420).

Tolkien also transformed his World War I experiences via his enchanted world and his writing. He himself only acknowledged this in regard to the stricken Middle-earth landscape of the Dead Marshes, which Tolkien said were inspired by the wartime landscape of the Somme (*Letters* 303). Among others, Flieger, Garth, Shippey, and Smol have elucidated how aspects of the battle-scenes, plot, relationships, and mood of *The Lord of the Rings* are linked to Tolkien's war experience. It was during the war that Tolkien began his legendarium, and he wrote about the Fall of Gondolin, the first extended war story set in his enchanted world, while in hospital recuperating from trench fever (Garth 214).

In light of all this, Tolkien's fantasy and writings may be seen as an expression of his struggle to maintain enchantment in the face of the many losses he experienced, ranging from his orphaning to the horrors of World War I. Shippey has pointed out that many writers who lived through this war turned to fantasy fiction to express their experience because the ordinary cultural forms of expression had failed (*Author of the Century* viii). Perhaps this use of fantasy was also the most direct way to re-engage with and explore the limits of the sense of wonder and connectedness that the war threatened to destroy.

HAPPILY EVER AFTER?

In closing, let us return to the other half of the fairy tale trope of a youngster engaging with an enchanted world: Even in simple fairy tales, loss of enchantment often occurs when the motif of the ordinary mortal entering Faerie is completed by the mortal returning to ordinary life. As he did with the transition into the enchanted world, Tolkien elaborated upon the return from the enchanted world to emphasize the tensions between enchantment and loss. Tolkien stayed close to the simple traditional ending in *The Hobbit,* highlighting the motif with the subtitle "There and Back Again," yet even in *The Hobbit* there are two pages subsequent to the statement that Bilbo would live very happily to the end of his days, describing Gandalf and Balin's visit from the wider enchanted world.

In *The Lord of the Rings*, the return from the enchanted world is complicated by numerous losses and partial recoveries. If *The Lord of the Rings* were a normal fairy tale, the story would end soon after the destruction of the Ring, and the protagonists would live happily ever after. But such optimism would have been far too simple for Tolkien. Just as he greatly expanded the

experience of becoming enchanted at the beginning, he greatly expanded the experience of disenchantment at the end.

To begin with, the hobbits return to find the Shire despoiled and dehumanized by the debased Saruman and his men. Frodo's companions lead a rebellion, and Saruman is slain by his former servant. (Saruman's diminishment and death in this section provides another example of disenchantment.) The Shire is restored to its former peace and fecundity, but the vulnerability to loss has been clearly demonstrated.

Even in the restored Shire there is no peaceful Happily Ever After for Frodo. His loss of the Ring, after it had so much control of his mind and soul, has left him bereft and wounded beyond cure in this world. In honor of his enormous service, and to give him a chance of healing before he dies, Frodo is allowed a grace forbidden to other mortals: to accompany one of the last ships of the elves as they sail to Elvenhome.

Is Frodo's sailing with the elves a re-enchantment? Or is it a deepening loss, as he separates irrevocably from his beloved hobbits? Of course it is both, and Tolkien lets his readers feel both.

At the very end, Frodo's companion Sam returns to his loving wife and family and says, "Well, I'm back." Flieger pointed out that it is not clear from the written text if this is meant to be read "Well, I'm *back*," or "Well, *I'm* back;" Flieger discussed how the latter reading implicates all the people *not* back from war, both in Tolkien's works and in his life (275-76). The contrasting readings also differ in their implications for the dialogue between enchantment and loss. "Well, I'm *back*" is more weighted in the direction of the ordinary Back Again experience with the loss of enchantment: Sam is back to normal life from the enchanted world. "Well, *I'm* back" is more weighted in the direction of enchantment, because it emphasizes that unlike Sam, others are *not* back from the enchantment (although in this reading too there is loss of enchantment—the ordinary enchantment of friendship). This subtle ambiguity continues to engage the reader in the dialogue between enchantment and loss.

My impression is that the commoner reading (now reinforced by Peter Jackson's planting it in viewers' minds) is "Well, I'm *back*." This reading gives us reason to believe that, surrounded by the ordinary enchantments of family love, Sam will live happily ever after. Yet even here Tolkien knits in further enchantment and loss: Sam too was briefly a Ring-bearer, and we learn in an appendix to *The Lord of the Rings* that Sam eventually passes over the sea to Elvenhome. To the last, Tolkien engages us in the struggle to balance the experience of loss with a sense of enchantment, connectedness, and meaning.

Note

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