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"Gandalf, Please, Should Not 'Sputter''

Paul Nolan Hyde
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Abstract
Asks “to what degree does Tolkien consistently use introductory verbs and modifiers to develop his characters?” Discovered Tolkien was quite consistent in use of both semantically significant (“marked”) and “unmarked” verbs and modifiers to delineate character.

Additional Keywords
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Early in the spring of 1958, J.R.R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings was being adapted for an animated film to be produced by an American film company. The producers submitted for Tolkien's commentary a film "story-line" written by Morton Grady Zimmerman. On the 8th of April, Tolkien wrote his publisher, Rayner Unwin:

I am entirely ignorant of the process of producing an 'animated picture' from a book and of the jargon connected with it. Could you let me know exactly what is a 'story-line', and its function in the process?

It is not necessary (or advisable) for me to waste time on mere expressions if these are simply directions to picture producers. But this document as it stands, is sufficient to give me grave anxiety about the actual dialog that (I suppose) will be used. I should say Zimmerman, the constructor of this s-l, is quite incapable of excerpting or adapting the 'spoken words' of the book. He is hasty, insensitive, and impertinent. [Letters, p. 266]

In June of that same year, Tolkien submitted a critique of Zimmerman's story-line to Forrest J. Ackerman, one of the film's promoters. Among other criticism, Tolkien notes the following regarding the speech patterns of the characters:

The Black riders do not scream, but keep a more terrifying silence... [ibid., p. 273]

The Balrog never speaks or makes any vocal sound at all. Above all he does not laugh or sneer... [Ibid., p. 274]

Gandalf, please should not 'sputter'. Though he may seem testy at times, has a sense of humor, and adapts a somewhat avuncular attitude to hobbits, he is a person of high and noble authority, and great dignity... [Ibid., p. 271]

I do earnestly hope that in the assignment of actual speeches to the characters they will be represented as I have presented them: in style and sentiment. I should resent perversion of the characters (and do resent it, so far as it appears in this sketch) even more than the spoiling of the plot and the scenery. [Ibid., p. 275]

Of all the criticisms which Tolkien levels at Zimmerman's sketch, the ones that move him the most are those directed at the liberties taken with the character's dialog. Could not this grave concern be attributable to the fact that Tolkien is writing in the Fairy Tale mode and that external expression is absolutely vital (given Tolkien's capacity for linguistics) to the portrayal and development of the individual characters? Readers of The Hobbit are well aware of this technique, particularly with Regard to the Trolls, the Spiders, the dragon, and, of course, Gollum. The following four quotes illustrate the technique.

**Trolls**

Three very large persons were sitting around a very large fire of beech-logs. They were toasting mutton on long spits of wood, and licking the gravy off their fingers. There was a fine toothsome smell. Also there was a barrel of good drink at hand, and they were drinking out of jugs. But they were trolls. Even Bilbo, in spite of his sheltered life, could see that; from the great heavy faces of them, and their size, and the shape of their legs, not to mention their language, which was not drawing-room fashion at all, at all.

"Mutton yesterday, mutton today, and blimey, if it don't look like mutton again tomorrow," said one of the trolls.

"Never a blinking bit of manflesh have we had for long enough," said a second.

"What the 'ell William was a-thinkin' of to bring us into these parts at all, beats me -- and the drink runnin' short, what's more," he said jogging the elbow of William, who was taking a pull at his jug.

William choked. "Shut yer mouth!" he said as soon as he could. "Yer can't expect folk to stop here forever just to be et by you and Bert. You've et a village and a half between yer, since we come down from the mountains. How much more d'yer want? And time's been up our way, when yer'd have said 'thank yer Bill' for a nice piece o' fat valley mutton like what this is." He took a big bite off a sheep's leg he was roasting, and wiped his lips on his sleeve. [H, pp.43-44]

**Spiders**

"It was a sharp struggle, but worth it," said one. "What nasty thick skins they have to be sure, but I'll wager there is good juice inside."

"Aye, they'll make fine eating, when they've hung a bit," said another.

"Don't hang 'em too long," said a third. "They're not as fat as they might be. Been feeding none too well of late, I should guess."

"Kill 'em, I say," hissed a fourth; "kill 'em now and hang 'em dead for a while."

"They're dead now I'll warrant," said one first.

"That they are not. I saw one a-struggling just now. Just coming around again, I should say, after a bee-autiful sleep. I'll show you." [Ibid., p. 168]

**Smaug**

"Well, thief! I smell you and I fell
your air. I hear your breath. Come along! Help yourself again, there is plenty and to spare!"

But Bilbo was not quite so unlearned in dragon-lore as all that, and if Smaug hoped to get him to come nearer so easily he was disappointed. "No thank you, O Smaug the Tremendous!" he replied. "I did not come for presents. I only wished to have a look at you and see if you were truly as great as the tales say. I did not believe them."

"Do you now?" said the dragon somewhat
flattered, even though he did not believe a word of it.

"Truly songs and tales fall utterly short of the reality, O Smaug the Chiefest and Greatest of Calamities," replied Bilbo. "You have manners for a thief and a liar," said the dragon. "You seem familiar with my name, but I don't seem to remember smelling you before. Who are you and where do you come from, may I ask?"

"You may indeed! I come from under the hill, and under the hills and over the hills my paths led. And through the air. I am he that walks unseen,"

"So I can well believe," said Smaug, "but that is hardly your usual name."

"I am the clue-finder, the web-cutter, the stinging fly. I was chosen for the lucky number,"

"Lovely titles!" sneered the dragon. But lucky numbers don't always come off.

"I am he that buries his friends alive and drowns them and draws them alive again from the water. I came from the end of a bag, but no bag went over me."

"These don't sound creditable," scoffed Smaug.

"I am the friend of bears and the guest of eagles. I am Ringwinner and Luckwearer; and I am barrel-ride, went on Bilbo beginning to be pleased with his riddling.

"That's better!" said Smaug. "But don't let your imagination run away with you!"

[ Ibid., pp. 234-35]

Gollum

"It's no good going back there to search, no. We don't remember all of the places we've visited. And its no use. The Baggins has got it in his pocketses; the nasty noser has found it we says."

"We guesses, precious, only guesses, We can't know till we find the nasty creature and squeezes it. But it doesn't know what the present can do, does it? It'll just keep it in its pocketses. It doesn't know, and it can't go far. It's lost itself, the nasty nosy thing. It doesn't know the way out. It said so,"

"It said so, yes, but it's trickys. It doesn't say what it means. It won't say what it's got in its pocketses. It knows a way in, it must know a way out, yes. It's off to the back door, that's it."

"The goblins will catch it then. It can't get out that way, precious."

"Sss, sss, gollum! Goblins! Yes, but if it's got the present, our precious present, then goblins will get it, gollum! They'll find it, they'll find it, they'll find out what it does. We shan't ever be safe again, never, gollum! One of the goblins will put it on, and then no one will see him. He'll be there but not seen. Not even our clever eyeses will notice him; and he'll come creepys and tricksey and catch us, gollum gollum!"

"Then let's stop taking, precious, and make haste. If the Baggins has gone that way, we must go quick and see. Go! Not far now. Make haste!" [ Ibid., p. 95-96]

There is a notable difference between the standard Hobbitish dialog spoken by Bilbo and that of Gollum or of the trolls. Tolkien has enhanced his portrayal of Gollum by literally spelling out the creature's accent. The Trolls speak a Cockney dialect which reflects the crudeness of their physical bodies and more importantly, the crudeness of their souls. With regard to the dialog of Smaug and the spiders, however, Tolkien has hinted at an additional parameter used to depict character traits: the verbs and adverbial modifiers which introduce the dialog of the characters also contribute to the characters' portrayal. Smaug "scowfs" and "snears". Gollum and the spiders "hiss". The question raised by this observation is, to what degree does Tolkien consistently use introductory verbs and modifiers to develop his characters?

In attempting an answer to this question during the fall of 1981, I extracted from Tolkien's fantasy works every verb and adverbial modifier which introduces dialog. These were entered into packed computer files according to the individual character who was speaking, the speaker's race, the verb used (if any), the adverbial modifier (if any), the person or thing addressed, the race of the one addressed, the responding verb (if any), the adverbial modifier (if any), and the book and the page number where the dialog was found. These files are displayed in the Appendices of my dissertation, Linguistic Techniques Used to Develop Character in the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien (Appendix E—Smith of Wooten Major), "Farmer Giles of Ham", and "Leaf by Niggle"; Appendix F—The Hobbit; Appendix G—Fellowship of the Ring; Appendix H—Two Towers; Appendix I—The Return of the King; Appendix J—The Silmarillion; Appendix K—Unfinished Tales). These entries were processed in a specially programmed account at the Purdue University Computer Center. This facilitated a controlled comparison of any one of the entry elements with any other element or series of elements within the corpus. The results of these file manipulations were startling. For me at least, there was no longer any question why Tolkien was so concerned about changes in the dialog of The Lord of the Rings and why, for a singular instance, he pleaded with Ackerman not to have Gandalf "sputters". Of all the creatures in the Middle-Earth works, there is only two characterizations who "sputter" while introducing dialog: Gollum and the spiders of Mirkwood. Gandalf never does. Tolkien's perturbation was with Ackerman's warping of character portrayal through changes in these verbs.

If Gandalf does not "sputter", what does he do? A survey of the introductory verbs to dialog reveals that he "muses", "pauses", "sighs", "laughs", "exclaims", "growls", "gasps", "utters", "sings", and "interrupts". While it is true that other characters do much of the same, some of the verbs are quite character specific. Gandalf is the only character who "pauses" (although Pippin "hesitates" once) or "exclaims". Saruman and Sam are the only other characters who "muse", Frodo, Pippin, and Béorn all "interrupt". In order to "growl" it appears that the characters need to be old crusty types (Sam, Gimli, Thorin, Galion), naturally gifted for growling (Béorn), or just plain nasty (the Orcs). Almost everyone "sighs", "laughs", "exclaims", "utters", and "sings" (even Orcs). All Hobbits (and Bombur the Dwarf) "gasp"; everyone else appears to have their second wind.

There are some dialog verbs that are racially specific: only hobbits "stammer", "pant", "rejoin",
and "argue"; certain hobbits "retort" (Sam and his father, the Gaffer) and "beg" (Sam and Bilbo); Orcs "hoot" (by themselves), "snarl" (with Bill), and "order" (with Thorin); Dwarves "moan" a lot (as does Bilbo) and "grumble" (both Bilbo and Galion of the Woodelves join in); all of the bad guys "hiss"

Evil has its own vocabulary as one might expect: only Saruman and Smaug "scowl"; Ted Sandyman, Saruman, Orcs, Gollum, Wormtongue, and Spiders though from time to time a good guy will fall from grace momentarily (Strider, Gimli, and other Dwarves).
the Orcs, and Smaug have all developed a talent for "snarling"; Smaug "gloats" and "snaps".

Gollum is quite interesting as a speaker of dialog: he "grovels", "shudders", "agrees", "weeps", and "pleads" all by himself; Gim the Dwarf and Legolas each "wails" with him once; he "cackles" with Saruman, "ahrieka" and "croughs" with the Orcs (Roac the Raven joining in on the latter), "sputters" with the spiders, "squeals" with Bilbo, and "whimpers" and "whines" with Wormtongue.
Bilbo "screams" and "sneezes" alone, "squeaks" with the troll's Purse, and "begs" with Sam. Sam "blushes", "protests", and "ventures" by himself; "demands" (with Eomer), "grunts" (with the Dwarves), "whistles" (with Tom Bombadil), and is one of the few who "muse"; he does not laugh and speak at the same time, however. Frodo does nothing uniquely although he does "breathe" with Anborn and "insist" with Faramir. The Gaffer is somewhat of a standout by being the only character who "declares" and "repeats". He also enjoys a good "jeer" occasionally (as do the Orcs and most Men).
How do one tell Merry from Pippin? Both "mutter", "stammer", "pant", "whisper", "gasp", and "laugh". Pippin, however, is the only character who "hesitates" and "fa lters"; Merry is the only one who "proceeds". Between the two, Pippin is the one who "interrupts", "argues", and "wonders"; Merry "excl ains", "smiles", and "chuckles".

As mentioned above, there is much "singing" dialog together with "whistling". There are also those who "chant" (Bilbo, Treebeard, Gimli, Strider, and Theoden) and those who "hum" (Hobbits, Treebeard, and Thorin). There are other sounds, not quite so melodious: Sam and the Dwarves "grunt"; Bilbo, Smaug, and the Dwarves "snort" (too much time underground, no doubt); and Treebeard "booms".

Only Men "acorn", With Saruman they "mock", with the orcs they "jeer", with almost everyone else in Middle-earth they "whisper", "exclaim", "murmur", and "mutter"; but they do know how to "laugh", probably their saving grace.

What does all this indicate? What we have sensed all along: that Tolkien exercised great care in delineating his characters, even to the point of carefully choosing the verbs and adverbs that introduce their dialog.

While it is interesting to note the use of these "marked" verbs and adverbial modifiers (that is, those which by virtue of their semantic value depict obvious characteristics of an individual), it is far more interesting (to me at least) to discover the contribution of the "unmarked" verbs and modifiers to character portrayal. If it is true that Tolkien was as concerned with the use of "unmarked" verbs as he was with other details of the narrative dialog (which is what this paper is attempting to establish), then the overall assessment of Tolkien’s skill as a literary genius would have to be reevaluated. In order to produce this kind of substantiating data, I selected seven relatively unmarked parameters for analysis: (1) Speaker use of the verb "said"; (2) Addressee use of the verb "said"; speaker utterance without an introductory verb, "("; (4) Addressee utterance without an introductory verb, ")"; (5) Speaker using no adverbal modifier, ""; and (7) Addressee without any responding utterance, "". Each of the major races was completely surveyed as to the frequency with which all of the characters combined used each of the seven parameters: Wizards (W), Hobbits (H), Elves (E), Dwarves (D), Rohirrim (R), Orcs (O), Men (M), Spiders (S), Woses (Wo), Ents (En), Dragons (Dr), and Black Riders (BR). By dividing the raw number for each parameter by the total number of dialog entries for the particular race, a series of percentages for each race was calculated. Finally, the raw total for each parameter was divided by the total number of entries, regardless of race, in order to produce a mean percentage value for each parameter.

Graphs G-1 through G-12 plot the percentages for each of the races according to their use of a particular parameter. The scaling for each of the parameters varies in order to display the relationships between some of the more condensed percentage values. The scaling was determined by dividing the difference between the mean and the most extreme point of divergence from the mean in each parameter, by a constant increment. The scaling does not affect the data; it simply makes it easier to read the graph. Another liberty taken was to have some scales ascending and some descending in order to eliminate as much line crossover as possible in the original overall comparative display (not given here). The scaling is, however, consistent throughout the several graphs.

Although many observations could be made about the various races and their usage of the seven parameters, one of the most fascinating is the fact...
that the racial line which most closely parallels the mean is that of the Hobbits (Graph G-2). Intuitively, this seems right. The Middle-earth stories are primarily told from the point of view of the Hobbits. The amazing thing, however, is that when each of the major Hobbit characters are plotted on the same scale, Tolkien's consistent feel for his characters, even in these "unmarked" parameters, is incredibly detailed.

Graphs G-13 through G-18 display the plottings for Frodo, Sam, Bilbo, Pippin, Merry, and Gollum together with the mean and the racial line for all Hobbits. Several intriguing observations can be made at this point. The personal line which most closely parallels the racial line of the Hobbits is that of Samwise Gamgee, indicating to me at least that Sam is more the "central" character than any other. Keeping in mind what we now understand about the history of the Red Book of Westmarch and other Hobbitish manuscripts, this seems completely consistent. Merry and Pippin's lines systematically parallel each other, substantiating in a simple linguistic way one of the reasons why it is difficult to distinguish between the two. The lines of Bilbo and Gollum generally move in opposite directions from one another; that is, when one ascends, the other descends as if they were mirror images of each other.

By comparing the plots of Graphs G-13 through G-18 with those of Graphs G-1 through G-12, other interesting correlations are discovered. Gollum's line (G-18) somewhat parallels that of the Orcs (G-6) around whom he lived for so long in the heart of the Misty Mountains. Merry and Pippin's lines (G-16; G-17) parallel that of the Rohirrim (G-5) which may be in turn a reflection of the overall use of the parameters by all men in Gondor: Frodo's line (G-13) parallels that of Men (G-7). Oddly enough (though not to the same degree), Bilbo's pattern (G-15) follows that of the Dragon (G-11) which may be an indication of why it was that he and Smaug got along so well verbally.

Needless to say, the above observations are tentative, but they do raise a question as to why these patterns exist statistically if they do not indicate something of Tolkien's sensitivity for character relationships and interactions. It is highly unlikely that in developing his characters, Tolkien himself worked out statistical delimitations for each of these marked and unmarked parameters, but the fact remains that the patterns exist and, to this reader at least, are consistent with the total portrayal of the characters.

**Appendix**

The following list of dialog introductory verbs are taken from *The Hobbit* and the *Lord of the Rings* without indication as to which. Those names introduced with "U-" indicates verbs in *Unfinished Tales*; those with "S-" are from *The Silmarillion*. Of interest is the fact that there are few marked verbs in *The Silmarillion* (the five referenced here are the only instances by any character). Does that suggest something about the popular appeal of the *Lord of the Rings* versus *The Silmarillion*? Might the "Return" to dialog in *Unfinished Tales* recommend its reading to those who were "disappointed" by the style of *The Silmarillion*? The same might be said of the subsequent volumes of the History of Middle-earth.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Verb</th>
<th>Characters</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>growled</td>
<td>Sam; Gandalf; Gimli; Orcs; Thorin; Galion; Beorn</td>
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<tr>
<td>whistled</td>
<td>Sam; Tom B.</td>
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<tr>
<td>sighed</td>
<td>Sam; Frodo; Legolas; Treebeard; Gandalf; Beregond; S-Thingol; U-Thingol; U-Galadriel</td>
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<td>Sam</td>
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<tr>
<td>cried</td>
<td>Frodo; Sam B.; Gollum</td>
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<tr>
<td>laughed</td>
<td>Frodo; Bilbo; Pippin; Merry; Elves; Gildor; Treebeard; Tom B.; Gandalf; Pippin; Gimli; Orcs; Strider; Eothain; Beregond; Denethor; Elves; Men; Spiders; Smaug; S-Maedhros; S-Glaurung; S-Turin; U-Elves; U-Androg; U-Morwen; U-Men; U-Gandalf; U-Saruman</td>
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<tr>
<td>interrupted</td>
<td>Frodo; Pippin; Gandalf; Galdalf; Beorn</td>
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<tr>
<td>breathed</td>
<td>Frodo; Anborn</td>
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<tr>
<td>insisted</td>
<td>Frodo; Faramir</td>
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<tr>
<td>sang</td>
<td>Frodo; Bilbo; Hobbits; Hobbits; Legolas; Galadriel; Gandalf; Strider; Dwarves; Elves; Orcs</td>
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<tr>
<td>smiled</td>
<td>Bilbo; Merry; Faramir; Theoden; Smaug</td>
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<td>chanted</td>
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<td>snorted</td>
<td>Bilbo; Gimli; Smaug; Bilbo; U-Thorin</td>
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<td>argued</td>
<td>Pippin; Sandyman</td>
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<td>wondered</td>
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<td>flitted</td>
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<td>declared</td>
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<td>jeered</td>
<td>Gaffer; Orcs; Men</td>
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<tr>
<td>shouted</td>
<td>Hobbits; Men</td>
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<tr>
<td>hummed</td>
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<tr>
<td>rejoined</td>
<td>Hobbits</td>
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wailed .......... Legolas; Gollum; U-Mim
boomed .......... Treebeard
paused .......... Gandalf
scrofled .......... Saruman; Smaug
declared .......... Saruman
his  .......... Saruman; Gimli; Orcs; Gollum;
Wormtongue; Strider; Dwarves; Gollum;
Spiders
mocked .......... Saruman; Men; Mouth of Sauron;
U-Hurin; U-Turin
cackled .......... Saruman; Gollum
hooted .......... Orcs
snarled .......... Orcs; Bill
ordered .......... Orcs; Thorin
groveled .......... Gollum
whispered .......... Gollum; Wormtongue
whined .......... Gollum; Wormtongue
shuddered .......... Gollum
shrieked .......... Gollum; Orcs; Gollum
agreed .......... Gollum
croaked .......... Gollum; Orcs; Roac
sputtered .......... Gollum; Spiders
wept .......... Gollum
ended .......... Gollum; Boromir; Bilbo
squealed .......... Gollum; Bilbo
pleaded .......... Gollum
persisted .......... Boromir; Bilbo
grumbled .......... Dwarves; Galion; Bilbo
moaned .......... Dwarves; Bilbo
yelled .......... Orcs
gruffly .......... Beorn
gloated .......... Smaug
snapped .......... Orcs
squeaked .......... Purse; Bilbo
sneezed .......... Bilbo
screamed .......... Bilbo
counselled .......... S-Huan
commanded .......... S-Luthien; U-Eorl
taunted .......... S-Saeros; U-Rohirrim
scorned .......... U-Men
returned .......... U-Erendis
explained .......... U-Gandalf

"The fishing net is heavy filled,
So rise it steady and slow --
I'll have me haul to sell today,
So heave, me fellows, ho!"

But strange to tell the net was filled
Though they had caught few fish,
For yet a mermaid in their web
Was raised against her wish.

Her hair was yellow gold, green-flecked;
Her skin, sun-tanned and hale;
Her lips and nipples, a brownish rose;
And golden green, her tail.

"I beg your pardon, holy one,
That you be tangled so --"
"Then loose the net, O fisherman,
And let me silent go."

"Of course, of course, but first you'll give,
In gratitude most rare,
Likely a gift, a little thing,
Since you're not shown at the fair?"

"What gift dost thou demand, my lord,
Who holds my life in fee?"
"Oh not so brutal is me hold --
I'll ask but wishes three."

"My spells are ocean born, my lord;
They do no touch elsewhere."
"Myself am sure you'll shape them well,
You'll spell with utmost care."

"Thy wish is my command, my lord;
I'll try to do thy will."
The sun was shining on the boat;
The winds were almost still.

"I like the simple phrase 'me lord,'
But fishers have no gold;
Likely a chest or two of coin
Would make me name extolled."

"That takes of magic none, my lord,
For thirty fathoms deep,
A galleon lies with gold enough
To make the English weep."

"A lord needs power to prove his worth,
Else all his gold is dumb;
Whenever he his fingers snap,
A dozen lords should come."

She cupped her hands within the net,
And sang some words at will --
Not Latin from an ancient scroll
Nor Gaelic older still.

A dark cloud rose upon the verge,
The breeze picked up a bit,
The waves grew stronger in the wind --
Against the boat they hit.

"And third, I'd like the gentry girl
Who lives above the bay --
Sole heir she is of that fine house,
Of all that pride and sway."

The mermaid sang again her song,
So soft, as the tide had ebbed;
She raised her right hand in the net,
Her fingers spread and webbed.

The cloud now covered half the sky,
The wind was blowing strong;
She smiled to see the rising waves
Which with the storm belonged.

"You fool, you fool," she cried to him,
"Kill me or kill me not --
The clouds have come, the winds are high,
The waves rise at this spot.

"You fool, you fool, your death is here --
You'll sink to gold below;
A foolish girl will cry about
Dead fishers she did not know."

"But power! me power! you gave me power --
I'll make the storm hold fast."

"The only power that you've received
Is in the mighty blast."

by Joe R. Christopher