



Mythopoeic Society

mythLORE

A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis,  
Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature

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Volume 34  
Number 2

Article 11

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4-15-2016

## Notes and Letters

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### Recommended Citation

Rosegrant, John; Polesiak, Debra; and Miller, Ryder W. (2016) "Notes and Letters," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 34 : No. 2 , Article 11.  
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol34/iss2/11>

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## Mythcon 51: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien

Albuquerque, New Mexico • Postponed to: July 30 – August 2, 2021



### Abstract

- *A Comment on "1904: Tolkien, Trauma, and its Anniversaries".*

A letter responding to Nancy Bunting's provocative article on Tolkien's traumatic family history in *Mythlore* #127.

By John Rosegrant.

- *Jean Louise to the Dark Tower Came.*

Explicates a pattern of references to Browning's "Childe Roland" in Harper Lee's recently published *Go Set a Watchman*.

By Debra Polesiak.

- *American Survivor: William Faulkner's A Fable.*

Draws our attention to American World War I veteran William Faulkner's *A Fable* as an example of the fantastic in response to the war's trauma.

By Ryder W. Miller.

### Additional Keywords

Bunting, Nancy. "1904: Tolkien, Trauma, and its Anniversaries"; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Childhood; Tolkien, Mabel; Browning, Robert. "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came"; Lee, Harper. *Go Set a Watchman*; World War I in fiction; Faulkner, William—Influence of World War I; Faulkner, William. *A Fable*



## NOTES AND LETTERS

### A COMMENT ON "1904: TOLKIEN, TRAUMA, AND ITS ANNIVERSARIES"

I WISH TO COMMENT ON NANCY BUNTING'S PROVOCATIVE "1904: Tolkien, Trauma, and its Anniversaries" in *Mythlore* #127 (34.1, Fall/Winter 2015). There is much in her article that I agree with and that I believe advances Tolkien studies. However, despite Bunting's commendable care in pointing out that her conclusions are uncertain, I think that she reaches for more conviction about proposed events in Tolkien's life than can be supported with current documentation. In her Editorial, Croft comments that Bunting's article is "[a]pplying our current understanding of childhood trauma and its later effects, [and] definitions of abuse" (3). In fact, though, some aspects of trauma theory used by Bunting remain controversial.

To begin with what I find most useful: I am in complete agreement with Bunting's emphasis on childhood trauma. Although it is common knowledge among Tolkienists that his childhood was difficult, with the loss of both parents, I think the traumatic effect of his war experiences has tended to be weighted more strongly in the literature (for example Croft, *Baptism*; Garth). Different people react differently to the same potentially traumatic events, depending on their temperaments, personality structure, and past trauma history; Tolkien's difficult childhood is important not only in itself but because it undoubtedly contributed to the traumatic effects he felt from the war, so Bunting's focus establishes a more accurate balance between childhood and war experiences in our understanding.

Bunting provides informative analyses of the meanings and feelings that may lie behind a number of Tolkien's artworks and writings. For example, her analysis of his *Eeriness* watercolor is a *tour de force*. By carefully studying the manifest painting and linking it to likely associations, Bunting convincingly argues that *Eeriness* "is a representation of Mabel Tolkien [and] somehow death and evil, as well as salvation and redemption, are associated with her" (66).

The problem comes in when Bunting moves from explicating Tolkien's feelings, his experience, to reconstructing actual childhood events that may have formed these experiences. There is no clear consensus in the field over whether it is possible to make such reconstructions accurately, and I have previously described the cyclical nature of our society's beliefs in this regard (Rosegrant). During the "Memory Wars" of the 1980s and 1990s there was tremendous controversy in both the scholarly literature and the popular press regarding the veridicality of recovered memories of trauma, including bizarre memories of Satanic childhood abuse (Loftus). When investigated closely many of these recovered memories proved to be false, and researchers such as Loftus have demonstrated the malleability and unreliability of memory, such that significant portions of what people code as memory is actually fantasy (see for example Laney & Loftus, Loftus & Davis).

Bunting does not discuss recovered memories *per se*, but the larger question raised by the Memory Wars is the extent to which we can infer actual specific childhood events from adult memories, fantasies, and behaviors, which in Tolkien's case include his artwork and writings. My own belief, based on clinical experience and supported by Loftus's research, is that one must be cautious in reasoning from adult memory/fantasy/behavior to childhood fact.

There are several examples where I think Bunting takes this step unconvincingly, but for reasons of space I will focus only on her central argument that Mabel was abusive to her sons and that Tolkien's resulting ambivalence about her (as seen for example in his feelings behind the *Eeriness* painting) contributed to his complex traumatic reaction to his mother's death. Bunting draws together various pieces of circumstantial evidence, including among others that "thrashings" of children were common at that historical period, that governesses were especially strict and Mabel was a governess, that Tolkien's idealized image of Mabel did not include the "charity and forgiveness" (71) that he learned from Father Francis, and that Tolkien showed ten-year and twenty-year anniversary reactions to the year of Mabel's death.

Each of these pieces of evidence could be otherwise explained, but since a key part of Bunting's argument that Tolkien was traumatized in this particular way in 1904 is based on the anniversary reactions that she hypothesizes, let me focus on these. Bunting is certainly correct that trauma victims can find the anniversaries of traumatic experiences particularly difficult, although in my clinical experience there is nothing special about ten or twenty years; any year anniversary may be challenging. (Frodo had one- and two-year anniversary reactions to his wounding on Weathertop and the destruction of the Ring.) But despite Bunting's interesting analyses of Tolkien's thoughts and art during these anniversary years, I am not persuaded that he

was having anniversary reactions. Such reactions are most easily recognized when they occur on or very near the date of the traumatic event, but Bunting proposes traumatic reactions throughout the tenth and twentieth years after Mabel's death, rather than in November when she actually died. (Bunting documents that other times in 1904 were stressful because both Tolkien and his brother were seriously ill, but she also documents that the summer was idyllic. Anniversary reactions are less likely to events that are not clearly delineated and include idyllic periods.) Furthermore, Tolkien's biography indicates that he was equally prone to pain at many other times. Bunting even gives an example in a footnote, Tolkien's near "breakdown" in 1938, thirty-four years after Mabel's death.

If Bunting's conclusions about childhood abuse are incorrect, whence came Tolkien's pain? I do not want to speculate much until we have more evidence, but we should keep in mind the centrality of loss and death in his writings—somehow, Tolkien grew to be intensely and poignantly sensitive to loss and death. Certainly his orphaning and World War I contributed to this. If these are not enough to explain it, we may not need to look at acute traumas for the explanation. Our society likes the idea that drastic discrete episodes explain the pain of life—witness movies like *Ordinary People* and *The Fisher King*—and sometimes indeed this is the case. I have had patients who wished they could identify such a trauma in their lives to give clarity, and sometimes it is there. But often the pain in life grows out of strain traumas like small but regular parental misattunements, and often these happen in preverbal years that are very difficult to access consciously.

I am grateful to Bunting for stimulating these thoughts. When the Tolkien archives are opened, we may find that her speculations are completely correct. We may find instead that Tolkien's pain is largely explainable by his orphaning and/or the war and/or strain traumas not yet identified. And we may find something else entirely. Until then, I recommend cautious humility in our conclusions. I also recommend that we keep in mind that what was most unusual about Tolkien was not the pain he experienced, but the creative transformations of it that went into his art.

—John Rosegrant

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**JOHN ROSEGRANT** is a clinical psychologist and psychoanalyst whose private practice is in New Orleans. John has published widely in the psychoanalytic literature on topics including psychoanalytic technique, short-term psychotherapy, play therapy, dreams, fairy tales, Harry Potter, and the World of Warcraft computer game, and his article "Tolkien's Dialogue between Enchantment and Loss" appeared in *Mythlore* 33.2, Spring/Summer 2015. John is also the author of *Gatemoodle*, *Kintravel*, and *Rattleman*, the first three volumes of *The Gates of Inland* Young Adult Fantasy series.



## JEAN LOUISE TO THE DARK TOWER CAME

TO BETTER UNDERSTAND HARPER LEE'S *Go Set a Watchman* (GSAW), one needs to understand Robert Browning's "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came" and Joseph Campbell's spiritual journey of the hero. Perhaps a better title for Lee's new novel would be *Jean Louise to the Dark Tower Came* since Browning's poem is referenced five times; however, the biblical connection to the twenty-first chapter of Isaiah is also apparent, representing Jean Louise's conscience into her own identity. Browning and the Bible are clearly intertwined into GSAW that "only God and Robert Browning knew what she [Jean Louise] was likely to say" (Lee 20); however, upon deeper analysis, Joseph Campbell lays the pathway for both pieces of literature.

Robert Browning's poem exemplifies the hero's journey defined by Campbell as the monomyth (*separation—initiation—return*). The poem reveals the *separation* of a knight, Childe Roland, on a journey in search of the Dark

Tower. Although told by the “hoary cripple” (l.2) which way to go, the narrator feels lied to, but he carries on with the *initiation* of the journey. He must overcome trials of a disastrous landscape: “As for the grass, it grew as scant as hair/ In leprosy; thin dry blades prick’d the mud/ Which underneath look’d kneaded up with blood” (l.73-75). As Campbell tells us, “Trials and revelations are what it’s all about” (126). To help continue with the quest, Roland remembers back to two friends, Cuthbert and Giles, since “one taste of the old time sets all to rights” (Browning l.90). Finally, in order to *return* and fulfill the hero cycle, he successfully finds himself at the end of his journey, at the Dark Tower, “And blew ‘*Childe Roland to the Dark Tower came*’” (l.204).

The several allusions to Browning’s poem in GSAW make the parallels between the two pieces obvious. Uncle Jack clearly identifies Jean Louise as our hero, “I can’t stop you and I mustn’t stop you, Childe Roland” (Lee 201). With her return from New York City to Monroeville, Alabama, Jean Louise’s *separation* brings her back to Atticus, who is afflicted with rheumatoid arthritis, as our hoary cripple. Then Jean Louise feels she has been lied to and begins her *initiation*. She battles Atticus on his views on racism and humanity, stating, “I’ll never believe a word you say to me again. I despise you and everything you stand for” (Lee 253) and “[Hitler] You’re no better” (252). Throughout these trials our heroine repeats ‘*Childe Roland to the Dark Tower came*’ (241, 266). While continuing on her journey, she remembers two important people to her, Jem and Dill, her Cuthbert and Giles, to help her focus on who she really is. The physical absence of these important characters from *TKAM* is important to note, for Jem, now deceased, can not help guide Jean Louise through her trials; she must go on her journey alone. For the same reason, Dill is in Italy, and probably is the one that Jean Louise really wants to marry, not Henry, hence her struggle to commit to him. Jem and Dill’s absences are, therefore, necessary for Jean Louise’s “transformation of consciousness,” a fundamental component of Campbell’s hero journey (Campbell 126). Her mentor, Uncle Jack, tells Jean Louise that she now is her own watchman. “You had to kill yourself, or he [Atticus] had to kill you to get you functioning as a separate entity” (Lee 265). Campbell echoes this idea: “losing yourself, giving yourself to some higher end, or to another—you realize that this itself is the ultimate trial” (126). However, Jean Louise’s *return* can not be completed without Uncle Jack explaining that instead of running, she should return to teach others in Maycomb to be more like her. In a final conversation between Uncle Jack and Jean Louise, he states, “You may not know it, but there’s room for you down here.” “You mean Atticus needs me?” “Not altogether. I was thinking of Maycomb” (272). Jean Louise to the Dark Tower came and shall return.

Campbell states that “the trials are designed to see to it that the intending hero should be really a hero. [...] Does he have the courage, the knowledge, the capacity, to enable him to serve?” (126). Jean Louise exemplifies the hero as she holds to her non-prejudiced viewpoint while not only confronting Henry and Uncle Jack on racial equality but also standing up to Atticus, her father, her God. Uncle Jack explains that what she did took courage; however, not like Childe Roland’s heroism. “Oh, not the kind of courage that make a soldier go across no-man’s-land. That’s the kind that he summons up because he has to. This kind is—well, it is part of one’s will to live, part of one’s instinct for self-preservation” (Lee 266). Jean Louise journeyed from the dark tower of racism to becoming her own watchman.

—Debra Polesiak

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**AMERICAN SURVIVOR: WILLIAM FAULKNER'S A FABLE**

While *Baptism of Fire* focused on British fantasists, there were also a number of American realists who spent time on European soil during the conflicts of World War I and II and were inspired by their times in the overseas conflicts. Ernest Hemingway was an ambulance driver in World War I who was wounded and wrote about some of the struggles there (including The Spanish Civil War (July 17, 1936– April 1, 1939). John Steinbeck covered World War II for New York newspapers as well as Vietnam years later when two of his children were soldiers. Steinbeck also wrote a King Arthur book that was published after his death and is worth reading, especially given the theme of the 2015 Mythcon, but he is not otherwise a fantasy author. More unusual however was the story of William Faulkner (1897-1962) who was part of the Canadian Air Force during World War I, and returned later to that time with *A Fable* (1954) which followed his receiving the Noble Prize in Literature in 1949. Faulkner made forays into genre subjects like crime stories, the Southern Gothic, and war stories. He was reacting to some of the same things the Inklings were in *A Fable*, which was a reaction to World War and doesn't quite fit together with Faulkner's other books. In this effort it is clear that the fires of war were still burning in him.

*A Fable* tells of a failed effort at lasting peace during the trench warfare of World War I. Corporal Stephan orders his troops to desist, an action which is copied by the other side. Some have considered Stephan a resurrected Christ like figure. But his men are later overruled and the conflict begins again. His superiors argue that aggression is part of human nature. Stephan is later executed; the Signet Modern Classic Book cover shows him on the cover being taken down from where other soldiers are still hanging on poles. The message is that humankind will endure and prevail, in part because the soldiers are not all or always blood-thirsty. The inner fires can be put out.

Faulkner may be said to share a literary style with *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion*; both Faulkner and Tolkien really require a second reading to be fully appreciated. Tolkien is difficult because of his complex world building, but does not hide obvious secrets. Nor is he very lyrical, but Tolkien is moving and profound nonetheless. *The Silmarillion* is less about shock and awe, than about loss, inevitability, and sorrow. For a more realistic treatment of war and World War I one might prefer Faulkner and Hemingway, but Faulkner's experiments, stream of consciousness, and unannounced flashbacks, may leave readers guessing. His work is not filled with symbolic enemies and fantastic monsters, but still tells an important painful story about defeat. They do hide secrets and poetry, and one might just need to visit his

books more than once to find it. The Inklings, especially Tolkien, captured the emotions of war, but they were less psychological.

Faulkner might be considered even more challenging than Charles Williams, who also sometimes explored dark psychological territory. *A Fable* tells some disturbing truths about a South that struggled with slavery and the loss of The Civil War. One can find such pain as well in *The Sound and The Fury*, *The Unvanquished*, and *Light in August*. People continue to struggle and some are still unvanquished; some have also grown weary of conflict or of the pain of being on the losing side. We can learn about these dark psychological depths from Inklings also. C.S. Lewis (and probably Tolkien also in tandem) said that people who don't like fantasy might very well be jailers. The Inklings knew that certain truths could be said in fantasy that would not fit well in more mainstream genres, things which might help us put out some of those internal fires. Faulkner in *A Fable* also tried to control those fires, but for many, Faulkner's symbolic bear still wanders in the flammable woods.

—Ryder W. Miller

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