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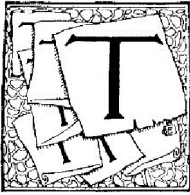
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Abstract

Mortality and immortality underlie the “emotional truth” (95) of Tolkien’s backstory, a truth which draws us as readers into a world in which longing and loss, death and deathlessness, are the foundation of a sub-created world that we as readers desire. The fantasy frame in Tolkien’s legendarium is extremely deep, and has been highly influential on other creators.

Additional Keywords

Fantasy—Techniques; Framing devices; Genre; Immortality and mortality in J.R.R. Tolkien; Loss in J.R.R. Tolkien; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Elves; Tolkien, J.R.R. The Lord of the Rings—Paratextual material; Tolkien, J.R.R. The Lord of the Rings—Technique



OLKIEN'S ALLUSIVE BACKSTORY:
IMMORTALITY AND BELIEF
IN THE FANTASY FRAME

WAYNE A. CHANDLER AND CARROL L. FRY

DISCUSSING THE ROOTS OF THE BROAD GENRE we today call “fantasy,” Michelle L. Eilers defines it as “prose fiction [...] in which an extranatural power plays a fundamental role and that [aims] to create an illusion of reality” (318). Thankfully, the writer of fantasy labors under no burden to make that illusory reality seem possible or even plausible. The writer must, though, present an illusion that seems believable—believable enough, at least, for the reader who would willingly engage with fantastic literature in the first place. “The moment disbelief arises,” J.R.R. Tolkien writes of fantasy tales (or, if you will, on fairy stories), “the spell is broken; the magic, or rather art, has failed” (“On Fairy-Stories” 52). This believability need not be strictly denotative: as Thomas A. Wendorf notes, “[G]ood fantasy answers its own demands for realism” (85). This answer, essential to the success of the tale, is *connotative* believability—making the fantastic seem emotionally *true*.

The common means of achieving this believability, this feeling of emotional truth, is the creation of what Jane Mobley describes as a “frame of explicability” (118). The fantasy frame (as we shall refer to it) is the content within or external to a primary text that reconciles the fantastic with the reader’s willingness to suspend disbelief. The first, most fundamental level of this reconciliation is the basic explanation of the fantastic’s existence. In short works, or if the basic justification is sufficiently broad and/or deep, that first level may be the frame’s entirety. The most basic fantasy frame is a simple introductory phrase: “Once upon a time,” say, or, “A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away.” A simple disclaimer of setting, however, often is insufficient, and both conceptually and materially the frame can be far more complex.

In works that require the reader to make more than a trivial commitment (of time spent reading, of credulity required for buy-in, et al.), the frame may require the writer’s building (or excavating) additional levels of explanation to enable the reader’s engagement. One method is to augment the basic explanation with references to extra-textual elements: other works or knowledge with which the writer assumes the reader to be familiar, or genre conventions that readers expect or value. Another method (often combined with extra-textual references) is the presentation of backstory. Ideally, the more

backstory a work presents, then the greater the impression of depth and truth, hence the easier the reader's suspension of disbelief, and consequently the more fully or strongly the reader's potential engagement with the tale.

The means of presentation also influences the frame's efficacy. The entire frame may be presented in a prologue¹ or even a single passage. It may take the form of bookends, in essence, preceding then following the primary tale. Another means of presentation—crucial to the present argument—is periodic insertions along the course of the story. The frame's potential appearances are myriad.

As implied by the discussion so far, the fantasy frame is part content and part form: it lies in both the material and the shape of the story. One variety of frame is the transitional journey to an alternate world where the laws of ours do not apply, such as Alice falling down the rabbit hole into Carroll's Wonderland, or Alan Carpentier (*né* Carpenter) falling off the window ledge into Dante's (and Niven & Pournelle's) Hell: the qualities of Wonderland and the horrors of Hell are seldom off-page for long. In L. Sprague de Camp and Fletcher Pratt's *The Incomplete Enchanter*, characters travel to parallel universes in which Earth's legends are reality, adventuring in the world of Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene*,² Norse sagas, and other mythological settings. More recently, Lilith Saintcrow's blade-wielding protagonist Dante Valentine murders her way through a kit-bash of elements reminiscent of Mickey Spillane, Charlaine Harris, and the Bible.

The fantasy frame made from whole cloth is rarer (in, one could argue, both the general and the Shakespearean sense) than the frame most of whose material is borrowed. One might even defensibly assert that no such frame is of entirely original content. Supernatural elements notwithstanding, the denizens and locales of Robert E. Howard's Hyborian Age, for example, seldom are more than two steps removed from their real-world antecedents, irrespective of the audacious skill with which Howard penned his confluence of histories, legends, and myths. Tolkien's frame, though, is of a much greater magnitude, and its uses of nomenclature and concepts from real-world sources often are beyond the ken of a lay audience. For instance, it is likely that, proportionally, very few readers of Tolkien's work recognize from their own familiarity with *The Poetic Edda* names including "Durin," "Dwalin," "Gandalf," "Thorin," "Gloin," and

¹ Among our favorites of such prologues are those that, with mock seriousness, seek to dissuade the reader from continuing. For example: "You who so plod amid serious things that you feel it shame to give yourself up even for a few short moments to mirth and joyousness in the land of Fancy; you who think that life hath nought to do with innocent laughter that can harm no one; these pages are not for you" (Pyle, 3).

² Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, arguably the most successful incomplete work in English, utilizes a highly ambitious, prolonged, and overtly allegorical frame.

others; nod in appreciation of the mythical etymology connecting the Kingdom of Dale to the Old English *dæl*; and so forth. The bulk of materials that make up the frame of *The Lord of the Rings* are of Tolkien's own imagining, and the real-world borrowings are sufficiently rarified or altered that they blend seamlessly with the frame's other content. This seamlessness contributes to thematic consistency, in turn enhancing the story's potential believability. For example, the prologue section "Concerning Hobbits" is entirely fictitious, yet the descriptions of Hobbits' nature, history, and lineages read as though lifted from a family chronicle. Given this convincing presentation, the exposition's focal shift from the Red Book of Westmarch to "a variety probably of *Nicotiana*" ("Concerning Pipe-weed" 8)—an insertion of a thing real and culturally present into matters completely imaginary—does not break the narrative's spell, but instead draws the reader further into it.

Such consistency is integral to sustaining the atmosphere of truth in fantasy literature in general and *The Lord of the Rings* in particular. True, there exist works whose artistic success stems partly from intratextual contradiction, such as through the device of the unreliable narrator (Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* comes to mind). *The Lord of the Rings* is not one of them, regardless of some claims to the contrary. Despite, for example, John Rosegrant's eloquent equivocation with the word "enchantment" (131-132), Tolkien's iteration of the fantasy frame does not encourage or even allow conflict between the truthiness (as it were) of the frame and the themes of decay and loss that the story communicates. To misquote Rosegrant, "[T]he *content* of loss is in constant [unity] with the enchanting *form* of *The Lord of the Rings*" (127). Loss, expressed in one form or another, has long been recognized as permeating the novel. William H. Stoddard asserts that even "Middle-earth itself is a symbol of loss. Tolkien's stories of it are filled with one loss after another" (158). Loss is inseparable from Tolkien's frame and fundamental to the tale the frame enables. Without the consistency of loss that feels true, the frame fragments, the believability falters, and the story fails. Because nothing in life is more real—more common or more unavoidable—than loss, it must be rendered in Middle-earth with utter verity.

The foundation of Tolkien's frame and primary (though not sole) sustainer of the novel's structural integrity is what we shall call the "allusive backstory": frequent references, myriad of topic yet consistent of tone and theme, to a deep yet absent history. One of the marvels of *The Lord of the Rings* is that millions of readers have thrilled to it without fully appreciating or even quite understanding that backstory, glimpsed in brief flashes of narrative lightning through hundreds of allusions to material that, four years and fifteen days after the loss of its author, would be published as *The Silmarillion*. In *The Lord of the Rings*, for example, Morgoth—"Dark Enemy of the World," in

Sindarin (*Silmarillion* 31)—is barely mentioned: at Weathertop, as Aragorn tells the hobbits tales of Middle-earth's history, Morgoth is referred to only as the "Great Enemy, of whom Sauron of Mordor was but a servant" (Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* [LotR] I.11.193), and Legolas identifies Gandalf's foe in Moria as "a Balrog of Morgoth" (II.7.356), but little other information is provided. In the backdrop tales spun by Aragorn and Gandalf, readers get references to some of the great heroes of the first two ages but no specifics about the battles among the Elves to regain the three Silmarils created by Fëanor, mightiest of the Eldar. They are alluded to only briefly, as when Sam Gamgee, of all characters, mentions the tale of Beren taking from Morgoth the Silmaril that was to come to Eärendil (IV.8.712). Nor does one hear of Morgoth's obsession with getting the jewels, or of the bitter internecine battles among the Elves to possess them.

As implied already, that *The Lord of the Rings* is not a happy story is hardly news. Ruminating on some of the novel's Christian implications, Anna Mathie calls its conclusion "one of literature's saddest happy endings. Tolkien makes us savor the bittersweet, for he knows (like Gandalf) that 'not all tears are an evil'" (10). Indeed, much of the novel's narrative drive and emotional power comes from the characters' work to achieve a victory (the destruction of the One Ring) that they know will bring their world's demise. Loss of races, of individuals, of an age of the world is inevitable, but the manner in which the collective loss occurs—the *ending* that brings about the loss—is the goal over which the characters contend. One option is the ending of the Third Age in a Shadow: a pall of darkness, smoke, and slavery. The other option is ultimately more pleasant, perhaps, but no less permanent, through a quieter fulfillment of Ilúvatar's design: the exodus of the Elves; the diminution and eventual extinction of the Dwarves, the Hobbits, and the magical creatures; and the ascent of Humankind. The characters struggle against the one ending and acknowledge yet still resist the other, even as we, as readers, resist it so much, in fact, that new books by Professor Tolkien continued to be published more than 40 years after his death). Yet the sadness of endings in *The Lord of the Rings* is coupled with another sadness—that of *not* ending, that of life. That of, in many cases, immortality.³ The reader's acceptance of immortality as *true* is integral to the novel's themes of loss and self-sacrifice. That sense of truth is

³ Readers and scholars (not always the same group) long have recognized how integral the Life/Death and Immortality/Mortality oppositions are to *The Lord of the Rings*. By 1968, Hugh T. Keenan had written that the novel's "major appeal [...] grows from its underlying and pervasive presentation of the basic struggle of Life against Death" (62), and tens, perhaps scores of subsequent essays and books have acknowledged the theme. As discussed in the present essay, however, the relationship between life and death is neither as simple nor as obvious as Life = Good and Death = Bad.

initiated and reinforced constantly through the allusive backstory that comprises a majority of the novel's fantasy frame.

So far as we know, *Homo sapiens* is the only creature with awareness of its own mortality and a concomitant ability, perhaps even compulsion, to speculate about it. The legend of the "elephant graveyard" may have some basis in fact, cats drag themselves off to hidden places to die, and every animal responds instinctively to life-threatening stimuli. But we are different. Even very small children can know intellectually that someday they will die. Regardless, even while facing our own deaths, even while burdened with sadness and anxiety produced by our knowledge of their inevitability, we continue to work, to strive, to create. As expressed by novelist Robert Charles Wilson, "[W]e know that our lives are insanely brief in terms of geological time, that the place we live is inconceivably tiny in cosmological terms. Yet we still find meaning in our daily existence and quite rightly so" (qtd. in Murphy, 218). Indeed, Tolkien writes in his essay "On Fairy-stories" that one of the primary appeals of fantastic literature is "the oldest and deepest desire, the Great Escape: the Escape from Death" (74). Such escape is shown through the various immortals in Tolkien's works. However, that life *and* death—immortality as well as mortality—carry both burdens and joys is a consistent theme in *The Lord of the Rings*, speaking to the uniquely human awareness of the transience of life and consequent inevitability of death.

To further explore this theme's part in the allusive backstory and the fantasy frame, we might think of *The Lord of the Rings* as three texts. First is the primary text: the novel itself, the words on the page ("Concerning Hobbits," for example, as noted earlier). There also is the *intertext*, those whispers from the author's life experience and culture that have worked their way into the structure of the novel (such as in "Concerning Pipe-weed"). Finally, secondary texts such as *The Silmarillion* and the appendices following *The Return of the King* exemplify the *paratext*: material relating to the primary text but not included within it. This category includes also Tolkien's letters, other recorded comments, and personal recollections of his words from those who knew him.⁴

⁴ Film adaptations of *The Lord of the Rings* present a paratextual conundrum. Individually and collectively, Ralph Bakshi's 1978 animated *The Lord of the Rings*, the Rankin/Bass animated *The Return of the King* (1980), and of course Peter Jackson's three-film series (2001-2003) have created reaction in millions of people who had or then did read Tolkien's novel. However, it could be argued that the films are not paratexts of Tolkien's work, but alternate texts—replacements—that millions of other people read *instead* of the novel. Does this situation, then, make Tolkien's novel a paratext of the films? Given the many, varied, conflicting responses of readers to the films and of viewers to the novel, we are satisfied to acknowledge and happy then to dodge this issue, at least for the present.

For the readers who experiences *The Lord of the Rings* without benefit of the inter- or paratexts, the various degrees of mortality are undefined, but the characters' relationships to life and death, immortality and mortality, remain consistent and believable via the fantasy frame and its allusive backstory.

To start at the start, as it were: it is difficult to say how many readers much attend to the epigraphical poem that faces the copyright page. She or he who reads it finds in its eight lines an emphasis on rings and Shadows, along with a single reference to "Mortal Men doomed to die" (*LotR* frontispiece). The poem says nothing immediately explicable, but it practically resonates with the feeling that something is amiss. Similarly, the Prologue does not specify powers beyond the mundane and Earthly, merely implying their existence, vaguely, through its references to Wizards and to Bilbo's finding of "the marvellous ring" (Prologue.12). Further, quick references such as to "Elves of the High Kindred" (Prologue.7); the Second, Third, and Fourth Ages; and "the Elder Days" (Prologue.15) tease the reader with hints of antiquity—particularly a mention of "[t]hree Elf-towers of immemorial age" (Prologue.7)—but provide no clarification of timespan. The Prologue briefly mentions Gandalf, Elrond, Arwen, Sauron, Celeborn, and Galadriel but says nothing of their immortality until the final sentence, noting that on the unknown day Celeborn "sought the Grey Havens, [...] with him went the last living memory of the Elder Days of Middle-earth" (Prologue.15-16).

Further suggestion of unusual relationships to mortality is not long in coming: immediately in the novel's first proper chapter, the Hobbits' murmurings about Bilbo's "prolonged vigour" (I.1.21) set the matter of aging (or not) right in front of the reader, as does Bilbo's complaint of *feeling* his great age, "like butter that has been scraped over too much bread. That can't be right" (I.1.32). Indeed not, and the reader soon enough listens with Frodo to Gandalf's description of "The Shadow of the Past," including the statement that the ring "would utterly overcome anyone of mortal race who possessed it" (I.2.46). Gandalf's warning contains the first use of the word "mortal" since the epigraph, and the specification "anyone of mortal race" is the first confirmation of what the epigraph and the description of Celeborn's departure imply: there are explicitly mortal races, a fact from which the reader may infer there also are explicitly *immortal* races, an inference the novel soon and repeatedly confirms but seldom—and never thoroughly—explains.

⁵ From this point forward, unless indicated otherwise, all references to "the reader" signify one who encounters *The Lord of the Rings* without having read *The Silmarillion*, *Unfinished Tales*, Tolkien's *Letters*, *The History of Middle-earth*, or scholarship thereon. Whether our straw reader has read *The Hobbit* or seen any of the Tolkien-based films is open to interpretation.

Despite the high price of immortality as Gandalf explains to Frodo, mortal creatures continue to yearn for it, but in Middle-earth such yearning is contrary to wisdom. The poster-children of immortal mortals are the Nazgûl, the nine mortal men to whom Sauron gave Great Rings. "Long ago" both greatly empowered by and hopelessly yoked to their rings, ensnared and dominated by the rings' creator (I.2.51), they are themselves incorporeal, given shape by their garments, physical sight by their mounts, but "at all times [smelling] the blood of living things, desiring and hating it" (I.11.189). They have achieved potential immortality but in the process have been consumed by and enslaved to what Tolkien calls the Shadow. Evil is immortal, and immortality, for naturally mortal creatures, is evil.⁶

The backstory thus presents a paradox: life is important and valuable, a long life is a thing to be revered and celebrated,⁷ yet the longer the life, also the greater the sorrow. This paradox is visible most clearly in the Elves. Theirs is "a fair tale, though it is sad," as Aragorn says of Tinúviel's story (I.11.191), and Elvish presence in the allusive backstory contributes greatly to the novel's atmosphere of believability, of loss that feels true.

The reader's first significant exposure to the Elves is in the Prologue's final lines, the description of Celeborn's departure from Middle-earth (15-16), and the tinge of sadness to that passage persists throughout the novel, from the observation of Elves "passing westward through the [Shire's] woods in the evening, passing and not returning" (I.2.43), to the poignant beauty of Cerin Amroth in Lothlórien, essentially an island of the Elder Days surrounded by the

⁶ Tolkien's assumption is that Humans—and Hobbits, and Dwarves, and the vast majority of other earthly creatures—are not made for immortality, either physically or emotionally. To put it another way, they are not *meant* to be immortal, a situation appropriate for (and, one might assert, appropriated from) the author's Christianity. Regardless of the completeness of Tolkien's myth-making (and as illustrated repeatedly in the present discussion) its theologism is not entirely disassociated from the intertextual influences of Tolkien's Catholic faith nor from his philological profession. Richard J. Whitt writes that *The Silmarillion* evinces "the harmonization between notions of Germanic fate"—expressed in Anglo-Saxon culture through the Old English word *dom*—"and Christian Divine Providence" (116). We would argue that this intersection of concepts—the Divine *dom*, one might say—is present throughout *The Lord of the Rings*, as well. The novel hints several times at a greater power, of unknown nature, lying ultimately behind the events of the world. For example, when relating the curious circumstances by which Bilbo came into possession of the One Ring, Gandalf says to Frodo, "I can put it no plainer than by saying that Bilbo was *meant* to find the Ring, and *not* by its maker. In which case you also were *meant* to have it. And that may be an encouraging thought" (I.2.56).

⁷ For example, witness the honor accorded to Bilbo at Rivendell; although all the Elves who surround him are almost unimaginably older than him, they treat him with respect precisely because of his relatively long life.

harshness and cold violence of the present (II.6.349-51), and beyond. Unlike Humans who receive immortality through the Great Rings, the Elves do not merely “continue”: they remain dynamic forever. Yet their unflagging vitality brings them not only joy.

While the Elves are more interested in themselves than in the other races—as indicated, among other examples, by Lindir’s confession that “Mortals have not been our study” (II.1.237)—the wisest and best of them are deeply concerned about the future of Middle-earth as a whole and about the fates of the other races. Elrond, Galadriel, Celeborn, Glorfindel, Gildor (to a lesser extent)—Legolas, of course—all do their best to help the Ring-bearer and his company and to defeat the evil of Sauron. They do this even knowing that regardless of the outcome, they themselves will be lessened by the Ring’s destruction, as their magic fades and they are compelled to leave Middle-earth. Frodo witnesses this self-sacrifice firsthand when he offers the One Ring to Galadriel. The Ring gives her the opportunity for beauty, terror, and power beyond measure, but after a long moment’s consideration, she refuses: “‘I pass the test,’ she said. ‘I will diminish, and go into the West, and remain Galadriel’” (II.7.366). Galadriel has willingly forfeited a chance that will never come again, one for which some other characters would kill (and do die). Her self-consolation of having “pass[ed] the test,” of remaining true to herself and thereby committing to an unending future of simply watching the world progress while she herself declines, is both noble and sad. Legolas most clearly explains what immortality means to the Elves and their view of the rest of the world:

For the Elves the world moves, and it moves both very swift and very slow. Swift, because they themselves change little, and all else fleets by: it is a grief to them. Slow, because they do not count the running years, not for themselves. The passing seasons are but ripples ever repeated in the long stream. Yet beneath the Sun all things must wear to an end at last. (II.9.388)

Legolas’s statement is the most direct allusion to immortality’s problematic nature as woven through the backstory. As immortals, the Elves will never be spared the sadness or the pain of seeing the decline or death of any mortal person or worldly thing. They will witness it all, whether they want to or not, while Humans and Hobbits and other races come and go.

Ironically, while “the gift of Ilúvatar” (*Silmarillion* 42) is one the Elves cannot receive, the allusive backstory consistently reminds the reader that death also is the gift that no mortal race appreciates. The faux immortality bestowed by the Great Rings, as noted, is a torment, and the Undying Lands are out of

reach.⁸ Even for the ringbearers—to whom Arwen, having chosen mortality for herself, gives her place for passage (*LoTR* VI.6.974-75)⁹—the Undying Lands are little more than a place to die: Frodo is plagued with health problems both physical and spiritual following the War of the Ring. He comments before leaving Middle-Earth, “I am wounded, [...] wounded; it will never really heal” (VI.9.1025).

Nothing in the discussion of mortality and immortality so far requires the reader's familiarity with either inter- or paratextual materials. Elements of the allusive backstory appear so frequently that they carry the reader along the paths, through the tunnels, and over the mountains of the novel without difficulty: unexplained references to matters not present in the primary text coalesce into a vague but omnipresent impression of a history and reality lying behind the story, including the respective and differing positions of Hobbits, Elves, etc. relative to death. However, the differences between the races' relationships to mortality become even clearer upon recognition that some elements in the backstory are rooted in the distinctly Christian intertext within which Tolkien lived and worked.¹⁰

The frame's Christian allusions (not allegories) mirror a world after the Creation and the Fall but with the potential for redemption. Further, the frame's descriptions of differences among the characters' positions and relationships to mortality are consistent with a concept that has fallen from intellectual favor over the past couple of centuries (or, as Professor Tolkien might say, “recently”): the Great Chain of Being, a theological assumption in western thought, and a tool frequently wielded by those in power to attempt preservation of the sociopolitical status quo, from ancient Greece and Rome through the eighteenth century. The connection of Middle-earth's racial hierarchy to the Great Chain has been noticed before: Jane Chance, for example, in her elegant study of *Tolkien's Art*, suggests that the joy expressed by Tom Bombadil and Goldberry stems from “their role in Nature[, which] involves the maintenance of the existing order” (156). Chance also observes that if the Christian Great Chain's

⁸ The Númenoreans who seek the Blessed Realm cannot find it (*Silmarillion* 281), and even if they could, they “would but wither and grow weary the sooner, as moths in a light too strong and steadfast” (*Silmarillion* 264).

⁹ Nancy Enright implies that Arwen's choice is emblematic of the Elves' contribution as a people to the continued existence of Middle-earth, “a bridge between the Third Age and the Fourth [...] embod[ying] in her loss the sacrifice the Elves, in general, willingly endure [...] with the destruction of the Ring” (98). As noted earlier, the contribution of the Elves—like the choice of Arwen—is fraught.

¹⁰ That Tolkien's faith influenced his works (and his views of others' works) has been variously noted, for example recently by Thomas Kullman and Philip Irving Mitchell, respectively.

links are of love, “then hate and envy and pride and avarice bind together the hierarchy of species under the aegis of the One Ring of Sauron the fallen [Maia]” (151). However, the connections of the Great Chain to Tolkien’s themes of mortality and loss and to the integral role of the allusive backstory in the fantasy frame have been less than thoroughly described.

A.O. Lovejoy’s seminal work *The Great Chain of Being* provides an exhaustive exploration of its origins. In summary, the Great Chain is

the conception of the universe as [...] an infinite number of links ranging in hierarchal order from the meagerest kind of existents, which barely escape non-existence, through “every possible” grade up to the *ens perfectissimum*—or, in a somewhat more orthodox version, to the highest possible kind of creature, between which and [God] the disparity was assumed to be infinite. (59)

In the hierarchy, God is at the top, followed by spiritual beings, then mortals, and all other creatures in descending order. Lovejoy also explores the medieval concept of plentitude, “that the extent and abundance of the creation must be great as the possibility of existence and commensurate with the productive capacity of a ‘perfect’ and inexhaustible Source, and that the world is the better, the more things it contains” (52). In this view, the plentitude came with the creation. As described by Lovejoy, the concepts of plentitude and the Chain suggest the great variety in Tolkien’s world and the characters’ relationships to each other and to mortality. In *The Lord of the Rings*, there is plainly an existential, perhaps even a moral, hierarchy. It is clear that Wizards, Elves, Dwarves, Hobbits, Humans, Orcs, and the various other creatures glimpsed or mentioned—Ents, the Balrog, Tom Bombadil, and so forth—are not all created equal. The lifespans, physical and spiritual capabilities, even the social structures of each type of being can be seen as relevant to, appropriate for, or stemming from its link in the Middle-earth Chain.¹¹

¹¹ That a people’s relationship to mortality is connected to their sociocultural or political status is right in line with the Great Chain of Being: a creature higher on the Chain is closer to immortality and privileged over one that is lower on the Chain and thereby farther from immortality. Dominic J. Nardi, exploring the various sociopolitical structures of Middle-earth, implies that the Elves’ immortality alters their perspective on the need for immediacy and certainty in decision-making (118-119). Nardi observes also that “Elven leaders are highly consensual” in their process of decision-making (118-119), this despite the fact that the Elves—as well as every other culture in Middle-earth—do not have a politically democratic society. That the Elves, immortal, are able to have, in essence, the best of both sociopolitical worlds—strong centralized leadership that nonetheless seeks and values consensus—is congruent with the concept of the existential hierarchy: it follows that creatures high on the chain would be more spiritual and accordingly less

Another intertextual influence on the allusive backstory of Tolkien's world may be found in *The Discarded Image*, written by Tolkien's friend and fellow Inkling, C.S. Lewis. Lewis outlines a "system of belief" that dominated thought in the Middle Ages, a medieval model for the great design. Included in this design are the *longaevi*, the spirits of place in wood and glade. Unlike Humans, they are "long livers":

[I]f we call them 'supernatural' we must be clear in what we mean. Their life is, in one sense, *more* 'natural'—stronger, more reckless, less inhibited, more triumphantly and impenitently passionate—than ours. They are liberated both from the beast's perpetual slavery to nutrition, self-protection, and procreation, and also from the responsibility, shame, scruples and melancholy of Man. Perhaps also from death [...]. (133-34)

The *longaevi* as described by Lewis certainly resemble beings inhabiting Tolkien's creation: linked closely with the natural world, strong and strange to the mortals who see them, with perspectives reflective of their relationships to time.

Various *longaevi* inhabit Middle-earth. For example, the love of trees runs through both the primary and paratexts of *The Lord of the Rings*.¹² Trees are the very symbols of life: the white trees of Númenor, dead and then reincarnated from a seedling at the end of *The Return of the King*, reflect trees' importance in Tolkien's work, as do the great Mallorn trees of Lorien. So it seems understandable that Tolkien would include them in some way among the *longaevi*. Consider, for example, the Old Forest, through which Frodo, Sam, Merry, and Pippin wander—and in which they promptly become lost—during their flight from the Shire. They take to the Old Forest to escape detection by the Black Riders, but as old and as powerful as Sauron's agents might be, they are scarcely stronger or more terrifying than the *longaevus* Old Man Willow in his home territory. And the "Old" in both "Old Man Willow" and "Old Forest" is a most appropriate adjective, as the Hobbits learn from listening to Bombadil's tales: "It was not called the Old Forest without reason, for it was indeed ancient, a survivor of vast forgotten woods; and in it there lived yet, ageing no quicker than the hills, the fathers of the fathers of trees, remembering times when they

inclined to conflict, be it military or political, than creatures lower on the chain. For example, Nardi notes multiple times that Isengard and Mordor, both of which are populated in large part by the very-mortal Orcs, have highly authoritarian, even totalitarian political structures (109-110, 116-118).

¹² In a letter to his publisher, Tolkien writes, "I am (obviously) much in love with plants and above all trees, and always have been; and I find human maltreatment of them as hard to bear as some find ill-treatment of animals" (*Letters* 220).

were lords" (*LotR* I.17130).¹³ The description of the living, sentient trees, pining (no pun intended) for the past, reveals an additional element of both wonder and sadness in the backstory. This element reappears through Merry and Pippin's encounters in Fangorn Forest, especially the revelation of the fruitless search for the Entwives (III.4.472).

Both the Old Forest and Fangorn Forest are ancient, all but primordial, and in each resides one of perhaps the most ancient beings in Middle-Earth. Gandalf remarks multiple times on Treebeard's great age and says quite explicitly to Theoden that "when you speak with [Treebeard] you will hear the speech of the oldest of all living things" (III.8.558). Yet Tom Bombadil, another *longaevus* and a denizen of the Old Forest, when asked by Frodo, "Who are you?" replies: "Eldest, that's what I am. [...] Tom remembers the first raindrop and the first acorn. [...] When the Elves passed westward, Tom was here already, before the seas were bent. He knew the dark under the stars when it was fearless—before the Dark Lord came from Outside" (I.7.131). Further, Elrond says of Bombadil that even in ancient times he was "older than the old." In that great past, says Elrond, "Iarwain Ben-adar we called him, oldest and fatherless" (II.2.265).

These similar descriptions of different beings teeter on the edge of contradiction but are saved by the same ambiguity from which they emerge: one might argue that Treebeard is, in fact, the oldest creature alive, and that Bombadil, although older, is not truly a *living* thing: despite, for example, J.E.A. Tyler's description of Bombadil as "eldest of all living creatures in Middle-earth," nowhere in *The Lord of the Rings* are the adjectives "living" or "alive" applied to Tom. Lin Carter describes Bombadil as a member of none of the sentient races, rather "the embodiment of utter goodness" (47), and Tom Shippey asserts that, as revealed in a piece of Tolkien's correspondence, Bombadil "was from his first conception a *genius loci*, a 'spirit of the place'; Shippey calls Bombadil "a kind of exhalation of the earth, a nature-spirit" (63-64), a description reminiscent of the *longaevi*. One also might propose that if, as it seems, both Bombadil and Treebeard are of the *longaevi*, part of the original creation that preceded the Children of Ilúvatar, neither is older than the other. Regardless of one's speculation of choice, this and the other mini-puzzles and

¹³ Paratextually, *The Silmarillion* makes known that the Valar modeled Middle-earth after the original creation and, after they had "brought order to the sea and the lands and the mountains," the Vala Yavanna "planted at last the seeds that she had long devised," from which ultimately came all plants (35). The reader, though, need not know of Yavanna to perceive that some trees are characterized as especially sentient. They have seen the other races of the world come (and some go), yet they themselves have remained, not only as a deathless species, but in many cases as ageless individuals, subject to death only through injury.

mysteries with which the allusive backstory teases the reader do not harm, but enhance the novel's atmosphere of believability or feeling of truth.

The Treebeard/Bombadil conflation notwithstanding, both the Ents and Old Tom provide some subtle emotional lift to *The Lord of the Rings*. The allusive backstory repeatedly suggests the importance of acknowledging perspective, such as the Elves' view of mortality and time, as told by Legolas. This importance is suggested again when Old King Théoden expresses amazement at his first sight of Ents. He believed them to be nothing more than fairy-tale creatures, but Gandalf sets him straight: "[To] them you are but the passing tale; all the years from Eorl the Young to Théoden the Old are of little count to them; and all the deeds of your house but a small matter" (III.8.549). When measured against lives so incredibly long, the great problems and dreadful squabbles of the present seem not quite so great or dreadful—they seem, perhaps, more manageable.

Combining the primary text with the intertext *and* the paratext results in an even more detailed picture of immortality and mortality among the characters in Tolkien's mythos. *The Silmarillion* provides the genesis of Æa, the material world, and Middle-earth. The Creator, Ilúvatar, calls his Ainur—to whom Tolkien refers as "the angelical First-created" (*Letters* 202)—to him to sing the music of creation. Experiencing a vision of creation's progression, including the coming of "the Children of Ilúvatar" (Elves, then later Humankind), many of the Ainur, both Valar and Maiar, express their love and desire for Æa as their home. To better communicate with and aspiring to guide Ilúvatar's Children, these Ainur "took to themselves shape and hue" (*Silmarillion* 21). Since the Ainur and Maiar are spiritual beings who have taken physical shape, one may assume they are true immortals. For example, when defeated in the great battle that ends the First Age, the Ainu Morgoth does not die in the usual sense, nor does Sauron, a Maia and successor to Morgoth. The reader of *The Silmarillion* learns that Morgoth is captured, bound, and by the Valar "thrust though the Door of Night beyond the Walls of the World, into the Timeless Void" (254). Of Sauron's passing, Gandalf at "The Last Debate" says that with the loss of the Ring, "he will be maimed for ever, becoming a mere spirit of malice that gnaws itself in the shadows, but cannot again grow or take shape" (V.9.879), a description similar to Morgoth's end.

The *longaevi*, less spiritual and more physical than the Ainur, can die but otherwise are functionally immortal: they are subject to death only through injury. For example, some of the Elves have been in Middle-earth very nearly since its creation. Yet despite their limited immortality, the Elves lay down their lives in battle in their nigh-interminable wars against each other and against Morgoth for possession of the Silmarils, and finally against Sauron in the Second and Third Ages. The paratext suggests that, upon being slain, the Elves go to a

place where they stay until the end of days, The Halls of Mandos (*Silmarillion* 28). As for those not slain, throughout *The Lord of the Rings* the reader is reminded often that living Elves are leaving Middle-earth, sailing West to the Undying Lands, as their vast epoch ends and their significance fades.

To the reader of only *The Lord of the Rings*—and to nearly all the characters therein—the nature of the Wizards is less clear. The paratexts provide more information, calling the Wizards the Istari, sent from The Blessed Realm by the Valar as intermediaries to aid the peoples of Middle-earth in the struggle against Sauron (*Silmarillion* 299). *Unfinished Tales* specifies the Istari as Maiar (411), who for their mission among the peoples of Middle-earth are “clad in bodies as of Men, real and not feigned, [...] able to hunger and thirst and be slain” (406). They are, it seems, immortal in the same sense as the Elves: ageless (though, unlike the Elves, aged-looking) and susceptible of being killed. Gandalf, for instance, via his plummet into the pits of Moria with the Balrog, does indeed *die*: Bill Davis argues persuasively that Gandalf the White is not a resurrection, but a reincarnation—Gandalf inhabits a new body (Davis, location 2367). Saruman, also of the Istari, the fallen head of the White Council, is killed after the Scouring of the Shire. But he is no longer Saruman the White, his power having been taken away, and his demise appears final: “about the body of Saruman a grey mist gathered [...] but out of the West came a cold wind, and it bent away, and with a sigh dissolved into nothing” even as the body itself “shrank, and the shrivelled face became rags of skin upon a hideous skull” (VI.8.1020). The only hint of divine intervention, the cold wind from the West, does not bring Saruman back.

Finally, after the true immortals (the Ainur) and the functionally immortal (Elves, other *longævi*, and the Wizards), there come mortals, including Hobbits and Humans. To be sure, some are less mortal than others: the backstory slowly reveals, through the accumulation of small references (II.1.221, 233, II.2.244, 246, etc.), that the Númenoreans’ descendants, greater than other Humans, correspondingly have longer lives. Hobbits’ standard lifespans appear to exceed those of most humans but not to rival those of the Númenoreans. But for any of these mortals—Númenorean, other Human, or Hobbit—immortality such as that of the Valar, or even the Elves, is unattainable. The Númenoreans are told by the Valar that, upon death, humans “escape, and leave the world, and are not bound to it, in hope or in weariness,” but just where dead humans escape *to* is unknown (*Silmarillion*, 265). As far as any Human can see, then, death is the end.

On the one hand, Tolkien uses endings to signal new beginnings, a reasonable approach from one whose professional specialty was study of the various Germanic languages: the *Völuspá*—“The Wise Woman’s Prophecy” from the Old Norse text, *The Poetic Edda*—concludes with the Prophet’s description of

the final battle between the gods and the giants, resulting in the deaths of both the giants and the gods, and the subsequent rebirth of the world:

Now do I see the earth anew
Rise all green from the waves again;
[...].
In wondrous beauty once again
Shall the golden tables stand mid the grass,
Which the gods had owned in the days of old,
[...].
More fair than the sun, a hall I see,
Roofed with gold, on Gimle it stands;
There shall the righteous rulers dwell,
And happiness ever there shall they have. (stanzas 59-64)

The climactic act of the War of the Ring, the destruction of the One Ring, means inevitably the end of the Third Age and of the dominance of the Elves in Middle-earth; simultaneously, it signals the beginning of the Fourth Age and the ascent of Humankind. Gandalf the Grey's death in Moria precedes the birth of the even wiser, more powerful Gandalf the White. The withering of the ancient Tree of Gondor, representing the power and health of the kingdom, makes way for the growth of a sapling, a new tree to continue the revered line (III.6.971-72). Most grand endings in *The Lord of the Rings*, as in the *Völuspá*, mark the beginning of, ultimately, even grander things.

On the other hand, especially on the personal level, endings are just that: endings. Boromir's death marks the ending, the breaking of the Fellowship. The disappearance of the Entwives, we are told, began a long, sad decline for the Ents. Frodo's sacrifice of his health, his peace of mind, and part of his body for the destruction of the One Ring results in no greater, sounder state for him: "I tried to save the Shire," he tells Sam, "and it has been saved, but not for me" (VI.9.1029).

Life versus death is a common opposition that writers use to create pathos, and Tolkien draws the sadness of loss, the pain of the process of ending, poignantly and believably. We feel confident in asserting that very few readers, certainly not we the authors of this essay, have seen an Elf die. But we have seen enough of death, and Tolkien has rendered the emotions and experience of ending and loss so well, that when he writes of Boromir's repentance and final smile; of Frodo's, Bilbo's, and Gandalf's embarking from the Grey Havens; of Theoden's and of Aragorn's dying words; of Arwen's quiet, wintertime passing upon Cerin Amroth; it certainly does feel true. "[I]f this is indeed, as the Eldar say, the gift of the One to Men," confesses Arwen, "it is bitter to receive"

(Appendix A.1063). Equally true feels Tolkien's message that the longer the life, the more death would be a relief—yet greater still is the pain.

Sterling calls Tolkien's treatment of death as a gift an "insight into the human condition" (18).¹⁴ We disagree. Naming death a "gift" reveals not an insight, but an opinion, and Tolkien's depictions of the various races and characters illustrate that, even in Middle-earth, it is an opinion not shared by all. Death, like life, is problematic, and the complexity of the problem might be exactly the same for no two creatures. The recognition of that difficult relationship between life and death, between beginnings and endings, may be the true insight that Tolkien shows us in this area. Without the magnitude of the allusive backstory, without the consistent verisimilitude of experiences that are real, those that were once thought to be real, and those that cannot be real—without, in short, the detail and the care woven throughout the fantasy frame—that insight would be far less believable, and the tale would feel much less true.



And so we come to what (one might argue) is the most important point.

Knowledge of the magnitude and detail of the frame around *The Lord of the Rings*, the fully articulated backstory and the Christian resonances including the Great Chain of Being, greatly enhance many readers' understanding of the novel and appreciation of its themes. That knowledge also renders all the more remarkable the fact that it is not *required*: as noted near the beginning of this discussion, the efficacy of the frame renders *The Lord of the Rings* itself literally all that is needed to understand the novel enough to enjoy it.

This fact, in turn, significantly heightens the irony that the allusiveness of the backstory—myriad, frequent, unexplained references to material absent from the book—was not only unintentional, but directly counter to the author's wishes. Clearly, Tolkien intended his readers to understand his myth and the history of Middle-earth as he wrote the novel. Both *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* are side events in *The Silmarillion*, the history of Middle-earth that he began while in the Army during World War I and never completely finished. Tolkien tried to persuade his publisher to make *The Silmarillion* actually a part of the text of *The Lord of the Rings* when it was published in 1952, as prelude to the novel in one large book. In a letter to Unwin, his publisher, he confesses that *The Silmarillion* "has captured *The Lord of the Rings*, so that that has become simply its continuation" and desired that it be published as part of a book of

¹⁴ Bill Davis provides a more nuanced perspective through examination especially of Arwen's choice.

“say a million words” (*Letters* 136-137). Unwin demurred and published *The Lord of the Rings* in three volumes, instead, without *The Silmarillion* (which was not actually ready for publication anyway). Though the author was disappointed that the entire myth could not appear with *The Lord of the Rings*, he solaced himself with the appendices published with *The Return of the King*, giving readers at least a sampling of the depth of his creation.

The Lord of the Rings is the first popular work with a frame of such complexity, and we assert that both the novel's commercial success and its subsequent literary influence are due in large part to the allusive backstory built into that frame. Earlier works by other writers, including Robert E. Howard and H.P. Lovecraft, had leaned on the device of the fantasy frame before, but the allusive backstory of *The Lord of the Rings* is arguably the densest, before or since, and remains the most influential on writers and audiences of fantastic literature. In the fantasy genre, at least, allusive backstory now is expected. Without Tolkien's fearless, albeit unintentional throwing of his readers under the mythic hooves of his references, would there now even exist in the general public such intrinsic comprehension of the concept of allusive backstory? Would the readers of *A Song of Ice and Fire* (or the viewers of *Game of Thrones*) so readily accept the density of unique references required to believe in the Seven Kingdoms of Westeros (Martin)? Would the recurrent mysterious hints of ancient magics and skullduggery among the seventeen Dragaeran Great Houses carry the reader at such invigorating speed through the Vlad Taltos novels and the Khaavren romances (Brust)? Would the breathless description of the third reconciliation of the last of the McKetrick supplicants so easily send a shiver of gleeful dread through audiences at the cathartic threat of roasting in the depths of the Sloar (*Ghostbusters*)?

One could be forgiven for thinking, “Perhaps not.”

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