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Tolkien and Englishness

Abstract

This paper discusses ways in which Tolkien draws upon various ideas of Englishness in order to construct his epic fictional world. In particular, Tolkien's combinations of different periods and traditions of Englishness - Anglo-Saxon, nineteenth-century - are explored.

Additional Keywords

Anglo-Saxons; First World War; Englishness; "The Lady of Shalott"; nationalism; Tennyson; trenches

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The literary critical establishment has, on the whole, never been willing to place Tolkien's works within the context of serious English literature, or to discuss his place in English culture. Yet his works are particularly rich and complex expressions of various kinds of Englishness, which draw on both nineteenth- and twentieth-century ideas about English national identities. In this paper I will try to show some of the ways in which *The Lord of The Rings* can be related to English history, ideas and ideologies, and to suggest some of the ways in which it uses such conceptions within its fictional world.

Any paper interpreting Tolkien with reference to a real world should probably start by looking at his disclaimers about its references to particular events. In the “Foreword” to *The Lord of The Rings* Tolkien wrote,

As for any inner meaning or “message”, it has in the intention of the author none. It is neither allegorical nor topical.

(Tolkien, 1979a, p. 11)

However: he also added

An author cannot of course remain wholly unaffected by his experience, but the ways in which a story-germ uses the soil of experience are extremely complex, and attempts to define the process are at best guesses from evidence that is inadequate and ambiguous.

I certainly would not want to claim that the motives or energies of Tolkien's fiction can be entirely pinned down, but it is possible to trace some of the network of specifically English references and ideas through which it is constructed. These are of a number of different kinds.

Some are relatively straightforward references to periods of English history, particularly, of course, the Anglo-Saxon period. Thus it is clear that the mounds of the Barrow-wights are to an extent based on excavations of Anglo-Saxon burial mounds, and that the Rohirrim are to a large degree based on ideas of Anglo-Saxon society in an early heroic period. Even these references, though, in fact tend to be focused through English literary traditions or specific texts. Thus the rather ritualised approach of Aragorn, Gimli, Legolas and Gandalf to Théoden's Hall is very closely based on passages in

Beowulf where strangers enter a king's hall after exchanging ritual speeches with a Doorward; and the evil counsellor Wormtongue has a clear relationship to the character of similar sort called Unferth.

Though *The Lord of the Rings* has many Anglo-Saxon sources, there is also a marked contribution from another period and type of English literature, that of nineteenth-century romanticism. It's notable that references to periods of literature in between this very early one and that of the one on which Tolkien was presumably brought up are much less frequent. Thus, I think that Tennyson in particular has a much stronger presence in Tolkien's work than Chaucer or Shakespeare. Much of Tolkien's poetry (for example that collected in *The Lays of Beleriand*, as well as many of the Elven songs) is distinctly Tennysonian in flavour. Some illustration of this can be given by comparing verses from *The Gest of Beren and Lúthien* and from “The Lady of Shalott”.

In fact, I think there is a particular set of associations for Tolkien which are focused through a rather nineteenth-century sense of “faery” and perhaps specifically through “The Lady of Shallot”. Tennyson's “faery lady” is mysterious, magical, linked to an idea of feminine creativity, rooted in a romantic past and subject to a fatal curse which will bring death in place of immortality if she strays from her magical web and looks out into the real world. These qualities are very much interlinked in much nineteenth-century thought: the Lady is a symbol of much that is valuable, and her fragility further enhances that value by guaranteeing that it is a value far from the vulgar modern values of the world. Her value is given strength and emotional power by her failure to survive, and this criterion for value is created in opposition to other strands of nineteenth-century ideology which stressed the value of success and progress. Like Tolkien's Elves – and particularly his Elvish women who clearly take precedence over Elvish men in *The Lord of The Rings* – it is notable that the Lady of Shalott, while based in a world of romance, is seen as being more mysterious, more romantic even than her framing romance. One could also note that part of the mystery of Tennyson's poem is created by the allusions to a narrative

which is never explicitly stated. Thus we never know exactly what the terms of the curse are. Though *The Lord of The Rings* as an extended prose work tells us much more about the past history of the Elves than does Tennyson's poem about the Lady, there is often a similar allusiveness which implies an unfathomable recession into the past, and a sense both of mystery and value. The final passing beyond the seas of the elves at the end of the Third Age is, of course, the ultimate example of the fading away of a set of values beyond human understanding, and of a guarantee that such values will always retain their status as unknowable, and therefore supremely valuable.

With these kinds of complex literary references or influences we are already approaching a kind of Englishness which is more than a matter of specific references either historical or literary. For Victorian ideas about the past and its relation to the modern world are important aspects of major ideologies of Englishness. I want next to look at how the Shire and its Hobbitry might relate to some of these ideas of Englishness, and then finish the paper by looking at the impact on these notions of a particularly traumatic event in modern English history.

If one nineteenth-century literary tradition tried to constitute an alternative set of values to those of the modern world through a medievalising romance, another strategy with related elements of nostalgia was to imagine or refer to an England seen as essentially rural. In fact even before the end of the nineteenth century the majority of England's population probably lived in environments which were not rural ones; nevertheless, the idea of England and English values as essentially rural was a strong one. One example of this is William Morris's *News From Nowhere* (1891) which creates an image of social harmony by envisaging a return to an England of villages and a machineless rural economy. Another example might be the recruiting poster from the Great War, which showed fields and a plough team, and had the caption: "It's Your Country – Fight For It".

This has much to do with the Shire. There are in the Prologue to *The Fellowship of the Ring* various hints which might lead us to see a connection between the hobbits and the English. They are, for example, divided into three original peoples, the Harfoots, the Stoors and the Fallohides, who may be equivalent to the Angles, the Saxons and the Jutes. Just as two brothers, Hengist and Horsa, are among the first Angles to come to Britain, so the hobbits are led across the Brandywine by two brothers, Marcho and Blanco. However, even were there not these specific hints, there is a great deal said about hobbit identity which can be connected with ideas of rural England. When hobbits first came to the Shire (itself, of course, a quintessentially English name), we are told, "the land was rich and kindly, and though it had long been deserted . . . it had before been well tilled: and there the king had once had many farms, cornlands, vineyards, and woods" (Tolkien, 1979a, p. 22).

From this down to earth but idyllic rural setting many of the hobbits' characteristics seem to spring. Thus:

The Shire at this time had hardly any "government". Families for the most part managed their own affairs.

Growing food and eating it occupied most of their time. In other matters they were, as a rule, generous and not greedy, but contented and moderate, so that estates, farms, workshops, and small trades tended to remain unchanged for generations.

(Tolkien, 1979a, p. 28)

Their concern with the basic needs and pleasures of growing and consuming makes them modest people who preserve tradition, do not initiate needless change, who are essentially peaceful, and perhaps a little inward looking. All of these qualities have been assigned to the English and there was a particular belief throughout the Victorian period that the English were essentially law-abiding and peace-loving (hence, unlike the French, they had not been involved in any recent revolution). Despite this idea of peacefulness and moderation, however, there was, I think, also a sense that if national need arose then the English would do their duty. This is the notion of the English yeoman – by choice a peaceful farmer, but if stirred a doughty fighter. There is a very similar qualification to the hobbits' peacefulness.

At no time had Hobbits of any kind been warlike, and they had never fought among themselves . . . Nonetheless, ease and peace had left this people still curiously tough. They were, if it came to it, difficult to daunt or to kill; and they were, perhaps, so unwearingly fond of good things not least because they could, when put to it, do without them.

(Tolkien, 1979a, p. 23)

Another related quality of the hobbits is their rather parochial outlook – an example of which is Rosie's comic comment to Sam on his return to the Shire, "If you've been looking after Mr. Frodo all this while, what d'you want to leave him for, as soon as things look dangerous?" (Tolkien, 1979c, p. 349). This is in many ways treated as an admirable (if comic) virtue, but there is a strand of criticism of it too. Such mixed feelings about the excitement of adventure and the comforts of home are already present in *The Hobbit* of course. But in *The Lord of The Rings* this criticism is also linked to a specific set of ideas about the English which arose because of this very parochial and peaceful model of identity which has been discussed.

This anxiety surfaces from the beginning of the twentieth century, and is present particularly in various kinds of spy thrillers, such as those of John Buchan. The worry is that England is so self-satisfied and content that it will not even notice external threats which may destroy that way of life. This anxiety was perhaps particularly stimulated by fears of potential German aggression (though in some early fictions, anxieties are focused on French aggression). Such thrillers usually set out to show – partly for reasons of fictional pleasure and partly as an increasingly popular political critique – that beneath the surface, or on the fringes of peaceful, everyday life, there are secret conspiracies designed to destroy England. The conspiracies are opposed only by a select few who, unknown to the majority, defend them in secret and desperate adventures.

All this sounds very reminiscent of some aspects of *The Lord of the Rings*. One might particularly recall the many

references throughout to the secret labours of those who have watched over the Shire, such as the Rangers, who are regarded by unknowing hobbits with great suspicion. One such reference is made in the Prologue itself: "They forgot or ignored what little they had ever known of the Guardians, and of the labours of those that made possible the long peace of the Shire. They were, in fact, sheltered, but they had ceased to remember it" (Tolkien, 1979a, p. 23). The portrayals of the Shirriffs are also part of this idea; they are the equivalent of the fictional rural British policeman: slightly comic, able to deal with simple matters of property and stray beasts, but with no real idea of the true evils outside.

These aspects of Englishness come from a pre-Great War stratum, but that war, and its effect on various ideas of Englishness, is also very important in Tolkien's work. In his Foreword, Tolkien, denying that *The Lord of The Rings* was primarily about the Second World War, suggested that the First World War might be much more central to its genesis:

as the years go by it seems now often forgotten that to be caught in youth by 1914 was no less hideous an experience than to be involved in 1939 and the following years. By 1918 all but one of my close friends were dead.

(Tolkien, 1979a, p. 12)

This seems absolutely the case: many (though not all) aspects of the War of the Ring seem to have their source in that cataclysm.

The imagery of trench warfare has often been seen as having a widespread effect on post-war literature, and this seems true here. The Dead Marshes and the wasteland surrounding Mordor may both have part of their origin in the trenches. In the journey through the Dead Marshes (where Gollum says a great war was once fought) we get a description of horrific, sticky mud and pools which contain corpses:

Sam tripped . . . fell and came heavily on his hands, which sank deep into sticky ooze, so that his face was brought close to the surface of the dark mere . . . "There are dead things, dead faces in the water," he said with horror. "Dead faces!"

(Tolkien, 1979b, p. 291)

As Frodo and Sam approach Mount Doom from far off, they see a landscape which seems to draw on scenes of life in the area just behind the trenches:

Frodo and Sam gazed out in mingled loathing and

wonder on this hateful land. Between them and the smoking mountain . . . all seemed ruinous and dead, a desert burned and choked. They wondered how the Lord of this realm maintained and fed his slaves and his armies. Yet armies he had. As far as their eyes could reach . . . there were camps, some of tents, some ordered like small towns. One of the largest of these was right below them. Barely a mile out into the plain it clustered like some huge nest of insects, with straight dreary streets of huts and long low drab buildings.

(Tolkien, 1979c, p. 239)

Such a landscape is, of course, notably opposed to the ordered fertile agricultural landscape of the Shire, and each is associated with its own set of utterly opposed values. Similarly, there was a stark contrast between the myths (and in some sense actualities) of the English countryside which contributed to English patriotic feeling, and the experience of the first "modern" war.

One other aspect of *The Lord of the Rings* may also have a partial origin in the First World War. It is very noticeable that the orcs, who provide the armies of The Enemy, are rarely portrayed as evil in quite the same way as the Ringwraiths or some other forces of evil are. They are brutal and brutalised, but their ways of talking and their motivations are often (indeed nearly always) sources of comedy to some extent – even if it is sometimes very black comedy. Thus we get the following kind of conversation:

"Garn! You don't even know what you're looking for."

"Whose blame's that?" said the soldier. "Not mine. That comes from Higher Up. First they say it's a great Elf in bright armour, then it's a sort of small dwarf-man, then it must be a pack of rebel Uruk-hai; or maybe it's all the lot together."

(Tolkien, 1979c, p. 241)

It seems likely that this conversation – and the many similar orc conversations – is to some extent based on an idea of the kind of grumbling, jokey idioms allegedly used by "other ranks" during the War. It could even be said that this is another aspect of modern urban life – an urban working-class dialect which is opposed to the more rural dialect of Sam and many other of the hobbits.

As Tolkien himself said, an author cannot remain entirely unaffected by his experiences, and it seems to me that *The Lord of the Rings* is very deeply influenced by a whole range of ideas of and about Englishness, which it both contains and reinvents for its own purposes.

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