The Green Sun: A Study of Color in J.R.R. Tolkien’s The Lord of the Rings

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The Green Sun: A Study of Color in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*

**Abstract**
Considers the fact that Tolkien rarely uses any but unadulterated basic color names (red, white, yellow, etc.) and gave unusually positive associations to neutral brown and grey. Also considers Tolkien's use of color in character identity and heraldry, and traces some of this to literature Tolkien studied as a scholar, as well as his interest and abilities in graphic arts.

**Additional Keywords**
Color in *The Lord of the Rings*; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Use of colors; Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings*—Color symbolism; Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings*—Technique; Stephan Peregrine; John Pivovarnick
Even the most casual reader of The Lord of the Rings cannot fail to notice the prominence of color words throughout the trilogy. Others have noted (and commented on at length) the thematic oppositions of white and black, light and dark, good and evil. What has not been examined are the other colors so frequently mentioned. Keeping in mind Tolkien's interest and abilities in the graphic arts, I feel that color theories, particularly those of A. H. Munsell (which were introduced to great popular interest in England during Tolkien's later student years) do much to illuminate the use of color in Lord of the Rings. I also feel that the usages of heraldry contributed to Tolkien's color choices in the trilogy.

My consideration of Tolkien's use of color in Lord of the Rings was shaped initially by two observations:

1. That Tolkien used a strangely limited palette—red, green, blue, black, gray, brown, yellow, and white (the last two are also referred to as gold and silver)—with very, very few exceptions.
2. That the above color words are used without modification; i.e., we see, again with very, very few exceptions, green, not pale green, or emerald green, or chartreuse.

The rest of this study attempts to explain these rather curious observations and to suggest some possible artistic effects which Tolkien may have achieved by using color in the above mentioned ways.

In his essay "On Fairy-Stories," Tolkien relies on color as a primary means of illustrating some of his observations on the nature of fantasy. The key concept of sub-creation (that is, man's abilities to create a Secondary World in imitation of his Creator) is twice described in terms of color:

The human mind, endowed with the powers of generalization and abstraction, sees not only green-grass, discriminating it from other things . . . but sees that it is green as well as being grass. But how powerful, how stimulating to the very faculty that produced it, was the invention of the adjective . . . . The mind that thought of . . . grey, yellow, . . . also conceived of magic that would . . . turn grey lead into yellow gold . . . . When we can take green from grass, blue from heaven, and red from blood, we have already an enchanter's power . . . . We may put a deadly green upon a man's face and produce a horror; we may make the rare and terrible blue moon to shine; or we may cause woods to spring with silver leaves and rams to wear fleeces of gold . . . . But in such "fantasy" as it is called, new form is made; Faerie begins; Man becomes a sub-creator. (22)

Man, Sub-creator, the refracted Light through whom is splintered from a single white to many hues, and endlessly combined in living shapes that move from mind to mind. Though all the crannies of the world we filled with Elves and Goblins, though we dared to build Gods and their houses out of dark and light, and sowed the seed of dragons—"twas our right (used or misused). That right has not decayed: we make still by the law in which we're made. (56)

The object of the process of sub-creation, the making of a Secondary World, is also illustrated with a color reference:

Anyone inheriting the fantastic device of human language can say the green sun. Many can then imagine or picture it. But that is not enough . . . .
It should be noted that the method of sub-creation described above, the use of adjectives to qualify nouns in ways entirely different from those observed in the Primary World, is not Tolkien's method of treating his Secondary World. Middle-Earth has no "green sun," no "rare and terrible blue moon," only the Yellow and White Faces of Gollum's (and our) experience. In fact, not one object in Middle-Earth is characterized by a color other than the one it would have were it in our Primary World.

However, the image of the rainbow created by passing white light through a prism does show up in The Lord of the Rings where it has a pejorative connotation. I refer, of course, to the transformation of Saruman the White into Saruman the Many-Colored as a result of his seduction by the Dark Lord (I 339). This is not the Noahian rainbow, God-given sign of redemption, but instead is a symbol of evil as perversion of good (or reflection, as it were), a thoroughly Christian concept of evil supported elsewhere throughout the book [Sauron's inability to create forces of good].

Tolkien also uses color as an example in his discussion of the twin ideas of Escape and Recovery, which he postulates as functions of fantasy:

We do not, or need not, despair . . . of painting because there are only three "primary colors" . . . . there may be a danger of boredom or of anxiety to be original, and that may lead to a distaste for . . . "pretty" colours, or else to mere manipulation and over-elaboration of old material, clever and heartless. But the true road of escape from such weariness is not to be found . . . in making all things dark or unremittingly violent; nor in the mixing of colours on through subtlety to drabness, and the fantastical complication of shapes to the point of silliness and on towards delirium. Before we reach such states we need recovery. We should look at green again, and be startled anew (but not blinded) by blue and yellow and red. (56-57)

This recovery, this "startling anew" as demonstrated by a heightened perception of color, occurs for Frodo when he visits Cerin Amroth in Lorien:

He [Frodo] saw no colour but those he knew, gold and white and blue and green, but they were fresh and poignant, as if he had at that moment first perceived them and made for them names new and wonderful. (I 456)

It is interesting that Frodo here exhibits an Adamic ability to suit the name perfectly to the perception—I suspect that Tolkien envied this ability, an envy which may lie at the root of his preoccupation with the invention of language.

While color references in "On Fairy-Stories" do not provide any direct explanations of the two observations I made earlier (namely, the limited palette and the lack of modification of color words), they do clearly indicate that Tolkien found the terminology of graphic arts to be a comfortable and effective means of communicating literary concepts. Other evidence of Tolkien's "painterly" concern with color (even from childhood) can be gleaned from Humphrey Carpenter's recent biography. Tolkien's mother commented on her son's color perceptions as a child:

Ronald can match silk lining or any shade like a true 'Parisian modiste.'—Is it his Artist or Draper Ancestry coming out?— (28)

This childhood aptitude was developed during student days and exercised throughout Tolkien's adult life:

[Tolkien] had never entirely abandoned this childhood hobby [drawing and painting], and during his undergraduate days he illustrated several of his own poems, using watercolours, coloured inks or pencils, and beginning to develop a style that was suggestive of his affection for Japanese prints and the lack of individual approach to line and colour. (163)

During these same years, the color theories of A. H. Munsell were introduced to Britain where they met with great popular acclaim. Briefly, Munsell developed the first systematic nomenclature for color in which every possible shade received its own designation, based on three characteristics: hue, brilliance or value, and chroma (intensity or saturation). Hue refers to the area of the spectrum in which a particular color may be found; i.e., whether it is red, blue, violet, yellow, etc. Brilliance is a measure of lightness or darkness; e.g. sky blue (technically a tint—color plus white) is high in brilliance, while navy blue (a shade—color mixed with black) is low. Finally, chroma or saturation refers to the degree of grayness in a color; the high saturation color is relatively pure in color, such as a bright leaf green, while the low saturation color (tone) has a relatively high admixture of gray, such as olive green. Symbols are then assigned to each color, indicating where on these three scales that particular color falls.

A number of color theorists have examined color in order to determine which hues represent primary sensations, and they have arrived at three different primary configurations:

1. Pigment primaries—red, blue, yellow (which when mixed form black or deep brown).
2. Light ray primaries—red, green, and blue (which when mixed form white).
3. Vision (or psychological) primaries—red, yellow, blue, green (which when mixed form gray).

I cannot say whether Tolkien definitely was aware of these color theories, although that seems likely in view of their popularity in Britain, or whether as an artist sensitive to color since childhood by his mother's witness, Tolkien intuited this information, but I definitely feel that these concepts are helpful in understanding color as it appears in The Lord of the Rings.

To explain my aforementioned observation that Tolkien uses color words almost always without modification, I think we may look at Munsell's three components of color. I believe that Tolkien in his creation of Middle-earth has essentially separated out these three components. He usually expresses color either solely in terms of hue (red, green, blue, yellow) or solely in terms of value without hue (light, dark, pale). Only rarely is a hue given value (pale green, dark blue, etc.). Because color—usually indicated only by hue or by the word grey (the lowest possible chroma or intensity), the number of colors characterized by all three components is very limited. In approximately 1500 pages of text, these are the only instances of color which indicate all three qualities:

scarlet (I 52, I 150; II 340, 341; III 139)—these last three references to the heraldic colors of the Haradrim—III 284)

magenta (I 188)
rose (II 29, III 194)—both referring to dawn, the first literally, the second metaphorically—
Coincidentally, perhaps, all five of these words are from the warm half of the color wheel (color being generally divided into "cool"—green, blue, and violet—and "warm"—yellow, orange, and red).

But what effects does Tolkien achieve by separating these components of color? First, the indication of brilliance simply by light (or pale) and dark or white and black is obviously used thematically to express good and evil.

[I will not say allegorically, for I agree with Neil Isaacs, Baillie Tolkien, and Tolkien himself (in the forward to *Fellowship of the Ring*, pp. x-xii) that he avoided the fixed one-to-one relationships which allegory imposes—as the White Hand of Saruman would exemplify.]

Second, the unqualified words for hue permit the reader to exercise his own imagination in picturing the scenery and characters of Middle-Earth. I suspect that very few readers imagine a pastel Middle-Earth, or a Middle-Earth painted all in dark colors, or a grayed one. I, for one, always have imagined the colors of Middle-Earth to be medium in brilliance and highly-saturated, giving it a jewel-like glow or "the effect of stained-glass windows, or the illuminations of mediaeval manuscripts." Finally Tolkien may have wanted to avoid the extraneous associations which come with many English color words:

... there are remarkably few primitive color terms—red, yellow, green, blue, white, black. Most other names are borrowings. ... Orange, violet, lilac, orchid, rose, on and on, all refer to other things such as flowers. ... Emerald, ruby, sapphire, turquoise are precious stones. Gold, rust, cobalt, terra cotta are minerals. Cherry, lemon, lime, chocolate, olive, peach are familiar edible products. Salmon, canary, cardinal are fish and birds. Delft, Nile, Sienna, Magenta are places. Who is to say (since Tolkien generally didn't) whether most of the above-mentioned things exist in Middle-Earth? Certainly some of them could not. However, Tolkien also avoids color words taken from things which do exist in Middle-Earth, words such as cream, leaf-, grass-, or apple-green sky- or midnight-blue, ruby, sapphire and amethyst (which are mentioned as gems, used metaphorically to describe Heneth Amroth, the Window of the Sunset, II 358), as well as words which have no such immediate associations for native English speakers, whatever their ultimate derivations (e.g., buff, taupe, beige).

I think that words such as these are in fact deliberately avoided in order to maintain a limited palette as noted earlier in this paper. They are the chief shades of the four psychological primaries (red, green, yellow, and blue), the three neutrals (black, white, and gray), the two metals (silver and gold—which as in the heraldic terminology argent and or can also at times be interpreted as white and yellow), and brown.

Brown, which is technically a shade (color mixed with black) of orange (yellow-red), does not fit neatly into any color pattern. I think that perhaps for Tolkien with his great interest, both literary and graphic, in trees and forests and other aspects of nature, brown had a psychological primary not typical of psychological perceptions in general. At any rate, since there is no green sun in Middle-Earth and all things there have the same hues as their counterparts here in the Primary World, Tolkien needed brown as its associations in *The Lord of the Rings* show: the forest of Fangorn, Treebeard, the Entwives (including their now-blighted gardens, the Brown Lands) and other references to trees and landscape (II 82, II 83, II 100 for example), the Robin-Hood-like green and brown camouflage costumes of Paminir's patrol, Legolas the Wood-elf, and Aragorn setting out from Rivendell (II 335, I 315, I 367), the cremations of those earthly creatures, the Hobbits and Tom Bombadil (I 22, I 174), and finally Radagast the Brown:

*Radagast is, of course, a worthy wizard, a master of shapes and changes of hue; and he has much love of herbs and beasts, and birds are especially his friends.* (I 337)

The description of Radagast the Brown, lore-master of herbs and beasts and friend to the birds, I think, cannot fail to bring to mind the picture of St. Francis of Assisi, surrounded by the flora and fauna of the forest, dressed in his customary brown friar's habit. Of the three named wizards of Middle-Earth, Radagast the Brown is the one whose province is nature, whose element is the earth—hence his color. The other wizards, Gandalf and Saruman, have colors (grey and white) which have decided different connotations, essentially those of immortal good, as will be demonstrated below. In contrast, all of the associations of brown are with the natural, temporal world of Middle-Earth, especially with its forests.

The very name of Radagast the Brown brings to mind one of the chief functions of color in *The Lord of the Rings*: color frequently serves as a marker of identity. It is no coincidence that the colors used in the trilogy, with the exception of grey and brown, are the colors used in heraldry (gules, vert, azure, or, argent, sable). Tolkien does in fact occasionally blazon arms, sometimes using heraldic language, as in the description of the standard of the Stewards of Gondor:

*... bright argent like snow in the sun, bearing no charge nor device. ...* (III 301)

at other times, using the common English terminology, as in the description of Saruman's arms as borne by the orcs in his service:

*... he [Sauron] does not use white. The Orcs in the service of Barad-dûr use the sign of the Red Eye.* (II 21)

As we shall see later, black and red are used as leitmotifs throughout Frodo's and Sam's journey to Orodruin. There are several other specifically heraldic references in *The Lord of the Rings*. All, except for the standard of the chief of Haradrim ("black serpent upon scarlet" III 139), follow the heraldic principle of color upon metal, metal upon color. These include the banners of Rohan ("white horse upon a field of green"—III 138—inevitably recalling the prehistoric horses carved into the chalk-white hills of England, now surrounded by green grass), of Dol Amroth ("a...
white ship like a swan upon blue water" III 180, also blazoned as "silver upon blue, a ship swan-rowned fastering on the sea ..." III 285), and of Aragorn as the returning King of Gondor ("... it was black, and if there was any device upon it, it was hidden in the darkness ..." III 74; later the device is revealed, "a white tree flowered upon a sable field beneath a shining crown and seven glittering stars." III 285).13

In addition to these literally heraldic usages, color is also used as a marker of identity in other ways. For example, a study of the onomastics of Middle-Earth would reveal that color words are the most frequent single type of geographic designation. Some examples of color-place names include the Blue, White, and Grey Mountains (Ered Luin, Ered Nimrais, Ered Mithrin), the Grey Havens, the Greenway, the White Downs, Greenwood the Great (later Mirkwood), the Greyflood, the Brandywine (Baranduin—the golden-brown river), the Field and River of Celebrant (Silver Lode), Barad-dûr (The Dark Tower), Moria (the Black Pit), Caras Galadon (the green city), Caradhras (Redhorn), Gwaihir the White (Silvervine), Fanuithal the Grey, Mt. Mindolluin (Towering Blue-head), Mordor (the Black Land), Mt. Ewereith, Morannon (Black Gate), Northbord (Blackroot Vale), the Brown Lands, and Lothlórien (the Golden Wood).

The tendency to use color words in naming extends from place to personal names. These latter fall into two classes. In the first the color word is an integral part of the name and may not even be identified as such by the reader. Examples would include Glosfrindel (Golden-haired), Celeborn (Silver Tree—cf. with mallorn—the Golden Tree), Goldwine, Goldberry, Hasufel (Grey Hide), Will Whiffit, the Swertings (dark ones), and Thingol (Greycloak). Into the second category fall individual characters and groups of characters who are distinguished by color epithets, the meanings of which (unlike those of the names in the first category) are fully felt by the audience and usually function thematically. Names include the wizards, Saruman the White, Radagast the Brown, and Gandalf the Grey, all members of the White Council; Saruman the Black One (the Dark Lord); the Grey Host; the Grey Elves; Old Grey Willow-man; Elwing the White; Ar-Pharazon the Golden; and the greatest of dragons Ancalagon the Black.

It will be noted that, as limited as is the total palette used by Tolkien in The Lord of the Rings, the colors used in personal and group names (of both categories) are still more limited. Again with the exception of Radagast the Brown, we find only the three neutrals (black, white, and gray) and the two metals (silver and gold). There are no counterparts here to such real and fictional characters of the Middle Ages as Erik the Red, Harold Blue-tooth, and the Green Knight. It is clear that these five color words have thematic and symbolic value in Lord of the Rings. As Baillie Tolkien observed in the Introduction to Drawings by Tolkien, "beauty, in his [Tolkien's] writing is almost always idealized, in terms of gold, or silver, [e.g. as in] Telperion (Nimloth) the White Tree and Laurelin the Golden Tree) or the bright glow of light from within (as exemplified most of all in the Silmarils)...." Black is, of course, regularly associated with evil (Black Riders, Ancalagon the Black, Black Numenoreans, Mordor, etc.), and its opposite on the scale of brilliance, white, is equally obviously associated with good (Elwing the White, the White Council, etc.). But what of grey, the mid-point on the scale of brilliance? The conventional connotations of grey can include "either a vapid dullness or a pleasing gentle quietness," (Barber, p. 41) old age, gloom, sadness, depression and a sleazy sort of border-line immorality ("tattletale grey," the "grey market," "grey areas," etc.). Its most common associations are with ashes, lead, overcast skies, and dawn or twilight. In general, the connotations of grey run from neutral, at best, to sordid, at worst. In The Lord of the Rings, however, the connotations of grey are uncharacteristically positive. To be sure, there is the Old Grey Willow-man, as Tom Bombadil calls him (I 175), a rather ill-tempered vegetable whose epithet of 'grey' is obviously a product both of advanced age and of the natural color of his hair and beard. In Middle-Earth as it is here,14 but, the primary associations of grey in Lord of the Rings are with Gandalf the Grey (Mithrandir, the Grey Pilgrim, the Grey Wanderer, Gandalf Greyhame), with the Grey Elves and the Grey Havens, and with the Grey Company and the Grey Host.15 There are several possible explanations for the use of grey as the identifying marker of Gandalf, the Elves, and the Rangers (the Grey Company). According to accepted color theories (in contrast to popular perceptions), grey is not the most neutral of all possible color sensations; the most neutral color form is tone—a mixture of a spectral hue plus grey (or hue plus white plus black). Grey is in fact the antithesis of pure color, containing the two primary elements (hue plus white plus black). Indeed, the color theorist A. H. Munsell believed that "in a broad way one may say that color balances on middle grey" (quoted in Birren, Grammar, p. 44). Further, the four psychological (visual) primary colors—red, yellow, green, blue—when mixed together form grey—which thus contains the universe of man's color perceptions (Birren, Principles, p. 22). These concepts associated with grey—centrality, balance, universality—are certainly appropriate ways to characterize Gandalf's role as organizer and coordinator of the fight of the allied Free Races against the evil of the Dark Lord. (After all, if alliteration were the determinant, he could just as well be Gandalf the Green.)

The Elves (and their historical allies and friends the Rangers) are, I believe, linked with grey by a series of common natural and literary (rather than scientific) associations. The predilection of the Elves for the twilight, the time when the stars first appear (III 485), leads naturally to an affinity with grey; this relationship is explicit in descriptions of Elrond and Arwen:

His hair was dark as the shadows of twilight ...; his eyes were grey as a clear evening. ... the light of stars was in her bright eyes, grey as a cloudless night ... (I 299)

Such descriptions inevitably call to mind the "eyes grey as glass," conventional description of the heroes and heroines of medieval romance.17

Among the gifts given by the Elves to the members of the Fellowship of the Ring before they leave Lothlórien are wondrous elven-cloaks, iridescent grey in color, symbolically investing the Company with the values of Elven culture, serving in a sense as badges of adoption:

It was hard to say of what color they were: grey with the hue of the twilight under the trees they seemed to be; and yet if they were moved, or set in another light they were green as shadowed leaves, or brown as fallow fields by night, dusky-silver as water under stars. (I 479)

The symbolism of the cloaks is made explicit by an unidentified Elf:

Leaf and branch and water and stone; they have the hue and beauty of all these things, under the twilight of Lórien that we love; for we put the thought of all that we love into all that we make. ... never before have we clad strangers in the garb of our own people. (I 479)

It is interesting to note that the description of these cloaks (afterward always referred to as simply "grey") is
optically accurate:

Whereas luster demands black contrast, \textit{indecescence requires gray contrast}, . . . the background is a light gray. The highlights . . . are white, and the shading is in a gray that is slightly deeper than the ground. (Birren, \textit{Principles}, p. 71)

The Elf's description of the cloaks also shows an artist's insight, referring to the principle of dominant tint:

The colors of nature (and those fashioned by man) are commonly seen tinted light that varies from the pink and orange of early dawn, to the yellow of sunlight, to the blue of sky light. Distance may be enveloped in grayish or purplish mist. (Birren, \textit{Principles}, p. 42)

In this case, of course, the dominant tint is the grey of twilight. The function of dominant tint in art is to provide a basic harmony to a color scheme containing many colors which otherwise might be un harmonious and displeasing. An analogous function might be ascribed to the cloaks, covering the disparate members of the Company.

The Elven word \textit{morth} "gray," which is the root of \textit{morthil} "true-silver," links the color gray to the color silver which is itself linked to white (as I have previously demonstrated), thus forming a triad of colors which symbolizes the good. This triad is consistently opposed to the colors of evil, of war and destruction: black and red. The opposition can be found throughout the trilogy. For example, the pivotal fight between Gandalf and the Balrog is dramatized, almost cinematically, by the shifts from black and red to white and gray (I 426-431). First Gimli the Dwarf sees a red light—the lower levels of Moria apparently on fire—which lights Gandalf's face with a "red glow." This "red glow" is mirrored in the sides of smooth black stone pillars. From a fissure beneath comes a "fierce red light" and "wisps of dark smoke." As the Fellowship reaches the Bridge of Khazad-dum, a "black cloud" sweeps up before them. They see "swarming black figures."—orcs—with "spears and scimitars red as blood." Gandalf's hat is pierced with a "black feather" of an arrow. The "dark form" of the Balrog appears, wreathed in flame and "black smoke." Gandalf turns to meet it, a small figure, "gray and bent, like a wizened tree before the onset of a storm," his sword Glamdring gleaming "cold and white." "From out of the shadow a red sword leaped flaming. Glamdring glittered white in answer." The clash is marked with a "stab of white fire." As Gandalf destroys the bridge, "a blinding slice of white flame" springs up. After the loss of Gandalf, the company makes its way out of Moria to see the "clouds white and high."—a "thin black smoke" trailing behind them from the Gates of Moria, the Black Pit.

Similar associations of black and red with evil can be found in the descriptions of the Southrons (II 321), the White Hand of Saruman with "its red nail darkening to black" (II 247), the banner of Barad-dûr, "black but bearing on it in red the Evil Eye" (III 202), the Red Arrow, war token of Gondor, "black-feathered . . . but the point was red" (III 86), and Sam's vision of the destruction of the Shire in Galadriel's Mirror, "a large red-brick building was being put up . . . a tall red chimney nearby. Black smoke seemed to cloud the surface of the Mirror" (I 469).

Finally, like the fight with the Balrog, the journey of Frodo and Sam through Mordor throughout Book III is painted in red and black (with an occasional gray). The references here are too numerous to list completely, but some representative passages follow. Sam's first look at Gondor reveals "a swirling smoke, dusky red at the roots, black above" (III 214); Shagrat the Orc threatens to put "red maggot-holes" into the belly of another orc with his "long red knife" (III 223). Even the flies of Mordor are "dun or grey, or black, marked like orcs with a red eye-shaped patch" (III 243). In Chapter 1 ("The Tower of Cirith Ungol"), the scenes are lit by a red glow, but in Chapters 2 ("The Land of Shadow") and 3 ("A Journey to Mordor") the sky is gray, but disappears, and black is all that remains—or rather almost all. Above the Ephel Duath, Sam sees:

\ldots a white star twinkle for a while. The
slim e" (I 34). The same connotations adhere to green as it occurs in the brightly colored lands of the East: green light alternated in his eyes. . . ." I I 303, I I side of Gollum's personality asserts itself (e.g. II 289, during one of his internal debates "A pale light and a green light alternated in his eyes . . ." II 303, II 317), Gollum is also reported as "covered with green slime" (I 34). The same connotations adhere to green as it occurs in the bright green of the East:

the sickly green of them [the lands of the East] was fading to a sullen brown. (II 265)

The only green was the scum of livid weed on the dark greasy surfaces of sullen waters. (II 295)

Even the gold of the Sun is perverted in Mordor:

Far above the rot and vapours of the world the Sun was riding high and golden now in a serene country with floors of dazzling foam, but only a pale ghost of her could they see below, bleared, pale, giving no colour and no warmth. (I 295)

It is clear from the many examples cited that color in The Lord of the Rings can be used as a marker of identity, literally and figuratively. Color also functions as a sort of visual leit-motif: key repetitions of color words setting moods and tracing the interlaced threads of themes. But, more than a convenient mark of identification or a way to tell the "good guys" from the . . . bad ones, the presence or absence of color seems to be an external indication of the most profound emotional states. When incidents occur which arouse a high degree of feeling, characters (or the ostensible hobbit narrators) generally respond with set pieces of description placing great emphasis on color. The first such emotional climax—the fireworks at Bilbo's birthday party—calls forth a veritable symphony of colors, sounds, smells, and tastes:

There were rockets like a flight of scintillating birds singing with sweet voices. There were green trees with trunks of dark smoke: their leaves opened like a whole spring unfolding in a moment; and their shining branches dropped glowing flowers down . . ., disappearing with a sweet scent. . . . there were pillars of colored fires that rose and turned into eagles, or sailing ships, or a phalanx of flying sunder; there was a shower of silver, and a shower of yellow rain; there was a forest of silver spears that sprang suddenly into the air with a yell like an embattled army, and came down again into the water with a hiss like a hundred hot snakes. . . . A great smoke . . . shaped itself like a mountain seen in the distance and began to glow at the summit. It spouted green and scarlet flames. Out flew a red-golden dragon. . . . (I 51-52)

Although this wondrous exhibition brought the provincial hobbits to prostration, this scene and the emotions aroused are trivial compared with the emotional content of later incidents. We have already seen Frodo's moment of epiphany at Cerin Amroth (I 454). Similar moments come to Gimli at the Caverns of Helm's Deep who responds with uncharacteristic eloquence:

. . . gems and crystals and veins of precious ore glint in the polished walls; and the light glows through folded marbles, shell-like, translucent as the living hands of Queen Galadriel. There are columns of white and saffron and dawn-rose, . . . fluted and twisted into dream-like forms; they spring from many-colored floors to meet the glistening pendants of the roof. . . . a silver drop falls, and the round wrinkles in the glass make all the towers bend and waver like weeds and corals in a grotto of the sea. (II 194)

and to Aragorn as, with the remaining members of the Company, he catches first sight of his destined kingdom of Gondor:

At last they reached the crest of the grey hill . . .

Turning back they saw across the River the far hills kindled. . . . The red rim of the sun rose over the shoulders of the dark land . . . the world lay still, forlorn and grey, but as they looked, the shadows of night melted, the colours of the waiting earth returned: green flowed over the wide meads of Rohan; the white mists shimmered in the water-valleys; and far off to the left . . . blue and purple stood the White Mountains, rising into peaks of jet, tipped with glimmering snows, flushed with the rose of morning.

"Gondor! Gondor!" cried Aragorn. (II 29)
The very capacity to experience such emotions, to appreciate the vividness and vitality of Middle-Earth, quite literally to have color in one’s life at all, is a dividing line between the morally good and the morally corrupt in Middle-Earth. This is most clearly indicated in a series of interchanges between the wizards Saruman and Gandalf, in which changes in color symbolize changes in character. The first example of this is the revelation of Saruman’s treachery, indicated by a change in epithet from Saruman the White to Saruman of Many Colors:

"For I am Saruman the Wise, Saruman Ring-Maker, Saruman of Many Colours."

"I [Gandalf]... saw that his robes, which had seemed white, were not so, but were woven of all colours, and if he moved they shimmered and changed hue so that the eye was bewildered.

"I liked white better," I said.

"White!" he sneered. "It serves as a beginning. White cloth may be dyed. The white page can be overwritten, and the white light can be broken."

"In which case it is no longer white," said I. "And he that breaks a thing to find out what it is has left the path of wisdom." (II 338-339)

Saruman has changed from pristine white to the entire spectrum which results from the breaking of light, revealed in his treachery; the once-good has been corrupted by his Tower. But he still has colors, even if only the broken garment shrouded by the grey rags had been turned from death. You have no colour now and the staff of Saruman is broken.

"Behold, I am not Gandalf the Grey, whom you destroyed. I am Gandalf the White, who has returned from death. You have no colour now and I cast you from the order and from the Council." (II 241)

the staff of Saruman is broken.

Having endured a death and a resurrection, Gandalf adopts as an outward sign of his apotheosis the color white, supplanting the traitor Saruman. As Gandalf first appears to his "disciples" on his return:

... there was a gleam, too brief for certainty, a quick glint of white, as if some garment shrouded by the grey rags had been for an instant revealed. (II 123)

Then his cloak drew apart, and they saw... that he was clothed in white.

His hood and his grey rags were flung away. His white garments shone. He lifted up his staff... (II 124)

His hair was white as snow in the sunshine; and gleaming white was his robe; the eyes under his deep brows were bright, piercing as the rays of the sun; power was in his hand, (II 125)

When hailed as Gandalf, the wizard makes clear that the change in color signifies a more profound change:

"Gandalf"... "Yes, that was the name, I was Gandalf."

"Yes, I am in White," said Gandalf. "Indeed I am Saruman, one might almost say, Saruman as he should have been." (II 125)

With the promotion, as it were, of Gandalf to Saruman's status, the Ranger Aragorn is similarly elevated, now to become associated himself with the color grey:

The grey figure of the Man, Aragorn son of Arathorn, was tall, and stern as stone, his hand upon the hilt of his sword; he looked as if some king out of the mists of the sea had stepped upon the shores of lesser men. Before him stopped the old figure, white, shining now as if with some light kindled within, bent, laden with years, but holding a power beyond the strength of kings. (II 133)

Even with the assumption here of his destiny as a king, Aragorn nevertheless acknowledges the higher destiny of the White Wizard:

And this I also say you are our captain and our banner. The Dark Lord has Nine: But we have One, mightier than they: the White Rider. He has passed through the fire and the abyss, and they shall fear him. (II 133)

Gandalf's change from Grey to White has as its purpose the strengthening of the forces of good in the inevitable war with the forces of evil:

I am Gandalf, Gandalf the White, but Black is mightier still. (II 132)

But evil in its most essential form is more than blackness, the absence of color; it has the power to erase even the memory of color, as Frodo and Sam discover in Shelob's lair:

They walked... in a black vapour wrought of veritable darkness itself, as it was breathed, brought blindness not only to the eyes but to the mind, so that even the memory of colours and of any light faded out of thought. (II 415)

The grim obliteration of color and memory and Light and life is, fortunately, not the last word. Although darkness and evil are strong, far too strong to be overcome unaided by hobbits (or men), there is, ever to be depended upon, the salvation of grace as Sam comes to understand through his vision in the spider's lair:

... as he stood, darkness about him and a blackness of despair and anger in his heart, it seemed to him that he saw a light: a light in his mind, almost unbearably bright at first, as a sun-ray to the eyes of one long-hidden in a windowless pit. Then the light became colour: green, gold, silver, white. Far off, as in a little picture drawn by elf-fingers, he saw the Lady Galadriel standing on the grass in Lórien... (II 418)

It is significant that grace, "a light in dark places," "a light when all other lights go out" (II 418), is symbolized by a return of color, first the green and gold of earthy creation, then the silver and white of immortality—an appropriate association for a man who created his fantasies both in literature and art.

The insights into color which Tolkien developed in his life-long avocation of artist completely permeate The Lord of the Rings. Color functions throughout the trilogy as a marker of identity, as a visual leit motif establishing atmosphere and delineating themes, as a means of expressing the highest emotions, and as an external sign of inner moral and spiritual condition. The limited palette of pure hues which Tolkien provided paints Middle-Earth in primary sensations, avoiding the subtleties and nuances which inevitably would be evoked by using a profusion of tints, shades, and tones, the subtleties and nuances which color the Primary World. For, although there is no green
sun in Middle-Earth, although everything there has the hue of its counterpart here, nonetheless there is a profound (although perhaps not immediately apparent) difference between the two worlds. Middle-Earth is a world purposefully simplified, a world of pure hue, a world of black and white, as it were, a world unlike ours with its bewildering range of ambiguities, where nothing is clear-cut.

ENDNOTES


4 All quotations from The Lord of the Rings are from the Ballantine revised edition (New York, 1965).

5 These two quotations are from Humphrey Carpenter, Tolkien (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977). I asked both Carpenter and Baillie Tolkien (Tolkien's daughter-in-law and executor in artistic matters) whether they cared to elaborate on Tolkien's "individual approach to . . . colour;" both declined to do so.

6 These theories can be found in A. H. Munsell, A Color Notation, 8th ed. (Baltimore: Munsell Color Company, Inc., 1936).


9 In her introduction to the Catalogue of the Tolkien exhibition, Baillie Tolkien so describes her father-in-law's paintings. I think the observation is also applicable to his writings.


11If we consider the pigmented colors, Tolkien uses all three primaries (red, yellow, blue) and only one of the secondaries (green). Of the other secondaries, orange is never used and purple appears only three times, all in reference to Mt. Mindolluin near Minas Tirith (II 29, II 262, III 24).

12Compare the following descriptions:

The guards . . . were robed in black . . . upon the black surcoats were embroidered in white a tree blossoming like snow beneath a silver crown and many-pointed stars. (III 97)

Pippin soon found himself arrayed in strange garments, all of black and silver . . . Above the mail was a short surcoat of black, but bordered on the breast in silver with the token of the Tree. (III 97) [italics mine]

The same identification of white and silver is made by Gandalf in two thematically important speeches:

I am Gandalf, Gandalf the White, but black is mightier still. (II 132)

Give me Shadowfax! . . . I shall ride him into a great hazard, setting silver against black . . . (II 161)

13The heraldic term sable is also applied to Pippin "clad in the silver and sable of the Guards of Minas Tirith" (III 287), the Morgul army "clad in sable, dark as night" (II 400), and the orcs at the Battle of Helm's Deep "with high helms and sable shields" (II 174). At that battle Erkenbrand of Rohan carries a red shield without device (II 186).

14Compare with the description of that other ancient creature of the forest, Fangorn:

. . . whether it was clad in stuff like green and grey bark, or whether that was its hide, was difficult to say . . . The lower part of the long face was covered with a sweeping grey beard, bushy, almost twiggy at the roots, thin and mossy at the ends . . . (II 83)

15There are of course incidental and off-hand mentions of grey in contexts which have the more typical connotations of gloom and sadness; for example, Gimi's song...
of Moria:

The world is grey, the mountains old,
The forge's fire is ashen-cold; (I 411-412)

16 The primacy of which are certainly known to Tolkien:

We should look at green again, and be startled anew (but not blinded) by blue and yellow and red. ("On Fairy-Stories," pp. 56-57)

17 The initial description of Aragorn (as Strider) notes especially his "dark hair flicked with grey: and his "keen grey eyes" (I 215). The association of the Elves with the Rangers of the North (the Grey Company) is demonstrated by their battle livery: the Rangers in cloaks of dark grey with a silver rayed star (emblem of Elves) as a badge—the grey-eyed sons of Elrond in cloaks of silver-grey (III 59-60).

18 The synonymy of Elvish meth "grey," "silver" with English myth inevitably calls to mind C. S. Lewis's definition of myth-making as "Breathing a lie through Silver," a definition which Tolkien quotes and rejects in "On Fairy-Stories" (54).

19 As an interesting sidelight, compare Bilbo's line with what Baillie Tolkien said about her father-in-law's artistic technique: He extracted an astonishing variety of greens from his materials. (In her introduction to the exhibition catalogue)

20 Hugh J. Keenan makes this point in comparing the descriptions of Meduseld (II 148) and Minas Tirith (III 281), pointing out the differences in color and vitality in the two civilizations—Rohan, young, vigorous, if somewhat barbaric, and decadent Gondor. ("The Appeal of The Lord of the Rings: A Struggle for Life" in Isaacs and Zimbardo, pp. 77-78.)

21 A possible source for these color associations (the green and gold of earthly creation and the silver and white of immortality) is the corpus of the Pearl-poet, a poet with whom Tolkien has special affinities. He, with E. V. Gordon, prepared the standard scholarly edition of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, began an edition of Pearl which was never completed, and translated both poems. (See Carpenter's biography, pp. 35, 46, 105, 118, 137, 140-142, 175, for discussion of Tolkien's relationship with this poet.) In Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, green is associated with nature (e.g., the Green Knight has a literally "bushy" beard—a description not unlike that of Fangorn Treebeard) and gold with the splendor of earthly courts. In the Pearl, however, as Wendell Stacy Johnson points out, there are two opposing sets of images:

... on the one hand, images out of the world of growing things, images of the garden and the vineyard which are associated with the dust of the earth; on the other, images of light, and of brilliant, light-reflecting, gems... associated with whiteness... (["Imagery and Diction of The Pearl: Toward an Interpretation," Fil4 20 (1953): 165; reprinted in Edward Vasta, ed., Middle English Survey: Critical Essays (Notre Dame, Ind.: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1965), p. 98.]

In the Pearl, as in The Lord of the Rings, goodness and immortality are associated with brilliant light, gems, and whiteness.

As an example of the proposed influence of the poet on Tolkien, compare the following description of the dream-garden in Pearl with Tolkien's descriptions:

The adornments of that wondrous deep-
Were buteuse banks of beryl bright;
Ever ripping on in murmurous flight.
In the depths stood dazzling stones aheap
As a glitter through glass that glowed with light,

As streaming stars when on earth men sleep:

Stare in the welkin in winter night;

For emerald, sapphire, or jewel bright
Was every pebble in pool there pent,
And the water was lit with rays of light.
Such wealth was in its wonderment. (109-120)


Readers of Tolkien will recognize the light shining through glass, the stars, and the precious gems, the beryl elfstones, the gems used in the description of Nenneth Annûn and Helm's Deep. Johnson's description of the dream-world of the Pearl:

... all is shining, shimmering, gleaming, glowing, flaming, bright; the colors have an incredible brilliance... (100)

could as well be applied to much of Middle-Earth.

Tolkien's use of color seems, therefore, to owe something to the Pearl-poet who wrote in the second half of the fourteenth century. It does not, I think, owe much to the use of color in Old English poetry, Tolkien's other scholarly field. While Old English poets seem interested in contrasts of light and dark (as does Tolkien), they make very few references to hue, preferring color words without denotations of hue (like wæt and dûm). They also tend to describe color in terms of finish, matte or glossy. For further information on this subject, see Nigel Barley, "Old English Colour Classification: Where Do Matters Stand?" ASE3:15-28.