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The Nature of Dreams in *The Lord of the Rings*

**Abstract**
Lists the dreams in *The Lord of the Rings* and speculates on their nature, origin, and purpose. Considers how they enhance the plot and tone.

**Additional Keywords**
Dreams in *The Lord of the Rings*; Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings*—Dreams; Sarah Beach
The Nature of Dreams
in The Lord of the Rings

Karl Schorr

Dreams are one of the most intriguing features of The Lord of the Rings; however, they are often overlooked. Though few serious readers of Tolkien would deny that the fellowship's waking hours are filled with wonder and adventure, fewer still still derive pleasure and insight from the characters' subconscious escapades.

Every dream in this epic has significance, and each takes one of three general forms: it may deal with past events, even if the events depicted are yet unknown to the dreamer; a dream might also mirror the present, and transport a character to witness something hundreds of miles away; finally, a dream may reveal mysterious signs of the future.

Tolkien spends more time with the dreams of Hobbits than he does with those of any other race. They dream frequently throughout the tale, and certain "dream themes" stand out. Hobbits, especially Merry and Pippin, often visualize tunnels. In Gondor, Merry's dream takes place in a "tunnel leading to a tomb" (III,163); at one point Pippin hears his voice "echoing in black tunnels" (II,53); and they both are in a "tunnel of misery," while on vacation with the orcs (II,66). The consistent reappearance of underground burrows in Hobbit dreams is in part due to the race's domestic habits; but tunnels also could symbolize a dark situation and an apparent solution (continued travelling), which could possibly lead to a greater darkness (deeper into the ground or becoming more seriously lost). This circumstance parallels Tolkien's plot, where the "dark situation" represents Sauron's threat, the "apparent solution" is the Ring's destruction, and the "possibility of greater darkness" as a result is the increasing chance of the Dark Lord's capturing the Ring on its way to Orodruin.

It is fitting that Frodo, the protagonist, dreams more often that any other character in this epic. While still in the Shire, "visions of mountains that he had never seen came into his dreams." These images remind Frodo of his task, if not confirm it as his duty. Whenever Frodo is safe within a sanctuary, strange dreams usually visit him and rid his mind of any serious notion to stay and forsake his mission. These dreams occur while he is enjoying the Shire, Bombadil's house, Rivendell, and probably Lothlorien ("he knew somehow that the time was very near when he must leave Lothlorien.") (I,466). Frodo's dreams are usually prophetic: he visualizes the Misty Mountains, Isengard, and the Grey Havens long before ever having seen these places. He is also the only character reported to talk in his sleep. He murmurs, "Gandalf, Gandalf." While asleep in Ithilien (II,392).

Though Frodo's dreams are many and varied, almost all of them share something—the wind. He hears the sound of "a great wind coming over the leaves of the forest" (I,154); while dreaming of Gandalf's escape from Orthanc, Frodo senses "a noise like a strong wind blowing" (I,177); during a dream of the attack on his house at Crickhollow, a vision of something that is presently happening as Frodo subconsciously imagines it, he feels the wind "curling round the house and shaking it" (I,240). Frodo frequently dreams of fire, as well. "He thought a fire was heating his toes" on Caradhras (I,379), and flame rarely leaves his mind while in Mordor.

Merry's dreams are very peculiar. Being a Bucklander, he is more accustomed to water than any other Hobbit in the fellowship, buy Merry more than once dreams of deep water and drowning (I,178,235).

Considering the Hobbits' dreams collectively yields an interesting theme. The things that consistently appear are earth (tunnels), air (wind), fire, and water. These were considered the four "elements," or fundamental components of the universe, in medieval times. Not only is the time period correct, but Tolkien is also commenting on Hobbit (and therefore human) comradeship. The elements are basic, and their union is necessary for a stable universe. About the same, in a sense, could be said for Frodo, Sam, Merry, and Pippin.

Hobbits are not the only people to dream—humans do, as well. Faramir's dreams get more attention than those of any other man. He has visions of the drowning of Numenor, and of a "great dark wave . . . coming on, darkness unescapable" (III,297). Faramir often (and Boromir once) has what is probably the most important dream in The Lord of the Rings: a voice cries:

Seek for the sword that was broken:
In Imladris it dwells;
There shall be counsels taken
Stronger than Morgul-spells.
There shall be shown a token
That doom is near at hand,
For Isildur's Bane shall waken,
And the Hafling forth shall stand (I,323.)

Denethor and his sons interpret the dream correctly, and Boromir heeds it. Not only does this allow the Council of Elrond to be complete, but it also gives Gondor some, if not much, hope.

Many others in this epic have subconscious visions, but to a lesser extent. Aragorn feels things in his sleep (I,407), and Elves blend "living night and deep dream" (II,55). Gollum has "secret dreams" (II,325), while Sam's are usually trouble-free.

A critical question to ask when studying dreams is why do they occur at all? Why do the minds of characters in Middle-earth continue to be active when their owners have gone to sleep? A number of explanations are possible. Many dreams are a direct result of the dreamer's experiences prior to sleeping. Merry takes part in a dreadful incident with Old Man Willow, Continued on page 46
strongly disagree. Celtic tradition is alive and evolving, and will continue as long as the Celtic languages are spoken. It is still sensitive to myth and to the enthusiasm myth generates, and to the power of language. Iolo and La Villemarque did not come to this tradition as strangers; they had the linguistic, cultural and imaginative background necessary to appreciate its heritage. They did not simply impose alien forms upon it, but, through a wondrously creative alchemy, transmuted it, without violating its essence, to make it more intensely involving for their own generations—just as the Christianized Celts of the Middle Ages had transmuted their pagan heritage to make it serve their new reality. Iolo's mythology and La Villemarque's imaginary folklore enriched and revitalized the great imaginative tradition of the Celts, and gave their cultures much-needed strength and self-confidence in a time of weakness. Now that the "forgery" debate is closed, it is time for us to study and enjoy this new branch of Celtic tradition for its own sake, and perhaps to recognize that it embodies at least a small measure of the Divine awen in which Iolo so devoutly believed.

NOTES

3. LA VILLEMARQUE: 1867, p. 9. Further references will be identified as BB in the text. In citations, I have changed the spelling of some words to conform to modern Breton usage. All English translations are my own.


5. For a discussion of this recent development see BREKILIEN: 1976, pp. 119-20.

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The Nature of Dreams: continued from page page 21 and a few hours later he goes to sleep and dreams about it. While he and Pippin are in the ores' possession, the Hobbits dream of ores. The reason for these and many other dreams is simply previous physical stimuli.

Other dreams surely have more purpose. The one that Faramir and Boromir share cannot be called coincidence; there is some supernatural power at work. Though this supreme authority is never named in The Lord of the Rings, it is the same one that "meant" Frodo to receive the Ring (I,88), and "ordered" the Council of Elrond to take place (I,318).

Both the Ring and the Black Breath influence the dreams of those with whom they come in contact. By the time Frodo reaches Mordor, his sleep is "full of dreams of fire" (III,241); and even after it is destroyed, the Ring continues to haunt Frodo's dreams. In the Shire, Farmer Cotton sees Frodo "half in a dream," holding Arwen's gift and groping for the Ring. "It is gone forever," says Frodo (III,376).

The Black Breath, the terrible spell of the Nazgul, causes evil and deceptive dreams. When Eowyn is affected, voices tell her falsely of Eomer's death (III,176). Also, Merry is exposed to the spell in Bree (I,235).

Not only do dreams and their prophecies benefit the members of the fellowship, they also add depth and enchantment to Tolkien's tale. The reader's fascination with Gandalf's escape from Orthanc is heightened by his knowledge of Frodo's related (but just recently interpreted) dream. When a swift sunrise greets Frodo after the Grey Havens, it is comforting to remember the same scene in a year-old dream. Yes, whether they deal with "pinnacles of stone," "great dark waves," or "willow trees," the most satisfying aspect of dreams is their contribution to the majesty of The Lord of the Rings.

Notes

*All references refer to the 1970 edition published by Ballantine Books.