



Mythopoeic Society

mythLORE

A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis,
Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature

Volume 15
Number 3

Article 1

Spring 3-15-1989

Tolkien's Creative Technique: *Beowulf* and *The Hobbit*

Bonniejean Christensen

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore>



Part of the [Children's and Young Adult Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Christensen, Bonniejean (1989) "Tolkien's Creative Technique: *Beowulf* and *The Hobbit*," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 15: No. 3, Article 1. Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol15/iss3/1>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Mythopoeic Society at SWOSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature by an authorized editor of SWOSU Digital Commons. An ADA compliant document is available upon request. For more information, please contact phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu.

To join the Mythopoeic Society go to:
<http://www.mythsoc.org/join.htm>

SWOSUTM

Online Summer Seminar 2023

August 5-6, 2023: Fantasy Goes to Hell: Depictions of Hell in Modern Fantasy Texts

<https://mythsoc.org/oms/oms-2023.htm>



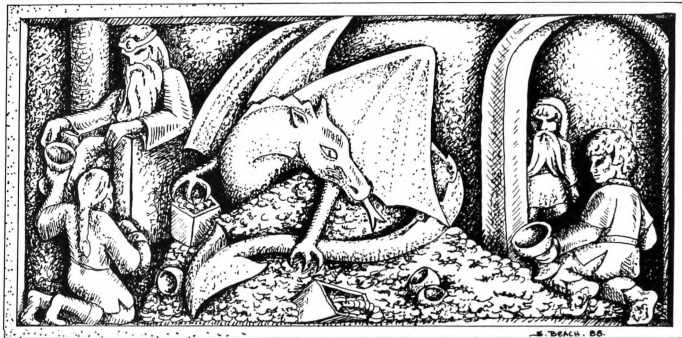
Tolkien's Creative Technique: *Beowulf* and *The Hobbit*

Abstract

Asserts that "*The Hobbit*, differing greatly in tone, is nonetheless a retelling of the incidents that comprise the plot and the digressions in both parts of *Beowulf*." However, his retelling is from a Christian point of view.

Additional Keywords

Beowulf—Influence on *The Hobbit*; Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Hobbit*—Sources; Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Hobbit*—Technique



Tolkien's Creative Technique

Beowulf and The Hobbit

Bonniejean Christensen

It is a great pleasure to me to have been invited to speak at this conference [The 1987 Mythopoeic Conference at Marquette University] – the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of *The Hobbit*. It was twenty years ago that I began my work on the relationship between *Beowulf* and *The Hobbit*, on Professor Tolkien's transforming epic into fantasy and elegy into affirmation. The relationship seemed so far-fetched that I was hesitant to propose it; but I received the encouragement of several scholars I respected and admired: Richard C. West, Clyde S. Kilby, Eugene Vinaver, and Owen Barfield. And it is with thanks to them that I developed my thesis on J.R.R. Tolkien's creative technique in *The Hobbit*.

In his essay "On Fairy-Stories" J.R.R. Tolkien speaks of recovery as one of the aims of fantasy, recovery in his sense including "return and renewal of health," or "the regaining of a clear view."¹ Recovery is seeing with fresh perspective, with new eyes, things which have lost their meaning through familiarity:

I do not say 'seeing things as they are' and involve myself with the philosophers, though I might venture to say 'seeing things as we are (or were) meant to see them' – as things apart from ourselves. We need, in any case, to clean our windows; so that the things seen clearly may be freed from the drab blur of triteness or familiarity – from possessiveness. (p. 57)

It is possible to consider *The Hobbit*² as a fresh vision of the world of *Beowulf*³; indeed, it is possible to consider it as a retelling of *Beowulf*, but from a Christian rather than a pagan point of view, and as a fantasy rather than an elegy – as Tolkien calls the Old English poem in his significant essay "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics."⁴

A comparison of the two works is possible on a very general level: each contains an unpromising hero who achieves heroic stature; each has monsters in an ascending scale of terror identified as "descendants of Cain," either literally or by implication; each has peripheral tales dealing with the histories of peoples, or dwarves in the case of *The Hobbit*; and each, of course, has at least one dragon. A much more detailed comparison can be made, one showing that Tolkien has recreated *Beowulf* through a complete retelling of it, but a retelling that denies the Anglo-Saxon belief that within Time every man is destroyed by evil, that the dragon waits at the end for every man.⁵ It is retelling that affirms the Christian belief that man can successfully withstand the dragon.

In this paper I am primarily concerned with internal evidence to demonstrate that *The Hobbit*, differing greatly in tone, is nonetheless a retelling of the incidents that comprise the plot and the digressions in both parts of *Beowulf*.

But there is also external evidence available that Tolkien was greatly concerned with *Beowulf* and with the nature of fantasy during the period of *The Hobbit*'s composition. In 1936 he reads his "*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics" before the British Academy. It was an essay that changed the direction of *Beowulf* criticism by insisting that *Beowulf* had to be read as a poem, a work of literature, rather than as a curious document illuminating history or religion or archaeology. The next year, 1937, he published in Great Britain *The Hobbit*, and the following year in the United States; it received favorable reviews in both countries, but was not a commercial success. Also in the year of its British publication he composed as an Andrew Lang Lecture "On Fairy-Stories," which he read at the University of St. Andrew. It is an essay that affirms the writer as a sub-creator, the Christian as an assistant "in the effoliation and multiple enrichment of creation" (p. 73). During the same period he composed "Leaf by Niggle"⁶ and began work on *The Lord of the Rings*.⁷ And both, differing so widely in scope and appeal, are examples of Tolkien's concept of "sub-creation" as developed in that essay. During this period he was also concerned with the revision of the Clark Hall translation of *Beowulf* and the *Finnsburg* fragment into modern English prose, a translation to which he contributed a preface.⁸

Allowing for the difference in tone, which is considerable, we can see the similarity in structure if we take the main sections of *Beowulf* and relate to them the corresponding sections of *The Hobbit*. *Beowulf* has of course been criticized for being so diffuse, for putting monsters in the center and relegating the historical material to the edges in a hodge-podge of stories and allusions. Tolkien has reordered this material in *The Hobbit*, still keeping the monsters in the center, but interweaving the digressions so that they are an important part of the fabric, an integral part of the narrative. Both works can be divided into four sections, which, following Friedrich Klaeber, we can call "the monsters," "the descendant of Cain," "episodes and digressions," and "the dragon."⁹

The part of *Beowulf* dealing with the monsters begins with the prologue narrating the early history of the Danes: the genealogy of the royal house, the building of the hall at Heorot, and the destruction wrought by Grendel. The first chapter of *The Hobbit* has the early history of the dwarves, the establishment of their Kingdom under the Mountain, and the arrival there of Smaug and the consequent destruction. In the poem, fifteen companions, hearing of Grendel's depredations, cross the sea to put an end to them. In *The Hobbit*, fifteen companions (counting Gandalf) also set out, but one of them – Bilbo – is anything but an enthusiastic champion of the cause.

Beowulf has a brief review of Grendel's nature and companions: Grendel dwells in darkness, a descendant of Cain, as are trolls, elves, monsters, and giants.

Danon untýdras ealle onwocan.

eotenas ond ylfe ond orcnæas,
sweylc gigantas. Ða wið Gode wunnon
lange þrage. (ll. III-III4)

[From thence sprang all bad breeds, trolls and elves and monsters – likewise the giants who for a long time strove against God.]

Tolkien expands this reference to several chapters in *The Hobbit*. The company meet these lesser evils on their way to the greater evil, the dragon – the same pattern Tolkien perceives in *Beowulf*.¹⁰ The company first meet trolls and overcome them with the help of Gandalf. Next they encounter elves, which Tolkien has removed from the Germanic catalogue of evil creatures and placed in the Celtic tradition of the "Good People." And then a glimpse of giants warring against nature, giants of whom Gandalf later says he will see about getting one to block up the entrance to the goblins' lair. And finally the monsters, the *orcneas*. The various references in *Beowulf* to Grendel and to *orcnæas* [hell-corpses] are brought together in *The Hobbit* and applied to the goblins, which Tolkien calls *ogres* in his criticism and *orcs* in *The Lord of the Rings*.

In *Beowulf* we find:

Ða com of more under mistleobum
Grendel gongan. Godes yrra bar

[Then came from the moor under the misty hills Grendel walking, wearing God's anger] (ll. 710-711).

Tolkien constructs the Misty Mountains and populates them with a breed vicious and soulless. (No need to remind you of the fire-lit cavern in which the Great Goblin holds court.) In *Beowulf* Grendel attacks an alerted troop – he is described as coming on a night in which all expect that

scaduþelmas gesecepu scriðan cwomana
wan under wolcnum

[shadowy shapes of darkness should come gliding, black beneath the clouds] (ll. 650-651).

In *The Hobbit* Tolkien develops the scene by contrast: the company is unsuspecting and all the ponies are driven off to become a meal (substituting, after a fashion, for the one warrior eaten by Grendel), observed only by the restless, dreaming Bilbo who sees a crack in the wall enlarging but is so afraid he cannot call out.

In *Beowulf* the hero struggles with Grendel until the monster finds that

Hyge was him hinfus, hoelster fleon, secan
de wolde on heolster fleon,
secan deofla gedreg

[His heart was eager to get away, he would flee to his cavern, seek his pack of devils] (11. 755-756).

Tolkien has the goblins, frightened by Gandalf's display of fireworks, fleeing to their cavern and their companion devils.

The special grudge the goblins have against the dwarves is reminiscent of the Freawar episode (11. 2024-2069), in which Beowulf speculates that a certain feud will be renewed when some old warrior draws his chief's attention to a sword now in the possession of the other side. A similar recognition scene occurs in the cavern in *The Hobbit*, not of an heirloom previously belonging to the goblins, but of a sword familiar to them because it had claimed so many of the victims. As Grendel gives up his arm and shoulder, and eventually his life, to Beowulf, so the Great Goblin loses his life to the sword flashing in its own light, once he recognizes Orcrist [Goblin-cleaver]. Here we have Tolkien's skillful interweaving of an incident with the main plot, correcting a criticism frequently leveled at *Beowulf*, that it is not integrated, but a collection of incidents surrounding the plots of the two parts.

In the company's escape Bilbo is lost, and Chapter V, "Riddles in the Dark," introduces Gollum, a descendant of Cain, and the killer of his brother hobbit, as we are to learn in *The Lord of the Rings*. Gollum partakes of the nature of both Unferth and of Grendel's mother, and the scattered incidents concerning them in *Beowulf* are drawn together in *The Hobbit*. In *Beowulf* Unferth taunts the hero, or as the poem has it, *onband beadurune* [unbound a battle-rune, or battle-runes] (1. 502), and one meaning of "battle-runes" is "riddles," as Tolkien himself points out elsewhere.¹¹ Beowulf accuses Unferth of fratricide. Each tells his own version of Beowulf's swimming contest with Breca (which Tolkien transforms later, in the battle with the giant spiders). And Unferth lends Beowulf his sword Hrunting, a name which can be glossed "Sting."

You will remember too that in *Beowulf* the hero risks his life in descending an unknown trail to a lair of water monsters and in a cavern there fights Grendel's mother, who is safe from his sword Hrunting, but vulnerable to a magic artifact he finds there – the sword with which he dispatches her.

From these varied elements Tolkien has created Gollum, who dwells on a rock in an underground lake, around which are many ancient creatures unknown even to the goblins. When Bilbo encounters Gollum, the two engage in a riddle contest in which Bilbo's life is the prize. In the end, it is not the sword which he is to name "Sting" that saves him, but a magic artifact, the ring, which he finds in the cavern.

When Bilbo reaches the surface again, he finds the dwarves lamenting his loss, as Beowulf found his men mourning for him.

In *The Hobbit* in Chapter VI the incident with the goblins and the wargs in the woods incorporates the whole of the *Finnsburg* fragment. Tolkien has the Lord of the Eagles summon his warriors to him when he becomes aware, in the moonlight, of the flash of fire, the howling of the wolves, and "the glint of the moon on goblin spears and helmets, as long lines of the wicked folk crept down the hillsides from their gate and wound into the wood." How similar in detail to the *Finnsburg* fragment, where the mighty chief sees fire flashing:

ac her forþ berað, fuglas singað,
gyllæð græghama, guðwudu hlylnæð,
scyld scefte oncwýð. Nu scýnæð ðes mona
wæðol under wolcnum; nu arisæð weaðena,
ðe ðine folces nið fremman willað.
(11. 5-9)

[but here they bear forth weapons, the birds sing, the grey-coated wolf howls, there is a din of spear, shield answers shaft. Now shines the moon fitful beneath clouds. Now arise evil deeds that will further this hatred of the people.]

The hatred is furthered, of course, giving the goblins one more score to settle at the Battle of Five Armies. This part of the story is not left a fragment, however: the eagles rescue the besieged companions, and Tolkien tells us, "So ended the adventures of the Misty Mountains."

What can be called "episodes and digressions" in *Beowulf* provides the details for the middle part of *The Hobbit*, primarily, though a few are used in the conclusion of the fantasy to tie up the loose ends of narrative. The middle part is concerned with Beorn, the giant spiders, and the Elvenking. Tolkien's narrative skill is nowhere more evident than in his successful reweaving of so many strands of story.

Among the episodes and digressions that Tolkien here incorporates from *Beowulf* are the feasting and gift-giving and recapitulation of events that occur at Hrothgar's table; Beowulf's following of the trail of Grendel to the mere where his mother's lair is; Beowulf's taking of trophies, specifically, Grendel's arm and later head; the story of the sea-battle with the nicors; and the story of the hateful queen Modthryth.

In *The Hobbit* we meet Beorn, a skin-changer, who is sometimes a man and sometimes literally a *beo-wulf*, a bear. With him there is much feasting and retelling of events and, upon the company's departure, much giving of gifts. During the company's visit, Beorn retraces their steps to confirm their story, and returns with trophies of their enemies, a warg skin and a goblin head – close enough parallels to the concluding scenes in Hrothgar's hall.

Tolkien has his company plunging into the forest, which replaces the sea, and has as their antagonists giant spiders rather than *nicors*, the sea monsters. In the passage

in *Beowulf* which is the source, Beowulf is telling of the Breca incident, in which he and his companion are driven apart in the sea and the anger of the nicors is aroused. He continues:

Me to grunde teah
fah feondscada, fæste hæfde
grim on grape; hwmære weard,
þæt ic æglæcan orde gesehte,
hildebille; heaþoræs fornam
mihlig meredeor þurh mine hand
(II. 553-558)

[A fierce cruel brute dragged me to the ground (bottom), held me grim in his grasp, but it was granted me to reach the monster with my sword-point, with my battle-blade. The war-stroke destroyed the mighty sea beast through my hand.]

Bilbo has an encounter in the dark with a great spider, after he and the dwarves are driven apart, and is held down while the spider attempts to poison him. He is able, with much struggling and the aid of his sword, to kill it. As a result of his single combat, Bilbo gains confidence in himself, knowing he is capable of heroism. The rest of his activities in freeing the dwarves correspond to Beowulf's description of the remainder of his battle with the nicors, though Bilbo is aided by a magic ring instead of by inhuman strength, as Beowulf is. Bilbo can say of the spiders what Beowulf says of the nicors:

Næs hie ðære fylle gefean hæfdon

[They had no joy of that feast] (I. 562).

The company's next adventure is with the Elvenking, modeled on Modthryth, a queen the *Beowulf*-poet mentions (II. 1931-1962). Modthryth in her youth was suspicious and proud and vengeful, but after her marriage to Offa came in time to use her offices well. When we first hear of her, she is moved by violence of mood because of fancied insult, ready to cast anyone into deadly bonds. This is approximately the situation, you will remember, between the Elvenking and Thorin. The Elvenking is easily offended and excessively suspicious and casts Thorin into a dungeon. Later the *Beowulf*-poet indicates that men at their ale-drinking (I. 1945) discuss the change in the queen's behavior; Tolkien uses the drinking motif, applying it to the steward and chief guard whom Bilbo overhears discussing the banquet and the evening's work in sending empty barrels down to Lake-town. The *Beowulf*-poet concludes with a description of Modthryth's activity after her marriage, in which she is praised for her goodness:

ðær hio syððan well
in gumstole, gode mære,
lifgesceafta lifigende breac,
hiolede heahlufan wið hmlæpa brego
(II. 1951-1954)

[There afterwards on the throne he was famous for generosity, while she was alive, held high love toward the lord of heroes.]

Tolkien seems to have this passage in mind in describing the change in the Elvenking in later chapters, when the Elvenking comes to the aid of Bard and the men of Lake-town, when he offers sanctuary to Bilbo after the latter's betrayal of Thorin, and when he names Bilbo "elf-friend and blessed."

In *Beowulf* the transition between Part I and Part II has the completion of the company's sea-crossing, their mooring their ship, their arrival at the stronghold, and their report to Hygelac, who gives great gifts to the hero and his men. In *The Hobbit* there are comparable events: barrels, instead of a ship, lashed to moorings; the company creating a stir by their arrival; and the banquet and the company's report to the Master, who, from mixed motives indeed, gives them provisions to continue their quest.

The remainder of *Beowulf* and of *The Hobbit* is concerned with the dragon. The *Beowulf*-poet summarizes three hundred years of dragon history in a few lines:

oð ðæt an ongan
deorcum niþum draca ricstan,
se ðe on hezum hæþe hord beweotode,
stanbeorh steapne; stig under lmg
eldum uncwð. (II. 2210-2214)

[until in the dark nights a certain one began to hold sway – a dragon, who on the upland heath kept watch over a hoard, a steep stone-barrow; below lay a path unknown to men.]

The expansion of this material in *The Hobbit* is obvious; every detail is used literally. The lines actually dealing with the thief number less than two dozen in the poem. In *The Hobbit* these few lines are expanded to a chapter (xi). From *Beowulf* we learn also that a thief, not of his own accord, flees to the cave and sees the sleeping dragon and carries off a precious cup (II. 2215-2230). We learn from a later retrospect that the dragon upon waking finds the footsteps of the one who

to forð gestop dyrnan cwmfte heafde neah

[had walked forward and close to the head of the dragon by his stealthy craft] (II. 2289-2290).

These events are telescoped in *The Hobbit*, and we find Bilbo examining the sleeping dragon and his hoard and walking invisible near his head with the help of the magic ring. As the thief in *Beowulf* takes a cup for reparation, Bilbo takes one in reparation of the low opinion the dwarves still occasionally have of him: he is frightened, "but still he clutched the cup, and his chief thought was: 'I've done it! This will show them. "More like a grocer than a burglar" indeed! Well, we'll hear no more of that!"

The *Beowulf*-poet next has a company of thirteen return with the unwilling thief to examine the treasure, and at the end of the poem has a group enter the cave to despoil it, a group led by one with a flaming torch. Tolkien combines these separate events. You will remember (Gandalf having left the group before the crossing of Mirkwood) the descent of Thorin and his twelve followers with – or more accurately, after – Bilbo when that burglar makes his third excursion into the cave, carrying a burning pine torch. And you will remember their taking wealth and armor and weapons, though Fili and Kili were less practical, spending time playing on the harps removed from the wall. You will remember, too, Bilbo's concealment of the Arkenstone. But more of that after the dragon.

Tolkien in *The Hobbit* patterns Smaug's behavior on that of Beowulf's dragon, but with a simpler and tidier chronology. In both the dragon is enraged by the theft, examining his barrow carefully for the thief, and each waits until nightfall to descend on the countryside to take vengeance. Even the scorching of the hero in *Beowulf* is included in *The Hobbit*, but shifted to the time of the interview between Smaug and Bilbo. You will remember that their battle consisted of a riddle contest, ending abruptly when Bilbo taunts the sensitive Smaug, who in turn sings the hair of the fleeing hobbit. Thus Tolkien reduces to a verbal contest the battle between Beowulf and the dragon, as he had earlier reduced the fight between Beowulf and Grendel's dam.

For the fight between Bard and Smaug in *The Hobbit*, Tolkien draws his details from the of Sigemund, Recited in the first part of *Beowulf* after the visit to the mere (11. 874-914). Bard, of course, performs in *The Hobbit* the actions attributed to Sigemund, killing the dragon and having great prosperity after the death of a greedy and battle-prone ruler. And like Sigemund, he is of royal descent, though this is recorded of Sigemund not in *Beowulf* but in the *Voluspá*. And Sigemund's foe, the *Beowulf*-poet tells us, is burned up in his own heat: *Wyrn hat gemaelt* (1.897). Smaug suffers (Chapter XIV) the same fate, falling on the town: "His last throes splintered it to sparks and gledes. The lake roared in. A vast steam leaped up, white in the sudden dark of the moon. There was a hiss, a gushing swirl, and then silence." Here again Tolkien has combined separate incidents from *Beowulf*: it is at the end of the poem that the warriors push the dragon over the cliff into the sea.

Through the last part of *The Hobbit* there are some episodes and digressions woven in, primarily those dealing with the *eorclanstans* and the various greedy rulers who were unjust to their faithful men. *Eorclanstans* is a word occurring once in *Beowulf*, where it signifies "precious jewels" and has the connotations of "brilliant" and "opalescent" (1. 1208). Tolkien produces the Arkenstone, the heart of Thorin, and interweaves three of the digressions in the poem to develop the importance of the

Arkenstone and to expand on the theme of the destructiveness of lust. One digression (11. 1197-1201) seems to indicate that the necklace worn by the goddess Freya at one time was stolen from the Gothic king Eormenric by the betrayer Hama. In *The Hobbit* the Theft of the stone is developed by Bilbo's stealing Thorin's Arkenstone (Chapter XIII) and his later giving it to Bard to facilitate treaty discussions (Chapter XVI). Another digression, Heremod's tragedy (11. 1709-1922), is paralleled by Thorin's tragedy: greed turns each of the rulers into a cruel and miserly tyrant. Hermod, the "war-minded," is the prototype of Thorin under the spell of the Arkenstone, for of Heremod it was said

ne gewæox he him to willan,
ac to wælfæalle ond to deað cwalum
Deniga leodum

[he grew great not for their joy, but for their slaughter, for the destruction of Danish folk] (11. 1711-1712).

The third digression is Hygelac's fall (11. 1202-1214), which refers to Hygelac's last expedition and terms it both unwise and fatal. It is paralleled in *The Hobbit* (Chapter XVII) by Thorin's last rash battle, which brings destruction on himself and on "many men and many dwarves, and many a fair elf that should have lived yet long ages merrily in the wood."

After Beowulf kills the dragon and himself dies, his people fear that old enmities will be recalled and old hatreds renewed through warfare. In a retrospect the messenger who reports his death also recites the events that occurred long before at the battle of Ravenswood and predicts the battle to come. This material Tolkien applies in *The Hobbit* to the events after the death of Smaug: the preparations of goblins and others to attack the defenders of the Mountain and, as it came to be called in the history of Middle Earth, the Battle of Five Armies that took place at Ravenhill.

In both *Beowulf* and *The Hobbit* there is an old feud and the motive of revenge: Ongentheow to avenge his queen; the goblins their Great Goblins – and the withdrawal of the defenders – the Geats to Ravenswood and the elves to Ravenhill. The fight, in both, lasts until dawn. The defenders are in despair until their chief arrives to rally the forces. In *Beowulf*:

Frøfor eft gelamp
sarigmodum somod ærdæge,
syððan hie Hygelaces horn ond byman
gealdor ongeaton, þa se goda com
leoda dugode on last faran.

(11. 2941-2945)

[Relief came afterwards with the dawn to the sad-hearted

ones when they heard Hygelac's horn and trumpet sounding, when the herd came on their track with a pricked body of troops.]

In *The Hobbit* Tolkien expands on the same incident:

Suddenly there was a great shout, and from the Gate came a trumpet call. They had forgotten Thorin! Part of the wall, moved by levers, fell outward with a crash into the pool. Out leapt the King under the Mountain, and his companions followed him. Hood and cloak were gone; they were in shining armour, and red light leapt from their eyes. In the gloom the great dwarf gleamed like gold in a dying fire.

.....
 'To me! To me! Elves and Men! To me! O my kinsfolk!' he cried, and his voice shook like a horn in the valley.

Noting the differences in chronology, we see that Beowulf has time for a dying speech, and so does Thorin. Beowulf can look upon death knowing he has not broken the two great pagan prohibitions – false swearing and the murder of kin – and that he has merited the *lof*, the praise, of his peers. Within the context of his pagan world, Tolkien sees him achieving all that can be expected of a man who must lose his battle within Time.¹² Thorin (Chapter XVIII) does not have that comfort – the death of a good pagan, for he has lied to Bard in refusing to reward his aid and he has caused the death of kin through his pride – but he achieves a reconciliation of himself to the world and to what lies beyond Time. He renews his friendship with Bilbo and he realizes the little worth of the treasure for which he is sacrificing his life. It is his nephews who achieve the pagan ideal, the praise of their peers, for "Fili and Kili had fallen defending him with shield and body, for he was their mother's elder brother."

Both Beowulf and Thorin receive a burial worthy of their station. The poem ends at this point, but *The Hobbit* concludes where it began, at Bilbo's hobbit-hole under the Hill. Tolkien interweaves the remaining episodes and digressions from Beowulf in order to complete this circle of the year and the circle of the journey. As one queen, Wealtheow, gives Beowulf a precious circlet –

Bruc ðisses beages, Beowulf leofa
 (l. 1216)

– and he in turn gives it to another queen; Hygd –

wrætlene wundurmeaðum

[a splendid wondrous treasure] (l. 2173)

– so Dain, the new King under the Mountain, gives Bilbo a necklace of silver and pearls and he in turn presents it to the Elvenking, who names him "elf-friend and blessed." We are reminded of the king in *Widsith* whose name Aelfwine can be translated as "Elf-friend," who, we are told, was most liberal in bestowing gifts:

se hæfde moncynnes mine gefræge,
 leahteate hond lofas to wyrceenne,
 heortan unhnæwaste bringa gedales,
 beorhtra beaga. (ll. 71-74)

[he had of all mankind, as I have heard, the readiest hand to work praise, the most liberal heart in the distribution of rings, bright necklaces.]

The second series of Swedish wars alluded to in *Beowulf* (11 2354-2396) are transformed in *The Hobbit* into the history of Bard subsequent to the Battle of Five Armies, when he becomes protector of the Master of Lake-town (Chapters XIV and XIX), as Beowulf became protector of Heardred, the son of the dead Hygelac, and of the widowed queen Hygd, and later when Bard becomes Lord of Dale (Chapter XIX), as Beowulf became king after Heardred's death.

"The Song of Creation" (11. 90-98), occurring near the beginning of *Beowulf*, is described by Tolkien on his essay on *Beowulf* as "the song of the minstrel in the days of untroubled joy, before the assault of Grendel, telling of the Almighty and His fair creation" (p. 101). In *The Hobbit* this song is represented by Gandalf's speech at the end of the story. It is a speech that affirms divine creation and preservation and is the only direct reference in the story to an ordering force in the universe.

Selectivity is Tolkien's hallmark in applying traditional material to his own literary works. Besides using both the plot and all the incidents from *Beowulf*, he reworks smaller units of material. He distributes the characteristics of the hero Beowulf over various individuals in *The Hobbit*, including on occasion Gandalf, Bilbo, Thorin, and Bard. He draws upon his concept of Heorot as a lighted place in the dark night of evil for the creation of various places of refuge in *The Hobbit* – Elrond's house, The cavern in the Misty Mountains, Beorn's hall, and the dwarves' kingdom under the Mountain. He elaborates on casual references to places and objects in *Beowulf* to create important matter in *The Hobbit*, including the Misty Mountains and the Arkenstone. He borrows selectively and creatively from other sources – the *Eddas*, *Widsith*, and the *Finnsburg* fragment.

Tolkien has used the general techniques of expansion, transposition, and negation, the statement of the contrary, in transforming *Beowulf* into *The Hobbit*. He has converted what he calls in his criticism of *Beowulf* "an Heroic-elegiac poem" (p. 85) into an affirmation of faith by transforming the theme. *Beowulf* he sees as an elegy on man's heroic struggle against inevitable defeat in Time; *The Hobbit*, his response to this concept, is the affirmation that man has the possibility of resisting and overcoming evil within Time. It illustrates a principle he puts forward in his essay "On Fairy-Stories," the principle of the *eucatastrophy*, the consolation of the happy ending (p. 68).

Tolkien's literary work derives its scope from his medieval studies and its form from his theory of subcreation, the rearranging in the secondary world of the artist the components perceived in the primary world. He has rearranged material in *Beowulf* as he interprets it from his own scholarly and Christian perspective to create *The Hobbit*. He has given us the opportunity for seeing with new eyes things which have lost their meaning through familiarity, for 'seeing things as we are (or were) meant to see them.'

Endnotes

- ¹ P. 57 of the revised essay in *Tree and Leaf* (London: G. Allen and Unwin, 1965; Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965).
- ² (London: G. Allen and Unwin, 1937, 1951; Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1938, 1958; New York: Ballantine Books, 1965, 1966; London: Longmans, Green, 1966.) My citations are to chapter numbers.
- ³ My text is *Beowulf and The Fight at Finnsburg*, ed. Friedrich Klaeber, 2nd ed. (New York: D.C. Heath, 1928), since it is the edition Tolkien would have known in the thirties.
- ⁴ Proceedings of the British Academy, XXII (1936), 245-295. Reprinted in *An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism*, ed. Lewis E. Nicholson (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1963), and in *The Beowulf Poet: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Donald K. Fry (Englewood Cliffs, 1968). My citations are to Nicholson.
- ⁵ *Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*, p. 67.
- ⁶ Publication came some years later in the *Dublin Review*, CCXVI (January 1945); twenty years afterwards it was reprinted with "On Fairy-Stories" in *Tree and Leaf*; and a year later both were reprinted in *The Tolkien Reader* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1966).
- ⁷ Consisting of three volumes, "The Fellowship of the Ring," "The Two Towers," and "The Return of the King" (London: G. Allen and Unwin, 1954-55; Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1954-56; New York: Ace Books, 1965. *Ibid.* Rev. ed. New York: Ballantine Books, 1965. *Ibid.*, 2nd Ed. London: G. Allen and Unwin, 1966; Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1967; *Ibid.* 1 vol. paperback, omitting the Appendices except for "Aragorn

and Arwen." London: G. Allen and Unwin, 1968).

⁸ "Prefatory Remarks" to *Beowulf and the Finnesburg Fragment, A Translation into Modern English Prose*, by John R. Clark Hall (London: G. Allen and Unwin, 1940).

⁹ Tolkien attacks the general position held by Chambers, Klaeber, et al, but he does not deal specifically with Klaeber. Yet much of his discussion parallels.

¹⁰ *Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*, p. 86.

¹¹ "Prefatory Remarks," p. xi.

¹² The Anglo-Saxon's doom Tolkien calls in his essay on *Beowulf* "this paradox of defeat inevitable yet unacknowledged," concluding that "It is in *Beowulf* that a poet has drawn the struggle in different proportions, so that we may see man at war with the hostile world, and his inevitable overthrow in Time" (p. 67). *Beowulf* has the comfort of knowing at his death that he has shown courage, "the exaltation of undefeated will" (p. 66). He knows that his foes are God's also:

Man alien in a hostile world, engaged in a struggle which he cannot win while the world lasts, is assured that his foes are the foes also of Dryhten, that his courage noble in itself is also the highest loyalty: so said thyle and clerk. (p. 78)

CLASSIFIED ADS

The Purpose of this section is to provide *Mythlore* readers a forum of communication. *Mythlore* reserves the right to reject or cancel any ads which do not conform to the standards of the publication. Ads must be typed or printed legibly. Anything separated by a space is considered a word. All classified ads, at 20¢ per word, are due with copy by check or money order. Send ads to the Editor - see page 2 for address.

Wanted: a copy of *The Personal Heresy* by C.S. Lewis [with E.M. Tillyard]. Glen GoodKnight, 740 S. Hobart, Los Angeles, CA 90005.

◆◆◆ Benefactors ◆◆◆

Benefactors support the improvement and outreach of *MYTHLORE* by making donations of \$20 or more beyond the cost of subscription. For this much appreciated support they are listed for four issues. You are encouraged to become a Benefactor and show your support in this way.

Lloyd Alexander	Drexel Hill, PA
Mary Borhek	St. Paul, MN
Geoffrey F. Brenny	Buena Park, CA
Bonnie Callahan	Pasadena, CA
Loretta Callagher	Washington Crossing, PA
Robert Hall, Jr.	Ithaca, NY
Alison S. Lewis	Hayward, CA
Kathryn Lindskoog	Orange, CA
Elizabeth Lower	Springfield, IL
Ted Nasmith	Toronto, Canada
Anne Osborn	Orange, CA
Diana Pavlac	Chicago, IL
Rivendell Discussion Group	St. Paul, MN
Peter Schakel	Holland, MI
Mary McDermott Shideler	Boulder, CO

Celebration of Tasker Hepplewater's Mock Turtle (1935)

All the assembled authors were discussing the extraordinary behavior of the Book of the Moment selectors in awarding their ephemeral crown to Tasker Hepplewater's *Mock Turtle*. "I finished this book," one distinguishing adjudicator had said, "with the tears running down my face."

— Dorothy L. Sayers, *Gaudy Night*, Ch. XI

Hidden and deep the writer's meaning lies,
about a swimming instructor, whose weary eyes
had seen the bathing beauties, seen them all,
had seen them swim a little, sunbath and loll;
mysteriously, his id in ashes dies.

Upon a whaler then, 'neath northern skies,
a female Eskimo the hero spies
who's covered with furs - her beauties him enthral,
hidden deep.

Brought to a London suburb, quickly she hies
with a vegetarian nudist; the hero plies,
his ego in ashes, unto the Aquarium hall
to watch a turtle swim within its shell
(such is the meaning expressed which wins the prize),
hidden and deep.

— Joe R. Christopher