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## Tolkien's World-Creation: Degenerative Recurrence

### Abstract

Argues The Lord of the Rings's structure is an inversion of that of *The Silmarillion*, closely linking the two. Notes "some of the elements that are inverted and the pattern in which they appear."

### Additional Keywords

Heroes in J.R.R. Tolkien; Heroism in J.R.R. Tolkien; Tolkien, J.R.R. The Lord of the Rings—Narrative structure; Tolkien, J.R.R. The Silmarillion—Narrative structure

# Tolkien's World-Creation: Degenerative Recurrence

Robley Evans

Not enough attention has been paid to the narrative structure of Tolkien's two major fantasies and to the ways in which their formal organization directs the reader's attention to thematic development. My concern is with the development of a typology for describing the structural elements in Tolkien's narratives, a typology which should emphasize the close links between his two major fantasies. The process of world creation and destruction in *The Silmarillion* prepares for the reconstruction of that world in *The Lord of the Rings*, as we all know. Not enough has been done, however, to emphasize that the destruction of the One Ring by Frodo and Sam is a structural as well as thematic conclusion to historical development recorded in the *Ainulindale* and the *Quenta Silmarillion*. The structure of the Trilogy is an inversion of that of the earlier work. By noting some of the elements that are inverted and the pattern in which they appear, Tolkien's artful consistency as a writer becomes more apparent, along with the possibility that the relationship of the two fantasies is a more imaginative one than we had first thought. Furthermore, we can clarify Tolkien's view of the connection between history and myth, and say something about his place in the Romantic tradition of myth-making.

If we examine the structure of *The Silmarillion*, as published, we find several accounts of "creations" (the *Ainulindale*, the *Valaquenta*, the *Akallabeth*), and a history of the creation and destruction of Arda or Middle-earth in the First Age, that of the Elves. In his essay, "On Fairy Stories," Tolkien tells us that the vital creative act is that of the imagination which perceives ultimate truth. Its vehicle is Secondary Creation, the fantastic breaking through the limitations of preconceived response, and revealing an essentially sacred reality. The fantasist has the aim of helping human beings achieve "freedom from observed fact" through "the making or glimpsing of Other-worlds." Such an aim is moral as well as perceptual, a Romantic vision thematically and structurally, with its existence upon an ideal reality against which the actuality of time and space is to be judged. In the *Quenta Silmarillion*, the making of the world involves a fall into time and space, the consequence of division of the originating power's deific unity. Consequently, the narrative develops movement away from totality through increasing fragmentation of creation into reductive and conflicting divisions. Mythic history metaphorically describes the turning away of created beings from light toward darkness, toward opacity, a movement away from expansion toward contraction and limitation.

In this version of world-creation, development of the secondary World is not organic but cellular, contracting into smaller units, narrower perceptions, a degenerative process of divisions leading to further divisions and to the narrowing of perception in created beings. This, in turn, creates corresponding reduction in the reader's ability to "see" the increasingly distant ideal world with which Eru, the One, begins. Historical process for Tolkien, then, is also cellular and spiral in its structure, a deterministic account of creation as an inevitable Fall and a consequent "blindness" to original light and wholeness. Such history is also analogical in its structure,

recording the similar events or characters that in some way are reductive versions of their original models. In his study of the Antigone myth, *Antigones*, George Steiner notes that mythic writers who deal with the constancy of human suffering represent it as synchronic; to see suffering as repeated in history is to forgo the history. "Humanist tragedy, whether classical or biblical, is a sustained analogy, unifying time through an invariance of *exemplum* and moral meaning."<sup>1</sup> As we shall see, the history of the Elves may be treated in this way: a series of similar events and figures inevitably brings about the destruction of the First Age of Middle-earth in the perpetuation of moral and perceptual error. We can find analogy at work everywhere in *The Silmarillion*: in the wars with Morgoth, the destructive taking of oaths by Fëanor and his heirs, the development of Elf kingdoms to be destroyed turn by turn in mistaken pursuit of the Silmarils, in what Tolkien calls "possessiveness," that dulling of moral perception expressed here in its physically compressed form, the Jewels of Light. Analogy is also an important critical term for describing Tolkien's use of nostalgic and elegiac elements in Elf history; analogy is by definition sentimental since its use presumes continued identity of the parts with their original nature, with an originating wholeness: the Elves remember the light of Valinor long after its reconstitution is possible, regretful memories of past glory that turn up in wistful songs and tales in the Trilogy.

If we try to characterize Tolkien's fantasy world structurally, noting his use of analogous incidents and characters, and, at the same time, the breakdown of such tropes into increasingly diminished and fragmentary parts of *The Silmarillion*, we can describe this structural process as *degenerative recurrence* with world-creation leading inevitably to world-destruction. Fragmentation and diminution are built into creation; whatever is created is dependent on its creator, and its distance from the originating source makes it less in power, more vulnerable. The history of all such creations must be inevitable, and recurrence, which would seem to promise continuance through repetition, only moves diminished beings and events away from their source. For Tolkien, such historical development is moral in its implication: the choices permitted Elves and Men are gradually restricted and the increased moral distance from beginnings is represented in pride, in jealousy, in the traditional Christian vices signaling alienation from the godhead. The physical world becomes a series of *exempla* in Steiner's sense, contracting into kingdoms and bodies to be destroyed. The original vision of light becomes a view of darkness, a vision of limits. In the deterministic history of *The Silmarillion*, degenerative recurrence is inevitable. In *The Lord of the Rings*, these analogies become creative and only there can Tolkien's important concept of Recovery be fulfilled. In fact, it is this deterministic and sentimental view of history which makes the history of the Elves an inferior fantasy, taking its true imaginative value from its complementary fiction, the later story of the One Ring.

We can note these structural principles at work in *The Silmarillion*, beginning with creation itself: fragmentation is built into the creative act in what

can be called an example of narrative delegation.<sup>2</sup> Not only does Iluvatar delegate creative power in the making of Arda to the Ainur, but Tolkien represents creation through the trope of Music, the art of time, with its potential for modulation. The Ainur are shown visions but not their fulfillment, darkness but not its meaning. They participate in the divine music without knowing its purposes, and give form without knowing consequences, so that creativity, by analogy, will always be ambiguous in its delimiting power. The building of Arda demands divisions among the builders, separating according to elemental capacity into male and female beings, and even taking on forms according to their "knowledge of the visible World, rather than of the World itself" (21). This adoption of form will devolve into a more fatal trope in describing the embodiment of the Maia, Melian, who, for love, took "upon herself the form of the Elder Children of Iluvatar, and in that union she became bound by the chain and trammels of the flesh of Arda." (234) The Ainur take on new names, the Valar, a subtle signification of their change through language modification, a linguistic shift that occurs throughout First-Age history; even the Noldor give up their original tongue and adopt that of the Sindarin, who cannot learn the "higher" one.

Each Valar makes some part of the world, and his or her contribution becomes available for degeneration. Aule, for instance, the Earth-Valar, is also a smith and a master of crafts; his are the gems and gold in the earth, and the jewel-making Noldor are closest to him. Inevitably, we are to see the creations of Aule as beautiful but nevertheless contractions of the larger creation; they foreshadow the lust of Melkor and of the Dwarves in secret before the coming of the properly-created Children of Iluvatar, "in a hall under the mountains in Middle-earth." His motives are good: "I desired things other than I am, to love and to teach them...." (43) Nevertheless, the secrecy is a concomitant to jealousy, to the making of hidden weapons and the fostering of pride in secret, as in Melkor's halls. The Dwarves, again, at one level are part of the rich diversity of being sought for Arda, but on another, they are the fatal edge of fragmentation with their own language, their love for "the things made by their own hands," and their unspecified role in the plans of Eru. They will have a part in the destruction of the Elf kingdoms and the creations of Aule's consort, Yavanna. Her plantings can be destroyed, her "growing things" go to feed the furnaces in which weapons and armor are forged.

Finally, the paradoxical reduction of creation through the act of creating has been with the Valar from the beginning: to "enter into the World" (20) is to accept that "their power should thenceforward be contained and bounded in the World...." Consequent creation functions analogously through the necessary "binding" or giving form to power. After Aule makes jewels and metal, Feanor will make jewels and armor. Later still, the reduction of creative life to jewels made and stored in secret places by Elves and Dwarves will lead to the destruction of Menegroth, one of the hidden cities of Middle-earth; a dragon will take over the abandoned hoard of Nargothrond. The symbolic power of the one ring is foreshadowed in these jewels, into which their makers put themselves. Tolkien works here with a principle drawn from magic and religion: the psychical life — emotion, imagination — becomes physical through art, and the operation of the mind in Secondary Creation is inevitably reduced, contracted, in the forms of the physical world, a world others can control when they take the Silmarils

or The One Ring. In terms of the narrative structure of *The Silmarillion*, the "possessiveness" carried as an adjunct to creation, is represented in the downward spiral of power delegation as Elves and Men succumb to the lure of the jewels and the power they symbolize.

We are also talking here about the way Tolkien makes images like the jewels into metaphors for power and its degeneration, metaphors which work analogously to describe and at the same time, create, the inevitable movement of Elf history. For instance, Melkor is the ultimate inverted analogy, identified from the beginning of time with darkness, the metaphoric equivalent of not being, where the other Valar are identified with light, a perverse but inevitable parody of creativity. As long, however, as Iluvatar delegated creative power to his own creations, Melkor can also perversely create by dividing the forces against him through their own perverse natures. Like all antagonists in epic literature, he is a limiter, striving to fragment the Maker's creativity. It is Melkor who fosters divisions among the Elves in Eldamar through lies and rumors; later, it is the lies of Morgoth that send Hurin to spread ruin in Thingol's kingdom. Elves like Feanor and men like Hurin then continue history's degeneration with actions that have political consequences.

In fact, an argument could be made that the narrative movement of the history after the first battle is based upon reaction to Melkor. It is because of his attacks on Creation that the Valar withdraw from Middle-earth and set up the first walls, the Pelori, on the outer limits of the world. When he builds a fortress, so do his opponents. Creation becomes an act of reaction rather than action in its fullest and freest sense. Balrogs, fire-drakes and lieutenants like Sauron become Melkor's substitutes, dependent beings who parody the delegation of Iluvatar's creations. We get this reaction and diminution in other tropes; for instance, in the way Tolkien uses images of light, as its changing forms mark the decline of Arda and the extension of Melkor/Morgoth's power. Light appears with the start of Time, already limited, as "lights" named Illuin and Ormal are raised by the Valar to light Middle-earth. After their destruction, they are replaced within the Pelori by the Trees of Light: Telperion and Silpion. This is a reduction in the scope of lumenescence; furthermore, as "trees" they become part of Yavanna's creation susceptible to destruction, and their light shines through Arda only along the narrow pass of the Calacirya. Destroyed in turn by Ungoliant, they are replaced after the Darkening of Valinor, by the tree of reflected light, Galathilion, which Yavanna creates for the Elves' city of Tirion, "like a lesser image of Telperion, save that it did not give light of its own." (59) Through successive reductions, a descendant becomes the White Tree of Numenor, Nimloth, a sapling found in the snow by the new king, Elessar. The Sun and Moon, reductions of light for the restricted cosmos of Arda, are made "to hinder Melkor" (99), so that for all their beauty and comfort to the Elves, they are a sign of his power. They become like the diminishing trees of light, metaphors for time's destructive progress. Even the changes in name are significant in Tolkien's analogical structure, as we move from the imagined names for light in the origins of things, to "sun" and "moon" in our own diminished tongue, just as the "Eldar" and the "Haldar," with their linguistic touch of origins, have become "Elves" and "Men."

And there are the Silmarils themselves, the Jewels



of Light which serve as metaphoric markers, as well, of fragmentation. Not only do the jewels take their light from the original Two Trees; they become the source of conflict for later generations. The heart of their maker, Fëanor, is locked within them, "fast bound," and the fate of Arda, as well (67). They take on the role of the reified imagination, a power which should be freeing and free, but which, instead, burns the hands of possessors. Melkor's passion for them leads to the first great death, that of Finwe, to their theft, and to the oath-taking of Fëanor, with the divisions among the Elves and their return to Arda, that follow. Through analogies, the jewels mark the decline in the Elves' integrity: the theft by Morgoth leads to the empty heroics of Beren and Luthien; to the amassing of treasure by rulers in their secret cities; to the death of Thingol at the hands of the artist-Dwarves reshaping the Nauglamir. Finally, the original light is available only indirectly: when the Eddain appear, they learn the arts of the Eldar and so surpass other Men, "who dwell still east of the mountains and had not seen the Eldar, nor had looked upon the faces that had beheld the Light of Valinor" (149). The equivalent of its now-reflected nature, light becomes the trope for what it is missing, lost, destroyed.

The cellular nature of creation history with its delegation of creative power and its initial potential for fragmentation, supports the narrative development of *The Silmarillion*. With its implications for moral and imaginative perception, the account of tribal and geographic divisions among the Elves represents Tolkien's interest in moving from the physical to the psychical, from the world in which created beings live to the perverse mental life which finally destroys them. As this particular Secondary World spirals to its end, we can note the several related forms division takes, the "invariance of exemplum and moral meaning" Steiner notes in myth. Fragmentation is perpetuated as the elder Children of Iluvatar leave and then return to Middle-earth. The increasingly destructive nature of their exile and its battles and losses to Morgoth share a terrible determinism, one in which romantic sentimentality plays a part. The removal of some of the First Born to Valimar results in initial divisions, based on those who stay and those who go, although the essential division is between those who look upon "the Light that was before the Sun and Moon" (53), and those who do not. Even the variety of names given the exiles and those who stay in differing parts of Middle-earth, reflects the breakdown in the Elves' unity of being. The oath-taking required by Fëanor leads not to reinforcement of unity but to division, and the settlement of Middle-earth with the Noldor sets up geographic divisions that are progressively attacked by Morgoth; their destruction and the numbering of wars and naming of battles become narrative divisions that reflect past losses and look forward to new ones. The Elves' hidden cities of Menegroth, Nargothrond and Gondolin are analogous both to Tirion, which Turgon specifically tries to recreate in Tumuladon, out of nostalgia for the past, and to Utumno, Morgoth's dungeon world. The girdle of Melian will find its lovely but pale reflection in the protective shield Galadriel maintains around Lothlorien in the Trilogy.

In *The Silmarillion*, the largest pattern of analogies alternates wars and inevitable destruction with accounts of kings and heroes who are decreasingly unable to resist Morgoth. A chivalric and egotistical heroism becomes the narrational equivalent of "possessiveness" substituted by Tolkien for the more subtle, internal, and sacrificial heroism of *The Lord of the*

*Rings*. The interleaved chapters recounting the heroics of individuals in *The Silmarillion* is a structural consequence of the moral degeneration of the Elves: the effort to recover the past -- whether in the Jewels of Light or the remembered beauty of Tirion -- devolves into private heroics in which the proud divisiveness of Fëanor is repeated and elective possibilities are reduced until we end with the destructive theatrics of Beren and the depraved outlawry of Turin Turambar. If we look briefly at the march of these heroes and leaders through the history, we can see that they all move in reaction to Morgoth and are all the same version of Fëanor. The consequent oath-taking and Return of the Noldor begin the devolution of power as his heirs turn away from the light of Valimar in favor of the symbolic twilight of Middle-earth.

For instance, if we pursue the analogy which Fëanor establishes, we can trace it in the history of Thingol whose active vanity is no less destructive than Fëanor's and as sentimental. We see Thingol initially as the opposite of the Noldor prince; Thingol becomes the king of the Sindarin, and his kingdom the stable refuge of the Elves against Morgoth. It is his city of Menegroth that is the model for later hidden cities, and his marriage with a Maia, Melian, would seem to promise a model union of diverse created beings. But Thingol is the complementary opposite of Fëanor in Tolkien's structural counterpoint: like the Noldor, early in history he turned away from the Light, choosing to remain in Middle-earth with Melian, and to stop time and its changes behind Melian's Girdle. Sexual love is associated with division of purpose as well as loyalty and unity. Thingol is sentimental by his own version of Fëanor's. In the contemporary literature, he demands that Beren capture one of the Silmarils from Morgoth's iron crown, in exchange for his daughter, Luthien, a risky equation of jewel and daughter which leads to Doriseth's inclusion in the Doom of Mandos, and Thingol's death.

In fact, Tolkien organizes the historical narrative so that the later episodes are less often about the great Elves who lead their people than about the "outsiders," the restless or frustrated, like Aredhel or Maeglin, who in the declining years of Beleriand do little against Morgoth. Chapter 15 in which Thingol learns of the true motives for the Noldors' return, is followed by the account of Aredhel, her seduction by Bol, and the introduction of her treacherous son, Maeglin, into Gondolin. The power of such characters in the narrative comes from the feeling of loss, of beauty and strength destroyed, in short, from sentimentality, which their frantic careers evoke. As the Elves' world vanishes, their helplessness is symbolized in Thingol's stasis as he sinks under the spell of the Silmaril, the internecine conflicts among Elf leaders, and an increase in the conventionality of heroes who cannot effect change. Instead of an Aragorn leading the Fellowship in hope against seeming disaster, we have "romantic" heroes whose passion destroys them and their people, the symbolic connection with the divisive career of Fëanor.

The best example of this narrative and psychical development is the chapter on Beren and Luthien, a pathetic account which follows the history of the Elves' defeat in the battle of the Dagor Bragollach. Where we might have expected Tolkien to recount the rise of a hero to defeat Morgoth at this point, we get the Lay of Leithian, a sentimental set-piece of pride rampant that would be the expression of Anglo-Saxon *ofermod*, were it not more closely related to the flaw of sexual passion.<sup>3</sup> We are to admire the lovers'

courage and beauty, but this is the destructive passion of Fearor; it is his creation they seek, and the challenge of Thingol that Beren takes up, brings the Doom of Mandos into Doriath. Passionate, inevitable love send the pair into the halls of Morgoth, a mythic enactment of the eros-thanatos theme of much romance literature, complete with metamorphic changes of shape enchantment through song, and a talking dog. Emotionally powerful as this episode is, we have to see what it is filled with the clichés of traditional romance, and the characters are lost in the sentimental conventions of their situation. The lovers' challenge to Morgoth does not stop his advance; if anything, their descent into the underworld stirs him up to the final destruction. Though triumphant, the lovers go into exile on their return, and, we are told, no longer speak to men. Where in *The Lord of the Rings*, self-sacrifice precipitates the eucatastrophe of the conclusion, here the challenge to Morgoth by the lovers initiates the final disintegration. The triumph of feeling over political reality in Elf history is a symptom of their decline.

Finally, the heroic actions of Fearor and his narrative successors, are parodied in the last great heroes of *The Silmarillion* as the pattern of diminishment based on passionate individuality and pride is repeated in the romance of Turin Turambar where another human destroys himself and his people. Symptomatic of the Elves' division and alienation, divided within himself and often mad, Turin's name changes — Neithan the Wronged; Gorthol, the Dread Helm, among others — indicate his madness. He commits incest with his sister, and initiates the destruction of Nargothrond, so that even the sexual passion idealized in the story of Beren and Luthien is degenerative in that of Turin. Structurally and morally, the reduction of free will in history, which Turin's madness symbolizes, becomes not only sentimental but also pathetic, so that action itself becomes suspect, insanely idealistic and possessive. Choice is so reduced that the last protagonist, Earendil, can only escape to the stars, no less a romantic ending than the model deaths of Tristram and Isolt, who "die" out of the world. In *The Silmarillion's* formulation of history, based as it is upon individual and ultimately destructive passions, Tolkien's concept of Recovery as presented in "On Fairy Stories" and in *The Lord of the Rings*, is not possible, and action is not redemptive.

We need only compare these narrative elements with their counterparts in the Trilogy to note Tolkien's divergent use of them. There the fragmentation resulting in divisions of races or peoples becomes constructive, as different kinds of beings left in Middle-earth in the Third Age contribute their skills to the destruction of Sauron. The narrative itself is purposefully divisive; the oath taken by the Fellowship is to hold only for a certain time, when personal wishes and fate will coincide; the movements of forces in the West, the escape of Merry and Pippin, are necessary diversions for Sauron's eye. The divisions of the text itself reflect these developments, and the emphasis falls upon cooperation, upon felt political unity, among Sauron's enemies.

In terms of misapprehension, only Boromir provides an analogy with the passionate, self-destructing heroes of *The Silmarillion*, in his pride and effort to possess the One Ring. As a representative of Men, he contrasts forcefully with Aragorn. Aragorn, in fact, carries the movement of the narrative in a converse direction, as the series of name changes he goes through identifies his growing power; his rise from

Strider to King Elessar, is a reversal of the degradation associated with naming in *The Silmarillion*. Aragorn thereby signals his freedom of choice, his communally-based heroism, and his tested suitability for the kingship. In the Trilogy, his nostalgia for the proud past of Elf and Numenorean ancestors takes active and constructive purposes as in Sam Gamgee's inspiring memories of the beloved Shire, or in his heroism under the light of Galadriel's phial in the halls of Shelob. It is most importantly in the image of such "diminished" heroism in the hobbits, that we find Tolkien using the analogies of degenerative recurrence in a new way. For the hobbits are a fantastic imaginative invention, requiring that we free ourselves of the "possessive" expectations associated with the small beings of fairy stories; diminished in strength as Frodo and Sam are from the great prototypes of the heroic past, it is they who, through endurance and love — psychological powers in a brutal world of physical ugliness and violence — triumph over the diminished version of Melkor/Morgoth, Sauron. Even the fatal delegation of power that marks Iluvatar's creation in the beginning of *The Silmarillion* is inverted in the Trilogy's conclusion as Gollum takes over from Frodo to inadvertently destroy the One Ring — and himself, an ironic destruction of "possessiveness" and a warped "anti-hero." Sauron sees his doom too late. Those who survive — and the reader — are given a larger vision of good triumphant: by analogy, a vision of man's nature as infinite and joyous, the eucatastrophe of which our imaginations are capable. In *The Lords of the Rings* the structural elements charting the downfall of the Elves are reversed to reflect the triumph of the imagination in a diminished and fragmented world. (A fantasy world linked to ours, in fact, by analogies: the barrows and ruins in our waste places are like those remaining in Middle-earth to remind its scattered inhabitants of their more glorious past. The spiral of history has not yet ended.)

I want to suggest from internal evidence that Tolkien never published *The Silmarillion* because of the historical premise upon which it is based. The work's historical position is fatalistic, dependent upon a moral determinant, pride, which can only be restrictive and destructive. *The Silmarillion* represents the defeat of the imagination by evil, that is, by blindness and consequent restriction over creation and change. In the view of history recounted here, the fate of heroes is inevitably pathetic because the Secondary Creation cannot open alternatives to defeat. There is no room for a Frodo or an Aragorn in the history of the Elves, only Boromir. Tolkien's concern with the imagination places him within the Romantic tradition, in which "cleansing the doors of perception" in William Blake's phrase, releases energy for creativity; closed against imagination life, the power of the Elves inevitably diminishes until only a few, for whom nostalgia is the major quality, remain in Middle-earth. With *The Lord of the Rings* Tolkien saved himself with the invention of new characters, never seen in fantasy before, and an entirely new narrative. A true "cleansing" of perception took place; energy was renewed, and Recovery was recorded by triumphant analogy in the Trilogy. *The Silmarillion* is a dead-end world-creation for creator and reader. *The Lord of the Rings* takes the structural and thematic problems of the earlier mythic history and imaginatively remakes the world.

#### NOTES

Page references in the text to *The Silmarillion* are to the first American edition, published by Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston, 1977.

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