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Abstract

Examines Tolkien's experiences during World War I and typical WWI themes in his writings: the pastoral moment, ritual and romance, and the sense of national literature. Looks at how Tolkien mythologized his war experiences in his fiction.

Additional Keywords

Pastoral in literature; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Influence of World War I; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Military service—World War I (1914–1918); World War I in J.R.R. Tolkien

The Great War and Tolkien's Memory: An Examination of World War I Themes in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*

Janet Brennan Croft

1. INTRODUCTION

J. R. R. TOLKIEN was one of a generation of Englishmen “caught by youth” during World War I. *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* are by no means allegories of that or any other war, yet the impact of the Great War is evident. Tolkien disliked criticism that focused on details of the author’s life, but he could not entirely deny the influence of his experience on his work; as he points out in the Introduction to the second edition of *The Lord of the Rings*, “the ways in which a story-germ uses the soil of experience are extremely complex” (1.7). What Tolkien forged from his experiences differs greatly from the writing of “canonical” World War I authors like Robert Graves and Siegfried Sassoon in both subject matter and tone, but he explores many of the same themes they do.

Paul Fussell brilliantly analyzes the major themes of British post-World War I writing in *The Great War and Modern Memory*. He concentrates mainly on the poets, memoirists, and novelists who wrote during and just after the war, and how their writing exhibited the new emphasis on irony that he feels is the typical literary mode of reaction to the war. Fussell traces the literary roots of this type of irony to Thomas Hardy’s 1914 collection of poems, *Satires of Circumstance*. Many of these poems explore an “irony of situation” arising from “a collision between innocence and awareness” (*Great* 5). War is always ironic because “its means are so melodramatically disproportionate to its presumed ends” (7), and the Great War seemed particularly ironic because it contrasted so sharply with the pre-war peace and innocence of early twentieth-century England, which had not fought a major war for a century. As the poet Philip Larkin put it, “never such innocence again” (128); the war was a “hideous embarrassment” (Fussell, *Great* 8) to the certainties and decencies of society.

For someone familiar with Tolkien, reading *The Great War and Modern Memory* is a disconcerting experience. As Hugh Brogan observed, “the 1914 war as Fussell

describes it is unmistakably the War of the Ring" (361). *The Lord of the Rings* is clearly outside the scope of Fussell's argument; nevertheless, it feels like there is a Tolkien-sized hole running through the whole book. The "bizarre inverse quest" (Fussell, *Great* 41) of the soldiers on their way to the front resonates throughout Frodo's quest to destroy the Ring, and almost every theme in Fussell's critique appears somewhere in Tolkien's work. The inevitable question arises: why, when so many of his contemporaries found the ironic mode the only appropriate mode for remembering and communicating their war experiences and exploring these themes, did Tolkien choose the heroic? This essay examines how several of the themes Fussell identifies appear in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* and how Tolkien's treatment of them sets him apart from his fellow post-World War I writers.

2. TOLKIEN'S WAR EXPERIENCES

Several months after England declared war on Germany in 1914, Tolkien signed up for a program that allowed him to finish his BA while taking officers' training, and when he completed his degree in 1915 he was assigned to the Lancashire Fusiliers as a second lieutenant. He was trained in signalling and appointed battalion signalling officer, and was posted to France in June 1916. After three weeks at Étapes his battalion was sent to the front, arriving at the Somme in the pouring rain at the end of June.

As Tolkien admitted in a 1944 letter to his son Christopher, "I was not a good officer." He spent a good deal of time working on his Elvish languages and histories at meals, during lectures, and even in dugouts while under fire (*Letters* 78).

On July 14th, two weeks after the commencement of the Battle of the Somme, Tolkien's battalion went into action. He survived a number of engagements; but while as a signalling officer it is unclear how much hand-to-hand combat he might have seen up close, there was no avoiding what Tolkien called the "animal horror" of the trenches (*Letters* 72). On October 27th he came down with trench fever, and was shipped back to England on November 8th. As Tolkien said in the Introduction to the second edition of *The Lord of the Rings*, "it seems now often forgotten that to be caught by youth in 1914 was no less hideous an experience than to be involved in 1939 and the following years. By 1918 all but one of my close friends were dead" (1.7). Tolkien spent the rest of the war convalescing in various infirmaries in England, becoming almost well and then succumbing to fever again, before finally being declared fit for duty just before the war ended in November 1918.

During his convalescence he wrote his first draft of "The Fall of Gondolin," and he worked on other tales during his recovery as well (Carpenter 72-99).

C. S. Lewis wrote:

[Tolkien's] war has the very quality of the war my generation knew. It is all here: the endless, unintelligible movement, the sinister quiet of the front when 'everything is now ready,' the flying civilians, the lively, vivid friendships, the background of something like despair and the merry foreground, and such heaven-sent windfalls as a cache of tobacco 'salvaged' from a ruin. (39-40)

Tolkien did explicitly acknowledge his debt to his war experiences in several places. He once commented: "My 'Sam Gamgee' is indeed a reflexion of the English soldier, of the privates and batmen I knew in the 1914 war, and recognized as so far superior to myself" (Carpenter 81). And in a 1960 letter he wrote, "[t]he Dead Marshes and the Morannon owe something to Northern France after the Battle of the Somme" (*Letters* 303). (Of course, he does go on to say that they owe more to the stories of William Morris.) One of the most telling quotes is from "On Fairy-stories," where Tolkien says "[a] taste for fairy-stories was awakened by philology on the threshold of manhood, and quickened to full life by war" (*Reader* 42). It shows he was already thinking in terms of expressing himself through the means of the fairy-tale; as I will argue later, this predisposed Tolkien to fit his war experiences into this framework from the start, rather than into the realistic and ironic form many other writers used.

3. OTHER CRITICS ON TOLKIEN AND WORLD WAR I

Hugh Brogan is one of several critics who have noticed the applicability of Fussell's critique to Tolkien's writing. In "Tolkien's Great War," he says the war "lay like a cloud on the consciousness of the English [. . .] heaviest on the souls of those who had been combatants" (352). As he points out, Tolkien makes very few references to World War I in any of his published writings. But he compares the passage where Tolkien describes the downfall of Sauron as a wind-blown cloud to a remarkably similar paragraph from Siegfried Sassoon's *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man*; both were clearly influenced by memories of shells bursting and smoke floating away. As Brogan asks, "if the Great War could break through so vividly at such an important moment of *The Lord of the Rings*, may it not have manifested itself elsewhere?" (354). Brogan's conclusion is that the quest-form allowed Tolkien

to express what the Great War meant to him and to write as meaningful a commentary on the war as Graves or Sassoon did.

Brogan discusses Fussell's list of pre- and post-war vocabulary, in which flamboyant words common in pre-war romances and adventure stories, like *comrade*, *strife*, *summons*, and *foe*, are contrasted with direct and unromantic post-war usages like *friend*, *war*, *draft-notice*, and *enemy* (Fussell, *Great* 21-2). Tolkien, the "passionate philologist" (Brogan 355), was highly sensitive to the nuances of language and was capable of varying his tone with great skill. In many places he used the solemn, alliterative vocabulary and inverted sentence structure of *Beowulf* to great effect, but other writers found this style embarrassing after the war and its excesses of propaganda. Hemingway notably said, "[a]bstract words such as glory, honor, courage, or hallow were obscene beside the concrete names of villages, the numbers of roads, the names of rivers, the numbers of regiments and the dates" (191). Brogan asks how Tolkien, sensitive as he was, "could have gone through the Great War, with all its rants and lies, and still come out committed to a 'feudal' literary style. His tenacity on this point looks like an act of deliberate defiance of modern history" (356).

I would suggest that this "deliberate defiance" was an integral part of the task of sub-creation, supporting Tolkien's theory that of one of the functions of Fantasy is Escape—the escape of a prisoner, not the escape from reality, but still a distancing from the everyday and mundane. The vocabulary rejected by the ironists is natural to Middle-earth, and Middle-earth could not exist without it.

Barton Friedman also examines Tolkien's World War I experiences through Fussell's critique. In "Tolkien and David Jones," Friedman compares the scene where Sam falls in the Dead Marshes and sees dead faces in the water to passages from Sassoon's *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, Plowman's *A Subaltern on the Somme*, and Masfield's *The Old Front Line*, all describing corpses in the mud of No-Man's Land. Still, Tolkien's descriptions of the horrors of war lack the graphic detail seen in other writers and seem to Friedman almost "antiseptic" (118). He compares the way Tolkien and Jones idealized and romanticized war, and rejected "technology unchecked by spiritual values" (120)—practically the definition of the hellish novelty of World War I in the eyes of an anti-modernist like Tolkien. Friedman concludes that Tolkien and Jones both strove to apply fundamental spiritual truths to the Great War.

Several other critics also speak to Tolkien's wartime experiences, though without reference to Fussell's theories. Verlyn Flieger in *A Question of Time* examines Tolkien's

dislocation from his own time. She sees much of the tension and melancholy of Middle-earth resting in Tolkien's "nostalgic longing for a return to a lost past coupled with the knowledge that this was impossible save in the realm of the imagination" (3), and observes, "he put his Hobbits in a world that moved too fast for them, and then forced them to keep up with it" (7). She calls Tolkien "at once reactionary and avant-garde, turning [his back] on the modernism that had turned its back on the past" (17), and considers the writing of authors like Graves part of "an antiromantic reaction, a militant and narrowly defined modernity that arose after World War I" (234). For Tolkien, writing was at once an escape, an attempt to communicate the experience of the Great War, and a way of working out his vision of the interdependence of the real world and Faërie.

Tom Shippey addresses some aspects of Tolkien's war experiences in *The Road to Middle-earth*. He discusses the concept of defeatism, a word that did not enter the English language until 1918, and how any hint of a willingness to give up and negotiate terms with the enemy is roundly rejected by the Free Peoples of Middle-earth. As Shippey puts it, "[w]ith his best friends dead in Flanders Tolkien had cause to hate that idea like poison" (*Road* 116). Even Denethor, convinced of the inevitable failure of Gondor and her allies, commits suicide and advises everyone else to do the same, rather than be a slave under a puppet government.

One of Shippey's main aims in this book was to examine Tolkien's theory of courage, a theory based on the northern heroic spirit and described in "The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son":

Heart shall be bolder, harder be purpose,
more proud the spirit as our power lessens!
Mind shall not falter nor mood waver,
though doom shall come and dark conquer. (*Reader* 17)

Tolkien's characters at their best exhibit a "courage undiluted by confidence—but at the same time untainted by rage and despair" (Shippey, *Road* 119). They can be cheerful without hope, sad but not unhappy, and above all determined to "see it through"—an attitude common enough among first-hand accounts of soldiers in the trenches. Shippey concludes that, unlike many writers of his generation, Tolkien "had not been alienated even by the Great War from the traditions in which he had been brought up," and retained certain "fundamental decencies" that provoked "automatic derision from much of the literary world" (217).

4. THEMES

Now I will examine three themes that Fussell discusses in great detail in *The Great War and Modern Memory*, and describe where and how they are played out in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. I will conclude by showing how Tolkien moved past irony as the only proper response to the war, the response chosen by writers like Sassoon and Graves, and chose instead to mythologize his experiences.

4A. THE PASTORAL MOMENT

For Fussell, war is the “ultimate anti-pastoral,” destroying nature while taking place within it. He sees the English pastoral tradition as unique in several ways. One is its mixture of “highly sophisticated literary pastoralism” combined with “a unique actual ruralism” (*Great* 231). It has its roots both in British imperialism, which encouraged in its exiles an idealized mental image of “home,” and the Industrial Revolution, which transformed the rural countryside within a generation. Both of these may have been influences on Tolkien, given his birth in South Africa and the industrialization of the English countryside where he grew up. Fussell further refines on this theme:

Recourse to the pastoral is an English mode of both fully gauging the calamities of the Great War and imaginatively protecting oneself against them. Pastoral reference, whether to literature or to actual rural localities and objects, is a way of invoking a code to hint by antithesis at the indescribable; at the same time, it is a comfort in itself, like rum, a deep dugout, or a wooly vest. (*Great* 235)

The pastoral landscape in Tolkien can include the works of men, elves, and hobbits, if they are in harmony with nature. A well-tended farm is pastoral; a city like Minas Tirith can be pastoral if it has gardens and families in it. After the King is restored, “[t]he evil things will be driven out of the waste-lands. Indeed the waste in time will be waste no longer, and there will be people and fields where once there was wilderness” (*LotR* 3.272). Even a dwarf-cave can be in harmony with nature; Gimli’s rhapsody on the Glittering Caves of Aglarond (2.152-53) stands in stark contrast to descriptions of Moria, where the dwarves delved too deep.

The enemy forces in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* are deeply antipastoral. The Desolation of Smaug, once “green and fair” (*Hobbit* 216), is now bleak and barren. The orcs were bred to be the opposite of the elves, and “[I]t

seems their delight to slash and beat down growing things that are not even in their way" (*LotR* 2.22). Saruman "has a mind of metal and wheels" and a special enmity for trees—"there are wastes of stump and bramble where once there were singing groves" (2.76-77). Sauron does not just destroy nature but uses and perverts it. When he dwelt in Mirkwood, the forest was an unwholesome place inhabited by spiders. Morgul Vale is a parody of the pastoral: "Wide flats lay on either bank, shadowy meads filled with pale white flowers. Luminous these were too, beautiful and yet horrible of shape, like the demented forms in an uneasy dream; and they gave forth a faint sickening charnel-smell; an odour of rottenness filled the air" (2.313). Mount Doom, under his dominion, makes a noise like "a rumour and a trouble as of great engines throbbing and labouring" (3.222).

Tolkien uses a comparison to the pastoral ideal to show the depth of Frodo's torment and what he has lost by carrying the Ring. When he first begins to understand about his quest, he says, "I feel that as long as the Shire lies behind, safe and comfortable, I shall find wandering more bearable; I shall know that somewhere there is a firm foothold, even if my feet cannot stand there again" (1.71). His last summer in the Shire is reminiscent of the glorious Summer of 1914 in England, the calm before the storm. But by the end, Frodo says, "I tried to remember the Brandywine, and Woody End, and The Water running through the mill at Hobbiton. But I can't see them now" (3.195); "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" (3.215).

Fussell also feels that the English pastoral is distinguished by the "special kind of sense [the English make] out of the classical tag *Et in arcadia ego* [. . .] they take it to mean (correctly) 'Even in Arcadia I, Death, hold sway'" (*Great* 245-46). The Old Forest is a prime example of this. The Withywindle valley is "the center from which all the queerness comes" (*LotR* 1.124), where Old Man Willow is filled with "pride and rooted wisdom, and with malice" (1.141). Lórien is a nearly perfect Arcadia, but "those who bring some evil with them" (1.353) find their doom there.

Yet balancing this theme is its opposite: finding a pastoral oasis in the midst of destruction. Like many Great War memoirs, the action of much of *The Lord of the Rings*, particularly *The Fellowship of the Ring*, consists of "bucolic interludes [. . .] sandwiched between bouts of violence and terror" (Fussell, *Great* 236). These moments of pastoral peace indicate the norm by which the surrounding horrors should be judged. Rivendell and Lórien are obvious pastoral oases, but it is the

smaller moments—as C. S. Lewis called them, “heaven-sent windfalls” (40)—that are more reminiscent of life in the trenches. For example, Merry and Pippin create a minor pastoral oasis after escaping from the orcs, by pausing for a bite of lembas: “The taste brought back to them the memory of fair faces, and laughter, and wholesome food in quiet days now far away. For a while they ate thoughtfully, sitting in the dark, heedless of the cries and sounds of battle nearby” (*LotR* 2.61).

The pastoral oasis in *The Hobbit* is less clearly defined by contrast with its surroundings, because except for the final battle the action of the book does not take place in a landscape dominated by war. And the “pastoral moment” usually does not occur immediately after a moment of great stress; after the party escapes the Trolls, there is still a long march before they reach Rivendell, and between the battle with the wargs and goblins and the stay in Beorn’s house, the party spends the night with the Eagles, which Bilbo at least does not find entirely restful. The transition from danger to a place of refuge is more gradual.

The pastoral refuge contains in it a “clarifying or restorative force” (Fussell, *Great* 239). Rivendell restores and heals the hobbits and Strider after their flight from Weathertop, and the Council of Elrond clarifies their mission; as Tolkien comments in a 1951 letter, Rivendell is “not a scene of *action* but of *reflection*” (*Letters* 153). Their stay in Lórien helps the Company recover from the death of Gandalf in a place “where the days bring healing not decay” (*LotR* 2.106), but is clarifying in a more dangerous way when Galadriel tests the survivors and reveals confusing visions to Frodo and Sam. Ithilien, on the edge of war, restores the spirits of Sam and Frodo: “the hobbits breathed deep, and suddenly Sam laughed, for heart’s ease not for jest” (2.259). And here again they have their mission clarified by advice from Faramir. Later, as they rest in the mountains of Mordor, Sam sees a star through the clouds: “The beauty of it smote his heart, as he looked up out of the forsaken land, and hope returned to him. For like a shaft, clear and cold, the thought pierced him that in the end the Shadow was only a small and passing thing; there was light and high beauty for ever beyond its reach” (3.199).

Leaving or losing the pastoral oasis creates a sense of melancholy. As the Company departed from Lórien, it seemed as if the land was “slipping backward, like a bright ship masted with enchanted trees, sailing on to forgotten shores, while they sat helpless upon the margin of the grey and leafless world” (1.393). The Elves sing melancholy songs anticipating the day when they shall have to leave Middle-earth. Fussell quotes a review of Edmund Blunden’s *Undertones of War*, which says of the author that “the sight of a rich and fruitful land, much like

his own, laid waste was an additional torment” (*Great* 259); Tolkien describes many places blighted by the Enemy as once having been fair and green (the Wizard’s Vale comes to mind), making his crimes against nature all the darker.

The pastoral is also a reminder that “ecstasy [is] still an active motif in the universe” (Fussell, *Great* 242), that the Shadow really is small and passing in Nature’s scheme of things. When Sam, Frodo, and Gollum come to the crossroads at sunset, they see that the orcs have defaced the statue of the king, setting a rock in place of the king’s head:

[. . .] Frodo saw the old king’s head: it was lying rolled away by the roadside. “Look, Sam!” he cried [. . .] “The king has got a crown again!” [. . .]

[. . . .] A trailing plant with flowers like small white stars had bound itself across the brows as if in reverence for the fallen king, and in the crevices of his stony hair yellow stonecrop gleamed.

“They cannot conquer forever!” (*LotR* 2.311)¹

Pastoral ecstasy segues into the ecstatic relief of the arrival of Rohan at the Battle of the Pelennor Fields. The Lord of the Nazgûl confronts Gandalf at the gates of Minas Tirith, and a pastoral image breaks his spell:

And in that very moment, away behind in some courtyard of the City, a cock crowed. ShriII and clear he crowed, recking nothing of wizardry or war, welcoming only the morning that in the sky far above the shadows of death was coming with the dawn.

And as if in answer there came from far away another note. Horns, horns, horns. [. . .] Great horns of the North wildly blowing. (3.103)

And yet the final pastoral oasis, the most important one of which the rest are but dim reflections, is home: “[. . .] 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” (3.311).

4B. RITUAL AND ROMANCE

The intensity of war reduces life to its essentials and creates a desire to understand and control experiences by fitting them into a structure that gives meaning to chaos. For the soldier in the field, ritual is a charm for maintaining an aura of normalcy amid surrounding chaos. Frodo’s ritual of continuing to celebrate Bilbo’s birthday (1.51) provides a sense of continuity and connection. The rituals of courtly love offer Gimli a behavior pattern into which he can properly channel and enact

his feelings for Galadriel. These rituals give him a legitimate way to respond to the "love and understanding" he sees "in the heart of an enemy" (1.137).

Ritual helps define mutual roles, as when Frodo ritually takes responsibility for Gollum: "Sam sighed audibly; and not at the courtesies, of which, as any hobbit would, he thoroughly approved. Indeed in the Shire such a matter would have required a great many more words and bows" (2.300). Ritual is a way to center and channel healing powers, as Aragorn does when he sings over the blade that wounded Frodo (1.210). And ritual provides a template for responding to overwhelming events, as when Sam ritually passes through the stages of mourning and composes Frodo's body after the attack by Shelob (2.340).

The way the hobbits joke about serious emotions has elements of ritual, as they do it to protect themselves from despair and to show "a decent solicitude for the feelings" of the person with whom they are speaking (Fussell, *Great* 182). After their capture by the Orcs, Merry greets Pippin with "So you've come on this little expedition, too? Where do we get bed and breakfast?" (*LotR* 2.52). Aragorn teases Merry about his tobacco after healing him from the Black Breath (3.146). These comic exchanges are reminders of the celebrated British phlegm in the trenches, the "stoical reticence" and "formulaic understatement" that could lead a young officer to describe life in the trenches as "darned unpleasant," or the unrelenting rain as "a certain dampness" (Fussell, *Great* 181). Legolas and Gimli demonstrate this trick of being "entirely unflappable" in their slightly macabre competition at the Battle of Helm's Deep. Bilbo sets the tone in *The Hobbit* when he describes the Battle of Five Armies as "very uncomfortable, not to say distressing" (297).

"Romance" can be considered as a sort of meta-ritual, blending individual rituals into the pattern of the Quest. Soldiers of a literary bent saw their lives taking on the quest-pattern; as Fussell points out, "The experiences of a man going up the line to his destiny cannot help seeming to him like those of a hero of medieval romance if his imagination has been steeped in actual literary romances or their equivalent" (*Great* 135). Fussell lists the three stages of the quest as described by Northrop Frye (the journey, the struggle, and the exaltation of the hero) and comments that "it is impossible not to be struck by the similarity between this conventional 'romance' pattern and the standard experience re-enacted and formalized in memoirs of the war" (130). The writers who came closest to mythologizing their experiences, like David Jones in *In Parenthesis*, used the quest-romance to structure their stories, as Tolkien did in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the*

Rings. The quest-structure and the hero's journeys of Bilbo and Frodo have been thoroughly examined elsewhere and clearly follow the pattern of separation, initiation, and return as defined by Joseph Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (30).²

The journey, or separation, stage of the quest is often characterized by rituals of meeting and parting, and by ritual interactions with strangers. When the Companions prepare to leave Rivendell, the charge laid on Frodo, the parting gifts and advice, and the sounding of Boromir's horn are traditional signs of the beginning of a formal quest (*LotR* 1.288-94). Similar rituals take place in Lórien. *The Two Towers* is particularly rich in such interactions, as the broken Company pursues its several paths, beginning with the farewell to Boromir (2.19), and continuing with interactions with the Rohirrim, the Ents, and Faramir's company.

A failure to follow the script in these interactions, as when Gollum turns his back on the farewells between Faramir and Frodo (2.304), is a "refusal of the call" (Campbell 59); the character refuses the opportunity to take the hero's journey and cuts himself off from his community. The preliminaries to the Battle of the Five Armies in *The Hobbit* are conducted in a series of ritual exchanges that define each side's position, and it is when Thorin breaks the ritual sequence by shooting at the herald that battle becomes inevitable (277). Although Elrond laid no oath on the Ring-bearer's companions, it is understood that they are to protect Frodo, and when Boromir breaks this unspoken promise and tries to take the Ring, he turns fatally aside from his hero-journey (*LotR* 1.414-16, 2.16).

A hero who accomplishes the journey and the struggle is marked by a change that sets him apart from the community to which he returns. Those who have been through an experience like the Great War, through such "inexpressible terror long and inexplicably endured" (Fussell, *Great* 115), are like initiates in a mystery religion; they cannot make their experiences comprehensible to those who have not shared them, whether it is taboo to discuss them or not. As Aragorn says in refusing to discuss his experiences in Moria, "the memory is very evil" (*LotR* 1.310). Sam, Merry, and Pippin settle back into the Shire seeming little changed, although Sam initially does not know how to explain his experiences to Rose in less than "a week's answer" (3.288); however, Frodo, "wounded with knife, and sting, and tooth, and a long burden" (3.268), can never be healed in Middle-earth.

Interestingly, Verlyn Flieger compares this inability to communicate on the part of Great War veterans to that of travelers returning from Faërie, although for them that which cannot be described is beautiful, not horrible (219). In his essay

"On Fairy-Stories," Tolkien says one of the qualities of Faërie is that it is indescribable; Fussell comments on the "inadequacy of language itself to convey the facts about trench warfare" (*Great* 170). Fliieger goes on to say:

In the way that extremes can sometimes meet, War and Faërie have a certain resemblance to one another. Both are set beyond the reach of ordinary human experience. Both are equally indifferent to the needs of ordinary humanity. Both can change those who return [. . .] Perhaps worst of all, both war and Faërie can change out of all recognition the wanderer's perception of the world to which he returns, so that never again can it be what it once was. (224)

4C. THE SENSE OF NATIONAL LITERATURE

Fussell points out that the typical British soldier of World War I was surprisingly well versed in his literary heritage. Popular education and self-improvement had wide appeal at this time, and led to a feeling that literature was "near the center of normal experience" and accessible to all, not just to intellectuals (Fussell, *Great* 157-8). Letters written by Other Ranks show a surprisingly broad range of literary allusion, not only demonstrating their familiarity with literature but also presupposing the same familiarity on the part of their correspondents at home. The efficiency of the postal service to the Front meant that a steady supply of books was available to the troops; *The Oxford Book of English Verse* was especially popular.

At its simplest level, literature was a consolation and a reassurance. Many soldiers drew great comfort from comparing themselves to Christian in *The Pilgrim's Progress*. In the same way, many characters in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* have a thorough grounding in the songs and legends of Middle-earth, and can draw consolation from past events with which they feel connected. Bilbo feels comforted when he discovers his sword was forged in Gondolin "for the goblin-wars of which so many songs had been sung" (*Hobbit* 80). The dwarves use their songs to stiffen their resolve under siege. When Gandalf tells Frodo the history of the Ring, he speaks of the alliance of men and elves at the end of the Second Age, and says, "This is a chapter of history which it might be good to recall; for there was sorrow then too, and gathering dark, but great valour, and great deeds that were not wholly vain" (*LotR* 1.61). Frodo's laughter at Sam's performance of *The Oliphaunt* "released him from hesitation" (*LotR* 2.255), and the besieged inhabitants of Minas Tirith took comfort in singing "amid the gloom some staves of the Lay of Nimrodel, or other songs of the Vale on Anduin out of vanished years" (3.98).

Sam in particular is sensitive to the consolations of literature, cheering Frodo with his imaginings of how their tale might sound when their adventure is over (2.322), and in the Tower of Cirith Ungol, when things seem darkest, “moved by what thought in his heart he could not tell, Sam began to sing. [. . .] snatches of Mr. Bilbo’s rhymes that came into his mind like fleeting glimpses of the country of his home. And then suddenly new strength rose in him” (3.184-85).

Familiarity with literature also helped the soldiers interpret their experiences, by finding “an analog in a well-known literary text” (Fussell, *Great* 137), or by placing their experiences “in the tradition” so they can be understood (146). Again it is Sam, “crazy about stories of the old days” (*LotR* 1.32), and Tolkien’s closest representation of the common but well-read soldier, who expresses this best (in a passage that is also an excellent meditation on Tolkien’s theory of courage):

“The brave things in the old tales and songs, Mr. Frodo: adventures, as I used to call them. I used to think that they were things the wonderful folk of the stories went out and looked for [. . .] because they were exciting and life was a bit dull [. . .] But that’s not the way of it with the tales that really mattered, or the ones that stay in the mind. Folk seem to have been just landed in them, usually [. . .] But I expect they had lots of chances, like us, of turning back, only they didn’t. And if they had, we shouldn’t know, because they’d have been forgotten. We hear about those as just went on [. . .] I wonder what sort of a tale we’ve fallen into?” (2.320-21)

Throughout *The Lord of the Rings*, characters comment that they feel like they are “inside a song” (1.365), or that they are taking part in an adventure with roots deep in the past. This feeling is underscored by the immense age of races like the Elves and the Ents, who actually lived through the old stories and to whom Men are but “a passing tale” (2.155). The imagery of “being in a song” is a logical development from Tolkien’s underlying mythology, where originally the Valar sang the world into being. Participants in the Great War often had a sense that they were acting in a play; wearing costumes, delivering their lines, making grand entrances and final exits; while this is not a metaphor Tolkien used very often, it has its parallels to the feeling of being in a song or tale. Fussell comments that, in retrospect, because of the odd ironies and overall theatricality of the war, “sometimes it is really hard to shake off the conviction that this war has been written by someone” (*Great* 241).

Aragorn, Sam, and the older Bilbo are all unusually conscious of their place in history and connections to the past and future through story. As Bilbo asks in

Rivendell, "Don't adventures ever have an end? I suppose not. Someone else always has to carry on the story" (*LotR* 1.244). He wonders if he will live long enough to hear about Frodo's part in the story, and Gandalf reminds him, "If you had really started this affair, you might be expected to finish it. But you know well enough now that *starting* is too great a claim for any, and that only a small part is played in great deeds by any hero" (1.283).

Aragorn is always mindful of the weight of history behind him and the hopes riding on his success. Even Sam, who has little pretence about the importance of his part in history, knows that he is involved in a never-ending story. When Sam talks about the tale of Beren and Lúthien and realizes that the light in Galadriel's phial can be traced back to the Silmaril, he says, "'Why, to think of it, we're in the same tale still! It's going on. Don't the great tales never end?' 'No, they never end as tales,' said Frodo. 'But the people in them come, and go when their part's ended'" (2.321). And the last thing Sam says to Frodo on the slopes of Mount Doom before the Eagles come is: "'What a tale we have been in, Mr. Frodo, haven't we? [. . .] I wish I could hear it told! Do you think they'll say: *Now comes the story of Nine-fingered Frodo and the Ring of Doom?* [. . .] I wish I could hear it! And I wonder how it will go on after our part'" (3.228-29).

The chapter "The Field of Cormallen" (3.226-35) ties together all three of these themes. The history of the Ring-bearer's mission is placed in the national literature and turned into myth; the heroes are honored with great ritual which becomes part of an annual, "national" ritual through the changed date of the New Year; and the whole is placed in an idealized pastoral setting emphasizing healing, rebirth, and contrast to war. This is the idyllic celebration of the returning warrior. In contrast, the Scouring of the Shire and the lack of respect for Frodo that so troubles Sam is reality seen through the "disillusionment of the returned veteran" (Shippey, *Author* 156). But as Frodo knows so well, it is the part of some heroes to give things up "so that others may keep them" (*LotR* 3.309).

5. MYTHOLOGIZING THE WAR

The important question remains: Why, in the light of his war experiences, did Tolkien choose the literary mode he did, when so many of his fellow veteran-writers used the ironic style in their poetry and memoirs—in fact, felt with Hemingway that the heroic style was rendered almost obscene by the unprecedented slaughter, stupidity, and waste of the war?

It may have been because major parts of Middle-earth's mythology and history were already forming in his mind before the war began, as background to his Elvish languages, and his experiences naturally fit themselves into this waiting framework. Brogan states that while Tolkien's project of a mythology for England "did not survive the Somme unaltered," it might not have survived at all "but for the advanced stage of the linguistic inventions with which it was bound up" (357).

While Fussell is most concerned with irony, he does examine some works that incorporate mythological material, like David Jones's epic poem *In Parenthesis*, and notes Northrop Frye's conclusion that in the cycle of literary styles, the ironic mode "moves steadily towards myth, and the dim outlines of sacrificial rituals and dying gods begin to reappear in it" (Frye 42). He firmly refutes Bernard Bergonzi's conclusion that "[t]he dominant movement in the literature of the Great War was [. . .] from a myth-dominated to a demythologized world" (Bergonzi 198). Fussell says, "No; almost the opposite. In one sense the movement was towards myth, towards a revival of the cultic, the mystical, the sacrificial, the prophetic, the sacramental, and the universally significant" (*Great* 131).

Fussell says of Jones's work that he showed a "desire to rescue and reinvigorate traditional pre-industrial religious and ethical connotations" (*Great* 145) and to "[re-attach] traditional meaning to the unprecedented actualities of war" (146). The first goal is very like Tolkien's hope of reviving his ideal of a Northern mythology and morality; intentionally or not, Tolkien achieved the second goal as well. His chosen subject matter and use of the quest-pattern led logically to a high-romance mode and vocabulary, and therefore to a more heroic interpretation of war.

But while the Battle of Pelennor Fields is one of the most stirring events in the tale, with the Rohirrim singing "for the joy of battle was on them" (*LotR* 3.113), and great deeds performed by the Men of Gondor, we also see the battle from the point of view of Pippin in Minas Tirith and Merry with the Riders of Rohan. Like the experience of the common soldier in the trenches of World War I, their part is far from glorious; there is tedious waiting, a sense of uselessness and futility, terror and pain and ugliness. But instead of falling back on irony as the proper response, the hobbits illustrate Tolkien's ideal of courage, going on in spite of being without hope. Their determination "master[s] all the grief and horror [. . .] giving it dignity and significance" (Brogan 358).

The creation of a world in which heroic deeds could still be done might also be, as Brogan put it, "therapy for a mind wounded in war" (358). It was a place to retreat to, but not an escape, unless in the sense that Tolkien used the word "Escape"

in "On Fairy-stories." W. H. R. Rivers, the psychiatrist who treated Graves, Owen, and Sassoon at the Craiglockhart officers' hospital, commented on how his patients processed the war through the dreams he recorded, "transform[ing] reality into a more bearable nightmare" (Friedman 122). Friedman notes how these dreams and nightmares repeat the romance-pattern, drawing on fairy-tale images and the hero-journey sequence. As Campbell puts it, "[d]ream is the personalized myth, myth the depersonalized dream" (19), but while their dreams might be moving toward myth, their writing on the war was consciously realistic and ironic. Their closeness to the war in time and their direct use of it as subject matter may have prevented these writers from mythologizing their war experiences in writing.

In contrast, Tolkien did not write *The Lord of the Rings* until many years after the war, and perhaps his experiences had more time to become part of his "personalized myth." Writing to his son Christopher, stationed in South Africa during World War II and thinking about writing himself, Tolkien describes his attempts to write during the Great War and how he settled on fairy story:

So I took to 'escapism': or really transforming experience into another form and symbol with Morgoth and Orcs and the Eldalie (representing beauty and grace of life and artefact) and so on; and it has stood me in good stead in many hard years since and I still draw on the conceptions then hammered out. (*Letters* 85)

Tolkien's rejection of the ironic mode shows that he did not allow himself to be utterly alienated by his war experiences. Irony in *The Lord of the Rings* is used as a plot device or to show character—not as an underlying literary mode or philosophy. Shippey, using references from World War II, points to ironic reflections of the uselessness of the Maginot line in the outwall around Minas Tirith, the Rammas Echor, and speaks of hints of "Vichyism and quislings, of puppet governments and demilitarized zones" (*Road* 128). In his most recent book, he also discusses the ironic gaps between what the characters know and what the reader knows—a sort of meta-irony (*Century* 110). Tolkien's failed men of power, Saruman and Denethor, sometimes speak in ironic tones, using their knowledge (which may be false, as in the case of Denethor's vision of the Corsairs of Umbar) to mock the ignorance of other characters. However, these are examples of irony in service to the plot, not irony as an attitude.

Tolkien must have recognized that sustained irony is a sterile mode; there is no consolation in it. A proper fairy tale offers "Fantasy, Recovery, Escape, and Consolation" (*Reader* 46). If "courage without hope" is what Tolkien witnessed

among the common soldiers and what he wanted to save out of the wreck of war, irony was not the way to express it—only fairy tale would do.

6. CONCLUSION

World War I was without precedent, and one of the major turning points in world history, not just because of its geopolitical consequences but also because of its status as the first “global, total, modern war” (Strachan 1). Fussell describes two ways in which the writers who served in the Great War tried to sort out and communicate their memories. He gives precedence to the ironic method, concentrating on “satires of circumstance” and official stupidity, exemplified by Robert Graves. But he also discusses attempts to mythologize the war and relate it to heroic romance, as David Jones did.

Since Tolkien was a student of myths and heroic literature, it is possible that his choice of mode was based in part on the staying-power of the fairy-story. Besides offering the artist a vast scope for sub-creation and a way to integrate the soul-satisfying four functions of fairy-stories, the mythical mode has a certain permanence about it not found in realistic depictions of contemporary events. As Shippey puts it in *Author of the Century*, “myth and applicability are timeless, allegory and legend time-constrained” (188).

In the end Tolkien’s works may well outlast those of the canonical war poets and memoirists, no matter how meaningful their work. Fussell pointed out in an essay that “those who wonder where the war poets are may not have found them because they have not lowered their gaze sufficiently to take in the popular tradition” (*Boy* 220). Tolkien’s stories will always be able to speak directly to a wide audience unfamiliar with his life and times, yet will have greater significance for the reader who understands the influence of the Great War on his writing and our world. Perhaps one reason Tolkien is so frequently voted “Author of the Century” is because he took what was a pivotal event in world history and transformed it into a comprehensible myth, to help us understand how our world has changed and learn how we can still live in it with courage.

Notes

1. There is a very strange echo of this scene in a line from David Jones’s *In Parenthesis*, where The Queen of the Wood decorates the dead with wild-flowers: “Emil has a curious crown, it’s made of golden saxifrage” (185).

2. For example, Anne Petty's *One Ring to Bind Them All: Tolkien's Mythology* (U of Alabama P, 1979) uses Joseph Campbell, Vladimir Propp, and Claude Lévi-Strauss to analyze the plot of *The Lord of the Rings*.

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