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Extreme Minimalism in *The Lord of the Rings*

Abstract

Notes two key moments of minimalistic style in *The Lord of the Rings*.

Additional Keywords

minimalism; JRR Tolkien

EXTREME MINIMALISM IN *THE LORD OF THE RINGS*

PIERRE H. BERUBE

IN PASSAGES OF PARTICULAR INTENSITY, I NOTICE that Tolkien often resorts to minimalism. His words become simple, homely, ancient. Monosyllables predominate. In some subliminal way which I cannot analyze, this increases the pathos. At least, such is the effect on me. Shakespeare and the Bible use the same trope. I have not observed it often in modern writers.

The most extreme case would be a passage composed *entirely* of monosyllables, and this actually occurs twice in *The Lord of the Rings*, and only twice. These two occurrences, I was startled to discover, correspond to the two main turning points of the plot.

That plot is simple: Get the Ring to the Fire. As the reader is constantly reminded, this is the primary action. All else is ancillary—the wars and policies, the adventures, the glimpses of ancient history, the poems, the strange races and cultures of Middle-earth, the astonishing feats of imagination, the subtle characterization, even the languages.

In this primary plot-line there are two turning points. At the Council of Elrond, Frodo accepts the quest: “‘I will take the Ring,’ he said, ‘though I do not know the way’” (II.2.270).

At the Sammath Naur, he repudiates it: “‘I have come,’ he said. ‘But I do not choose now to do what I came to do. I will not do this deed. The ring is mine!’” (VI.3.944).

Surely this cannot be coincidence.

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MIRKWOOD

JOHN V. ORTH

MOVING THROUGH Bilbo Baggins's journey with the dwarves, the company sheltered with Beorn and enjoyed the best meal they had had since they left the Last Homely House in the West. It was to be a long time before they would feast again. Ahead of them on their route lay a dark and dangerous wood, “the terrible forest of Mirkwood.” The dwarves knew that “after the mountains it was the worst of the perils they had to pass before they came to the dragon's stronghold” (*The Annotated Hobbit* [H] VII.177). Beorn agreed. The way through Mirkwood was “dark, dangerous and difficult.” Water would be a