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Abstract

Suggests that certain scenes from Wells's *First Men in the Moon* inspired the Khazad-dûm episode in *Fellowship of the Ring*.

Additional Keywords

Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings*—Sources; Wells, H.G. *The First Men in the Moon*—Relation to *The Lord of the Rings*

The Drums of Doom

H.G. Wells' *First Men in the Moon* and *The Lord of the Rings*

Robert Boenig

The literary debt of C.S. Lewis to H.G. Wells, as I and others¹ have tried to demonstrate in the pages of *Mythlore* and other journals, is both deep and complex. Like the medieval authors he explicated in his scholarly works, he knew that creativity often involves the response of one author to the work of another. As he demonstrated in his famous article, "What Chaucer Really Did to *II Filostrato*," source criticism -- the analysis of such literary debt -- is a fruitful mode of literary discourse. Among the authors Lewis used for the sources of his own creative work -- Dante, Milton, Bunyan, and the rest -- H.G. Wells stands out, for Lewis used him more than once, responding in *Out of the Silent Planet* to *The First Men in the Moon* and in *The Dark Tower to The Time Machine*.² I do not wish to cover this well-travelled ground again; instead I wish to suggest that Lewis' friend J.R.R. Tolkien also used Wells as a source. His literary debt, of course, is not so obvious as that of Lewis: *The Lord of the Rings* little resembles Wells' *First Men in the Moon* in plot, characterization, theme, or anything else. Yet one crucial scene in *The Lord of the Rings* has such striking connections to *The First Men in the Moon* that we might be tempted to subtitle "The Bridge at Khazad-Dum," Chapter 5 of Book II of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, "What Tolkien Really Did to H.G. Wells."

The First Men in the Moon, published in 1901, thus at the end of Wells' period of great science fiction novels, recounts how the eccentric physicist Cavor constructs a space sphere in the back yard of his vacation cottage and travels to the moon with Bedford, his mercenary companion. Their connections to Lewis' characters Weston and Devine should be obvious. While on the Moon, the two encounter the satellite's inhabitants, the Selenites, who capture them, setting off the violent denouement of the novel. When Cavor and Bedford first arrive on the Moon, they leave their sphere to begin exploring. The first evidence that the Moon is inhabited comes when they hear an ominous noise:

And even as we stood there, confused and lost amidst unprecedented things, we became aware for the first time of a sound upon the moon other than the stir of growing plants, the faint sighing of the wind, or those that we ourselves had made

Boom.... Boom.... Boom....

It came from beneath our feet, a sound in the ground. We seemed to hear it with our feet as much as with our ears. Its dull resonance was muffled by distance, thick with the quality of intervening substance. No sound that I can imagine would have astonished us more, nor here changed more completely the quality of things about us. For this sound, rich, slow and deliberate, seemed to us like the striking of some gigantic buried clock.

Boom.... Boom.... Boom....³

It is the sound of the Selenite's machinery, yet in its dull insistency it is more than that, reminiscent

perhaps to Wells and his original readers of the ominous knocking in *Macbeth*, but to readers of *The Lord of the Rings* evocative more of the drums of the orcs of Moria:

Gandalf had hardly spoken these words [of direction], when there came a great noise: a rolling Boom that seemed to come from depths far below, and to tremble in the stone at their feet. They sprang towards the door in alarm. Doom, doom it rolled again, as if huge hands were turning the very caverns of Moria into a vast drum.⁴

For the rest of the chapter, the Fellowship hears intermittent repetitions of *doom, doom*. Significant, however, is the first spelling of the sound, *Boom* -- Wells' own word; significant also are the downward direction of the sound in both passages and the similar details of feeling the sound with the feet.

After Cavor and Bedford are captured by the Selenites, they are being led downward through vast subterranean caverns when they arrive at the place that provides the title to Wells' fourteenth chapter, "The Giddy Bridge":

In another moment, as it seemed, we had reached the edge [of a precipice]. The shining stream gave one meander of hesitation and then rushed over. It fell to a depth at which the sound of its descent was absolutely lost to us. Far below was a bluish glow, a sort of blue mist. And the darkness the stream dropped out of became utterly void and black, save that a thing like a plank projected from the edge of the cliff and stretched out and faded and vanished altogether....

"We can't cross this at any price," said I [Bedford, the narrator]. (*Moon*, p. 83)

In more than one way this bridge is the forerunner of the one that gives title to Tolkien's chapter:

Suddenly Frodo saw before him a black chasm. At the end of the hall the floor vanished and fell to an unknown depth. The outer door could only be reached by a slender bridge of stone, without kerb or rail, that spanned the chasm with one curving spring of fifty feet... they could only pass across it in single file. (I, p. 343)

Not only are narrowness and precipitance shared characteristics of these subterranean bridges, but they also function as metaphors. The actions at each are climactic, precipitating the novels' subsequent events. At the Selenite's bridge, Bedford revolts, strikes out at his captors, and effects his and Cavor's escape. Their flight upwards towards light and freedom, punctuated by violent encounters with the pursuing Selenites, begins at this point. At the Bridge of Khazad-Dum, of course, Gandalf, like Bedford, turns to fight, enabling the rest of the company to escape out

into the light. His fall with the Balrog into the abyss is a major development in the plot.

Many details of the actual fights are similar. In both there are fights at bottlenecks. In Tolkien,

[t]here was a crash on the door, followed by crash after crash. Rams and hammers were beating against it. It cracked and staggered back, and the opening grew suddenly wide. Arrows came whistling in, but struck the northern wall, and fell harmlessly to the floor. There was a horn-blast and a rush of feet, and orcs one after another leaped into the chamber. (I, p. 338)

In Wells, the standoff is at a grate in the floor:

Then I could see that there was something moving dimly in the blackness below the grating, but what it might be I could not distinguish. The whole thing seemed to hang fire just for a moment; then, smash! I had sprung to my feet, struck savagely at something that had flashed out at me. It was the keen point of a spear. (Moon, p. 96)

Frodo is wounded in the fight:

... a huge orc-chieftain, almost man-high, clad in black mail from head to foot, leaped into the chamber; behind him his followers clustered in the doorway. His broad flat face was swart, his eyes were like coals, and his tongue was red; he wielded a great spear. With a thrust of his huge hide shield he turned Boromir's sword and bore him backwards, throwing him to the ground. Diving under Aragorn's blow with the speed of a striking snake he charged into the Company and thrust with his spear straight at Frodo. The blow caught him on the right side, and Frodo was hurled against the wall and pinned. (I, p. 339)

Frodo's wound is in the shoulder. Like this Orc, the typical Selenite is almost man-high and black clad (Moon, p. 61). During the fight in the caves, Bedford too is wounded in the shoulder:

He [a Selenite] was aiming in the queerest way the thing against his stomach. "Chuzz!" The thing wasn't a gun; it went off more like a crossbow, and dropped me in the middle of a leap.... I perceived there was a sort of spear sticking half through my shoulder. (Moon, p. 97)

Neither wound, of course, is fatal.

The implication of Tolkien's indebtedness to Wells in "The Bridge at Khazad-Dum" is, I feel, an important one. We tend to think of Tolkien as very much a writer *sui generis* -- a man of startlingly original creativity who, like the secondary creator he was, created out of nothing his fantasy world, a man resistant to criticism. There is, of course, much truth in this. Lewis himself supports this image of his friend in his famous remark, "No one ever influenced Tolkien -- you might as well try to influence a bandersnatch."⁶ I suggest that Tolkien's fantasy was more open and flexible than this comment might lead us to believe.

We often view him as the arch literary conservative, preferring medieval literature -- and life -- to modern. This is true, as the famous anecdote of his reciting the Lord's Prayer in Gothic into a tape recorder to exorcise technological demons indicates. But this literary indebtedness also reveals a modern side to Tolkien: he did, after all, use that tape recorder. Wells was an older contemporary, very much alive while Tolkien was writing *The Lord of the Rings*. *The First Men in the Moon*, is, moreover, a novel of science fiction, not fantasy, looking into the technological future for inspiration. And Tolkien -- unlike Lewis, who used Wells mainly to criticize his scientific and socially evolutionary ideas -- adapts details from Wells for their own sake, as pure, uncriticized elements of the plot. Consonant with this modern Tolkien is a Tolkien who was open to suggestion from his Inklings colleagues. Out of the *Silent Planet* was one of Lewis' Inklings works; in it he not only parallels the plot of *The First Men in the Moon* but also mentions it directly. I suggest that Tolkien took home from an Inklings meeting a vivid impression of Wells' novel -- one that changed forever the direction *The Lord of the Rings* would take.

NOTES

- 1 See Robert Boenig, "Lewis' Time Machine and his Trip to the Moon," *Mythlore* 42 (Summer 1980), pp. 6-9; Janice Neuleib, "Technology and Theocracy: The Cosmic Voyages of Wells and Lewis," *Extrapolation* 16 (1975), pp. 130 ff.; and Doris T. Myers, "What Lewis Really Did to the Time Machine and *The First Men in the Moon*," *Mythlore* 49 (Spring 1987), 47-50, 63.
- 2 Reprinted in C.S. Lewis, *Selected Literary Essays*, ed. Walter Hooper (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), p. 27-44.
- 3 H.G. Wells, *The First Men in the Moon* (New York: Airmont, 1965), p. 57. Hereafter *Moon*.
- 4 J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974), I, p. 337.
- 5 Quoted in Humphrey Carpenter, *Tolkien: A Biography* (New York: Ballantine, 1977), p. 226.

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