A Nodal Structure in Tolkien’s Tales of the First Age?

Nils Ivar Agøy

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

Part of the Children's and Young Adult Literature Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol13/iss4/16

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

To join the Mythopoeic Society go to: http://www.mythsoc.org/join.htm
Abstract
Identifies “nodes” or “stable images,” which persist in “staying more or less the same among endlessly changing plotlines” as Tolkien developed his narratives of the First Age.

Additional Keywords
A Nodal Structure
in Tolkien's Tales of the First Age?
Nils Ivar Agøy

This article will deal with two different, but closely related themes, namely with J.R.R. Tolkien's use of stable, more or less unchanging images or motifs in his writings about the First Age of his "sub-created" world of Middle-earth, and with his re-use of certain plot elements. It is a slightly revised version of a lecture held at the first international Arda Symposium, arranged in Stockholm from 12th to 14th April 1985. As such, it was designed to provoke discussion, and it does not represent a finished theory. Rather it is meant to suggest a possible way of approach to Tolkien's early writings.

With the publication in 1983 and 1984 of the two volumes comprising The Book of Lost Tales, and, to a lesser degree, of Unfinished Tales in 1980, we have been given an exceptional opportunity to trace the development of Tolkien's conception of Middle-earth. Put simply, The Book of Lost Tales gives the early versions of the tales that finally appeared in The Silmarillion in 1977, and that Tolkien had been working on for most of his adult life. Not only finished up-as he thought --, coherent forms are included, but also rough drafts, outlines, numerous corrections, riders, fragments and other working papers; the whole being edited and thoroughly commented upon by Christopher Tolkien, J.R.R. Tolkien's literary executor. We can say that The Book of Lost Tales represents Middle-earth in its earliest form. In parts it goes as far back as 1916-17, when Tolkien was 25 years old, and it takes his private mythology through many stages of revision and complete rewriting up to the 1930s, at which time it had changed character and become the core of the book we know as The Silmarillion. Needless to say, the later versions of Tolkien's "Great Tales" differ from the earlier in many respects, sometimes fundamentally. Some of the most important parts, as we reckon, of The Silmarillion can hardly be discerned at all in The Book of Lost Tales, and the reader's overall impression, faced as he is with seemingly innumerable versions and plotlines going off in all directions, may easily be one of utter confusion, tempered only by (reluctant) admiration for Tolkien's staying power and his undeniably fertile imagination.

It is all the more interesting to see how certain episodes in his tales seem to be virtually immune to this ordinarily over-powering drive to change, delete, revise and rewrite. Now of course stable elements in different versions of the same story is nothing particularly noteworthy in itself: some essential features will have to remain the same if we are to say that it is the same story. No, the conspicuous thing about Tolkien's Great Tales is that some of the unchanging parts aren't really necessary to give the story its identity at all. They could be skipped, or perhaps replaced by something else without really changing the character of the story they are part of.

Perhaps the most striking example of these that I mean are the two passages describing how Turin the hapless unknowingly slays his friend Beleg, who has just rescued him from a slow painful death. The killing itself is essentially the same both in The Book of Lost Tales and The Silmarillion, but in the early version it happens under frankly improbable circumstances [1]. Moreover, the story lines leading up to that point are quite different. It looks as if the killing had to happen in exactly such an such a way; as if the picture of Turin clutching his sword and suddenly seeing his friend Beleg lying lifeless and blood-drenched in front of him was the point of departure, and that the surrounding story was written in order to make this scene fit in. Other possible examples of such nodes or stable images, staying more or less the same among endlessly changing plotlines, are

-Turin throwing the heavy goblet in the face of the haughty and mocking Saeros [2].

-The Elf-hero Glorfindel fighting the terrible Balrog on the narrow mountain path after the flight from fallen Gondolin (BLT2, p. 194; S, p. 243).

-Luthien the beautiful, standing before the subterranean throne of Morgoth the Dark Lord and singing him to sleep (BLT2, p. 32-33; S, p. 180-181).

-The people of Gondolin waiting on their high walls for the light of dawn, but seeing instead the glare of Morgoth's approaching army (BLT2, p. 172; S, p. 142).

-The mariner Earendil, as he climbs the long steps of empty Tirion, glistening with diamond dust as he moves (BLT2, pp. 255, 260, 261; S, p. 248).

-Probably one could also add

-Ulmo, Lord of the Waters, revealing himself in all his might to Tuor (BLT2, p. 155; S, p. 239; UT, pp. 28-30).

and

-Turin killing Brodda the Easterling in the victim's own hall and before the eyes of his household (BLT2, p. 90; S, p. 215; UT, p. 108).

I don't doubt that many more can be found.

It is possible that I have been unconsciously looking for just such episodes, but otherwise these are mostly visually very effective, often dramatic scenes, that would probably have looked good on stage or on the silver screen. One may theorize that Tolkien first, originally, visualized these scenes -- saw them clear-cut before his inner eye -- and only later placed them into a greater context, or, to be precise, into a number of different contexts, testing them out as his view of Middle-earth developed. The nodes or images were the important thing; just what the plot that led up to them looked like did not matter as much, even if the reader would probably judge the story primarily by this secondary plot.

We know that this line of thought is justified at least in some cases from what Tolkien wrote in several places about the origins of the story of Beren and Luthien [3]. The central image is Beren's first
encounter with Luthien as she is dancing at night in the Forest of Neldoreth, an image again stemming from a woodland glade near Roos in Holderness, where Edith Tolkien danced for her husband sometime in 1917.

This last may serve to illustrate the obvious fact that searching for the kernels of particular tales is no new pursuit in Tolkien scholarship, even though I do not believe the particular idea of nodes or stable images has been systematized before. Randle Helms, among others, has used a lot of effort trying to extract the kernels of the stories in The Silmarillion, The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings. Christopher Tolkien, too, during his monumental work of editing, collating, and commenting his father's work, has naturally in many cases told us exactly where different versions of a tale are at variance with each other, and what he thinks the central parts are. He has, for example, commented on Earendil's glistening raiment and the graphic image of Gondolin's people standing on the walls. Tom Shippey writes, in his excellent book The Road to Middle-earth, about a story's "kernel" or "lyric core" [4]. Among others he mentions the meadow near Roos as the core of the story of Beren and Luthien and puts forth as origin of Tolkien's Earendil-figure the now so famous lines from the Old English poem Crist:

"Eala earendel, engla beorthast,
ofer middangeard munnum senden" [5].

And the lyric core in the tale of the Fall of Gondolin, Shippey says, is Hurin the Steadfast, hero of Men, crying in his despair to king Turgon and thereby betraying to Morgoth the Enemy where Turgon's hidden city of Gondolin lies. This last scene, says Shippey, is "a picture, a posed tableau" (RM-e, p. 188). He also suggests that Tolkien may well "have accepted the thesis (not unfamiliar to medievalists) that all great works of fiction should contain a kernel scene or a "lyric core"" (RM-e, p. 182). Shippey's kernels, however, remain qualitatively different from the theory of nodes or stable images. This is because they touch upon the identity and significance of the story, as in the examples of Earendil and Hurin. It is a safe assumption that the lines from Crist were the basis of so much in Tolkien's final conception of Earendil that Earendil's tale would have been fundamentally different without them, if indeed it had existed at all. By that very token, the lines do not qualify as a node, as we shall show presently. And while Hurin's cry to the mountains is highly symbolic and significant as well that it does not appear in the earliest versions and consequently was not the origin of the passage. Only more accidentally do Shippey's cores coincide with the stable images, as in the case of Beren and Luthien. It is unfortunate that Shippey doesn't give any precise definition of what he means by "lyric core".

We, on the other hand, cannot allow ourselves to be that free. If we are to make the nodes operational in any way, we must find means to recognize them. Certain conditions will have to be met. The most important of these has already been mentioned a few times, namely that the images must not be a necessary part of the story's identity as such. We have to be able to talk about the story with and without the node. For instance, a fundamental theme like the two cosmic trees being destroyed by Morgoth and Ungoliant must be excluded simply because it is too central. Similarly, Turin's killing of the great dragon Glaurung is too basic an element in his story to be considered a node.

Another condition must be that we are dealing with reasonably limited passages that can be separated from the rest of the text with some claim of certainty. Basic conceptions like the Earendil-figure or the city of Gondolin can not be accepted, while, as I have said, I think that Earendil on the steps in Tirion and the congregation on Gondolin's walls can. Admittedly, this fence between basic conceptions and nodes/stable images is largely erected for pragmatic reasons, and the division should not be perceived as absolute. The point is that we cannot in principle know whether a basic conception is at the same time a node on the grounds that it would naturally be stable in both cases. On the other hand, it will often be rewarding to treat nodes and basic conceptions much in the same way.

Next, we have to demand of a node that it appears in at least two largely different versions of the same story, i.e. that it represents something resistant in a flowing and changing mass. In practice this means that today we can only examine properly the tales of the First Age, and that even then our findings will be a bit coincidental.

All this makes for a lot of drawbacks. What we have called a "node" becomes an artificial term not least because we certainly miss some of the most important exactly because they actually are a story's basic conceptions. And even when all precautions are taken, the method has to be used with care. Its subjective element can easily lead into temptation; there is a danger that every similarity between two versions can be called a node. [6]

It is perhaps notable that the majority of the examples of nodes listed above come from only three of Tolkien's Great Tales: the Tale of Turin Turambar, the Tale of the Fall of Gondolin, and the Tale of Beren and Luthien. These, are all fairly detailed, slow, and centered on a few characters. The more wide-sweeping chapters that deal with large spans of time and provide the broad background for the slower tales, have far fewer obvious nodes. This fact makes it particularly interesting to read Tolkien's letters that exactly those three stand at the very beginning of his great work of sub-creation:

"The germ of my attempt to write legends of my own to fit my private languages was the tragic tale of the hapless Kullervo in the Finnish Kalevalla. It remains a major matter in the legends of the First Age.... The second point was the writing, 'out of my head', of the 'Fall of Gondolin', the story of Idril and Earendel (III 314), during sickleave from the army in 1917; and by the original version of the 'Tale of Luthien Tinuviel and Beren' later in the same year." (Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien, London 1981, p. 345)

In the early versions of these stories we meet Tolkien at a point when his ideas are raw and his universe new, and when he had relatively little writing experience. Obviously, if we are looking for nodes, this is where we should expect to find them! Later, as Middle-earth developed and thought had to be given to inner consistency and backgrounds, the new material sprung more from what had already been written, or was at least shaped by it, and the nodes became less important and less productive.

The second main theme of this article is Tolkien's repeated use of the same motif in wholly different
contexts. As Anders Stenstrom has pointed out, it is essential that this repetition is held clearly apart from the nodal theory. We are now talking about elements in different stories, not in different versions of the same story. An example is how a crucial battle is won by the good side because the great eagles come to the rescue in the nick of time. This motif first in the Battle of Five Armies in The Hobbit [7], then again in the battle before the Black Gate in The Lord of the Rings (The Return of the King; hereafter RR), London, 1966, p. 169, and finally in the Battle of the Cleft in The Silmarillion (BLT2, p. 193; S, p. 243). Another well-known example is Glorfindel's duel with the Balrog -- also in the Battle of the Cleft -- which ends tragically when both he and the Balrog fall into the abyss (Ibid.). This is quite clearly repeated in Gandalf's fall in Moria in The Lord of the Rings (The Fellowship of the Ring, p. 345). The giant eagles who bear the heroes away from the catastrophe is another old acquaintance: both Beren and Luthien and Frodo and Sam get this kind of ride after having acquired a Silmaril and rid themselves of a Ring, respectively (S, p. 182; RR, p. 229). We can also consider how the eagles rescue Gandalf, Thorin, and company from becoming prey for the Orcs or dinner for the Wargs in The Hobbit (p. 100).

To go on with just one more illustration, what we may call the "Blondel-motif" leaps to the eye. This consists of a prisoner hearing his unlooked-for rescuer singing, and crops up at least three times. Fingon sings to Maedhros, who is hanging on the cliffs of Thangorodrim (S, p. 110); Luthien sings to Beren as he lies deep in the dungeons of Sauron on Tol Sirion (S, p. 174) and Sam, of course, sings to Frodo in the Tower of Cirith Ungol (RR, p. 185).

Tolkien's tendency towards this kind of recycling is easy to notice and has been much commented on, but perhaps most eagerly by the above mentioned Randel Helms in his two books Tolkien's World and Tolkien and the Silmarils. There he lists a large number of parallels between episodes in plots of The Hobbit, The Lord of the Rings, and The Silmarillion. One of his main theses is that "The Hobbit could be called The Silmarillion writ small" [8], while "one says without exaggeration that The Lord of the Rings is The Hobbit writ large" [9]. All in all, he argues convincingly, though some of the examples he uses to underpin his theory are a bit vague. A typical example runs like this:

"An evil power has stolen a great treasure from a good and creative being, whose presence and powers have until his loss enriched those about him. The treasure's physical essence is compressed and crystalized carbon -- diamond -- but the physical loss appears puny beside the moral devastation wrought by the theft. The former owner's son (or sons) grow pathetically grasping and vindictive, willing to destroy even friends or kinsmen who might hinder their efforts to regain the treasure, forgetting that treasure is as nothing compared to loyalty and love. A bald summary of part of The Silmarillion -- but look again, a bald summary of part of The Hobbit as well! (Tolkien and the Silmarils, p. 80)

Without passing judgement on Helms' theory one way or another, I am inclined to think that we, for our purposes, shall have to be more restrictive than that as regards what we will accept as parallel motifs, for here there is real danger of ending in pure speculation. The episode in question must not describe something that could be expected to occur of itself from time to time, and we have to ask if it cannot be explained from human psychology or as a Middle-earth custom. Otherwise we will no doubt establish every motif Tolkien describes as a new occurrence of the "eating motif"...

Well, then, we can now ask if there is any connection between the nodes and the repeated episodes. At least two should be fairly clear. First, a repeated motif can simply be a node that Tolkien was so taken up with that he wanted to exploit its general aspects as well. I think this may be the case where the fight with the Balrog motif is concerned. Second, and intimately connected with the first, Tolkien may have written some of his old motifs into new contexts because he feared that they would never reach any public at all if he didn't. This is primarily worth considering for The Hobbit and the earliest parts of The Lord of the Rings, written while Tolkien had almost despair of ever getting The Silmarillion published. Where there is doubt, it is possible that repeated motifs may help us to identify a node.

The assertion above, that there is little point today in looking for nodes outside the First Age, is correct in principle and as far as it goes. It may have to be qualified a little, however. Interesting links and similarities, sometimes reminiscent of nodes, may be found, for instance, between The Hobbit and the delightful Mr. Bliss, a very short children's story probably written between 1932 and 1937. The present author has touched upon these in an article in Mal­lorn, the journal of the (British-based) Tolkien Society, No. 20. One problem there is whether the two works can be viewed in any useful way as essentially the same story in different stages of development. If we decide that they can, we may speak of nodes; otherwise we must limit ourselves to parallels and repetitions.

It ought also to be mentioned in passing that Tolkien, in his letters, gives us some intimations of where in the Second and Third Ages we can start looking for nodes when our source material becomes more extensive. That the recurring dream of the enormous wave towering up over the green and fertile land is the origin of the Paradise-story of Akallabeth, should surprise no one who has read Humphrey Carpen­ter's biography [10], though it is perhaps less known that Tolkien saw the description of Cerin Amroth as the heart of The Lord of the Rings [11].

What, then, is the use of trying to find and isolate eventual nodes, and of compiling lists of repeated motifs? (Passing over with due contempt the spurious answer that philologists must have something to do as well!) We would say that the nodal theory may possibly be a means to map in even greater detail how Middle-earth, which seems so monolithic and stream­lined in The Silmarillion and The Lord of the Rings, is really put together, to follow at close range the literary development of one of our period's great works of fiction. Maybe it can help us towards a better understand­ing of some of the peculiarities of the Middle-earth corpus as well. In The Road to Middle-earth, Tom Shippey complains about the tale of Beren and Luthien, meeting among the hemlocks in the Forest of
Noldoreth, who first touched Tolkien's heart. The story about these two persons, so immensely important in themselves, had to be full of moving scenes, heroic deeds and dramatic images, -- which Tolkien therefore wrote and rejected in quick succession. His own relationship to Beren and Luthien was the precondition of the tale, and it did not alter because of a trifflè like the present state of the written manuscript version. Correspondingly, I think we may assume that a tale like Earendil's meant unimaginably more to Tolkien himself than to the average reader. The Lord of the Rings and The Silmarillion are full of references to the mighty mariner Earendil, renowned in song, but when we eventually reach the story about his life and deeds, it somehow doesn't come up to our expectations. It seems a little insipid for so legendary a personality. The explanation is probably that Tolkien associated so much more with the Earendil-figure than what eventually found its way into The Silmarillion. The Book of Lost Tales: 2, with its exciting, exotic, but wildly differing plotlines for the Earendil-story gives us some indication in that direction. So do, to a lesser degree, Tolkien's published poems from before ca. 1937. If a small digression is allowed, I will remark that these poems provide less material to the nodal theory than could be expected. Poems ought otherwise to be excellent repositories for such stable, emotionally loaded images as we are considering. When the results are so small, it is probably because the poems are mainly descriptive, not narrative. Beren's meeting with Luthien is clear, and I should say Tol Eressëa and Earendil as well, but for the rest we must make do with far vager references to Elven mariners and distant lands of happiness or brooding emptiness. If one is inclined, Tirion, Valinor and Numenor can be seen dimly. If we see the poems in conjunction with The Book of Lost Tales, we can perhaps guess at a motif that evidently fascinated Tolkien, but that he never managed to incorporate into Middle-earth in any really fruitful manner, i.e. the myriad of more or less wonderful and enchanted islands. We see from his earliest efforts as well as from The Silmarillion that he repeatedly tried to make use of this magic archipelago, but without any particular luck. It is probably used with best effect in the poem "Imram" from ca. 1945.

From all that has now been said about Beren and Luthien, Earendil and maybe the enchanted isles as well, we could proceed to ask the question if Tolkien did not actually write best without nodes and basic conceptions to divert his attention and displace his judgement; if his talent did not stand out the more clearly when the main themes forced the single episodes into being and not the other way around? Central and effective scenes like the Kinslaying at Alqualonde, the Burning of the Ships at Lothlórien, and Hurin's cry to Turgon with "the wind hissing over the stones" (S, p. 228) have in common the fact that Tolkien put them in at a late date because the story demanded them. --This approach will not be discussed here, but it may serve to illustrate the kind of questions and problems the nodal theory can produce.

Another point is that Tolkien emphasized that both Earendil and the whole story of The Hobbit were originally separate from the universe of The Silmarillion (Letters, pp. 346, 385). So were the legends of Numenor up to a quite late stage (Letters, p. 347). By looking at the -- possibly -- use of nodes it may be possible to delineate these "independent" sections in some way, and also to find others. From a scholarly point of view, this would be a job well worth doing.