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## Point of View in Tolkien

### **Abstract**

Many stories are told by more than one teller in Tolkien's works. This paper compares different versions to see what areas of interest or emphasis arise, and what differences might be explained by the specific interests or culture of the teller. The paper also evaluates which kinds of stories are told most often by which tellers.

### **Additional Keywords**

The Hobbit; The Lord of the Rings; narrators; points of view; The Silmarillion; Unfinished Tales

# Point of View in Tolkien

Christine Barkley

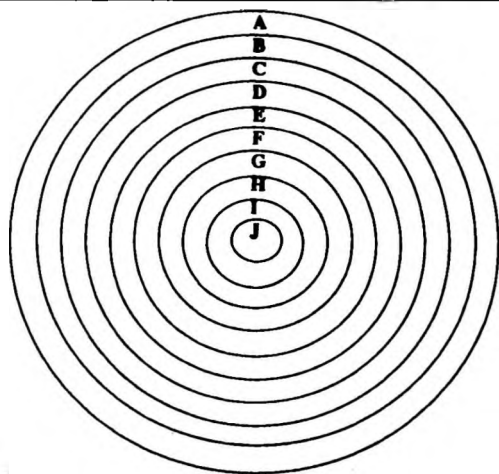
**Abstract:** Many stories are told by more than one teller in Tolkien's works. This paper compares different versions to see what areas of interest or emphasis arise, and what differences might be explained by the specific interests or culture of the teller. The paper also evaluates which kinds of stories are told most often by which tellers.

**Keywords:** *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings*, narrators, points of view, *The Silmarillion*, *Unfinished Tales*

*Peter Pan* is a very different story told from the point of view of Captain Hook rather than Wendy, as in Steven Spielberg's *Hook*. John Gardner's *Grendel* changes our perspective of *Beowulf*. A story from the point of view of Javert (as opposed to Jean Valjean) in *Les Misérables* or from the point of view of the Sheriff of Nottingham rather than Robin Hood would not only change our sympathies somewhat but also our perceptions about the world, what is right and wrong. Point of view is extremely important in a story. It affects our moral sense and our understanding of the secondary world of the tale. It provides us with our world view which suggests that the perceptions and judgments made by the omniscient narrator are absolute truth and right thinking. Even this, however, can be thought of as the author's point of view. And if the tale is told by a character or even by a narrator limiting his main perceptions to those of a single character,

or only one character at a time (as does Tolkien), then more can be learned than from just plot, dialogue, or action of the story. For characters, by what they notice, report, comment upon, or find worthy of attention and by what they *fail* to notice, can reveal much about their own characters and world views than mere actions or dialogue.

Most criticism of literature asks us to look beyond *what* is being said by the author to examine also *how* it is presented. A closer look at J.R.R. Tolkien's technique of using a limited or omniscient point of view in his stories may reveal much to us. The diagram below illustrates several levels of interpretation possible for any work of literature. This represents various levels at which a work may be interpreted. It is based on a model by Hazard Adams from the University of Washington.



- A) Context of Story, of author
- B) Author, his canon or "fictive reader"
- C) Title, introduction, preface
- D) Theme(s), issues
- E) Narrator(s) omniscient or limited
- F) Visual tableaux – what we are only shown
- G) Verbal tableaux – what we are only told about
- H) Characters/events
- I) Plot/story inferred

The centre of interpretation, of course, is the plot or the story itself. Our awareness of the particular character traits or personalities of the characters can colour our evaluation of the plot. These next two levels I added when I was writing a paper on *Hamlet* and may apply better to plays than to novels, but are still relevant here, I believe. What other characters tell us about (which I call verbal tableaux) or just show us (which I call visual tableaux) can also add to our

understanding of the events. One example in Tolkien of this level comes in the "Council of Elrond" chapter of *The Lord of the Rings* when each participant at the council *tells* his own story, but we also *see* much of Boromir's personality coming forth when he is willing to interrupt Elrond's plan to get his own say in. However, it is on the fifth level, level E, the level of point of view of the narrator(s) that I wish to concentrate at present. But first let me continue to explain

the other levels. Themes may be stated by the author, by characters, or implied by the action and resolution of the plot. Certainly the issues which the author is interested in will become known by the situations in which he or she placed the characters. Above the level of the tale itself, additional meaning can sometimes be inferred through the use of the title or from an introduction (often by the author himself). Tolkien's "Prologue" to *The Lord of the Rings* is a perfect example of this, as the entire frame tale which authenticates the story as having come from the "Red Book of Westmarch", a history of Hobbits which included the story of *The Hobbit*, also provides a larger context for the present tale and gives away the "happy ending" by mentioning some history of the characters after the events of the present tale. This level is useful to compare with the point of view in *The Hobbit*, as well, since the narrator then paraphrased Bilbo's account, revealing his own bias. Tolkien's "Foreword", in this case, is yet another level removed from his "Prologue". The "Prologue" deals mainly with hobbits and the tale of *The Lord of the Rings*; the "Foreword" refers to Tolkien's creative process in writing *The Lord of the Rings*. Beyond just one work lies an entire canon of a particular author. Knowing that, for Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* came first and was the major opus he kept returning to, adding to, and revising would also affect our interpretations of the other works. Sometimes themes become more evident when we see them repeated over and over in other works, or we get variations on a theme in other works. The last level of possible interpretation of a work (that I use) is the contextual level. Here not only the time period in which the author is writing, but also his particular interests and even the events which have shaped his life become important.

There are schools of criticism, such as deconstructuralism, which also include reference to our own paradigms, the contexts of the reader's life which might colour an interpretation of the work, but I have deliberately kept my focus on the text itself and its many levels of possible meaning. An evaluation of the reader's bias would, of course, be broader than my A level as would Marxist criticism which tries to tie power and finance into creativity by suggesting the political situation could dictate which works could get published. But this is not my concern. Another school would focus more particularly on the word or sentence level (in more detail than my level I, sort of on the J, K, or L level). Here the author's choice of vocabulary, sentence structure or the flow of the sentences, the division into paragraphs or chapters would be examined, but this is more detailed than I choose to be at this time. One might even doubt my own last level, arguing that a work of literature can stand on its own without need for knowledge about the author's life or likes, but in light of so many excellent critical articles published about Tolkien which illustrate his sources and influences, I doubt that anyone would begrudge me that level.

This paper will focus on level E, then, and compare three different sets of works to show how a change in narrator can change the focus of the tale itself. First I want to evaluate

Bilbo as the narrator of *The Hobbit* and compare this to Gandalf's version of the first part of that story found in "The Quest of Erebor" in *Unfinished Tales*. For this I will also refer to the summary from Tolkien's "Prologue" to *The Lord of the Rings*. Then I would like to compare Aragorn's version of the Beren and Lúthien tale to that found in *The Silmarillion* with some reference to "The Tale of Aragorn and Arwen" from Appendix A. And finally I will look at Bilbo's telling of Eärendil's tale in the halls of Elrond to the version provided in *The Silmarillion*. Other such examples are possible but these should illustrate my points. I hope to show that hobbits, men, Istari, a historian/scholar or a scribe, and the omniscient narrator of *The Silmarillion* focus on different aspects of a tale due to their own personalities, interests, or concerns. Naturally the interests of the hobbits or men might be more limited than those of a God-like narrator.

Let me begin with a definition of the different kinds of narrator possible. A first-person narrator is the most limited because he can only report what he thinks, sees, says, hears, does, or is told about by another character. *The Hobbit* uses a third-person/limited narrator which is very similar. It also purports to have been written after the conclusion of the adventure from a journal kept by Bilbo on his travels; thus the subtitle "There and Back Again" reveals the ending. It also brings us the issue of memory and the trustworthiness of the recollection. *The Lord of the Rings* uses a similar third-person limited point of view with some variations. Its point of view is limited to one character at a time, but it is not always the same character: for example, it is Gimli's point of view we get on the Paths of the Dead, and more importantly Sam's in Mordor. But Tolkien usually chooses a less powerful, less "in charge" character for his point of view. However, there are even a few exceptions in *The Lord of the Rings*, for example the seeming omniscient reporting of the dreams each of the hobbits (except Sam) has in Tom Bombadil's house. But even this supposed exception could be explained by having each of the hobbits tell his dream to Frodo who eventually compiles the entire story. But this does not explain the fox's point of view as he wonders at seeing three hobbits travelling through the woods, but this is one of the few exceptions to Tolkien's use of third-person/limited point of view as opposed to omniscient in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. This third-person/limited viewpoint narrows our focus to what that character is aware of or interested in. The choice of this character determines what details we will have, and how those details will be weighted or interpreted for us. Since the limit is on what the character already knows and then sees, hears, and does, there is often much dialogue, and even minor actions are reported. This tends to limit the story in time and space as well, but to expand it in detail.

*The Silmarillion* and *Unfinished Tales* often use a different narrator. It has been said that *The Silmarillion* was like Tolkien's Bible as it is the history of an entire race of beings and thus the scope is much vaster. Each tale is like reducing *The Lord of the Rings* to a 15-page summary, and connecting it to all other significant happenings of that age. The

connections to other tales, to the larger history in *The Silmarillion*, become more important than the limited individual actions, dialogue, or observations. This provides us with a larger sense of purpose but less personal involvement. So there are advantages and disadvantages to each type of narrator. But that is not the point here. I simply want to illustrate how the choice of narrator affects our interpretation of the tale.

Let me begin with *The Hobbit*, "The Quest of Erebor" (which is Gandalf's version of the beginning of that tale), and the narrator from the Prologue to *The Lord of the Rings*. I will assume more familiarity on the part of the audience with *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, so I will focus more on the other works to show contrast. Bilbo, as has been pointed out, was very concerned about eating and drinking, creature comforts, and things familiar to himself (like riddles), so his version focused often on what meals he was enjoying or was deprived of, etc. At the beginning of the tale Bilbo has no plan to seek adventures – the designs seem to be either Thorin's or Gandalf's, and it is mainly Bilbo's confusion and limited understanding we see through the narrative. His interests are limited to dirty dishes and forgotten handkerchiefs. "The Quest of Erebor" shows a different focus on the tale itself and the choice of Bilbo to accompany Thorin and Company.

But first let me comment that "The Quest of Erebor" is complicated by yet another level of interpretation as to its narrator for it purports to be Frodo's recollection of a conversation with Gandalf in Minas Tirith after the coronation of King Elessar. So technically it is Frodo who is the narrator, but almost the entire tale is a quoted passage of Gandalf speaking, so perhaps we could trust to Frodo's memory and his accurate representation of Gandalf's words and intent. Therefore I will refer to this as Gandalf's point of view, despite the fact that Frodo admits, "I cannot remember all the tale now" (Tolkien, 1980, p. 321). So we know we do not have the entire story the exact way Gandalf told it. Frodo interprets Gandalf's interests and motives a bit when he says, "we gathered that to begin with Gandalf was thinking only of the defence of the West against the Shadow" (Tolkien, 1980, p. 321). This would make Gandalf's point of view broader, certainly more so than Bilbo's or even Thorin's, and more like that of the omniscient narrator in *The Silmarillion*. And yet the quoted material, supposedly Gandalf's own words, does not entirely bear out the claim that Gandalf was *only* concerned with Middle-earth itself. However, Frodo's claims predispose the reader towards a particular interpretation of the events which an examination of the text does not clearly prove true. But this just shows us the power of the narrator. In the text, Gandalf first admits to going to the Shire himself for some rest and to reason out the problem that Sauron posed to the West (not yet to act, in other words). Gandalf focuses much on the concept of fate. He claims when he met Thorin, "it was at that moment that the tide began to turn" (Tolkien, 1980, p. 322). He talks of his possession of the map and key as "another strange chance" (Tolkien, 1980, p. 323). Apparently an earlier version also suggested the older Gandalf was "no longer trammelled by the burden of

Middle-earth as I was then" (Tolkien, 1980, p. 329). So the most recent version of "The Quest of Erebor" shows more awareness of the broader perspective of happenings in Middle-earth (beyond the scope of the concern of the dwarves or of the hobbit Bilbo) and at least in retrospect a belief in and trusting in fate – a faith in the concept of the overarching universe with some sort of plan beyond the individual's. Gandalf's point of view gives us a breadth of space, a larger view of Middle-earth, which includes the Necromancer/Sauron and his plans as well as the desires of the dwarves (and possibly one hobbit's desire for adventure). It gives us a larger space but not the same depth in time we would get in *The Silmarillion*. Nor does the quoted material support Frodo's claim for totally unselfish motives on Gandalf's part.

Gandalf's version provides another point of interest or comparison, for at one point he interprets Bilbo's motivations.

I guessed that he wanted to remain "unattached" for some reason deep down which he did not understand himself – or would not acknowledge, for it alarmed him. He wanted, all the same, to be free to go when the chance came, or he had made up his courage.

(Tolkien, 1980, p. 331)

Nowhere in Bilbo's version does he ascribe such motives to himself for his unmarried state. Thus a different narrator can give us a different psychological view of a character. This passage again reveals Gandalf's interest and belief in fate, which we don't find in Bilbo's account. Bilbo talks about *luck* and *chance* but not *fate*.

Gandalf himself recognized and acknowledged the truth that different narrators tell slightly different tales about the same events. "The Quest of Erebor" really only attempts to explain why Bilbo was included in the dwarves' plans at Gandalf's suggestion. Gandalf then said, "the rest of the story is well known to you – from Bilbo's point of view. If I had written the account, it would have sounded rather different" (Tolkien, 1980, p. 335). Later Frodo says,

"Well, I am glad to have heard the full tale. If it is full. I do not really suppose that even now you are telling us all you know."

"Of course not," said Gandalf.

(Tolkien, 1980, p. 336)

And also we might remember that Frodo admitted that he had forgotten some of the tale when he went to set it down. Thus another truth about the point-of-view of the narrator is that it is always a partial story, not a complete version of the tale, which would require not only perfect memory, but also a point-of-view account from each of the characters. Ironically Tolkien's omniscient narrator in *The Silmarillion* is often the scantiest with details, though the limits of memory, or awareness of the thoughts, actions, dialogue, and perceptions of several characters are available to him. In other words, he should have access to more detail but he chooses not to include them. Instead the focus for the omniscient narrator is broader in purpose or theme. But he's still controlling to what the reader will be exposed.

The result of Gandalf's addition to the tale, however, is to

broaden *The Hobbit* to include actions more directly connected with the larger picture provided by *The Lord of the Rings*. The actions of the dwarves and Bilbo are thus connected to Gandalf's battle with the Necromancer/Sauron and its repercussions for all of Middle-earth. No longer could Sauron enlist the aid of a dragon in the north; Sauron does not choose to attack Rivendell or Lothlórien but instead flees to Mordor; and finally fate decrees that the One Ring will be found again, thus precipitating the events in *The Lord of the Rings*. Gandalf as narrator broadens our perspectives and concerns over space, he shows us a larger map.

The "Prologue" to *The Lord of the Rings* provides a frame tale of the discovery of the "Red Book of Westmarch" telling tales of *days gone by* in the Third Age. Thus a perspective of time is introduced. The narrator at one point says, "Those days, the Third Age of Middle-earth, are now long past, and the shape of all lands has been changed" (Tolkien, 1991, p. 14). This narrator is complex, of course, because he is a "modern" historian/scholar who has uncovered an old manuscript and will interpret it for us. He is not involved in the tale nor affected by it. But through the perspective of time and with hindsight, he can focus on the most important events. Thus in his version of Bilbo's tale, his concern is not Bilbo's confusion or interest with food or a dry bed, nor Gandalf's designs and motivations. He summarizes in one paragraph the entire tale and then comments that this "adventure" was only important because of the "accident" of Bilbo's finding of the Ring. He then recounts in much more detail the "Riddles of the Dark" chapter from *The Hobbit*.

As a historian/scholar his interest also lies in the different versions of Bilbo's tale – the lie he first told the dwarves and set down in his memoirs and the true account which this narrator subscribes to Frodo or Sam rather than Bilbo. Our narrator from the Prologue, the historian/scholar, also analyses Bilbo's choice of calling the Ring a "present" as being suggested by Gollum's naming it his "birthday present." The historian/scholar not only has Gandalf's spacial perspective but also a temporal view from safely in the Fourth Age. However, unlike the omniscient narrator of *The Silmarillion*, he is limited to the text itself. He can interpret the author of the text's use of a specific word like "present" but has no other knowledge than that provided in his version of the "Red Book of Westmarch". And though he tries to claim its authenticity, he also admits his own limitations. This is not the original; "the original Red Book has not been preserved, but many copies were made" (Tolkien, 1991, p. 26). He traces his copy to one written in Gondor, "an exact copy in all details of the Thain's Book in Minas Tirith" (Tolkien, 1991, p. 27) which "was a copy, made at the request of King Elessar, of the Red Book of the Periannath" (Tolkien, 1991, p. 27). Thus even this narrator admits that he has only that portion of the tale which was preserved in his version.

Of the next two comparisons I wish to make, the tale of Beren and Lúthien is perhaps the best known though for my purposes the most obvious and therefore the less interesting. I am comparing Aragorn's telling of that story at Weathertop with *The Silmarillion's* version. As I do this I will also refer

to "The Tale of Aragorn and Arwen" from Appendix A of *The Lord of the Rings*. Most of Strider's entire poem or chant (eight of nine stanzas) deals with Lúthien and recounts her meeting with Beren. The only exception is a line that refers to Beren's fate: "Enchantment healed his weary feet / That over hills were doomed to roam" (Tolkien, 1991, p. 208). But this version does not tell us over which hills, why he was doomed, or where he roamed to and why. It does not require a great stretch of the critical faculties to suppose that Aragorn is reminded of his own meeting with Arwen and how he mistook her for Lúthien Tinúviel, and that this determines his focus on the tale that he tells the hobbits. Only the last stanza deals with the adventures Beren and Lúthien shared.

Long was the way that fate them bore,  
O'er stony mountains cold and grey,  
Through halls of iron and darkling door,  
And woods of nightshade morrowless.  
The Sundering Seas between them lay,  
And yet at last they met once more,  
And long ago they passed away  
In the forest singing sorrowless.  
(Tolkien, 1991, p. 209)

And even this stanza mentions the romantic idea that even death could not keep them apart. But more importantly, the entire passage does not mention the Silmarils at all. Strider does admit that this is only part of the tale, and he summarizes part of the rest for the hobbits. He tells of the slaying of Barahir, Beren's father, and Beren's escape over the Mountains of Terror to Thingol's kingdom (Beren's early experiences here, by the way, do coincide a bit with Aragorn's own history of losing his own father at age two and going with his mother to live with Elrond under a hidden identity to keep Sauron from discovering his whereabouts, so again there is a personal connection). Thus there was more to the story *before* the part that Aragorn chose to relate. And there was more after:

Many sorrows befell them afterwards, and they were parted long. Tinúviel rescued Beren from the dungeons of Sauron, and together they passed through great dangers, and cast down even the Great Enemy from his throne, and took from his iron crown one of the three Silmarils, brightest of all jewels, to be the bride-price of Lúthien to Thingol her father. Yet at the last Beren was slain by the Wolf that came from the gates of Angband, and he died in the arms of Tinúviel. But she chose mortality, and to die from the world, so that she might follow him.  
(Tolkien, 1991, p. 210)

Here at least we have a wider glimpse of the significance of the story but he also focuses still on the romance – Tinúviel's choice to become mortal, as Arwen will. Aragorn then relates the lineage of Lúthien and Beren, connecting both Elrond of Rivendell and the kings of Númenor (himself, though he does not claim this at the time). This part isn't in *The Silmarillion*, but it would certainly be of interest to Aragorn especially since he had just discovered it prior to meeting Arwen. Aragorn himself admits that he must of

necessity omit part of the tale “for it is a long tale, of which the end is not known; and there are none now, except Elrond, that remember it aright as it was told of old” (Tolkien, 1991, p. 208). So his choices of what part of the tale to tell, what to summarize, and what to quote from the song “in a mode that is called *ann-thennath*” (Tolkien, 1991, p. 210) become even more significant. In addition this is supposedly a translation into the Common Speech and has by implication *lost* something in the translation, as Aragorn says, “this is but a rough echo of it” (Tolkien, 1991, p. 210).

But again, as I said before, this is a relatively simple comparison because Aragorn puts almost the entire emphasis on the romance of the tale, the meeting between Beren and Lúthien which is so closely related to his own meeting with Arwen. “The Tale of Aragorn and Arwen” (or actually a part of that tale as it is labelled in Appendix A of *The Lord of the Rings*) creates for us another problem with identifying the narrator. It is included as per the “Prologue” as part of the “Red Book of Westmarch”. But according to our historian/scholar the “abbreviated version of those parts of *The Tale of Aragorn and Arwen* which lie outside the account of the War” (Tolkien, 1991, p. 27) was added later in Minas Tirith. Thus we cannot assume Frodo or any hobbit translated, transcribed, or wrote from memory this tale. The entire passage is in quotes which could be accounted for by the fact that it is only a part of a larger tale. But I prefer to think that it was written, dictated, or related by Aragorn himself. Certainly dialogue is included between Aragorn and his mother Gilraen, between Aragorn and Elrond, and even between Aragorn and Arwen which only he would know. The story also refers to Aragorn’s solitude. Yet it often subtly praises him as well, for example, “he seemed to Men worthy of honour” (Tolkien, 1991, p. 1097) and this would suggest that a scribe or court writer might well have recorded the tale. And also the story continues beyond the death of Aragorn to that of Arwen as well, so the court scribe as narrator seems more likely but I will refer to Aragorn as the narrator in the same way I called Gandalf the narrator of “The Quest of Erebor” since (other than a little harmless flattery of Aragorn) the scribe does not seem to interject his own world view or observations.

In “The Tale of Aragorn and Arwen” we learn that indeed Aragorn had been singing part of the “Lay of Lúthien” about the meeting between Beren and Lúthien (perhaps the very same passage he quoted to the hobbits) when he first saw Arwen. So we know that Aragorn has a personal connection to and fondness for the part of the story he chose to relate. As I said, in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, the story focuses almost entirely on the romance. Very little was said of the long way “which fate them bore” or the dangers or indeed even the successes or the glories either. In “The Tale of Aragorn and Arwen” an older Aragorn with an awareness of how his own tale worked out (in retrospect) more clearly connects his life quest with Beren’s when he relates his conversation with Elrond: “I see that I have turned my eyes to a treasure no less dear than the treasure of Thingol that Beren once desired. Such is my fate” (Tolkien, 1991, p. 1096). Both Gandalf and Aragorn (after the fact, with the quest

successfully completed) do focus more on fate than they did earlier. Yet even “The Tale of Aragorn and Arwen” still emphasizes the romantic story, not Aragorn’s role in the political events of Middle-earth, except that becoming King of both Gondor and Arnor was a condition upon which he could claim Arwen.

So we see, through Aragorn as a narrator, that his focus is more narrow even than Gandalf’s. He is, of course, deeply involved in the War of the Ring, the battle against Sauron, but he limits his own concerns to those of men, to fight to defend Minas Tirith before attacking the Dark Lord directly, to claim his kingship and his bride, to govern well, and to choose the hour of his own death rather than to “fall from my high seat unmanned and witless” (Tolkien, 1991, p. 1100). And the primary motivating factor for him is his love for Arwen. This is revealed partly in his choice of which portion of the Beren and Lúthien tale to tell.

The narrator of *The Silmarillion*, on the other hand, has a much vaster focus of interest. He is telling the tale of the entire First Age, of which the tale of Beren and Lúthien is only a small, but important, part. His interests, though, will be in connecting this tale to the larger political and social history. In *The Silmarillion* the story is told in prose rather than poetry (either in the Common Speech as is Aragorn’s translation, or in its original Elvish). This choice alone on the part of *The Silmarillion*’s narrator affects the reader. The narrator does use poetry to quote the battle between Finrod Felagund and Sauron in songs of power, and also quotes the Song of Parting which figures prominently in the plot. But he relates all the rest, even Lúthien’s songs to Morgoth or to Mandos, in prose. Thus this version reads more like summary of a tale than the tale itself. We sometimes feel deprived of the dialogue, the psychological or physical detail, the report of the songs themselves.

I won’t recount the entire tale of Beren and Lúthien from *The Silmarillion*, but I would like to point out that the emphasis is on the political interactions between the various groups of elves and how Beren’s and Lúthien’s actions affected those political relationships. The narrator often veers the tale away from Beren or Lúthien to reveal the political shenanigans of the sons of Fëanor – Celegorm and Curufin – or to reveal Sauron’s or Morgoth’s plots to defeat Huan, or to discuss the machinations of Thingol. The love between Beren and Lúthien is not as much the focus as the repercussions of that love on the other elves. Melian tells Thingol that the quest he has devised for Beren will bring doom and draw Doriath “within the fate of a mightier realm” (Tolkien, 1992, p. 168). Fate again is an important theme. And the perspective of this narrator is on the entire fate or history of the elves, how every action, every character, is interconnected with the others. It is broader in both space and time than Aragorn’s view. Thus it seems weightier in theme, though scantier in detail.

My last example, I believe, will show much the same thing, as I compare Bilbo’s version of the story of Eärendil to that given in *The Silmarillion*. Actually, the poem Bilbo recited, though composed mostly by himself, was also amended, edited, or added to by Aragorn. Bilbo claims that it should be

easy to tell which is the narrator. To Lindir, a listening elf, he says, "if you can't distinguish between a Man and a Hobbit, your judgement is poorer than I imagined. They're as different as peas and apples" (Tolkien, 1991, p. 253). Lindir claims all mortals sound alike. Bilbo tells Frodo that Aragorn's addition was mostly the reference to a green stone (probably the line "upon his breast an emerald"). Aragorn's own name, "Elfstone", foretold to him even before he received the stone, might suggest his interest in such a talisman. And assuming Aragorn's interest in romance, there could easily have been more detail in the poem about Elwing and her love and help for her husband in his trials were Aragorn truly a co-author. Since there is not and also for other reasons (for one Aragorn had only been around three days and had doubtless had important business other than composing poems to attend to), and also because of the style and point of view in the poem, I will assume most of the version is Bilbo's and refer to him as the narrator, but I will eventually show how his interests and perceptions as revealed by the poem might also coincide with Aragorn's, so that it is appropriate that both are judged to be the author/narrator.

First, the choice of subject matter is always of interest – why does Bilbo choose Eärendil? Aragorn seems to think it a bit cheeky for him to do so in Elrond's own house. Bilbo could have done so to try to flatter Elrond but nothing in the poem suggests flattery (certainly not in the same way that the scribe of Minas Tirith seemed to flatter Aragorn in "The Tale of Aragorn and Arwen"). If this theory can be dismissed, then it seems likely that Bilbo's interest in Eärendil is personal, that he feels some kinship of spirit with the restless Elf (or half-Elf) who wanted adventure, yet later yearned for home, who took the plea for help from men and elves to the shores of Valinor itself, and who was eventually exiled from the earth into the heavens with the Silmaril on his brow. At the end Bilbo writes of Eärendil "But on him mighty doom was laid . . . [and he could] tarry never more on Hither Shores where mortals are" (Tolkien, 1991, p. 253). He is forever on an errand, never to rest or go home. At this point in his life, of course, Bilbo is in self-imposed exile from the Shire. He has done his wandering and merely settled in Rivendell because it seemed the best place to be – yet it isn't home and he is without his kin and loved ones (most notably Frodo). Aragorn as well has had little rest from wandering and thus it is appropriate that the poem be partly ascribed to him as well.

Bilbo does give elaborate detail of the makings of the ship, the wardrobe of Eärendil, his flight into the heavens. Bilbo is interested in the details of the story which personalize it to one man, one ship (actually two), more so than its political import. There is no mention of the political necessity for Eärendil's journey to Valinor, nor of the coming of the Valar to Middle-earth to fight with men and elves in the final battle between the Host of the West and Morgoth in which Morgoth is defeated and exiled to the void, nor of the part played by the sons of Fëanor when the other two Silmarils from the Iron Crown are recovered or how they are lost again. None of the vaster political or social ramifications of

Eärendil's tale are referred to by Bilbo. This broader perspective is only seen through the point of view of the narrator of *The Silmarillion*.

The omniscient narrator in *The Silmarillion* has another advantage: he can provide for us motivation or emotion for several characters. He can tell us of Elwing that "she sat in sorrow by the mouths of Sirion" (Tolkien, 1992, p. 246) or that Maedhros was tormented by knowledge of his unfulfilled oath or that Eärendil turned in despair at seeing the ruins of Sirion. These details provide the logical connections, the cause-and-effect logic, to explain the actions of the characters on that grander scale, but also might divide the reader's interest or sense of loyalty. The limited third-person narrative focuses attention more on one character.

We've examined several kinds of narrators: Bilbo, Aragorn, Gandalf, the historian/scholar who discovered the "Red Book of Westmarch", the scribe in Minas Tirith who recorded Aragorn's story, and the omniscient narrator in *The Silmarillion*. As I said earlier, there are advantages and disadvantages to each kind of narrator – the more limited point of view is less broad in scope or theme, but at least in Tolkien more detailed in description, dialogue, poetry, song, etc. The omniscient narrator has a broader purpose but loses the ability to involve his readers with a greater wealth of detail and focus. He can still involve them with the power of the story or the theme or purpose itself. I do not presume to choose one as better than the other, though since we already have *The Silmarillion* to provide the scope, I would love to read a three-volume version of the Beren and Lúthien story or of the Fall of Gondolin in the same detail as *The Lord of the Rings*.

But hopefully I have demonstrated how the awareness and observations, the interests, the world view and concerns of the narrator can affect the telling of the tale. We never really get to read a definitive tale. It is always a summary or presentation by some narrator. If there were an ur-Tale or an Ideal Tale, it would have to encompass the points of view, awareness, and biases of all the characters as well as the scope of vision and the depth of space and time possible with an omniscient narrator. Not only would such redundancy be boring, but even that could not be without its bias as then the *order* of the presentation of the various points of view would suggest their relative importance.

So each author must choose *how* to present the tale. Looking at the circles again – an omniscient narrator tends to focus on the theme or issue level (D); a more limited narrator's interest stays more on the plot, action, character levels (I, H). This is not to say the limited narrator does not reveal theme, but it takes longer; the omniscient narrator does discuss plot and character but perhaps in less detail. But *any* narrator, whether limited or omniscient, still gives only a partial rendering of the tale. And therefore, the narrator by his choice of what aspects of the tale he presents or emphasizes can reveal as much about himself as he does about the tale. A gifted author, like Tolkien, would keep this in mind in *his* choice of narrator. This kind of evaluation, of course, focusing on point of view, going back to the circles



again, is only one layer of analysis, but examination of the tale at this level should make our appreciation of the tale that much richer. It should also make us very appreciative of the other versions of Tolkien's tales which have come out as then we can better see the choices the narrator has made.

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