10-15-2017

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Richard Angelo Bergen
University of British Columbia

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Abstract

Considers Tolkien's skilled evocation of evil and the way he manages to hold Augustinian and Manichean conceptions of evil in balance, particularly in his depiction of orcs.

Additional Keywords

Augustine, St.—Concept of evil; Evil, Nature of, in J.R.R. Tolkien; Horror in J.R.R. Tolkien; Manichean concept of evil; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Dragons; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Orcs; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Sauron; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Ungoliant; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Technique

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When it is already too late for Saruman, Elrond notes that "[i]t is perilous to study too deeply the arts of the Enemy, for good or for ill" (*The Lord of the Rings* [*LotR*] II.2.265).[1] And yet, J.R.R. Tolkien has left his readers with such strong impressions and images of evil that reflection and study seem called for; akin to St. Paul's ethos in 2 Corinthians 2:11, Tolkien was not ignorant of evil's devices. There is much to think on concerning this topic, for to say "that evil is one of the major themes of Tolkien's fiction is to state that water is wet. If we were to trace where the theme of evil appears in his three major works, we'd have to cite nearly every page and retell the entire history of Tolkien's mythology" (Petty, *Tolkien in the Land of Heroes* 99). In order to avoid such a long account, this essay will endeavour to narrow its focus to explore the manner in which Tolkien presents monsters, and will argue that there is a significant strain in Tolkien which artistically aims to present evil as having an overwhelming presence and power, but that this does not signify a latent Manichaeism in Tolkien's mythology. The essay will moreover consider some of the potentially problematic implications of Tolkien's views on evil and their relation to one particular kind of monster: the orc.

Perhaps Tolkien's most well-known essay is entitled "*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics"; it is broadly recognized as the most important essay in the history of *Beowulf* criticism. In this work, Tolkien states that his chief aim is to advocate for treating that remarkable Old English poem as art rather than history, treatise, or fact repository. He surveys critical attitudes towards the poem, and records how many critics appreciated incidental and stylistic features rather than the main matter of the poem. Throughout his essay, Tolkien elucidates why the *Beowulf* poet's choices are sophisticated and deliberate: in

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[1] One wonders whether Tolkien is referring to the intense scrutiny and sympathy *with* evil characters as they are practicing their "arts," which so much modern fiction features. Fritz Leiber and others have criticized Tolkien for refusing to give Sauron a sympathetic hearing: Tolkien "does not explore and even seems uninterested in exploring the mentality and consciousness and inner life of his chief villains" (qtd. in Birzer 90). Tolkien is very willing, it seems, to depict "evil in all its ingloriousness," but focuses upon its *effects and manifestations* rather than on its psychopathology.

particular Tolkien draws attention to how the conflicts with the monsters affect the structure and substance of the poem. He writes,

> If the dragon is the right end for Beowulf, and I agree with the author that it is, then Grendel is an eminently suitable beginning. They are creatures, *feond mancynnes* [enemy of mankind], of a similar order and kindred significance. Triumph over the lesser and more nearly human is cancelled by defeat before the older and more elemental. And the conquest of the ogres comes at the right moment […]. The placing of the dragon is inevitable. (32)

Tolkien, throughout, explains that the pessimistic Norse mythology of chaotic monsters attacking the hearth of humans and the gods, as well as the Christian mythology of the giants descended from Cain, were conflated in the mind of the *Beowulf* poet. Tolkien considers this to be a great strength of the poem: "It is just because the main foes in *Beowulf* are inhuman that the story is larger and more significant than this imaginary poem of a great king's fall. It glimpses the cosmic and moves with the thought of all men concerning the fate of human life and efforts" (33). Yet, evil is terrifying; "the outer darkness and its hostile offspring lie ever in wait for the torches to fail and the voices to cease" (33), and this is true to the real circumstance of men, for "God has never guaranteed to His servants immunity from temporal calamity" (44).

In a 1937 letter concerning the publication of *The Hobbit*, Tolkien insisted to Stanley Unwin that the scariness of the story must be preserved: "The presence (even if only on the borders) of the terrible is, I believe, what gives this imagined world its verisimilitude. A safe fairy-land is untrue to all worlds" (*Letters* 24). On this question of Reality and the terrible is a sentiment of clear resonance with fellow Inkling C.S. Lewis. In an early letter on the sales of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, Lewis wrote that "real children" liked the novel it even if schoolmistresses feared that it might frighten (*Letters* 3.93). Also, in his essay "On Three Ways of Writing for Children," he remarked further that,

> Since it is so likely that [children] will meet cruel enemies, let them at least have heard of brave knights and heroic courage. Otherwise you are making their destiny not brighter but darker. Nor do most of us find that violence and bloodshed, in a story, produce any haunting dread in the minds of children. As far as that goes, I side impenitently with the human race against the modern reformer. Let there be wicked kings and beheadings, battles and dungeons, giants and dragons, and let villains be soundly killed at the end of the book. Nothing will persuade me that this causes an ordinary child any kind or degree of fear beyond what it wants, and needs, to feel. (39-40)

Later in the essay, Lewis salutes this aesthetic feature of fairy stories, that the terrible figures "are not merely terrible, but sublime" (40). Similar ideas can be found throughout Lewis's *oeuvre*. For instance, in an essay "On Stories," he appreciates the numinousness that some gothic tales convey. One of his stories, *Perelandra*, is striking in the many angles of horror and fear it explores (and the diction of the novel confirms this fact): horror of the holy, horror of the demonic, the dauntedness that comes with unknowing, horror of vastness, horror of death, and fear of unfamiliar and potentially dangerous creatures.

Returning to the matter of Tolkien's fascination with monsters, he appreciated the flavour of fear that dragons could give to a story; he writes in his essay "On Fairy-stories" that "[i]n whatever world [a dragon] had his being it was an Other-world. Fantasy, the making or glimpsing of Other-worlds, was the heart of the desire of Faërie. I desired dragons with a profound desire" (55). However, Tolkien is not speaking of a "tamed" Disney dragon, for the dragon in the western tradition is not an amoral creature, but "positively" and unequivocally evil, having strong associations with Satan (as per the Revelation of St. John), as well pride and greed.[2] Tolkien himself basically concurs with this view, exposing the same logic at work in *Beowulf*, only one year before the publication of *The Hobbit*: "the dragon is real worm [but] the conception nonetheless approaches *draconitas* […]—a personification of malice, greed, destruction (the evil side of heroic life), and of the undiscriminating cruelty of fortune" ("*Beowulf* and the Critics" (B) 142). While Smaug is no personification, but a fully conversant three-dimensional character, there are some obvious parallels to Beowulf's bane: both stories have a dragon guarding an ancient treasure hoard (l.2214), the theft of a gold cup (l.2217), the ensuing rage of the dragon and the attacking of the nearby town (l.2312), the vulnerability of the dragon in an unprotected part of his underside (l.2705), and finally its death at the hands of a hero with an heirloom weapon (l.2700). Perhaps most importantly, both dragons are "driven to hunt out / hoards under ground, to guard heathen gold / through age-long vigils, though to little avail" (ll.2275-77).

The reader's enjoyment, as well as the development of the theme of avarice, are heavily dependent on the "most specially greedy, strong and wicked worm" (*The Hobbit* I.32), Smaug. More than four-fifths of the story passes in the anticipation, confrontation, and victory over Smaug. There are at least three close calls that are highly thrilling, as Bilbo is singed, and the dwarves' mounts are devoured. After the external threat of Smaug passes, the internal avarice of the various factions in turn causes there to be yet another external threat. Thorin is "quite ready to sit on a heap of gold and starve" (XVI.283). The Elvenking, too, has a "weakness for treasure […] and though his hoard was rich,

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[2] See esp. pp. 213-230 and 248-264 in Anne Petty's *Dragons of Fantasy*.

he was ever eager for more" (VIII.179). When the various parties fail to reach a settlement, the narrator diagnoses the situation as being diseased with "dragon-sickness"; Bilbo, too, complains, "The whole place still stinks of dragon" (XV.278). The fiery and desirous dragon eyes have a sort of omnipresence, then, which pervade *The Hobbit*, and the dragon as a tremendous, physical, evil monster, as well as a symbol of the psychological predilection for greed, comes full circle in this story. Tolkien, too, is drawing on a motif in Norse legends, in which the dragon-slayer, and newfound hoard owner, becomes a dragon himself.[3]

Although *The Lord of the Rings* features no dragons, it does draw much inspiration from *Beowulf* and other Germanic and Scandinavian sagas; Tolkien repeats in several letters that his chief atmospheric and creaturely inspiration lies in northern Europe. Shandi Stevenson presents an excellent essay on the ethos of the north in Tolkien's story, concluding that Tolkien "constructs a world with deep roots in the mythology of early Europe, capturing the fear, helplessness, violence, and pessimism characteristic of Norse and Germanic sagas and folk-tales" (93). Indeed, any cursory research into Tolkien whatsoever promptly reveals much evidence that Tolkien's evil beings are "based" (etymologically, pictorially, and often ideologically) on *Beowulf* itself, other Norse myths, medieval bestiaries and romances, fairy tales, and gothic fiction.[4] The insights from all these scholars is too vast to assimilate and convey here, yet it is important for our purposes here to indicate Tolkien's strong ties to the tradition of monsters and their significance, as well as acknowledge his creative adaptations and syntheses. As Reno Lauro writes, "monsters are an important literary element to Tolkien *because they mean something*." And yet, rather paradoxically, "They represent horrors and evils too elusive, complex, or banal, to often make sense" (75).

Tolkien, however, does not simply place a monster in his story, and let them passively effect their representation ("representation" is, after all, a highly allegorical word, and Tolkien "cordially disliked" allegory [*LotR*.

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[3] The name Thorin comes from one such legend. See Jonathan Evans' article: "The Medieval Dragon Tradition."

[4] Thus, for instance, Marjorie Burns writes about Celtic and Norse landscapes and creatures; Amy Amendt-Raduege writes an essay on the unquiet dead in Tolkien, and their imaginative root in Icelandic tales and burial practices; Rainer Nagel records the history of symbolism on spiders in the Middle Ages, showing that Shelob corresponds to the conventional vices associated with spiders in these texts; thus Maria Benvenuto writes about the vampiric behaviour of the Nazgûl and their links to the demonic in source texts from *Beowulf* to *Dracula*; thus Tom Shippey explains the Old English etymological origins for wraiths, wights, and orcs.

Foreword.xxiv).[5] A 1947 letter about *The Lord of the Rings* records Tolkien's assertion that "every romance that takes things seriously must have a warp of fear and horror" (*Letters* 120). Indeed, although the primary genre of *Lord of the Rings* is not horror, Tolkien's horror artistry has long been recognized by those in that genre as some of the finest. Michael Cunningham exposes the aesthetics of Tolkien's fear and terror tactics with particular acuity. His work focuses on the phenomenological experience of the reader as Tolkien foregrounds horrifying situations, particularly by using the trope of "crossing the threshold" (e.g., a barrier, crossroad, gates, arch, or cave mouth) into a new, foreboding space. In particular, Cunningham recognizes that Tolkien often signifies a supernaturally evil presence by painting "cold, lithic" zones that precede "a greenish light" (especially in the barrow-wight scene, Weathertop, Minas Morgul, and the Paths of the Dead) (126). Mostly, though, the aesthetic aura that surrounds each monster is shadowed and dark. Cunningham notes that although physical darkness is what it is, Tolkien often adds adjectives to enhance the quality of the darkness (such as "utter" and "impenetrable," in Shelob's lair, *LotR* IV.9.717) to render it thick and palpable. Importantly, Tolkien's drafts and notes reveal that he often did not consider his initial attempts at painting the darkness to be successful; one of his many "notes to self" in his earlier drafts are like the following one: "Minas Morgul must be made more horrible. The usual 'goblin' stuff is not good enough here" (qtd. in Cunningham 131).

And Tolkien was very *good* at portraying *evil*. An inscrutable and insidious Darkness pervades the War of the Ring, oppressively so when Sauron covers the land in the Great Darkness. Even without the ring in his possession, Sauron and his forces appear stronger than the forces of good, which is why Gandalf admits that victory "could not be achieved by arms" (*LotR* V.9.878). Shippey writes that "Mordor and 'the Shadow' are nearer and more visible than the Valar or 'luck'" (*Road* 153). This fact of the conspicuous "visibility" of darkness has led a number of critics to call Tolkien's representation of dark/evil to be absolutely elemental; the aesthetic elements of his story present a Manichaean cosmos of light and dark, archetypes of the bright such as

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[5] Although Thomas Gasque argues in "The Monsters and the Critters" that Tolkien's inventions of Shelob and the Balrog are artistically weak, supposedly for this very reason. He claims that these creatures possess "an independence that places them outside the central moral concern of the story—the destruction of the Ring. Their amorality, like their nonhumanity, reveals them as allegorical principles: […] Shelob of death or blind appetite, and the Balrog of a central disorder that no creature can withstand" (157). Gasque's suggestions seem preposterous to me, not least because his allegorical assignments appear arbitrary, but more, they ignore the marked *im*morality of Ungoliant's spawn and the Balrog, as shown in their dissent from Eru from the very beginning of the *Silmarillion*.

Galadriel's gift and Gandalf's staff, but all can be quenched, just as light sometimes overcomes darkness. "The Shadow Returns" was the title of Tolkien's draft of a sequel to the *Lord of the Rings*, and the history of Middle-earth sees many cycles of light and dark. The archetypes of darkness often give just as strong a memorial impression, ergo the constituents of the psychological and imagistic duality inherent in Manichaeism, so a critic like Pia Skogermann points out and celebrates (ch. 12). However, although Tom Shippey is sometimes criticized for arguing for Manichaeism in *The Lord of the Rings*, he represents Tolkien's views well when he explains that "[s]hadows are the absence of light and so don't exist in themselves, but they are still visible and palpable just as if they did" (*Road* 146-7). Indeed, Tolkien held the view that good and evil are not evenly matched because evil is merely *privatio boni*, the classical Christian position articulated by St. Augustine that "evil has no existence except as a privation of good, down to that level which is altogether without being" (III.vii.12).[6] The implication is that all beings are created good, but exercise their free will to choose evil. Elrond, for instance, echoes Augustine's ideas when he remarks, "nothing is evil in the beginning. Even Sauron was not so" (*LotR* II.2.267).

The same ontological-ethical reality obtains concerning Melkor, who was one of the foremost of the Valar, before he became Morgoth ("Dark Lord"): "He began with the desire of Light, but when he could not possess it for himself alone, he descended through fire and wrath into a great burning, down into Darkness. And darkness he used most in his evil works upon Arda, and filled it with fear for all living things" (*Silmarillion* [*Sil*] 31). Following Melkor, evil in Arda is "most frequently depicted in imagery that relies on two loaded words: *shadow* and *flame*" (Petty, *Tolkien* 99), words suggestive of the demonic in Christian mythology. The Balrog, a rebellious Maia, and roughly analogous to a

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[6] Ralph Wood's essay "Why *The Lord of the Rings* is not Manichean" also cites Augustine's concise formulation on Manichean ideas about evil in *Confessions* III.vii.12. Elsewhere, Tolkien wrote discursively, "In my story I do not deal with Absolute Evil. I do not think there is such a thing, since that is Zero" (*Letters* 243). Evil in *The Lord of the Rings* is *privatio boni*, chiefly for two reasons: First, temptation to evil appeals chiefly to virtue for characters like Gandalf, Galadriel, and Boromir. Even the most evil characters have (or originally had) good motives and objectives. Hence, Tolkien's comment that "you have to understand the good in things, to detect the real evil" (*Letters* 55). Second, there are many evils not centralized or in cooperation with each other; several of the factions of evil fight each other: "Oft evil will doth evil mar" (*LotR* III.11.595). Evil appears powerful, but since evil is selfish in nature, it is utterly far from having "all of its act together," and from exercising omnipotence or omniscience. Tolkien's "Mythopoeia" states that at the end of all things, evil will no longer be Real: "Evil it will not see, for evil lies / not in God's picture but in crooked eyes, / not in the source but in malicious choice, /and not in sound but in the tuneless voice" (90).

fallen angel of Christian theology, is called the "Flame of Udûn." As the Balrog approaches the company, Gimli mutters ominously, "there is a light ahead. But it is not daylight. It is red. What can it be?" (*LotR* II.5.328). Tremendous anticipation crescendos with the panic of the orcs and the *doom doom* of the drums in the deep, until the company sees a figure "like a great shadow, in the middle of which was a dark form, of man-shape maybe, yet greater; and a power and terror seemed to be in it and to go before it" (329). Its shadowed hands wield weapons of flame, and it is called a "fiery shadow" (330). Similarly, Sauron's physical appearance in Frodo's visions is a fiery, shadowy eye, and in the films, a panoptical one at the summit of the tower, Barad-dûr. Tolkien's narrator describes Frodo's experience of "seeing the eye" as follows:

> Frodo looked into emptiness. In the black abyss there appeared a single Eye that slowly grew, until it filled nearly all the Mirror. So terrible was it that Frodo stood rooted, unable to cry out or to withdraw his gaze. The Eye was rimmed with fire […] and the black slit of its pupil opened on a pit, a window into nothing. (II.7.364)

Shadow and flame: both have great magnetism and presence, even while both imply derivation and transience. The shadow is the absence of light, and the flame is an imitation of the Imperishable Flame of Ilúvatar; imitative, given that the latter is associated with productivity and creativity while the former is connected with destruction and industrialism. It is no accident that Gandalf calls the Balrog's weapons "dark fire," while his own Glamdring emits a white flame. Gandalf calls himself a "servant of the Secret Fire" (i.e., the Flame Imperishable of Ilúvatar), but differentiates this from the evil flame (II.5.330). There are several episodes that indicate discrimination between two kinds of light, but a particularly pertinent one is the confrontation of Denethor by Gandalf. When Gandalf first sees Denethor by the pyre, "a light like flame was in [Denethor's] eyes, and he held a drawn sword," but Gandalf's subsequent "coming was like the incoming of a white light into a dark place, and he came with great anger." Denethor's purview of the light of time is limited to the ashen blackening that fire causes, and has only a gravity toward mutability and depredation: "They have set a fire in his flesh. But soon all shall be burned. The West has failed. It shall all go up in a great fire, and all shall be ended. Ash! Ash and smoke blown away on the wind!" (V.7.852). There is something more enduring about the light from a divine source as when Yavanna's seeds become the basis for the lamps of Illuin and Ormal "so that all was lit as it were in a changeless day" (*Sil* 35). Finally, the choice of Mount Doom as the centerpiece of Mordor is an apt one, for the volcano is ancient, mighty and destructive, but ultimately transient: its entropic eruptions may desolate all around it, but it does not last forever, just as the volcanic period of any planet comes to a definite end.

Another strain of monster in *The Lord of the Rings* is what I would term, after Milton, "darkness visible" (I.63). First, there are the Nazgûl. They inhabit the paradoxical realm of "darkness visible" by being "undead." Their presence is deeply affective, and they strike their foes' hearts with despair unlike any other monster in literature. The Nazgûl are shadows of their former selves, having been irremediably *twisted* from their humanity: "to twist" is the meaning of the Old English *wridan*, from which *wraith* is derived, as Shippey has indicated. On Weathertop, they are so black that "they seemed black holes in the deep shade behind them" (I.11.195). Shippey writes that they are "like shadows, both material presences and immaterial absences: under their hoods and cloaks there is nothing, or at least nothing visible, but just the same they can wield weapons, ride horses, be pierced by blades or swept away by flood" (*Road* 148). But they are not Manichean essences of darkness; when Gandalf defies the Witch King, he condemns him to return to "nothingness" (*LotR* V.4.829). Shelob, too, is uncannily dark, even though she is not undead. She has a certain shadowy formlessness, as Tolkien shares the bare minimum of the Watcher's and her actual appearance; the effects of their appearances on the *characters* "fire the reader's imagination thereby creating a link between writer and reader" (Cunningham 128).

Perhaps the best example of all for what we are considering here is Ungoliant, the "monstrous and demonic black hole" (Birzer 93), who is another "darkness visible" monster. She has an obscure origin (the author of the *Silmarillion* speculates that she is a Maia), and is preternaturally powerful, more than a match even for Morgoth. She "took shape as a spider of monstrous form, weaving her black webs in a cleft of the mountains," and "sucked up all the light that she could find, and spun it forth again in dark nets of strangling gloom, until no more light could come to her abode; and she was famished" (*Sil* 73). This Ungoliant wove "an Unlight, in which things seemed to be no more, and which eyes could not pierce, for it was void" (74). Darkness may be the absence of light, but Ungoliant disturbingly seems to be a force that is able to turn light into darkness. Under Melkor's direction, she is so successful in her defilement that she is able to wither the trees of the two great lights, Telperion and Laurelin. We learn that then "was made a Darkness that seemed not lack but a thing with a being of its own: for it was indeed made by malice out of Light, and it had power to pierce the eye, and to enter heart and mind, and strangle the very will" (76). A cursory impression of this story seems to represent Ungoliant as a Manichean force of darkness, *par excellance*. However, there are some clues concerning her real impotence. First, we learn that the Unlight is, in essence, "void"; it does not have positive existence. The second is that Ungoliant remains famished; her darkness is not self-sufficient or indefinitely renewable. Moreover, we learn that Ungoliant took light and spun it into dark nets; her dark

nets are derivative from the light, and a corruption of them. Perhaps the most important detail to note is that the darkness *seemed* not lack but a thing with a being of its own; the seeming of darkness is often overwhelming—but seeming is not reality, and the shadow stays, for a time, on this side of eternity.

While I write all of this, I nevertheless find Shippey's argument that the story presents a dynamic tension between evil as a shadowy absence (Boethian view) and evil as a substantive power (Manichean view) ultimately very interesting and persuasive. In the crucial quotation (below) that Shippey prints from *The Lord of the Rings*, we must remember that it concerns what Frodo perceives, and is not a statement from Ilúvatar Himself, determining the structure of Arda for all time: "The two powers strove in him. For a moment, perfectly balanced between their piercing points, he writhed, tormented. Suddenly he was aware of himself again, Frodo, neither the Voice nor the eye: free to choose, and with one remaining instant in which to do so" (II.10.401). Timescales are an important consideration here, for us as readers, and for Frodo. Likewise, time is a phenomenological challenge for Augustine thinking through the existence of evil in the universe he inhabits. Book XII of Augustine's *City of God* is about whether the creation of will for angels was part of God's good creation, and how this will might have become evil for some of them in time, after the fact of creation. Augustine concludes that the will, substantially good at the creation, can become corrupted. G.R. Evans, a leading Augustine scholar, characterizes the Patristic theologian's thought on this issue by highlighting the enduring substance and activity of good beings turned away from God by their repurposed desires:

> Evil changed men so radically that they became mortal. It ruined the angels who fell. It is to be feared because it distorts God's good creatures, letting loose in the world damaged beings who are actively malevolent, exercising their wills for evil with a terrible energy, making the negative appear positive by the force of their desire. We must, therefore, fear, not an abstraction, but the terrible 'angelic darkness', darkness personified, the brightest creatures bereft of light and intent on destruction. In the wills of rational beings who have turned from the good there is power and substance, that makes the 'nothing' of evil a 'something'. (99)

For Tolkien, too, an original being will always exist as good in the beginning, but after being corrupted can be, in a sense, a "presence" for evil, the same presences from the creatures discussed above.[7] However, this presence will have an impossible time self-sustaining indefinitely, and will ultimately return to the

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[7] Lisa Coutras approximates this view in her discussion of evil as "darkness made out of light" (127-129).

void, as Sauron does. If the song of Arda has a warp of fear and horror, one must remember that the story is not complete.

Tolkien's famous invented term *Eucatastrophe* is sometimes misunderstood as meaning that there will be a *deus ex machina* to make sure each story on this side of eternity will have a happy ending. Rather, Tolkien maintained a "northern pessimism" where the monsters and demons may have their way in this world, which can coexist with a hope in Eucatastrophe. Eucatastrophe, Tolkien believed, "does not deny the existence of *dyscatastrophe*,[8] of sorrow and failure." In fact, "the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance; it denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat and in so far is *evangelium*, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief" ("On Fairy-stories" *75*). In *Return of the King*, Sam is given such a glimpse of this Joy when he sees a bright star, quite literally beyond the walls of the world: "The beauty of it smote his heart, as he looked up out of the forsaken land, and hope returned to him. For like a shaft, clear and cold, the thought pierced him that in the end the Shadow was only a small and passing thing: there was light and high beauty for ever beyond its reach" (*LotR* VI.2.922). Tolkien's hopeful-realistic perspective is reiterated in a wartime letter to his son Christopher: "all we do know, and that to a large extent by direct experience, is that evil labours with vast power and perpetual success—in vain" (*Letters* 76). The idea is also touched on in a most remarkable dialogue: "Athrabeth Finrod ah Andreth." Andreth, the wise woman insists to the elf Finrod that "the Nameless is Lord of this World" (*Morghoth's Ring* [*MR*] 312-13), an obvious New Testament echo. Because of the lack of direct intervention of Eru, men are tempted to think in a Manichaean manner; but "All wisdom is against them. Who is the One, whom ye call Eru? If we put aside the Men who serve the Nameless, as do many in Middle-earth, still many Men perceive the world only as a war between Light and Dark equipotent. But you will say nay, that is Manwë and Melkor; Eru is above them" (*MR* 321). The Light is more potent than the dark, but Eru, the source of this Light, does not intervene as pyrotechnically as those who work in the absence of the light. And Eru is alone capable of unmarring the earth.

The question remains concerning what can be unmarred on this side of eternity, and how evil can be combated. The great Augustinian insight that evil is a privation of the good, "down to that level which is altogether without being," has complex implications, particularly concerning the final monster this essay will consider: orcs. The problem of violence and orcs' redemption in

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[8] It is significant that Tolkien keeps *dyscatastrophe* in the lower case, but capitalizes *Eucatastrophe*, as if it is a proper noun. This grammatical move suggests Tolkien's belief that *Eucatastrophe* has true Reality while *dyscatastrophe* is temporary.

Middle-earth has already been raised at length by Janet Brennan Croft and Robert T. Tally, Jr., the first relating to the demonization of Germans in World War I, and the latter pondering whether orcs might in some sense be considered "good." Orcs, I believe, are very important to the impression that the army of the evil faction in *The Lord of the Rings* is overwhelmingly vast; they are, so to speak, the "infantry" of evil; they provide the disagreeable sweat and muscle that discourages readers from identifying with Sauron's factions in the War of the Ring.[9] Now, "orc" is the Old English word for demon, but Tolkien claimed that he chose it "only because of its phonetic suitability"; they were "not in fact *demons*" (*MR* 124). They do not fit particularly well into the categories of "demonic," or "darkness visible," but are far more humanoid. Tally's provocative article has highlighted several ways in which orcs are very human indeed. Orcs have sexual organs, and are mostly human in shape.[10] They banter like vulgar men. Tally finds that orcs, "like Men, may debate strategy, question authority, and dream of a better future." Importantly, he points to evidence from various parts of *The Lord of the Rings* and the appendix which indicate that "Orcs, like Men, have different cultures, languages, and philosophies" (24). Orcs behave much like evil men. However, the killing of orcs is not afforded the ethical reflection that arises from the killing of Sauron's men in *The Lord of the Rings*, and inquiring into their origin might provide a clue as to why.

In *The Silmarillion* we learn that "all those of the Quendi who came into the hands of Melkor […] were put there in prison, and by slow arts of cruelty were corrupted and enslaved; and thus did Melkor breed the hideous race of the Orcs in envy and in mockery of the Elves" (50). Treebeard echoes this view (*LotR* III.4.473), as does Frodo (VI.1.914). However, in later years, Tolkien came to be deeply discomfited with the view of the orcs expressed in his books,[11] and felt the need to theorize the metaphysical and anthropological implications of orcs more clearly. In his later essays (compiled by Christopher Tolkien in *Morgoth's Ring*), he tacitly rejected the view that their origin is a corruption from elvish (409), and wrote "[orcs'] nature and origin require more thought. They are not easy to work in the theory and system" (409). Tolkien recognized that if

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[9] In one letter Tolkien wrote that his story is "cast in terms of a good side, and a bad side, beauty against ruthless ugliness" (178). Orcs aptly furnish this casting and provide a lions' share of ugliness.

[10] Tolkien makes this matter fairly explicit in one of his letters in which he writes that orcs are "corruptions of the 'human' form seen in Elves and Men. They are (or were) squat, broad, flat-nosed, sallow-skinned, with wide mouths and slant eyes: in fact degraded and repulsive versions of the (to Europeans) least lovely Mongol-types" (*Letters* 274).

[11] In a letter, Tolkien tacitly expressed his dissent from Treebeard's position: "Treebeard is a *character* in my story, not me […] he is not one of the Wise, and there is a quite a lot he does not know or understand" (*Letters* 190).

the origin of orcs was elvish, then it would mean that Melkor had made corruption heritable, an act which would render Melkor far more power and "privilege" than Eru had given him. Therefore,

> the Wise in the Elder Days taught always that the Orcs were not 'made' by Melkor, and therefore were not in their origin evil. They might have become irredeemable (at least by Elves and Men), but they remained within the Law. That is, that though of necessity, being the fingers of the hand of Morgoth, they must be fought with the utmost severity, they must not be dealt with in their own terms of cruelty and treachery. (419)

This passage is somewhat obscure (for instance, does it suggest that elves and men are the agents who can redeem orcs? Even Christopher Tolkien notes his confusion as to this passage's meaning). However, it clearly demonstrates that orcs are not amoral, that ethical considerations are not moot in dealings with them, and it leaves the tantalizing suggestion that orcs are perhaps redeemable. Tolkien considers this possibility due to his Augustinian understanding of their origin not being evil, and through recognizing the theological impossibility of a being-generating evil.

However, Tolkien tries to dodge this conclusion. Tolkien at one point declares that orcs have "an irremediable allegiance to evil," and suggests the plausibility of orcs being "wholly corrupt": "Finrod probably went too far in his assertion that Melkor *could not* wholly corrupt any work of Eru, or that Eru would (necessarily) interfere to abrogate the corruption, or to end the being of His own creatures because they had been corrupted and fallen into evil" (*MR* 411). Tolkien conveys a seething indignance that the orcs are "abuses of his highest privilege" of sub-creation, and therefore they must be "creatures begotten of Sin, and naturally bad"; but this "natural badness" would only follow a past corruptive activity, and Tolkien adds the caveat, "I nearly wrote 'irredeemably bad'; but that would be going too far" (*Letters* 195). Elsewhere, he states that *only* Eru can grant an independent will to a being, and thus asks, "would Eru provide *fëar* [souls] for such creatures? For the Eagles etc. perhaps. But not for Orcs" (*MR* 410); orcs, then, are "not immortal" (418). Tolkien exhibits perplexity that orcs often appear to have very independent wills, which is why they are so quarrelsome, and are "conscious of their hatred" for their master (422). He also wrestles with the question of the soul and its relation to language, for the orcs can indeed use language; his solution is to assert that orcs carry a dispersed will from Melkor, and that their language is parroted and utilitarian

rather than creative and communicative.[12] This solution is highly problematic, though, not least because the orcs have longstanding cultures and languages, showing some measure of desire to distance themselves from the centralized hub of Sauron's commands and production, and return to their own affairs, as when orcs from the north argue with Uglúk and the Uruk-Hai stating, "We have come all the way from the Mines to kill, and avenge our folk. I wish to kill, and then go back north" (*LotR* III.3.446). Is Melkor the "fount" of ill-will and evil language, or are wills and languages corruptions of the good themselves? There is no evidence that Tolkien held to the solution that Melkor was such an efficacious and superabundant source, and elsewhere he hints (though doubtfully) at an alternate solution: "Eru would not sanction the work of Melkor so as to allow the independence of the Orcs. (Not unless Orcs were ultimately remediable, or could be amended and 'saved'?)" (*MR* 409).

The origin that Tolkien eventually decided on for orcs is that they are "fundamentally a race of 'rational incarnate' creatures, though horribly corrupted" (*Letters* 190). Tolkien explains "rational incarnate" by stating that the orcs were lesser spirits below the Maiar who became evil by following Melkor, and eventually took physical shape on Arda. Melkor subsequently manipulated their shape to mock the Children of Ilúvatar. Orcs were, then, "*beasts* of humanized shape (to mock Men and Elves) deliberately perverted/converted into a more close resemblance to Men" (*MR* 410). Tolkien proceeds to make the relationship between orcs and humans quite close: "the conception in mind of the Orcs may go far back into the night of Melkor's thought, though the beginning of their actual breeding must await the awakening of Men" (420). He notes that most of the orc broods extant to the Third Age were produced out of violently enforced cross-breeding between humans and orcs.

Severally, Tolkien affirms that the degree of corruption which orcs have descended to can be reached by humans, implying that the orcs and humans are on the same "chain of being." Interestingly, Tolkien points to the behaviour of contemporary men: "Men could (and can still) be reduced to such a condition (*MR* 422); orcs are "no more [corrupted] than many Men to be met today" (*Letters* 190). Furthermore, in almost every wartime letter of J.R.R. to his son Christopher, he compares the behaviour and the moral standing of many German (and English) soldiers to orcs. W.H. Auden had even once written a letter asking Tolkien if the notion that an entire race was irredeemably wicked was not heretical, and Tolkien responded as follows: "We believe that, I

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[12] The appendix of *The Lord of the Rings* explains that orcs "took what they could of other tongues and perverted it to their own liking; yet they made only brutal jargons, scarcely sufficient even for their own needs, unless it were for curses and abuse" (App.F.1131).

suppose, of all human kinds and sorts and breeds, though some appear, both as individuals and groups to be, by us at any rate, unredeemable" (*Letters* 355).

In summary, one gets the sense from his essays and letters that Tolkien is uncomfortable with stating that orcs are altogether irredeemable, and this is probably because of his commitment to an Augustinian understanding of evil, and orcs' close association with corrupted humanity. However, orcs in *The Lord of the Rings* certainly do appear unredeemable. Following an analysis of orcish behaviour, Tom Shippey's expert observation is that orcs, in Augustinian fashion, "recognize the idea of goodness, appreciate humor, value loyalty, trust, group cohesion, and the ideal of higher cause than themselves, and condemn failings from these ideals in others" ("Orcs, Wraiths, Wights" 186), but do not do the good they ought, and hence chronically ironize their own "ideals." Shippey continues, "there is in Tolkien's presentation of the orcs […] a quite deliberate realism. Orcish behavior is human behavior, and their inability to judge their own actions by their own moral criteria is a problem all too sadly familiar" (189). Tolkien gives the orcs no narrative opportunities to redeem themselves. Their servitude to a tyrant, their gratuitous ugliness, their mean-spirited joking, and their bullying of the hobbits all perjure them in the eyes of the reader. Thus we cheer when Aragorn sportily proclaims "Forth the Three Hunters!" (*LotR* III.1.420), when Gimli quips about being more wakeful when orc-necks are nearby (III.7.532), and when he and Legolas play their kill-counting game; it appears that part of Boromir's redemption in his last hours, is the stack of orcs he slays; we rejoice when the orcs at Cirith Ungol begin to feud violently. Even though orcish behaviour is obviously comparable to human behaviour, the reader is never asked to consider any alternative course of action against them other than violence,[13] and is constantly encouraged to look on them as evil monsters, as foulness that is best exterminated by arms.

Something about this readerly experience is dissonant with the virtue that is praised perhaps above all others in the book: pity. Tolkien wrote in one of his letters that his story "breathes Mercy from start to finish" (qtd. in Shippey, *Road* 145). Gandalf's speech to Frodo is also of great relevance to the discussion above:

> "What a pity that Bilbo did not stab that vile creature, when he had a chance!"
> "Pity? It was pity that stayed his hand. Pity, and Mercy: not to strike without need. And he has been well rewarded, Frodo. Be sure that he took so little hurt from the evil, and escaped in the end, because he began his ownership of the Ring so. With pity." […]

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[13] The only explicit evidence to the contrary is Faramir's off-hand comment that he "would not snare even an orc with a falsehood" (IV.5.664).

"Now at any rate [Gollum] is as bad as an Orc, and just an enemy. He
deserves death"

"Deserves it! I daresay he does. Many that live deserve death. And
some that die deserve life. Can you give it to them? Then do not be too
eager to deal out death in judgement." (I.2.59)

Indeed, Gollum is a vile creature, no less ugly than an orc, and yet he is shown
pity, first by Bilbo, then by Frodo, and then by Sam, thus being given several
opportunities to find redemption. If *The Lord of the Rings* pits the forces of good
and evil against each other in non-negotiable clashes of arms, it is an unsettling
oddity that Gollum-Sméagol is given the opportunity to negotiate with himself
in an inner *psychomachia* for redemption. Also, in "The Scouring of the Shire,"
Saruman is granted forgiveness, even though Frodo asserts, "He is fallen, and
his cure is beyond us; but I would still spare him, in the hope that he may find
it" (*LotR* VI.8.1019). Tally, moreover, observes that

in the distinction between enemy Men and enemy Orcs, Tolkien is willing
to accord some rights and respectability even to these fallen or lowborn
humans fighting on Sauron's behalf, as when Aragorn—now King
Elessar of Gondor—releases the Easterlings who had surrendered on the
battlefield, makes peace with the swarthy men of the South, and frees the
thralls of Mordor, granting them lands in that region. (21)

None of this is to argue that Tolkien was a pacifist. Any glance at
Tolkien's letters, even the ones which lament the "waste of war," shows that he
was no pacifist. The saintly Faramir's articulation of the just war theory seems
to approximate Tolkien's own views. The "Free Peoples of Middle-earth" were
not the aggressors, but had need to resist Sauron and his minions (including
many humans). The goodness of a cause, and the legitimacy of violence in the
"real world," Tolkien maintains, has little to do with whether there are orcs in
your army (because there always will be), but it matters "who are your captains
and whether they are orc-like per se!" (*Letters* 82). But then, the question
inevitably emerges: given Augustinian doctrine, how "applicable" is Tolkien's
story to the real world, in which we meet human beings that act like orcs? If we
are "to do what is in us for the succour of those years wherein we are set,
uprooting the evil in the fields that we know" (*LotR* V.9.879), does that mean we
"hunt orc" and kill the worst sorts of humans? Does it mean we refuse arms
completely and act as ethically as possible toward them? The question of
legitimate violence and the scope of mercy is complex enough just in the sphere
of Middle-earth. Birzer certainly seems to think there is a wide application of
mercy, and unequivocally states that "orcs, like all sentient creatures except the
devil, are ultimately redeemable" (94), and therefore orcs must be shown the

same mercy as, for instance, Sméagol is given. Stevenson's essay on Tolkien is not as explicit as Birzer, but he does highlight Christianity's breakthrough view of evil which transformed European perspectives toward the potentially dangerous monsters "out there": "good cherishes the 'other' while evil strives for mastery and uniformity" (109). Wood, however, writes that "there is no forgiveness for the minions of Sauron. The orcs and Uruk-hai are wholly evil, and to slay them is to experience the joy of justice" (*Gospel* 94). All three of these scholars show sympathy for Augustinian theology, and yet they do not concur about the orcs; one wonders indeed with which of them Tolkien himself would concur.

I believe that the (ir)resolution to this issue has much to do with what one believes about the degrees of corruption. Although some theologians throughout the centuries (like Origen) have suggested the possibility of Satan and demons repenting, Christians have by and large concurred with Jude v.6 which affirms that "everlasting chains" are reserved for "angels which kept not their first estate." In Tolkien's mythology, it seems ridiculous to suggest that Melkor, Sauron, or Shelob could repent, they having rejected Eru for so long. And yet, cannot orcs (and men) descend into further levels of corruption? Wood explains that this is the implication of the Augustinian view, although he does not connect it explicitly to orcs: "Soon the will that had acted initially without compulsion is itself compelled, addicted, trapped" ("Tolkien's Augustinian" 92). Gracia Fay Ellwood supports this point, and emphasizes that in Middle-earth, corruption can very quickly lead to a spiral of further corruption and enslavement, which will eventually lead to an incontrovertible de-personalization of the self (a case study being the Mouth of Sauron, 42). "Corruption" is a refrain in *Morgoth's Ring*, and Tolkien flirts with the idea that the orcs became "wholly corrupted." But "wholly corrupt" would imply that there is no being whatsoever. Tolkien settles on "horribly corrupt," but also refuses to call the orcs "irredeemable."

Tolkien's discussions about orcs in his letters and in *Morgoth's Ring* did not lead to altogether stable conclusions. Even though Tolkien theorized more about orcs, I do not get the sense that he would have changed the manner in which orcs are depicted and engaged with by the forces of good. What he has in *The Lord of the Rings* works *artistically*; it feels like a credible secondary world, and orcs are an integral part of it. This may have to do in part with Lykke Guanio-Uluru's observation that from the creation myth, beauty and harmony are associated with the morally good, and dissonance is associated with evil, and this extends to the races of Middle-earth. Tolkien explains some motivations for his authorial creation of orcs in terms of genre:

> I think the orcs as real a creation as anything in 'realistic' fiction […]; only
> in real life they are on both sides, of course. For 'romance' has grown out
> of 'allegory', and its wars are still derived from the 'inner war' of allegory
> in which good is on one side and various modes of badness on the other.
> In real (exterior) life men are on both sides: which means a motley
> alliance of orcs, beasts, demons, plain naturally honest men, and angels.
> (*Letters* 82)

However, one does feel a disconnect between the extreme ethic of pity and
mercy exercised toward horribly corrupt Saruman or wretched Gollum, and the
ethic of "kill at will" exercised toward horribly corrupt and wretched orcs. It is
perhaps worth remarking that the allegorical aspect of the Middle-earth conflict
is a site of substantial problems, and one can only speculate on whether Tolkien
"cordially disliked" these.

And so, perhaps surprisingly, it is the orcs, the least fearful and most
humanoid of the monsters in Middle-earth, which present the greatest challenge
for an Augustinian theology of sin and evil to be applied in Tolkien's
mythology. All of the more powerful and more sinister evil monsters and beings
do not necessitate a Manichean world, for Tolkien often beckons beyond the
walls of the world; rather the demonic and "darkness visible" monsters are
entirely consonant with an Augustinian understanding of evil as a privation of
the good down to the level of non-being, even though their presence (and
presentation) is often felt by the reader to be horrific and overwhelming. This
paper has aimed to elucidate these issues, and to expose some of Tolkien's art
and intent in depicting evil, while probing at theoretical spectres and ethical-
authorial problems. For Tolkien, evil is present in the world humans inhabit,
cosmic evil and mundane evil, and in order for stories to feel real, they should
depict this evil in its full range. And yet, an evil sub-creation of the good (one
might coin the term, sub-sub-creation) will be doomed to imitation and cannot
have True Reality; however, the inverse (not corrupted) *reality* is that Tolkien
was highly creative and was *very good* at depicting evil.

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About the Author

Richard Angelo Bergen is a fourth-year PhD candidate for medieval and early modern English literature at the University of British Columbia. He holds a Joseph-Armand Bombardier Canada Graduate Scholarship from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, and has published essays on Milton, Bunyan, cosmology, spatiality, and allegory. He was a Research Assistant for the Inklings Institute of Canada in 2014/2015, and regularly reads and presents on Lewis and Tolkien.