



Mythopoeic Society

mythLORE

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

Volume 24
Number 2

Article 6

10-15-2004

"The young perish and the old linger, withering": J.R.R. Tolkien on World War II

Janet Brennan Croft
University of Oklahoma

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore>



Part of the [Children's and Young Adult Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Croft, Janet Brennan (2004) "The young perish and the old linger, withering": J.R.R. Tolkien on World War II," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 24: No. 2, Article 6.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol24/iss2/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Mythopoeic Society at SWOSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature by an authorized editor of SWOSU Digital Commons. An ADA compliant document is available upon request. For more information, please contact phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu.

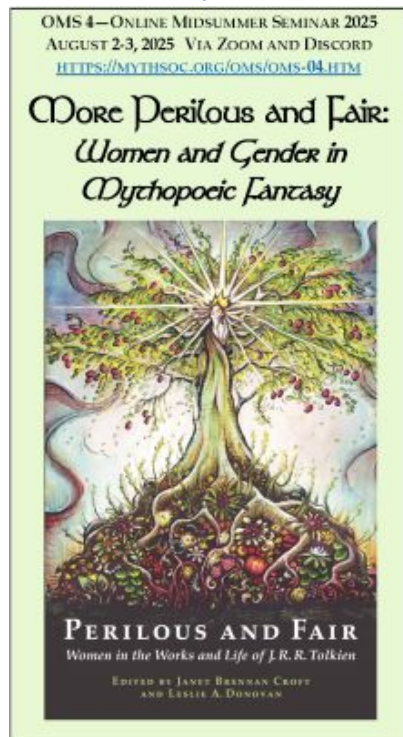
To join the Mythopoeic Society go to:
<http://www.mythsoc.org/join.htm>

SWOSUTM

Online MidSummer Seminar 2025
More Perilous and Fair: Women and Gender in Mythopoeic Fantasy
August 2-5, 2024

Via Zoom and Discord

<https://www.mythsoc.org/oms/oms-04.htm>



"The young perish and the old linger, withering": J.R.R. Tolkien on World War II

Abstract

Discusses the impact of World War II on the themes and style of *The Lord of the Rings*, and particularly in Tolkien's depiction of families affected by war.

Additional Keywords

Tolkien, J.R.R.—Family—Military service—World War II (1939–1945); Tolkien, J.R.R.—Influence of World War II; Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings*—Depiction of families; War in J.R.R. Tolkien; World War II in J.R.R. Tolkien

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

“The young perish and the old linger, withering”: J.R.R. Tolkien on World War II

Janet Brennan Croft

Introduction

J. R. R. Tolkien wrote much of *The Lord of the Rings* during World War II, but he denied that his work had any allegorical relationship to the war. In the Foreword to the second edition, he asserts that

The crucial chapter “The Shadow of the Past” was written long before the foreshadow of 1939 had yet become a threat of inevitable disaster [. . .] [T]he story would have developed along essentially the same lines, if that disaster had been averted [. . .] [L]ittle or nothing in it was modified by the war that began in 1939 or its sequels.

The real war does not resemble the legendary war in its process or its conclusion. (FR6-7)¹

However, there are themes throughout the work that reflect his perspective as a parent of two combatants and as a veteran of an earlier war, and there are plot elements that reveal the attention he paid to world events as he wrote. He admits later in the foreword, “an author cannot remain wholly unaffected by his experience” (7). There is no denying that the second global war in his lifetime was taking place in the world outside his Middle-earth, and that Tolkien was deeply affected by it.

While I feel that thematically and stylistically *The Lord of the Rings* is in many ways more clearly a product of his World War I experiences,² the World War II elements are worth studying for the additional light they shed on Tolkien’s attitudes towards war in general, and modern warfare in particular. This paper will examine some of these themes and motifs in *The Lord of the Rings* and Tolkien’s *Letters*, and compare them to the pre-War *Hobbit*.

Tolkien as a Post-World War II Writer

Some of the earliest critics of *The Lord of the Rings* saw the work as an allegory of World War II, so much so that Tolkien felt it necessary to deny any such intent in the Foreword to the second edition. *The Lord of the Rings* was, after all, begun in 1936, while the “awful rumour” of war was building; parts of it were sent in serial form to his son Christopher, serving in the Royal Air Force in

South Africa; and it was finished in 1949, several years after the end of the war. It is understandable that these critics viewed the Ring as an allegory for the Bomb. But as Verlyn Flieger points out, “[t]o subject it to such a reading is to ignore chronology”(7); Tolkien’s work on Middle-earth actually began years earlier, during World War I.

A few recent critical works examine this position more plausibly, focusing less on one-to-one correspondences between Tolkien’s work and real world events, and more on the broader picture. John A. Ellison, in his 1989 article “‘The Legendary War and the Real One’: *The Lord of the Rings* and the Climate of its Times,” argues that the early success of the book was due to a readership “who had had the Second World War as a central part of their experience” and therefore “saw embodied the truth of their own experience” (20). But this is a logical fallacy, arguing from results back to causes. In truth, what Tolkien’s readers brought to the books had nothing to do with what he put in them; that his readers saw their own unique individual experiences mirrored in the books supports Tolkien’s own argument that allegory resides in the purposed dominion of the author and applicability in the freedom of the reader (*FR* 7). To quote Flieger again, “[a] story need not be about a particular war in order to show its effects”(8).

Ellison’s most interesting passage, on the “odd but diverting impression of amateurishness pervading much of *The Fellowship of the Ring*” (18), which he compares to the so-called “Phoney War” stage of World War II before Churchill became prime minister in 1940, could as easily apply to the early stages of Britain’s involvement in World War I. Gandalf tells Frodo he is lucky to be alive, after “all the absurd things” he did after leaving home (*FR* 231). The younger hobbits especially have no idea of the scope of events they are soon to be involved in, finding the whole thing, as Paul Fussell says of the British in 1914, “strenuous but entertaining” (*Great War* 25). It was only after the start of the Battle of the Somme that “the innocent army fully attained the knowledge of good and evil” (29); it could be argued that it is only after Gandalf falls in Moria that Merry and Pippin begin to understand the stakes, and only after their capture by Orcs that they are compelled to a mature understanding of their own danger. But this is true of almost any war, not just the two World Wars; the early stages are usually marked by tentativeness and blundering, and Ellison’s arguments do more to show the applicability of Tolkien’s work to war in general than to any particular war.

Tom Shippey clearly stated in his 1993 article “Tolkien as a Post-War Writer” that he felt Tolkien belonged to a post-World War II group of writers, but in his recent book *Tolkien: Author of the Century* he modifies this view somewhat and gives almost equal time to World War I influences. In the original article Shippey considered *The Lord of the Rings* as part of a group of post-World War II non-realistic works including *The Lord of the Flies*, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *Animal Farm*, *That Hideous Strength*, and *The Once and Future King*. He felt that all of these works were similar in that they dealt with the question of evil and were marked by their authors’ war experiences. They stand apart from the mainstream of post-World War II literature because the authors chose the fantastic mode to communicate their themes. He particularly notes that these books “were all effectively or as regards their major impact post-World War II by publication date” (“Post-War” 85). He also sees their writing as in part a reaction to between-the-wars literature, dominated as it was by cynicism and a type of pacifism that believed more in the rejection of all forms of violence than in the active pursuit of peace. He expands on this theme in his recent book, *Tolkien: Author of the Century*, and calls the writers of these and a few selected other works “traumatized authors.”³

Shippey raised the question in his article—which war influenced Tolkien the most? Chronologically, all of these works were published between 1945 and 1958. All of the authors lived through both World Wars, though only Tolkien and Lewis served in the first one; T. H. White was the only one never in active service during a war. White may come closest to Tolkien’s medievalism in style and subject matter, but his dark pessimism about *homo ferox* and the centrality of sex to the whole Matter of Britain in the later parts of the story mark *The Once and Future King* as more influenced by the Second World War. As useful as it is to consider Tolkien among Shippey’s traumatized authors, the other authors in this group seem much more clearly influenced by World War II in terms of both their conclusions about the evil inherent in man and in their literary style.

In *Tolkien: Author of the Century*, Shippey discusses Tolkien’s own dissection of the allegorical reading of *The Lord of the Rings*. Tolkien’s point in rejecting this reading was that a true allegory should have a one-to-one correspondence with its subject, and this is emphatically not the case with *The Lord of the Rings* and World War II. But of course the “[h]ints of correspondence between our history and the history of Middle-earth are in fact fairly frequent,” as Shippey

points out (*Century* 164). There is an echo of Neville Chamberlain’s “peace in our time” speech in Frodo’s saying “I wish it need not have happened in my time” (*FR* 60); Gandalf emphasizes several times that the whole concept of appeasement must be rejected. The fortification of the Rammas Echor, the out-wall of Minas Tirith, is a reminder of the futility of the Maginot Line, which gave France a false sense of security against German invasion. Sauron’s offer to the armies assembled at the Gates of Mordor is “in effect the creation of a demilitarized zone, with what one can only call Vichy status, which will pay war-reparations, and be governed by what one can again only call a Quisling” (Shippey, *Century* 166). The situation in the Shire under Sharkey, despite Tolkien’s denials, does have a lot in common with the situation in England under the Socialist government of 1945-1950. Tolkien did not ignore world events and was capable of using parallels to them in Middle-earth where applicable, but the fact that a one-to-one correspondence does not exist shows that he was not creating an allegory.

Characteristics of World War II Literature

Apart from the chronology of its antecedents and Tolkien’s own statements about the war’s lack of influence on the plot of his story, there are other reasons why *The Lord of the Rings* does not fit in with mainstream post-World War II writing. There is little if any evidence of any distinctively and clearly World War II influence on its themes or style.

Paul Fussell discusses the typical themes and characteristics of World War II literature in *Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War*. One recurring theme is the distrust of authority, traceable to three main causes: the prevalence of “blunders, accidents, and errors” (26) by both military and civilian leaders; the use of propaganda and rumors by both sides in psychological warfare and on their own troops (35-48); and the “ideological vacuum” (129) resulting from both a lack of a clear meaning and purpose for fighting and from the “demoralizing [. . .] repetition of the Great War within a generation” (132).

It should be remembered that the atrocities of the Holocaust are not what drew the United States into the war, and only assumed importance as a motivation in retrospect; the official reason for U.S. entry into the war was retaliation for the Japanese attack on the military base at Pearl Harbor (138). The fact that civilians at home were under direct and sustained attack may have made the British troops more sure of their purpose than the Americans;

however, common soldiers from both countries frequently said the reason for fighting World War II was simply “to get home” (Fussell, *Wartime* 141). There was no romanticism to the beginning of World War II—no Rupert Brooke writing in all sincerity “[n]ow God be thanked who has matched us with His hour” (144). Fussell quotes Robert E. Sherwood’s remark that this was the first war “in which general disillusionment preceded the firing of the first shot” (132).

Tolkien rejects disillusionment as antithetical to his theory of courage, where the highest good is to go on without hope and the gravest sin is defeatism. There is notably little mistrust of authority among the allies in *The Lord of the Rings*, and this may be because blind obedience to orders is not expected by leaders like Aragorn, Faramir, and Théoden. Among the Riders of Rohan, in particular, warriors “surrender less of their independence to their superiors than we do” (Shippey, *Century* 96). Authority rightly held and fairly used is respected, not resented; there is no question that Aragorn, by virtue of his ancestry, experience, and demonstrated ability, is competent to lead. Saruman’s authority as the duly appointed head of the White Council is not mistrusted, despite his odd behavior, until Gandalf reveals his treachery at the Council of Elrond. There is some evidence of resented authority on the Enemy’s side, however; for example, some of the Orcs express a desire to go someplace where there are “no big bosses” after the war (*TT* 347). But on the side of the Allies, even when a leader makes a questionable decision or rule, their followers may argue the decision but do not distrust the authority to make it.

There are few “blunders, accidents, and errors” on the part of the Free Peoples. Perhaps the only examples are some of Denethor’s decisions, such as his insistence on pointlessly fortifying the Pelennor Wall (21, 89-90), which merely serves to slow down the Rohirrim when they have to fight through the enemy forces who have taken it. Enemy leaders are more feared than respected by their troops, and some of the orcs do express doubts about their leadership abilities. Uglúk of Isengard and Grishnákh of Barad-dûr revile each other’s leaders in their march across Rohan with the captured Merry and Pippin (49, 55). In the tunnel under Cirith Ungol Sam overhears Gorbag saying, “But they can make mistakes, even the Top Ones can [. . .] even the Biggest” (346-47). And when Sam and Frodo are hiding from the pair of orcs seeking them in the jagged peaks of the Morgai, both the tracker and the soldier express doubts about their leaders’ knowledge and abilities (202).

There are a number of examples of the enemy side employing psychological warfare tactics. Sauron feeds false information to Denethor (*RK* 132, 154), and his lieutenant shows the mithril mail and elven cloak to the allies at the Gates of Moria (165). Saruman lies to his allies the Dunlendings about how the men of Rohan would treat them if they were defeated (*TT* 150). The orc captains Shagrat and Gorbag are well aware that their leaders have placed spies among their own troops (346). Sauron uses the debilitating psychological effects of terror by catapulting the heads of fallen defenders into Minas Tirith and having the Nazgûl fly low over the city.

However, the allied leaders do not use any tactics like this on their own soldiers; there is too much mutual respect between the leader and the led. The closest approach to this might be in some of Denethor’s manipulations of Faramir, but this is part of his personal psychological war against his surviving son, and not a matter of Denethor’s policy towards his troops in general—and in any case, Denethor was already under Sauron’s influence at this point.

There is also no ideological vacuum on the side of the allies—all know the reason why they are fighting, and understand the stakes. Beregon, who calls himself “a plain man of arms,” has a long conversation with Pippin in Gondor where he shows himself to be exceedingly well-informed about the causes and consequences of the war (*RK* 37-39). There would have been no need of a series of “Why We Fight” movies among the Free Peoples (Fussell, *Wartime* 138). If there is any ideological vacuum in Middle-earth at all it is on the side of some of the human allies of Mordor, forced to fight in a war they don’t understand far from their own lands, and who in the aftermath of Sauron’s destruction “cast their weapons down and sued for mercy” (*RK* 227). The enemies of Middle-earth personify the failings the enlisted men saw in their own leaders during World War II, but the allies represent an idealized relationship between the leaders and the led.

Another characteristically World War II theme is the conflict between the individual and the officially sanctioned uniformity and anonymity of the soldier. In contrast to the poetry of the Great War, poems of World War II typically do not name or describe individuals; they speak of “The Ball Turret Gunner” (Randall Jarrell, cited in Fussell, *Wartime* 67) or the nameless pilot and observer of “When a Beau Goes In” (Gavin Ewart, cited in Fussell, *Wartime* 140). Jean Cocteau called it “the conspiracy of the plural against the singular” (qtd. in Fussell, *Wartime* 69). The war was intolerant of “individualistic performances”

(74); this was the war in which G.I. Joe became the generic term for the American soldier: “[I]n the Second World War you’re one of sixteen million. You might as well be an inert item of Government Issue, like a mess kit or tool, entrenching” (70).

But in Middle-earth, even common soldiers among the allies are not anonymous; consider the lists of the dead of Rohan, for example (*RK* 124-25), or of the Hobbits killed in the Scouring of the Shire. Aragorn is mindful of individual variation in capabilities and bravery when he provides some troops with the option of retaking Cair Andros instead of going to the Gates of Mordor (162). Individual performance is highly important and can turn the tide of a battle, the prime examples being Bard shooting down Smaug, and Merry and Éowyn conquering the Ringwraith. We even witness individuality among the enemy’s troops, in Sam’s brief meditation on the dead Southron in Ithilien (*TT* 269), and in the portrayal of some of the orcs of Isengard and Minas Morgul. But in general, we see Saruman and Sauron treating their troops as faceless interchangeable parts; think of the seething masses hoisting ladders at Helm’s Deep, or wielding the battering ram Grond at the gates of Minas Tirith.

Typically, the English-language literature of World War II was also far more hetero-erotic than that of the Great War. This was no longer an exclusively male world, with an officer class drawn from the even more exclusively male world of the British public school system. World War II literature is far more concerned with heterosexual sex than with homoerotic friendship, and there is an unfortunate corresponding coarsening of language and response (Fussell, *Wartime* 148) and increasing use of obscenity (92). This was also a more secular war (51), in spite of the chaplain corps and the pocket-sized New Testaments. Fussell notes that by the time of the Second World War, *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, familiar to both the highly educated officer class and the Other Ranks in World War I, “is almost never invoked, let alone read” (232).

The emphasis is on male friendship rather than romantic male-female relationships throughout *The Lord of the Rings*; although romance is not entirely neglected, friendships, particularly that of Sam and Frodo, are at the center of the story. And it would be difficult to find a coarsening of response or casual use of obscenity anywhere in the work, particularly on the part of the allies. Even the orcs seem rather restrained. Interestingly, there is no overt sexual obscenity in any of the evil Tolkien depicts. The closest thing we see to this is a bare hint at Wormtongue’s lust for Éowyn (*TT* 124). It is possible to read

Shelob's attack on Frodo and Sam as “female sexuality run rampant [. . .] a grim perversion of the sex-act” (Craig 13), but because of the way Tolkien handles this sequence it actually takes a conscious effort to detach this scene from its surroundings and read it this way. It is highly unlikely it would have been Tolkien's intent to have it interpreted in this manner at all.

The Lord of the Rings is most emphatically not a secular work, and its underlying themes are deeply religious. But enough has been written on this elsewhere, and particularly in Tolkien's own letters, that I will only mention that the lack of any overt religious practice (aside from the Standing Silence observed by the men of Gondor before meals) can make it seem thoroughly secular if read shallowly, and therefore more typical of World War II than World War I. But it takes very little effort to read below this surface, and a reader who misses this the first time is not likely to pass over it again.⁴

Tolkien's personal life as influence

Tolkien's perspective as a veteran, as a “traumatized author” in Shippey's phrase, gives him an outlook on World War II not shared by most of the young men and women just enlisting. A veteran's point of view may be seen in *The Hobbit*, in Bilbo's comment after the Battle of Five Armies: “Victory after all I suppose! [. . .] Well, it seems a very gloomy business” (299). However, the outbreak of a second global war in his lifetime added another dimension to his writing of *The Lord of the Rings*. We can see some of his insights on the retrospective futility of World War I in a speech by Elrond, who remembers the last great battle with Sauron and the years between the wars: “Sauron was diminished, but not destroyed. His Ring was lost but not unmade. The Dark Tower was broken, but its foundations were not removed” (*FR* 257). And Frodo's plaintive yearning “I wish it need not have happened in my time” (60) echos Tolkien's own feeling of darkening horizons.

But there is an aspect of *The Lord of the Rings* that sets it apart from Tolkien's pre-war writing and shows the influence of World War II in a somewhat unexpected way. During this war, Tolkien was not just a veteran and a participant in homeland defense efforts, but also the parent of two combatants. Michael became an anti-aircraft gunner and saw active duty defending aerodromes in Britain and France. Christopher joined the Royal Air Force and was sent to South Africa to train as a fighter pilot. Tolkien's eldest son John, though not in the armed forces, was training for the priesthood in Rome and had to be

evacuated from Italy shortly before the war broke out (Carpenter 193; Tolkien, *Letters* 70-71). It gave Tolkien an additional perspective on war to explore in his writing. It was not World War II itself, but the new personal experience of being a parent of grown children in active military service that gives his writing on war an added poignancy.

In his letters to Christopher in South Africa, what could have been more natural than to think back on his own war experiences? Tolkien even admits a nostalgic desire to revisit the trenches and roads of northern France, the scene of his World War I service (*Letters* 111). In his letter of 18 April 1944, Tolkien compares Christopher's situation in the Royal Air Force to his own in the trenches of World War I, and comments on the multiplication of stupidity in wartime (71-73). He hopes that the experience will prove useful for Christopher in the future, as his did. "May you, too, escape—strengthened," he writes (77). All of his letters to Christopher are full of a tender concern for his physical and spiritual safety and a longing to be able to share his danger.

How does this theme work out in Tolkien's fiction? In the inter-War *Hobbit*, there are no actual parent-child pairs. The closest relatives are Thorin and his nephews, Fili and Kili. Gandalf may be parent-like, but he is never really worried about Bilbo in the same way he is concerned for Frodo's safety in *The Lord of the Rings*. There was no global war going on, and the thought of his own children ever serving in the military was probably not uppermost in Tolkien's mind. The Shire is a peaceful, post-war country—"[s]words in these parts are mostly blunt, and axes are used for trees, and shields as cradles or dish-covers" (*Hobbit* 30). Children never seem to die before their parents.

However, there are many parent/child pairs in *The Lord of the Rings*, and Tolkien explores a variety of parental reactions to the risks their children run in war. Consciously or not, Tolkien may have been examining all the ramifications of his possible reactions to what could happen to Michael and Christopher, and what might have happened to Priscilla if she could have served, or to John if he hadn't left Rome in time.

Fittingly, the first parent/child pair we encounter is Bilbo Baggins and his adopted heir Frodo. He is troubled to learn of the danger he put Frodo in by giving him the Ring: "I am sorry: sorry you have come in for this burden: sorry about everything" (*FR* 244). Gandalf says of Bilbo that he "would never have passed on to you anything that he thought would be a danger" (56). Bilbo even tries to take on the quest himself during the Council of Elrond (283), and

gives Frodo his sword Sting and his mithril coat to keep him safe. When Frodo later learns that his mail coat is worth the price of the Shire, he “felt no doubt that Bilbo knew quite well” what a “kingly gift” this was (*FR* 330). In Bilbo we see a parent figure with a deep concern for his child, willing to take the danger of his task on himself if only it were possible. It is similar to the feelings Tolkien expresses in his letters to Christopher and Michael: “If only I could do something active!” (*Letters* 55).

Among the hobbits we also have a few glimpses of the relationship between Ham Gamgee and his youngest son Sam. He is a bit puzzled by Sam’s appetite for Bilbo’s tales and interest in the wider world: “Mr. Bilbo has learned him his letters—meaning no harm, mark you, and I hope no harm will come of it” (*FR* 32). In the Eryn Muil, when Sam chastises himself for forgetting the rope in his pack, he recalls his Gaffer calling him “nowt but a ninnyhammer” (*TT* 214). But Sam thinks of his father’s teasing with fondness at the Black Gate: “My word, but the Gaffer would have a thing or two to say, if he saw me now! [. . .] But now I don’t suppose I’ll ever see the old fellow again. He’ll miss his chance of *I told ‘ee so, Sam*: more’s the pity. He could go on telling me as long as he’d got breath, if only I could see his old face again” (*TT* 245). Upon their return to the Shire, the Gaffer asks Frodo if “my Sam’s behaved hisself and given satisfaction,” and though he seems pleased, he still “don’t hold with wearing ironmongery, whether it wears well or no” (*RK* 293-4). Sam is a “representative hobbit” (Tolkien, *Letters* 329), and this seems like a very typical hobbit father-son relationship, given their tendency to use light words and “say less than they mean,” even when “a jest is out of place” (*RK* 146). While Hamfast Gamgee is mystified by his son’s desire to go out into the wider world, he is supportive. And there is a great depth of feeling here; Sam’s vision of his father in Galadriel’s mirror is a powerful temptation to abandon his quest.

Parents in wartime worry about their other children as well as their sons or daughters on the front line. One of the most tragic parent/child pairs in *The Lord of the Rings* is Elrond Half-Elven and his daughter Arwen. As Tolkien said of him in Appendix A, “For Elrond [. . .] all chances of the War of the Ring were fraught with sorrow” (*RK* 315). Even if the war were won and his sons Elladan and Elrohir survived unscathed, victory for the Free Peoples would mean the end of the Third Age and of the power of the three elven rings, and the departure of the Elves from Middle-earth. Worst of all it would mean separation forever from his only daughter Arwen, her fate tied to Aragorn’s by

their marriage: “[b]itter was their parting that should endure beyond the ends of the world” (256).

Little is said about King Théoden’s relationship with his son Théodred, although when Gandalf and his companions come to Edoras five days after Théodred’s death, he is bowed with grief: “The young perish and the old linger, withering” (*TT* 121). He had long before adopted his sister Théodwyn’s children when they were orphaned (*RK* 351), and after Gandalf’s healing transfers his trust to his heir Éomer. He also acts as a father to Merry “for a little while” (51).

While he regards Éomer as equal to his other captains in maturity and courage and never urges him to caution, he tries to prevent both Éowyn and Merry from following him into battle. He does not want his warriors to be burdened by worrying about women and children in combat, although shieldmaidens are not unknown among the Rohirrim, and very young men participated in the defense of Helm’s Deep. Merry of course is not a child and is ashamed to think of staying behind (75), and Éowyn bitterly resents the traditional role in which she is imprisoned. In spite of his age, Théoden tries to shelter his dependents by going into battle himself, but both are inspired by love and loyalty to follow in spite of his orders, and are the last to stand by him when the Nazgûl attacks. This is a father who wants to protect the children he sees as weaker than himself, in spite of their own desires, but who admits the right and duty of his grown sons to risk themselves honorably in battle.

The parent/child relationship most deeply explored and most difficult is that between Denethor and his sons Boromir and Faramir. There are more references to this family in Tolkien’s *Letters*, and especially to Denethor and Faramir, than to any other parent/child pair. Denethor is bitterly jealous of any influence over his sons except his own, wanting to keep control of them. Although he loves both sons, he also has a marked preference for one of them, and it was this preference that sent Boromir on the fatal journey that ended at Parth Galen. Denethor knew of Boromir’s ambitious nature and how he chafed at being heir to a Steward and not a King, but still he “loved him greatly: too much perhaps; and the more so because they were unlike” (25). Gandalf has to warn Denethor to “be not unjust in your grief” when he cries out that Faramir should have gone on the journey instead (27); he has to learn that the responsibility is his and, eventually, understand that he mixed this cup of bitterness himself (*RK* 86).

Denethor exemplifies the frustration of a parent who loses control over his children as they grow up. He accuses Faramir unjustly of disloyalty: “He [Gandalf] has long had your heart in his keeping” (RK 85). Yet he cannot admit that Boromir might have turned from him if he had taken the Ring: Boromir “would not have squandered what fortune gave. He would have brought me a mighty gift [. . .] I who was his father say that he would have brought it to me” (86). Faramir, as Tolkien wrote in a letter, was “daunted” by his father’s personality and rank, and was “accustomed to giving way and not giving his own opinions air” (Tolkien, *Letters* 323).

Survivor guilt drives both Denethor and Faramir; it leads Denethor to expect Faramir to do the work of two, and Faramir to follow his orders in spite of his better judgment. Denethor tries to displace his guilt by blaming Faramir. But when Faramir is wounded and lies near death, Denethor is broken by remorse: “I sent my son forth, unthanked, unblessed, out into needless peril [. . .]” (RK 97). Still his pride keeps him from bending, and he declares that if he cannot have all things as he desires them, with a son who does not listen to wizards to follow him as Steward, then he will have nothing.

Denethor embodies the horrible dilemma of the parent who loses one child to war—how can he face the guilt of having allowed him to go into danger, even if he really had no choice in the matter, and how can he comfort his surviving children, who are also grieving? A basic definition of survivor guilt states that “bereaved parents often withdraw to extremes,” and “survivor guilt may interfere with grieving and is often at the kernel of unresolved grief and depression” (Valent); in Denethor’s case his inability to resolve these problems, coupled with despair over what he sees as Sauron’s inevitable victory, leads to madness and suicide.

There are other examples of parent-child pairs in *The Lord of the Rings*. Bergil, the son of the soldier Beregon, is one of the few children allowed to stay in Minas Tirith after the evacuation of the civilians. Thingol and his daughter Lúthien are mentioned several times, particularly in a song sung by Aragorn. The Ents often seem to stand in a parental relationship to some of the more Ent-like trees, and their destruction of Saruman’s fortifications is a parents’ dream of vengeance. Treebeard in particular treats Merry and Pippin like his own Entings while they are with him. These and other less obvious parent/child bonds are worthy of further investigation.

Conclusion

Tolkien cannot really be considered a typical writer of either post-war period—he lacks the ironic response of the post-World War I writer and the disillusionment and secularity of the post-World War II writer. He moved beyond irony and disillusionment to mythologize his war experiences and create a more universally applicable story.

While the themes with which he is most consistently engaged are those of World War I, he did not ignore the Second World War, and there are a number of World War II events with Middle-earth parallels. The fact that Tolkien was living through the second global war in his lifetime, after the futility of The War to End All Wars, is echoed in the melancholy of the long-lived Elves, who have “through ages of the world [. . .] fought the long defeat” (*FR* 372). One of the most interesting influences of World War II on *The Lord of the Rings*, however, was Tolkien’s newly added perspective on war as the parent of two sons in the armed forces. In keeping with his Northern theory of courage, the sympathetic fathers in *The Lord of the Rings* reject despair, but they still cannot help wishing they could protect their children from the risks of war.

Notes

¹All references to *The Lord of the Rings* are to the 1965 Houghton Mifflin (second) edition. The individual volumes are cited as *FR* (*Fellowship of the Ring*), *TT* (*The Two Towers*), and *RK* (*The Return of the King*).

²See my article in *Mythlore* 23.4, “The Great War and Tolkien’s Memory: World War I Themes in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*.”

³One might add Mervyn Peake to Shippey’s list. Much of the first volume of the *Gormenghast* trilogy was written during Peake’s service in World War II, during his recovery from a nervous breakdown. Steerpike is a chilling portrait of evil, reminiscent of Richard III or Iago. Another candidate is Anthony Burgess, who served in the Royal Army Medical Corps in World War II and wrote *A Clockwork Orange*.

⁴If there is one piece of writing by Tolkien that appears to exhibit a strong World War II influence, it is the short story “Leaf by Niggle.” The work was originally written just before the war began and read aloud to the Inklings in early 1940, and as Sebastian Knowles writes in *A Purgatorial Flame*, it “is thus a product of the pre-war twilight, the purgatorial period after Munich and before the fall of France” (135). Tolkien was stalled in his writing of *The Lord of the Rings*. He had been unwell, and the state of the world was depressing: “the war had arisen to darken all horizons” (qtd. in Knowles 136). As Knowles points out, “That Niggle’s purgatory is a response to war has gone unnoticed in Inklings criticism mainly because critics are looking for the war in the wrong place. The most common snare is to perceive *The Lord of the Rings* as

an allegory of war” (136). In a short stand-alone work unconnected with his Middle-earth subcreation, Tolkien had the freedom to examine some World War II issues more directly; particularly, the implications of socialism and the place of art in a society of scarcity.

Works Cited

- Brooke, Rupert. *The Works of Rupert Brooke: With an Introduction and Bibliography*. Ware: Wordsworth, 1994.
- Carpenter, Humphrey. *Tolkien: A Biography*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977.
- Craig, David M. “Queer Lodgings: Gender and Sexuality in the *Lord of the Rings*.” *Mallorn* 38 (2001): 11-18.
- Ellison, John. “‘The Legendary War and the Real One’: *The Lord of the Rings* and the Climate of Its Times.” *Mallorn* 26 (1989): 17-20.
- Flieger, Verlyn. *A Question of Time*. Kent: Kent State UP, 1997.
- Fussell, Paul. *The Great War and Modern Memory*. 1975. 25th anniversary ed. New York: Oxford UP, 2000.
- . *Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War*. New York: Oxford UP, 1989.
- Knowles, Sebastian D. G. *A Purgatorial Flame: Seven British Writers in the Second World War*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1990.
- Shippey, Thomas A. *J. R. R. Tolkien: Author of the Century*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001.
- . “Tolkien as a Post-War Writer.” *Proceedings of the J. R. R. Tolkien Centenary Conference*. Ed. Patricia Reynolds and Glen H. GoodKnight. Altadena: The Mythopoeic P, 1992. 84-93.
- Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Annotated Hobbit: The Hobbit, or, There and Back Again*. Edited and annotated by Douglas Anderson. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1988.
- . *The Fellowship of the Ring: Being the First Part of the Lord of the Rings*. 2nd ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965.
- . *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*. Ed. Humphrey Carpenter assisted by Christopher Tolkien. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000.
- . *The Return of the King: Being the Third Part of the Lord of the Rings*. 2nd ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965.
- . *The Two Towers; Being the Second Part of the Lord of the Rings*. 2d ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965.
- Tolkien, John, and Priscilla Tolkien. *The Tolkien Family Album*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992.
- Valent, Paul. “Survivor Guilt.” *Encyclopedia of Stress*. Ed. George Fink. Vol. 3. San Diego CA: Academic P, 2000. 555-57.