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## Notes and Letters

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### Notes and Letters

#### Abstract

Replies to John Rosegrant's response (in *Mythlore* #128) to her article on Tolkien's traumatic family history in *Mythlore* #127.

#### Additional Keywords

Tolkien, J.R.R.—Biography; Tolkien, J.R.R. Visual art; Tolkien, Mabel

# NOTES AND LETTERS

## A REPLY TO ROSEGRANT BY NANCY A. BUNTING

FIRST, I VERY MUCH WANT TO EXPRESS MY APPRECIATION for John Rosegrant's support for my raising the issue of Tolkien's childhood trauma.<sup>1</sup> I also want to thank him for his validation of my using Tolkien's art work as well as his writings.

Rosegrant raises the issue of recovered memories to illustrate a point about the fallibility and unreliability of memory. It is important to be clear that I have never claimed nor do I think there is any evidence or reason to believe that Tolkien had "recovered memories" of trauma. That is, I do not believe that Tolkien forgot, repressed, split off, or disavowed these memories. (Terminology varies as this is a difficult phenomenon to describe and there is a range of experiences.) Further, Tolkien is very unlikely to have been exposed to the kinds of suggestive interventions that bedeviled the Recovered Memory controversy. He was both exceedingly discreet about this/these event(s) and he was also particularly sensitive and aware of the possibility of suggestion implanting distortion. He accurately portrays this process with Gríma Wormtongue's undermining of Théoden and Smaug's deft misdirection of Bilbo concerning how the dwarves might be taking advantage of him and then implanting suspicions about their intentions (*Letters* 421; *LotR* III.6.513; *The Hobbit* XII.235-6). Tolkien is aware that an editing of reality by itself without any direct commentary can have tremendous psychological impact as seen in Denethor's despair from looking into the *palantír* controlled by Sauron and Morgoth's torment of Húrin permitting him to see only scenes of doom and sorrow from which Melian releases him (*LotR* V.7.853; *Silmarillion* 241, 280, 285-6).

I am in complete agreement with Rosegrant that reasoning from adult memory/fantasy/behavior to childhood fact is not an exact science. I agree that caution is needed and that is why I have tried to rely on converging lines of evidence: the three signs of childhood trauma plus evidence of anniversary reactions. However, I do not think Rosegrant's point that there are other possible alternative explanations is a weakness. Rather, this is precisely how inductive thinking in this area proceeds. While Rosegrant conceptualizes in terms of a reconstruction, I think about this more as a hypothesis to be tested. If one thinks about the process of testing a hypothesis as being like a horse race,

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<sup>1</sup> In *Mythlore* vol. 34, no. 2 (#128), 2016, pp. 167-170.

then before the bell rings one places one's bet on the best horse (explanation/hypothesis). Like good experimental psychologists, the bookies, who are taking the bets, understand the need for probabilistic reasoning in picking the best horse/hypothesis by taking into account any number of variables such as track conditions (dry or wet), length of the race, the horse's previous performance, the jockey, etc. There should be other contending horses/hypotheses or this would only be an exhibition. Further, the more specific the hypothesis, then the clearer the test will be and the more information will be gained. I have tried to elaborate and become more specific about my hypothesis concerning Tolkien's trauma in my recent paper in *Lembas*. Further, I believe this hypothesis can go the distance in the sense that it can explicate and resolve some puzzles in Tolkien's writings, and I hope to use it in this way in another paper. However, the beauty of the system is that if the specific hypothesis/horse fails, then a better horse/explanation wins and we will all have learned something new. This is what matters. In this case, the facts are certainly known to the Tolkien Estate, and this hypothesis can be validated or refuted.

I agree with Rosegrant that any anniversary of trauma can be difficult. I think Rosegrant's objection that in individual clinical cases 10- and 20-year reactions are not outstanding is reasonable, but this is necessarily based on a small sample size and there are individual variations. Culturally, 10 and 20-year anniversaries have special commemorations. Tolkien himself refers to the Queen Victoria's "Diamond Jubilee" as a marker for his childhood (*Letters* 230). This kind of cultural marker would be an example of the "coconstruction" or shared world view that Rosegrant presents as one of three psychological realities. I agree with Rosegrant that traumatic reactions are likely to be most intense in the first or second year, except in the cases of delayed onset. However, that knowledge is not helpful in relation to Tolkien as we have almost no specific information about his activities and behavior in 1905 and 1906. Rosegrant is correct that these reactions are most easily recognized when they occur on or very near the date of the traumatic event and that Tolkien's 1904 summer respite and reunion with his mother complicate this picture.

While Rosegrant notes that I acknowledge Tolkien's "breakdown" of 1938, he takes this as evidence for a recurrent depression and as a counter example for traumatic anniversaries. He evidently did not read my argument that this "breakdown" was likely to have been based on a reaction to Tolkien's "melancholy errand to the Connaught Hospital" August 10, 1938. I link this visit to the diagnosis of cancer in Tolkien's first cousin, Mary Incedon, who knew Tolkien during the "sad and troublous" time in Sarehole, who was a fellow language inventor, and who experienced financial backlash from her father, Walter Incedon, for becoming a Catholic in a way very similar to the experience of Tolkien's mother ("The Shadow of the Past" 7). I proposed in that paper that

this visit brought back painful memories from the past which released Tolkien's writing block when he was beginning to work on *The Lord of the Rings*.

I can understand Rosegrant's objection to a seemingly year-long, amorphous dysphoria of 1924 as a 20-year anniversary reaction. I am sure that Rosegrant will agree that this reported depression was not caused by external factors as I carefully document all the positive and successful experiences that occurred around that 1924 time frame. I think what is important is that this is Tolkien's retrospective report from almost 20 years later, i.e. April 1944. In retrospect what stands out in Tolkien's memory is the gloom of that year which was relieved by Christopher's birth. This retrospective memory is clearly biased given all the positive events that we know about. I would attribute this distortion of memory to a possible anniversary reaction. The poem, *The Nameless Land*, would also be consistent with an anniversary reaction.

The consideration of dates is clearer with the 10-year anniversary of 1914. The trigger for January water color *Eeriness* was Tolkien's need to sort out and rethink his relationships with the important women in his life given that he had just become betrothed to his future wife, Edith, who had just converted to Catholicism. He vacillated between a celebratory poem, a romantic fantasy hideaway, the dissonance of *Eeriness* associated with his mother and the past, and his faltering attempt in *Beyond* to focus on a new future with his wife-to-be. In March, 1914 he did a likely representation of the Great Wave linked to his earlier traumatic memory of his brother Hilary's near drowning in Sarehole. March, based on the hypothesis that is elaborated in my article in *Lembas* (specifically after February 27th), would also be associated with the trauma of 1904. The likelihood of March containing a significant anniversary is supported by Tolkien again being so "unwell" in March, 1946 that he described himself as "near to a real breakdown" so that he took three weeks off and returned to the university "so troublous that it was all I could do to get through it" (Scull and Hammond 1.299). Tolkien began working on his re-imagining the Kullervo story in October, 1914. This can be linked with an anticipated November anniversary of his mother's going into a coma on the eighth of November and then her death on the fourteenth. Here we have enough information to link triggers, dates, and trauma reactions.

I agree with Rosegrant that there are likely to be other deficits based on misattunement/strain/lack of empathy from Tolkien's early years. Tolkien recalled his dragon story from the age of seven, and his "mother said nothing about the dragon" but only corrected his grammar (*Letters* 214). This is certainly an example of misattunement. Further, she opposed his intense involvement with invented languages, one of his greatest pleasures (Bunting, "Tolkien's First Notebook"). My recent article in the June and July *Beyond Bree* also presents another likely scenario concerning Tolkien's disappointment with his mother.

In response to these difficulties, Tolkien later developed a special relationship with Christopher Wiseman in TCBS. Wiseman shared Tolkien's love of languages and was privileged to share in one of Tolkien's early invented languages (Garth 17). His importance was such that Tolkien named his youngest son for him. Further, "They [Tolkien and Wiseman] called themselves privately the Great Twin Brethren" (Garth 5). This calls to mind Kohut's discussion of the twinship transference, especially in relation to the anxieties of new artistic endeavors, to compensate for previous emotional injuries.

Rosegrant proposes three realities that need to be balanced: the world of external or historical facts, the world of dream/fantasy/psychic reality/emotional meaning, and the shared or coconstructed world that forms the basis of myth. While most Tolkien studies have focused on his use of myths and medieval stories or his exploration of fantasy, i.e. coconstructions and psychic reality, I would like to address the influence and impact of historical fact with due respect for the fallibility and uncertainties of memory. This has been an area of neglect. As Rosegrant knows, the interpretation of dreams and fantasy depends on and is a function of the reality of the day residue and the patient's associations. Our increased appreciation of Tolkien's Primary Reality can only lead to a better understanding of his creation of a Secondary Reality.

Two other considerations arise from this discussion. One is that Tolkien's denials about the influence of his biography on his writings can not be taken at face value. Both Rosegrant and I treat self-report very seriously unless there are compelling indications of other intentions or motives that would intrude on its reliability. Tolkien's report of "things that records do not record: the dreadful sufferings of our childhoods," along with Carpenter's assertions 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" let us know that we cannot accept his frank denials (*Letters* 421; Carpenter 260). For example, Tolkien insists "The story [*LotR*] is not about JRRT at all, and is at no point an attempt to allegorize his experience of life" (*Letters* 239). This statement directs the reader's attention away from the possibility that his stories might be a "feigned history" in "mythical and legendary dress" (*Letters* 211) as I argue in my article, "Roverandom, an Autobiographical Reading." Further, this is the man who, in his debating mode, can claim that "more than one poem in recent years [...] has been inspired by the dragon of *Beowulf*" ("*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics" 16). As Tom Shippey points out in "Tolkien and the *Beowulf*-poet," "more than one poem" means "exactly two, his own 'Iumonna Gold Galdre Beweunden' and C.S. Lewis' 'Once the worm-laid egg'" (3). Tolkien's denial seems to be a good example of Shippey's insight that "Tolkien's mind was one of unmatched subtlety, not without a streak of deliberate guile" (*The Road to Middle-earth* 5). A possible acceptable description of *LotR* might have been: the

revelation and working out of God's redemption in the world with the inadvertent and incidental involvement of JRRT.

The second consideration is the fact that there are two psychologists, myself and Rosegrant, discussing Tolkien, the man and his art. I can only think of Tolkien's well-known distaste and repeated scathing comments on psychologists and psychoanalysts (*Letters* 232, 266, 288; Kilby 30). However, these opinions were expressed in the 1950s and later when *LotR* was becoming an unexpected success and people began to wonder and ask about the author. Prior to that, Tolkien's opinion appears to be different, as presented in *The Notion Club Papers* in the character of Dolbear. Dolbear is a respected character who contributes judiciously to the discussion, and he has "interests" in psychoanalysis. If Tolkien changed his opinion about psychologists and psychoanalysts, who are known to explore and use childhood history to understand and comment on adult art and behavior, was this change due to concerns about protecting his privacy and the things that "records do not record?" I think of Hamlet, who asks his mother, Gertrude, for her opinion of his play, *The Mouse Trap*. She replies, "The lady [The Player Queen] protests too much methinks" (*Hamlet* III ii). Tolkien also protests too much.

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# CALL FOR PAPERS: DIVINATION THEMES IN MYTHOPOEIC LITERATURE

Special Issue of *Mythlore*, Spring 2018

Guest Edited by Emily E. Auger

Deadline: July 15, 2017

The theme of divination is usually expressed in literature as fortune-telling (astrology, tarot, runes, etc.), oracular pronouncements, or prophecy, and is a frequent element of mythopoeic literature and its sources, which this special issue will explore. Papers on specific works and/or the works of specific authors, including comparative treatments, are particularly welcome, as are studies of divination in folklore, fairy tale, myth, and medieval literature. Here is an incomplete list of possible authors and works, some of which may need more thought regarding their status as mythopoeic:

## Pre-WWII

T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land* (1922)  
Charles Williams, *The Greater Trumps* (1932)  
W.B. Yeats, various

## Mid-Twentieth-Century

William Gresham, *Nightmare Alley* (1946)  
C.S. Lewis, *Chronicles of Narnia* (1950s)  
J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* (1950s)

## 1960s-1980s

Italo Calvino, *Castle of Crossed Destinies* (1973)  
John Crowley, *Little, Big* (1981)  
Samuel R. Delany, *Nova* (1968)  
Philip K. Dick, *The Man in the High Castle* (1963) (maybe)  
Frank Herbert's *Dune* series (1965-1985)  
Stephen King, *The Gunslinger* 1982; *The Dark Tower* series through 2012  
Jane Yolen, *Cards of Grief* (1984)  
Roger Zelazny, *Chronicles of Amber* series (1970s-1980s)

## 1990s-2000s

Susanna Clarke, *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell* (2004)  
Erin Morgenstern, *The Night Circus* (2011)  
Rachel Pollack, *The Child Eater* (2014)  
Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman, *Good Omens* (1990)  
J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter* series (1990s-2000s)

Submissions: send to Janet Brennan Croft, editor of *Mythlore*, [mythlore@mythsoc.org](mailto:mythlore@mythsoc.org)