

10-15-1980

## The Making of a Hobbit: Tolkien's Tantalizing Narrative Technique

Steven C. Walker

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore>Part of the [Children's and Young Adult Literature Commons](#)

### Recommended Citation

Walker, Steven C. (1980) "The Making of a Hobbit: Tolkien's Tantalizing Narrative Technique," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 7: No. 3, Article 3. Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol7/iss3/3>

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

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



---

## Online Summer Seminar 2023

August 5-6, 2023: Fantasy Goes to Hell: Depictions of Hell in Modern Fantasy Texts

<https://mythsoc.org/oms/oms-2023.htm>



## The Making of a Hobbit: Tolkien's Tantalizing Narrative Technique

### Abstract

Calls Tolkien's fiction highly "audience-centered," inviting divergent interpretations of everything from the appearance of hobbits to the landscape; through the technique of leaving room for imagination, Tolkien is "demanding that his readers participate with him in the creative process."

### Additional Keywords

Reader response theory; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Hobbits; Tolkien, J.R.R. The Lord of the Rings—Narrative technique; Stephen Casey

# THE MAKING OF A HOBBIT

## TOLKIEN'S PANTALIZING NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE

STEVEN C. WALKER

No recent writer has been more extravagantly praised than J.R.R. Tolkien. The Lord of the Rings has been compared by apparently serious critics with the Prose Edda, with Genesis, with Ariosto, Malory, and Spenser.<sup>1</sup> Some think "its congeners are . . . Gilgamesh . . . the Aeneid . . . Chanson de Roland . . . Beowulf."<sup>2</sup> Others see it "closer to the Odyssey, Divine Comedy, Paradise Lost, or Faust."<sup>3</sup> Modernists find Tolkien "as good as War and Peace," "Spenglerian," "in the ranks with Eliot," located in superlative literary prominence "somewhere between Dickens and Wordsworth"—a position variously pinpointed as artistic intimacy with Blake, Coleridge, Keats, Shelley, Browning, Tennyson, Arnold.<sup>4</sup> Tolkien's fiction has reminded readers of Chaucer and Shakespeare, of Verdi and Wagner, of Wilde and Pound, of Melville and Proust and Cervantes and Faulkner and Marlowe and Henry James and Whitman and Kafka and Augustine and D.H. Lawrence and Defoe and James Joyce—it "may surpass Joyce's more radical work."<sup>5</sup> Tolkien's fiction has also reminded readers of James Bond, Buck Rogers, Tom Swift, Peter Rabbit, and "the excruciating cutenesses of Walt Disney."<sup>6</sup>

Tolkien's fiction excites passionately divergent reactions. I suggest that those reactions, contradictory as they are, prove neither insanity on the part of adulaters nor insensitivity on the part of revilers of The Lord of the Rings. Rather, the divergent enthusiasms reflect a vital quality of the work itself: this fiction is to an unusual degree audience-centered. Involving the reader in the very process of creation, Tolkien deliberately stimulates response which is as individual as it is intense. He designs fiction that provokes readers to react personally, even idiosyncratically. Tolkien manages that invitation to individual reaction through a complex array of ingenious literary enticements, but his technique is at base a simple matter of alloying vividness with sketchiness. His fiction is purposefully fragmentary, an outline highlighted by tangible details patterned to provoke readers to fill in its blanks. Tolkien's carefully wrought incompleteness lures the reader into personal involvement in the creation.

Take his hobbits, for example. In the Prologue to The Lord of the Rings, Tolkien outlines hobbit characteristics in what at first appears vivid detail:

They were a merry folk. They dressed in bright colours, being notably fond of yellow and green; but they seldom wore shoes, since their feet had tough leathery soles and were clad in a thick curling hair, much like the hair of their heads, which was commonly brown. Thus, the only craft little practised among them was shoe-making; but they had long skillful fingers and could make many other useful and comely things. Their faces were as a rule good-natured rather than beautiful, broad, bright-eyed, red-cheeked, with mouths apt to laughter, and to eating and drinking. And laugh they did, and eat, and drink, often heartily, being fond of simple jests at all times, and of six meals a day (when they could get them).<sup>7</sup>

Those hobbit attributes, apparently straightforward at first glance, turn out to be as "ramifying" as their convoluted tunnels. Indeed, hobbits prove not only complex but contradictory creatures. One would think those bright yellows and greens would make them colorful, but hobbits on closer inspection turn out to be "unobtrusive." One would expect curly brown hair on feet as well as heads to suggest a certain hairiness among hobbits, yet, except for the "down" on the chins of the scarce Stoors, no hobbit has "any trace of a beard." One might from the description guess:

hobbits to be peaceable, passive creatures, yet they prove "curiously tough," "doughty at bay." And should one incline to think them, on the basis of their eating habits, to be portly, again one must think again: they are "less stout and stocky" than dwarves. Note the hedging even on such a measurable matter as height, which for hobbits ranges "between two and four feet of our measure. They seldom now reach three feet; but they have dwindled, they say, and in ancient days they were taller."<sup>8</sup> All of which manages to seem somehow precise while allowing the reader a one hundred per cent variation in hobbit height.

I propose, on the basis of this disconcertingly diverse array of apparently precise hobbit statistics, that Tolkien is inviting us to make of hobbits what we will. Not that he allows the invitation to become so nebulous as to be un-compelling. Though there is little between but room for the imagination, the hobbit's curly-haired feet and pipe-puckered smile provide a provocatively concrete invitation to speculation. Tolkien takes us into his creation just far enough to entice us to go deeper on our own.

To test the success of that invitational technique in provoking individual response, I tried a simple experiment. I asked each person in three different groups of Tolkien admirers—a ladies' reading circle, a seminar of senior English majors, and an arena full of rabid Tolkien fans—to draw a picture of a hobbit. The results were dramatic. Even though the hobbit is Tolkien's best known and most thoroughly delineated character, even though all the respondents were thoroughly familiar with that delineation, and even after drastic allowances for questionable artistic abilities, the drawings confirmed emphatically that different readers view Tolkien's hobbit very differently.

About a third of the participants drew hobbits that looked like men—hairy footed, to be sure, and diminutive, but unmistakably men: "us," as one commentator suggested, "on a smaller, furrrier plane." Even among those who shared the idea of hobbits as men, however, there seemed to be a vast range of viewpoints as to just what sort of men they may be. The majority pictured Tolkien's heroes as tending to middle-age spreads and middle-class placidity, but there were intriguing extremes ranging from bowler-hatted British businessmen types to the seamiest sort of hobo.

Another third of each of the sample groups viewed hobbits as boys, their perspectives contrasting with the hobbit-as-man pictures in exuberance of expression, surprising thinness of form, and a Peter Pan air of insistent immaturity. But as with the mannish hobbits, the category was a spectrum rather than a pigeonhole: apparent ages among hobbits-as-boys, for example, ranged from eighteen years down to no more than three.

The hobbit drawings of the other third of each group were decidedly elvish. Partly the fairy quality was a matter of clothes. But the elvish tendency extended beyond pointed hats to pointed ears and ample beards upon oversized heads, creating a group of hobbits ranging in appearance from Rumpelstiltskin to Santa Claus's helpers. Some drawings pushed the non-human qualities of hobbits even further; an occasional hobbit looked very much like a rabbit.

Should you suspect those differences among hobbits-as-elves, hobbits-as-boys, and hobbits-as-men to result from lack of skill in drawing, you might contrast the Robert J. Lee hobbit-men with Barbara Remington's hobbit-boys with

David Levine's elvish hobbits.<sup>9</sup> Pauline Baynes, the most frequent illustrator of the hobbit, acknowledges the challenge of the creature's ambiguity by drawing her calendar hobbits with noncommittal backs to us. For the conclusive illustration, check an original Allen and Unwin edition of *The Hobbit*, illustrated by Tolkien himself, where you can observe his boy-elf-perhaps-small-men hobbits, too tiny (or blown up, too vague) for the discernment of any definitive characterizing detail.

The insistent ambiguity of Tolkien's illustrations of his hobbit implies that the vaguest of the experimental drawings, particularly those that seem deliberately vague, may be the most significant. Consider, for instance, the hobbit drawn in clear outline, with markedly furry feet, but, beneath a badly needed haircut, a blank face. Another version of the hobbit had only a nose--no personality-defining eyes nor mouth. Some drawings showed hobbits walking away, Baynes-fashion, in such a manner that the features were impossible to discern, and some--despite my emphatic request that the hobbits be drawn large so the detail could be observed--were less than an inch high.

Other Tolkien fans were still more explicit about the impossibility of capturing the hobbit essence in a picture. One person insisted, "I couldn't show you what a hobbit looks like, I could tell you what one wasn't. None of the pictures I have seen come close to my vague illusions." And still another much-erased and pictureless page must suffice to represent the many who refused to attempt a drawing at all, often with a vehemence which intimated I was profaning something sacred by the very request to imprison a hobbit on paper:

I think any picture of a hobbit anyone could draw would be a crime, because he is a creature designed to live in the imagination. The only way he can be successfully depicted is outlined in words as the author has already done.

Bear in mind that the creators of these divergent perspectives of Tolkien's hero were not novices in Middle-earth lore. In response to my ballot--

Indicate your reaction to *The Lord of the Rings* by circling one:

Among best ten/Rereadable/Recommendable/OK/  
Unfinishable/Nauseating books I've read

--two percent considered it "Recommendable," Thirty-seven percent "Rereadable," and a stunning sixty-one percent thought it "Among best ten books I've read." These are fans--Tolkien experts. From my rough estimates based on raised hands, fewer than half of the respondents had read *The Lord of the Rings* only once, and a sizeable group had read it a half-dozen times. These are people who know hobbits about as well as they can be known from the pages of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Yet they know them very differently.

The closest thing to a common denominator among the hobbit drawings was furry feet. But even this hallmark of hobbitdom was not universal; a few hobbits wore shoes. I considered exiling shod hobbits on the grounds that they represented insufficient knowledge of Tolkien's description, until I looked again at his actual statement on the state of hobbit footwear: "They seldom wore shoes."<sup>10</sup> From the soles of his leathery feet to the crown of his curly-haired head, "Tolkien's hobbit as revealed in these drawings was capable of incredible individuation--in physique, in age, in social status, in intelligence, in disposition, in virtually every way. The hobbit functioned for these readers rather like a literary Rorschach blot.

I conclude that J.R.R. Tolkien has with impressive success created a character whose vividly outlined incompleteness lures the reader into direct involvement in the creative process. The hobbit comes alive in the reader's imagination because his concrete embodiment depends upon the reader. That reader participation is essential not only in Tolkien's characterization but in his narrative; indeed, in his entire fictive world. Middle-earth as an artistic

locale has been much praised for its concreteness: "Everyone who reads these works feels the presence of a possible culture."<sup>11</sup> The intriguing thing is that individual readers are so sold on the precise nature of that culture they fail to notice the general disagreement about just what it is. One critic assures us, "Middle-earth is surprisingly fixed . . . the Shire, the rich English Midlands near Birmingham," whereas another insists with equal certainty that the tale "does not take place in England."<sup>12</sup> Other readers find in Tolkien's creation "exactly the same geographical relationship" as "the area of the epics in middle western Europe, perhaps France," "considerable rugged Scandinavian terrain," a "real" similarity to "the Colorado mountains where I live."<sup>13</sup>

Tolkien's openended fictive technique might account for negative responses to *The Lord of the Rings* as well as for divergencies among positive responses. There may well be readers, and very good ones, who feel that Tolkien, in leaving his creation incomplete, has slighted the work of the artist. There may be those who regret what they view as the superficiality of the work, who see it as Edmund Wilson sees Sauron's lidless eye--not a hauntingly evocative suggestion of reader-imagined evil, but a graphic inability to create a head, let alone a body.<sup>14</sup> There may be those, in short, who view Tolkien's invitation to reader imagination as a failure of Tolkien's imagination.

But I think Tolkien, in demanding that his readers participate with him in the creative process, has done the best thing a writer of fiction can do. For those who are able to involve themselves in the work, Tolkien's insistence on reader creation accounts for the most attractive quality of *The Lord of the Rings*: because it is to such a large extent reader-created, this weird fiction partakes of the quality of real experience. Thus it is that Tolkien addicts remark so frequently that they came back to Middle-earth, in *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings*, or simply in daydreams, as to an old memory. To come to Middle-earth is to come more intensely and at the same time more objectively to one's own deepest perceptions of life.

Tolkien actively demonstrates in his fiction his faith in the powers of human imagination.

The radical distinction between all art (including drama) that offers a visible presentation and true literature is that it imposes one visible form. Literature works from mind to mind and is thus more progenitive. It is at once more universal and more poignantly particular. If it speaks of bread or wine or stone or tree, it appeals to the whole of these things, to their ideas; yet each hearer will give to them a peculiar personal embodiment in his imagination.<sup>15</sup>

Tolkien's fiction attempts a "peculiar personal embodiment" in the reader's imagination. Among these readers for whom it works, it works impressively well. Because it requires exercise of the imagination, it responds with unusual sensitivity to reader awareness. It also expands that awareness. The fiction of J.R.R. Tolkien, like the magic mirror of his Elf-queen Galadriel, provides an almost infinite invitation to personal imagination: "what you will see, if you leave the Mirror free to work, I cannot tell. For it shows things that were, and things that are, and things that yet may be."<sup>16</sup>

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Catherine R. Stimpson, *J. R. R. Tolkien, Columbia Essays on Modern Writers*, No. 41 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), p. 7; Robert J. Reilly, "Tolkien and the Fairy Story," *Thought*, 38 (1963), 90; C. S. Lewis, "The Gods Return to Earth," *Time and Tide*, 35 (14 August 1954), 1082; Naomi Mitchison, "One Ring to Bind Them," *The New Statesman*, 48 (18 September 1954), 331; Richard Hughes, "The Lord of the Rings," *The Spectator* (1 October 1954), p. 408.

(Continued on page 37)

coffee-time on Sunday after mid-day communion:

Before the service was over--one could wish these things came more seasonably--I was struck by an idea for a book which I think might be both useful and entertaining. It would be called *As One Devil to Another* and would consist of letters from an elderly retired devil to a young devil who has just started work on his first 'patient.' The idea would be to give all the psychology of temptation from the other point of view....e.g. About undermining his faith in prayer, I don't think you need have any difficulty with his intellect, provided you never say the wrong thing at the wrong moment. After all, the Enemy will either answer his prayers or not. If he does *not*, then that's simple--it shows prayers are no good. If He *does*,--I've always found that, oddly enough, this can be just as easily utilised. It needs only a word from you to make him believe that the very fact of feeling more patient after he's prayed for patience will be taken as a proof that prayer is a kind of self-hypnosis. Or if it is answered by some external event, then since that event will have causes which you can point to, he can be persuaded that it would have happened anyway. You see the idea? Prayer can always be discredited either because it works or because it doesn't....In attacking faith, I should be chary of argument. Arguments only provoke answers. What you want to work away at is the mere unreasoning *feeling* that "that sort of thing can't really be true."

Incidentally, Lewis's inspiration came during a period of weather he greatly enjoyed--good wind and driving rain.

Kathryn Lindskoog

(Continued from page 7)

<sup>2</sup>Bruce A. Beatie, "Folk Tale, Fiction, and Saga in J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*," *The Tolkien Papers, Mankato Studies in English*, No. 2 (Mankato, Minnesota: Mankato State College, 1967), p. 6.

<sup>3</sup>Mark R. Hillegas, ed., *Shadows of Imagination* (Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969), p. xiii.

<sup>4</sup>Edmund Fuller, "The Lord of the Hobbits: J. R. R. Tolkien," in Neil D. Isaacs and Rose A. Zimbardo, eds., *Tolkien and the Critics* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), p. 36--Fuller quotes Philip Toynbee quoting W.H. Auden; Robert Sklar, "Tolkien and Hesse: Top of the Pops," *Nation*, 204 (8 May 1967), 599; W. R. Irwin, "There and Back Again: The Romances of Williams, Lewis, and Tolkien," *Sewanee Review*, 69 (October-December 1961), 577; Daniel Hughes, "Pieties and Giant Forms in *The Lord of the Rings*," in *Shadow of Imagination*, p. 96; D. Hughes, p. 95; George Burke Johnston, "The Poetry of J. R. R. Tolkien," in *The Tolkien Papers*, p. 65; Celrad Monsman, "The Imaginative World of J.R.R. Tolkien," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 69, (1970), 265; Reilly, p. 99; Burton Raffel, "The Lord of the Rings as Literature," in *Tolkien and the Critics*, p. 229; Michael Wood, "Tolkien's Fictions," *New Society*, 338 (27 March 1969), 493; Stimpson, p. 13.

<sup>5</sup>Johnston, p. 63; Monsman, p. 265; Marion Zimmer Bradley, "Men, Halflings, and Hero Worship," in *Tolkien and the Critics*, p. 126; Fuller, p. 18; Monsman, p. 264; Neil D. Isaacs, "On the Possibilities of Writing Tolkien Criticism," in *Tolkien and the Critics*, p. 4; Charles Moorman, "The Shire, Mordor, and Minas Tirith," *The Precincts of Felicity* (Gainesville, Florida: University of Florida Press, 1966), p. 86; William Ready, *The Tolkien Relation: A Personal Inquiry* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1968), p. 165; W. D. Emrys Evans, "The Lord of the Rings," *The School Librarian*, 16 (December 1968), 287; David M. Miller, "The Moral Universe of J. R. R. Tolkien," in *The Tolkien Papers*, p. 60; Patricia Meyer Spacks, "Power and Meaning in *The Lord of the Rings*," in *Tolkien and the Critics*, p. 263; Reilly, p. 91; Irwin, p. 575; Rose A. Zimbardo, "Moral Vision in *The Lord of the Rings*," in *Tolkien and the Critics*, p. 105; Sale, p. 247; Clyde S. Kilby, "Meaning in the Lord of the



Rings," in *Shadows of Imagination*, p. 75; Monsman, p. 271.

<sup>6</sup>Spacks, p. 97; Wood, p. 493; Charles Elliott, "Can America Kick the Hobbit? The Tolkien Caper," *Life*, 62 (24 February 1967), 10; Francis Huxley, "The Endless Worm," *New Statesman*, 50 (5 November 1955), 587; Fuller, p. 22.

<sup>7</sup>J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 2nd ed. (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1966), I.11. This work comprises Volume I: *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Volume II: *The Two Towers*, and Volume III: *The Return of the King*.

<sup>8</sup>*Rings*, I.10-15.

<sup>9</sup>Byrna and Louis Untermeyer, eds., *Wonderlands* (New York: Golden Press Inc., 1962), p. 55, includes a Lee illustration of the hobbit. Barbara Remington's can be seen in Nancy Griffin, "The Fellowship of Hobbitomanes," *San Francisco Examiner and Chronicle*, Sunday, December 18, 1966, "This World" section, p. 44, and David Levine's in Gerald Jonas, *New York Times Book Review*, October 31, 1965, p. 78.

<sup>10</sup>*Rings*, I.10.

<sup>11</sup>E. L. Epstein, "The Novels of J.R.R. Tolkien and the Ethnology of Medieval Christendom," *Philological Quarterly*, 48 (1969), 517.

<sup>12</sup>Stimpson, p. 27; Douglass Parker, "Hwaet We Holbytla," *Hudson Review* 9 (Winter 1956-1957), 605.

<sup>13</sup>Epstein, pp. 522-23; Alexis Levitin, "The Hero in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*," in *The Tolkien Papers*, p. 26; Beatie, p. 8.

<sup>14</sup>Edmund Wilson, "Oo, those Awful Orcs!" *Nation*, 182 (14 April 1956), 312-313.

<sup>15</sup>J.R.R. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf* (London: Unwin Books, 1964), p. 67.

<sup>16</sup>*Rings*, I.377.