



Mythopoeic Society

mythLORE

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

Volume 24
Number 2

Article 4

10-15-2004

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Recommended Citation

Hannon, Patrice (2004) "The Lord of the Rings as Elegy," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 24: No. 2, Article 4.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol24/iss2/4>

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The Lord of the Rings as Elegy

Abstract

Discusses the elegiac theme of loss which permeates *The Lord of the Rings*.

Additional Keywords

Tolkien, J.R.R. The Lord of the Rings—Style

The Lord of the Rings as Elegy

Patrice Hannon

“I will tell you the tale of Tinúviel,’ said Strider, ‘[. . .] It is a fair tale, though it is sad, as are all the tales of Middle-earth, and yet it may lift up your hearts.’”
J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*¹

“By 1918 all but one of my close friends were dead.”

J.R.R. Tolkien, Foreword to *The Lord of the Rings*²

THE *Lord of the Rings* is a story of loss and longing, punctuated by moments of humor and terror and heroic action but on the whole a lament for a world—albeit a fictional world—that has passed even as we seem to catch a last glimpse of it flickering and fading, disappearing in the mist like the ship carrying the Ring-bearer over the sea to the West. In the very first chapter, after Bilbo has vanished with the help of the magic ring during his birthday party, a surprising note of finality abruptly ends the comic scene: “he was never seen by any hobbit in Hobbiton again” (*FR* 40). This “never again” moves us out of the present of the birthday party to a point where the scene is long past, reminding us that we are not there with Bilbo but looking back at the day of the party from a great distance. The narrator soon repeats this gesture:

The second disappearance of Mr. Bilbo Baggins was discussed in Hobbiton, and indeed all over the Shire, for a year and a day, and was remembered much longer than that. [. . .] eventually Mad Baggins, who used to vanish with a bang and a flash and reappear with bags of jewels and gold, became a favourite character of legend and lived on long after all the true events were forgotten. (*FR* 51)

We move by steps—“a year and a day”—“much longer than that”—“long after all the true events were forgotten”—into a time remote from the once-immediate events of the novel. Here is Aragorn in Lothlórien: “And taking Frodo’s hand in his, he left the hill of Cerin Amroth and came there never again as living man” (*FR* 367). And Frodo leaving it: “Suddenly the River swept round a bend, and the banks rose upon either side, and the light of Lórien was hidden. Never did Frodo see that fair land again” (*FR* 394). After Boromir’s funeral boat has carried him away: “he was not seen again in Minas Tirith, standing as he used to stand

upon the White Tower in the morning” (TT 19). Now since Boromir is dead, this obviously goes without saying. But the pronouncement is not meant to be informational but elegiac, one more appearance of a recurring lament for all that will not be seen again. Variations on this line appear repeatedly right up to the very last line of the last appendix, which reads: “The dominion passed long ago, and they [the Elves] dwell now beyond the circles of the world, and do not return” (RK 416). The lines both signal a foreclosure on possibility for the characters and, as I’ve suggested, establish the reader’s great distance—across an unbridgeable chasm—from the time of the story.

In reading *The Lord of the Rings* again recently after more than twenty years, I was reminded of a passage from Tolkien’s great essay on *Beowulf*:

When new *Beowulf* was already antiquarian, in a good sense, and it now produces a singular effect. For it is now to us itself ancient; and yet its maker was telling of things already old and weighted with regret, and he expended his art in making keen that touch upon the heart which sorrows have that are both poignant and remote. If the funeral of Beowulf moved once like the echo of an ancient dirge, far-off and hopeless, it is to us as a memory brought over the hills, an echo of an echo. (33)

Last glimpses—or echoes—haunt *The Lord of the Rings* as well. There are continual vanishings, departures, farewells—people and places, we are told, seen for the last time or already fading from memory. Heaven knows, the book contains enough action and adventure to fill up a hundred movies. It is a page-turner. But the many quick-moving scenes of flight and pursuit and battle, which hurry us forward, are secondary to the sense the book conveys of things slipping into—or already become part of—an irrecoverable past. Even in those moments when the narrative is moving rapidly, in the battle scenes, for example, here too the narrator will interrupt the action to remind us that these events occurred long ago. What seemed so immediate and urgent and active becomes fixed in a tableau of a time long gone, a vanished world.

Not only is the book’s “present” action continually removed into a time far distant from the reader; a past “weighted with regret” intrudes upon it at every turn. (Of course the narration is not actually in the present tense; I use that description here as we conventionally use the present tense in describing literary action.) Chapter 2 of Book I is called “The Shadow of the Past.” In it, Gandalf tells Frodo frightening stories of a sad and sinister past and yet, when the two discuss Bilbo’s meeting with Gollum, Gandalf says:

“There was a little corner of his [Gollum’s] mind that was still his own, and light came through it, as through a chink in the dark: light out of the past. It was actually pleasant, I think, to hear a kindly voice again, bringing up memories of wind, and trees, and sun on the grass, and such forgotten things.” (FR64)

The shadow of the past, light out of the past: these two touch the story at every point, whether in the tale of the lost Entwives or the tragic history of the Men of Westerne. Present terror, of which there is a good deal, affords almost the only respite—if we can call it that—from the sorrowful past whose traces can be found in the ruins and graves and songs of lamentation that are everywhere in *The Lord of the Rings*. Even the prospect of victory, the best possible outcome the forces of Good can hope for, is melancholic. As Elrond says: “when the One [Ring] has gone, the Three will fail, and many fair things will fade and be forgotten” (FR 282). The destruction of the great Evil will bring about the fading away of good things and, much crueller, their descent into oblivion. While memory is an instrument of great sorrow in *The Lord of the Rings*, there too—as in so much English literature—only in memory does anyone fully feel what the past was. When Strider tells tales of a time “when the world was young” (FR 205), the tales are affecting not so much in themselves but insofar as the world that they tell of is lost. Its remoteness and irrecoverableness greatly enhance its value. In his elegy *In Memoriam*, Tennyson asks how this familiar phenomenon occurs:

And is it that the haze of grief
 Makes former gladness loom so great?
 The lowness of the present state,
 That sets the past in this relief?
 Or that the past will always win
 A glory from its being far;
 And orb into the perfect star
 We saw not, when we moved therein? (section 24, lines 9-16)

Although stories of the earlier ages of Middle-earth are deeply sorrowful, things in the time of *The Lord of the Rings’* action are lesser, diminished and incomplete: “all lore was in these latter days fallen from its fullness of old” (RK 136). In the Third Age of Middle-earth the fallen condition is the familiar one and part of that condition is a feeling of nostalgia for a prelapsarian world, though that world is itself, as William Empson said of Milton’s Eden, “inherently

melancholy” and not so only after the fall (187). Pastoral Lothlórien, though extant, would seem to be such a world:

Frodo stood awhile still lost in wonder. It seemed to him that he had stepped through a high window that looked on a vanished world. A light was upon it for which his language had no name. All that he saw was shapely, but the shapes seemed at once clear cut, as if they had been first conceived and drawn at the uncovering of his eyes, and ancient as if they had endured for ever. He saw no colour but those he knew, gold and white and blue and green, but they were fresh and poignant, as if he had at that moment first perceived them and made for them names new and wonderful. [. . .] No blemish or sickness or deformity could be seen in anything that grew upon the earth. On the land of Lórien there was no stain. (FR 365)

And yet, this paradise, which appears not to suffer from time’s destructive passage, is also lost: “our spring and our summer are gone by,” says Galadriel, “and they will never be seen on earth again save in memory” (FR 392). As I’ve suggested, *The Lord of the Rings* is concerned with memory, short- and long-term we might say, individual and cultural, that is Tennysonian in its pervasiveness. When Gimli is heartbroken upon leaving Lothlórien, Legolas remarks that “the memory of Lothlórien shall remain ever clear and unstained in your heart, and shall neither fade nor grow stale,” and Gimli responds, “Memory is not what the heart desires” (FR 395). The promise of it is nonetheless what makes the loss bearable (though we might wonder if in fact it isn’t forgetting, not remembering, that eases grief). Of a healing herb it is said: “the fragrance that came to each was like a memory of dewy mornings of unshadowed sun in some land of which the fair world in Spring is itself but a fleeting memory” (RK 142). In this simile the fragrance is not compared directly to the pastoral world, the Platonic ideal of the world, Tennyson’s “perfect star / We saw not, when we moved therein,” but to each individual’s memory of such a world. We further see the centrality of the *capacity* for remembering—and not just of that which is remembered—in this moving scene very near the end of the quest:

Hardest of all it was to part with his cooking-gear. Tears welled in his [Sam’s] eyes at the thought of casting it away.

“Do you remember that bit of rabbit, Mr. Frodo?” he said. “And our place under the warm bank in Captain Faramir’s country, the day I saw an oliphaunt?”

“No, I am afraid not, Sam,” said Frodo. “At least, I know that such things happened, but I cannot see them. No taste of food, no feel of water, no sound of wind, no memory of tree or grass or flower, no image of moon or star are left to me. I am naked in the dark, Sam, and there

is no veil between me and the wheel of fire. I begin to see it even with my waking eyes, and all else fades.” (RK214-15)

It appalled Frodo to hear Gandalf say that there was a racial resemblance between Gollum and hobbits, yet the very same things Frodo cannot remember are those that cast a powerful light from Gollum’s past into his black present. Part of the ring’s evil work is here shown to be the destruction of memory. Still, while *The Lord of the Rings* as a whole is deeply elegiac, hobbits themselves do not feel the weight of the past as a heavy burden, nor are they afflicted with the same perpetual aching for it as the other races of Middle-earth, as one of Bilbo’s songs suggests:

But all the while I sit and think
of times there were before,
I listen for returning feet
and voices at the door. (FR292)

Hobbits reminisce about the past yet are attuned with at least one ear to the rhythms of everyday life that keep them quite contentedly in the living present. Frodo, as we see in his final speech, is an exception, having been “too deeply hurt” to resume that lighthearted way of living after completing his quest:

“I tried to save the Shire, and it has been saved, but not for me. It must often be so, Sam, when things are in danger: some one has to give them up, lose them, so that others may keep them. [. . .] You will be the Mayor, of course, as long as you want to be, and the most famous gardener in history; and you will read things out of the Red Book, and keep alive the memory of the age that is gone, so that people will remember the Great Danger and so love their beloved land all the more. And that will keep you as busy and as happy as anyone can be, as long as your part of the Story goes on.” (RK309)

Yet even here, for all his un-hobbitlike *gravitas*, Frodo charges Sam with keeping alive the memory of the age that is gone not as a *sorrowful* duty but as one that will keep him “busy and happy.” In Frodo’s words we see a suggestion of the consolation that is a traditional part of English elegy, although we might feel that the sadness in the passage trumps the consolation. The last lines of the novel proper belong to Sam and we see in them a similar conflict:

At last they rode over the downs and took the East Road, and then Merry and Pippin rode on to Buckland; and already they were singing again as they went. But Sam turned to Bywater, and so came back up the Hill, as day was ending once more. And he went on, and there was

yellow light, and fire within; and the evening meal was ready, and he was expected. And Rose drew him in, and set him in his chair, and put little Elanor upon his lap.

He drew a deep breath. "Well, I'm back," he said. (RK311)

Although Sam has just bidden a heartbreaking farewell to his beloved master, the narrative focuses on those quotidian comforts—hearth, home, food, wife, child—that should signal a return to the busyness and happiness of the present. Yet Sam is strangely passive in the novel's penultimate paragraph, seemingly numb with grief. Moreover, the short clauses; the many pauses and full stops; and the schematic repetition of the conjunction "and" in the lines create a hypnotic rhythm that adds to the trance-like effect and undermines the comforting qualities of the domestic setting and activity. But we see the last two sentences of the novel break this monotonous rhythm as Sam seems to "come to" and, with a deep breath, affirm his allegiance to the here and now. While not as assured a farewell to the sadness of elegy as the last line of Milton's "Lycidas"—"Tomorrow to fresh Woods, and Pastures new"—Sam's declaration suggests a quiet but firm determination to be consoled.

What I have found in rereading *The Lord of the Rings* after so many years is that something of the effect suggested by Tolkien's phrase the "echo of an echo" is not only intrinsic to the work but is magnified by the distance between my last youthful reading and my recent experience of the book. *The Lord of the Rings* was my favorite book when I was a teenager and I read it over and over again. (The lines from Bilbo's song quoted above appear next to my picture in my high school yearbook.) In rereading it I was at once returned to those early years and aware of how much time had passed since then. The inherent nostalgia of the book touched me in a particular way it could not have earlier, for now the world of my youth had passed away too, "save in memory," as Galadriel says. I suspect this experience, of "a memory brought over the hills," is one that many of my fellow baby boomers will share if they too decide to pick up *The Lord of the Rings* again, and they will find it deeply moving and, not to be too somber about it, great fun. For, like the hobbit Sam Gamgee, we dearly love tales, even when they are sad. And many of our greatest tales—and *The Lord of the Rings* is one of them—tell the story of how and why, where and when Paradise was lost.

Notes

¹ *The Lord of the Rings*. 2nd. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), FR 203. All quotations are from this edition. I have used the following abbreviations in parenthetical citations: FR for *The Fellowship of the Ring*; TT for *The Two Towers*; and RK for *The Return of the King*.

² Foreword 7.

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