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Verlyn B. Flieger

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## A Question of Time

### Abstract

Uses the ambiguous nature of time's passage in Lórien to discuss the nature of time and timelessness in Middle-earth. Uses Tolkien's other writings to suggest the symbolic meaning of time in Middle-earth.

### Additional Keywords

Time in The Lord of the Rings; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Elves—Concept of time; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Settings—Lothlórien—Time in

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# A Question of Time

Verlyn B. Fieger

Theologically-minded writers from St. Augustine to T.S. Eliot have explored the question of time – what it is, why it is, what it's good (or bad) for. J.R.R. Tolkien is no exception. A constant thread running through his mythology is concern with the passing time of Middle-earth. Time is an ever-present factor; it is counted up, sometimes raced against always observed and marked. Time brings Durin's Day, Bilbo's Birthday, the sad anniversaries of sting and knife wounds, the realization of loss. On the literary level, this adds realism to the fantasy, but at a deeper level it can be seen as echoing the meditations of St. Augustine on time and decay as aspects of mortality directing humanity toward God. "Wherever the soul of man turns," he says in the *Confessions*, "unless towards God, it cleaves to sorrow even though the things outside God and outside itself to which it cleaves may be things of beauty.... They rise and set... they grow old, and they die" (53). *The Lord of the Rings* is permeated with this sense of transience and loss, expressed feelingly by Theoden after the battle of Helm's Deep when he asks Gandalf "However the fortunes of war shall go, may it not so end that much that was fair and wonderful shall pass forever out of Middle-earth?" (*The Two Towers*, 155). An exception to this inevitable passing is the perfection of the Elven strongholds, where time and loss are kept at bay. This is worth noting, for it is more than an attempt to inject extra beauty into Tolkien's world. The varying effects of time mark a significant difference between Elves and Men, the difference between holding on and letting go as indices of faith and relationship to God.

Toward the end of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Sam, Frodo, Legolas and Aragorn have a debate about time. In terms of the plot it is inconsequential, but it bears on the theme I have described. The situation is this: they are on their way down the Great River a week after their departure from Lórien. Sam starts off, counting on his fingers in an effort to reconcile his memory with the present night sky. He has just seen a new moon, and remembers that the moon was waning when they came to Lórien. The preceding narrative supports this, describing a "fast-waning moon" as the Fellowship escapes from Mória, and a "sickle moon" when they arrive next night in Lórien. But once in Lórien this exactitude is dropped, and the narrative says only that "They remained some days in Lórien, so far as they could tell or remember," and "they could not count the days and nights they had passed there." (*Fellowship*, 373, 386). And now, says Sam in bewilderment, "up pops a New Moon as thin as a nail paring, as if we had never stayed no time in the Elven country." (*Fellowship*, 404). Either more time has passed than he can account for, or else none at all. "Anyone would think," he exclaims indignantly, "that time did not count in there!"

This is precisely the issue, both of the ensuing debate,

and of the question of time in Tolkien's world. It is surely no accident that Tolkien has chosen to state it in the voice of the literal-minded Sam, that earthbound gardener whose work is tied to the rhythms of time. Does or does not time count in Elven country? If it does, then the ensuing discussion is superfluous, hardly worth the attention the narrative gives it. If time does not count, then something else and something important is going on, something entirely out of Sam's experience, and significant enough to warrant attention.

Sam's outburst is evidence of his frustration, and shows how important the counting of time is to him. But literal though he is, his word "count" is ambiguous. Does it mean "count" in the sense of "add up"? Does time not matter in Lórien because it flies when you're having fun? Or does Elven time not add up on a calendar? The question can mean both, of course, and perhaps does. But if that is the case, we should be prepared to accept equal ambiguity in the answer.

What Tolkien gives us is a variety of answers, all of them plausible, each a little different from the others. The exact nature of Lórien is the key, and Lórien is hard to pin down. It is unquestionably a real place. It is on the map. Travellers arrive by the road and on their own feet. And yet it is clearly set off from the ordinary world by that indefinable quality that Sam calls Elven magic and that Tolkien called *Fäerie*. We are told that Lórien has a peculiar reputation, that people are afraid to go in for fear they will be changed when they come out. But until Sam raises the question there is little to suggest that it is outside natural law.

And yet, there are anomalies unobtrusively woven into the narrative. Experiencing Lórien, Sam remarks "It's wonderfully quiet here. Nothing seems to be going on, and nobody seems to want it to" (376), an observation that seems ordinary enough, but that will, in the light of other evidence, take on new significance. Frodo feels as if he has stepped "over a bridge of time into a corner of the Elder Days" and is walking "in a world that was no more" (364). And as he departs, Galadriel, appears to him "present and yet remote, a living vision of that which has already been left far behind by the flowing streams of Time" (389). But how much of this is subjective impression and how much is objective reality? And is there a difference? The debate explores the question, but each answer typifies the character and species (Man or Elf) of the speaker. No reliable omniscient narrator has the final word.

Frodo, little man and Elf-friend, is unusually sensitive to the mood and ambience of Lórien. He takes Sam's last statement literally, and agrees. "In that land, maybe," he ventures, "we were in a time that has elsewhere long gone

by. It was not, I think, until Silverlode bore us back to Anduin that we returned to the time that flows through mortal lands" (404). Much is implied in his words. Time as a river is a familiar literary motif, as is the Rip van Winkle device of the time-warped that takes the traveller out of his own world into fairyland for a spell, and returns him a lifetime later. Tolkien has shortened the span, but the principle is the same. So, in Frodo's view we have passing time – the river – and suspended time – Lórien the Edenic, fairy world of the Elder Days. Frodo knows a Paradise when he sees one, but leaving, knows also that he has lost it, that when he is once again in the mortal world he cannot go back.

But Legolas, an Elf and presumably an authority on things Elven disagrees. "Nay," he says, time does not tarry ever, but change and growth is not in all things and places alike. For elves the world moves and it moves both very swift and very slow. Swift, because they themselves change little, and all else flees by. Slow, because they do not count the running years, not for themselves. (404-405).

This introduces perception as a valid time-factor. How time counts depends on individual experience. If you are an immortal Elf, the world will change faster than you do, and you will not trouble to keep track of it. Mortal Men may count the running years. Immortal Elves don't bother. Legolas sees time as perception, contingent on the quality of experience, and on point of view, and thus as a variable rather than a constant. But, he concludes, "beneath the Sun all things must wear to an end at last" (405). Swift or slow or changeable, however time passes, it does pass, even in Lórien.

Frodo is not persuaded, sticking to his notion of an actual time-difference between Lórien and the rest of the world. He argues that while yes, all things wear to an end, "the wearing is slow in Lórien." Moreover, he suggests Galadriel as the cause. "The power of the Lady is on it. Rich are the hours, though short they seem, in Caras Galadon, where Galadriel wields the Elven-ring" (405). But he is equivocal, on the one hand conceding that time may be a function of perception – rich hours seem short – on the other attributing this to the power of Galadriel and her ring.

Aragorn, takes a middle position. His answer reconciles both views, for he agrees with Legolas that time has indeed passed, but explains to Sam and Frodo that they have experienced it like Elves rather than like Men. "In that land you lost your count," he tells Sam. "There time flowed swiftly by us, as for the Elves. The old moon passed and a new moon waxed and waned in the world outside." This is persuasive but his "the world outside" recalls Sam's phrase "in there," and re-invokes the fairy tale concept of Lórien as separate from the ordinary world with laws of its own. The question is still unresolved.

Seeking fact instead of opinion, we leave the narrative and turn to Appendix B at the end of *The Return of the King*. "The Tale of Years" supports Aragorn, noting with reassuring exactness that the Fellowship arrived in Caras Galadon on January 17 and left Lórien by way of the Great

River on February 16. They spent exactly twenty-eight days – one moon month – in Lórien. Good. This settles it. But then we turn to the Prologue, where we learn that this chronology is internal, assembled from several sources, both Men and Hobbits, and thus no more an independent authority than they are. We are back where we started.

At this point all we can safely say is that something is different about time in Lórien, but it is not clear what, and certainly not why. More is going on than our author will allow to meet the eye, and for a writer known among other things for scrupulous attention to the calendar, this raises questions. What is behind this apparent concern with the nature of time coupled with the avoidance of as definite answer? Manuscript versions of the time-debate are multiple and not easily disentangled, for it is plain that Tolkien was trying a variety of approaches. Christopher Tolkien's account of this stage of composition describes and organizes much of the tangle, and the reader is referred to his admirably lucid discussion in *The Treason of Isengard* for his comments and clarifications. His conclusion, after consideration of all the evidence, is that Tolkien decided to have no time difference between Lórien and the rest of the world. The question remains why the possibility of such a difference was under consideration at all. The problem at issue in the present discussion has much to do with the kinds of problems Tolkien ran into as with the final outcome, and so the focus will be on the shifts and changes he considered, the direction those took, and what they imply about the treatment of time. This will, I am aware, overlap Christopher's presentation, but will have a different function, in that it will place the revisions in the context of the present discussion of time.

Tolkien's early drafts of the time-debate underwent multiple revisions, and make clear what his published text does not: that time was an issue in its own right. This evidence, together with corollary passages from his non-fiction – essays and letters concerned with what I shall call the theology of time – shows that he was using time as a vehicle for exploration of the relationship between humanity and God. Detailed comparison of all the revisions in all the drafts is beyond the scope of this paper. But a fair sampling of the kinds of changes he contemplated, what he kept and what he discarded, will illuminate the issue.

In all the drafts, Sam's speech which introduced the question is much the same as in the published text except for his final outburst, "Anyone would think that time did not count in there!" Tolkien tried out other things that anyone would think of, such as that "time slowed down," and that "we came straight on" (that is, without ever stopping in Lórien). Each alternative alters the experience. Time slowing down challenges the clock. Coming straight on challenges the reality of their stay. Either may have been finally too extreme, for both were discarded in favour of the less explicit "time did not count," which, as we have seen, can be ambiguous.

Frodo's speeches, unlike Sam's, go through major changes. His reply to Sam about being in a time long gone by and returning to mortal lands and mortal time is in one draft assigned to Aragorn (here called Trotter). His voice would give more authority to the answer, since he knows Lórien better than his companions. Tolkien's decision to re-assign the speech to Frodo weakens the explanation. And where draft versions of Legolas' speech follow the published text, Frodo's answer varies between attributing the phenomenon to Galadriel's "power" or to her "will" (a subtle distinction in its own right), but always including the Elven-ring. The final text retained "power", suggesting that the time-factor is neither intrinsic to Elvishness as such or to Lórien as a special place, but is consciously imposed and takes some doing.

One draft replaces Frodo's "rich hours" in Lórien with "days and nights and seasons," omitting the adjective and citing more objectively observable phenomena. But the subjective rich hours went into the published version. Yet another draft has Frodo try out an uneasy compromise between subjective and objective. "Slow for us there might time have passed, while the world hastened. Or in a little while we could savour much, while the world tarried." This is a bad mix. The hastening or tarrying of the world is external and objective, while the words, "for us" and "savour" are distinctly subjective. The explanation vacillates between magic and psychology without coming out in favor of either. This draft, too, was discarded. Fairy tales do not hedge their bets.

But published text or rough draft, the clearest, most definite statements seem always to be given to Aragorn, who, in the text as published, not only tells Sam what happened, but explains why he was confused. Aragorn's speeches are therefore worthy of special attention as indicators of Tolkien's underlying concept. In one draft Aragorn's "time flowed swiftly by us as for the Elves" is followed contiguously by the explicit statement "for we did not change." And just to make it clear what that means, the word "change" is cancelled and replaced by the word "age." "We did not age." Here is the Rip van Winkle motif plain as day and given by an authority. But it was omitted from the published text.

The most striking revision of all appears in a draft of the preceding chapter, "Farewell to Lórien," wherein two cancelled sentences and a note on their cancellation furnish the rationale behind the debate in all its revisions. As the company prepares to leave Lórien, their Elf-guide, Haldir, announces "I have just returned from the Northern Fences... and I am sent now to be your guide again." So far, draft and published text concur. But the draft continues ["There are strange things happening away back there. We do not know the meaning of them. But."]. These are the cancelled words. A line is drawn through them and they are enclosed in brackets. Above them is written "This won't do - if Lórien is timeless, for then *nothing* will have happened since they entered." The cancelled lines and the note make the matter plain at last. It "won't do" to have an

Elf in a timeless land report "things happening" in time. Lórien is timeless, and Sam was righter than he knew when he observed that nothing seemed to be going on, and even more right when as he concluded that nobody seems to want it to. The beauty of Lórien and its Elves is frozen in time, suspended in a past only they can maintain, while outside their haven the world goes on.

Nonetheless, the cancelled lines and the note pretty much settle the debate. Lórien is timeless, and Sam's indignant exclamation "Anyone would think that time did not count in there!" is right on the mark. Unfortunately he did not have the advantage of access to the note, and his creator does not include the information in the published text.

The question then arises of why all the fuss? Why all this effort to no apparent purpose? If the debate is meant to be inconclusive, why put it in the narrative at all? I do not pretend to have a final answer, and the possibility cannot be overlooked that Tolkien's intention here comes across imperfectly and unsatisfactorily. But I do not think so. Addressing first the puzzle of the deliberate vagueness, I suggest that Tolkien could have had good reason for it. He could have wanted to avoid getting trapped in too explicit a system, of bogging down his narrative in mechanics. He could have been trying to save his reader the effort of keeping track of two time schemes. He could have been trying to convey a quality rather than a fact. Whatever the reason, he gave Lórien the aura of timelessness and left it at that.

I think it was a wise choice, for the alternative would have been to sacrifice mystery to mechanics, to fall into the trap of much science fiction, where the unexplainable is not just explained, but all too often explained away. Tolkien knew, none better, that myth dies when it is caged in system. The enchantment and the vitality breathe away, leaving a lifeless diagram in place of a living myth. "The significance of myth," he said of *Beowulf*, "is not easily to be pinned on paper by analytical reasoning. It is at its best when it is presented by a poet who feels rather than makes explicit what his theme portends, who presents it incarnate in a world of history and geography" (M.C., 15). It is not difficult to imagine that he was talking of himself and his own work, as well as of the *Beowulf* poet whose work he knew and loved so well.

Granting that this is so, what is that significance which he went to such lengths to avoid pinning on paper? What is the meaning he chose to feel rather than make explicit? A possible answer emerges from comparison of the evidence cited here with correlative passages in his essays and letters, where he allowed himself the explicitness he omitted from his fiction. In his essay "On Fairy-Stories", Tolkien devoted a section to a discussion of what fairy tales give their reader. The things he proposes - fantasy, recovery, escape, consolation - are hallmarks of his own fiction. The last two, escape and consolation, are closely connected, and especially linked in what he calls the Great Escape, the Escape from Death. As mortals, we seek escape

from death, and we find it, temporarily, in the consoling happy ending of fairy tales, and eternally in the salvation promised by Christ in the Gospels (described by Tolkien as a true fairy tale). But we do not get those things in reality in this life.

And then, almost mischievously, it seems, Tolkien turns the coin over, remarking that "Fairy-stories are made by men, not by fairies, and continuing with the topsyturvy statement that "The human-stories of the elves are doubtless full of the Escape from the Deathlessness." (*The Monsters and the Critics*, 153) Here is a switch: immortal elves console themselves with human-stories, finding in them just what men don't want – Escape from Deathlessness. This is more than mere turning the proposition on its head; it is a large part of what Tolkien's mythology is about. Shortly after the publication of *The Lord of the Rings*, he wrote to a reader:

The real theme for me is about something much more permanent and difficult [than war]: Death and immortality: the mystery of the love of the world in the hearts of a race 'doomed' to leave and seemingly lose it; the anguish in the hearts of a race 'doomed' not to leave it, until its whole evil-aroused story is complete. (*Letters*, 245)

and again:

It is mainly concerned with Death and immortality, and the 'escapes', serial longevity and hoarding memory. (*Letters*, 284)

Here is the theoretical framework underlying that curious phrase, "Escape from Deathlessness." The longing expressed in the human-stories of the elves is to contrast and contest the opposite longing expressed in the fairy-stories of humans. This, I suggest, is the significance of timelessness in Lórien. But fairy tales do not explain themselves, and neither does Tolkien's story. They are to be felt, not explicated.

Those opposites Death and Deathlessness are concomitants of those other opposites Time and Timelessness. The first two are inevitable results of the last two. Death is tied to time because time is predicted on decay, on the necessary passing – the death, if you will – of each moment to make way for the next. Deathlessness is tied to timelessness because it requires the suspension of time and its laws. In Tolkien's world the death/deathlessness contrast is embodied and illustrated on the time/timelessness contrast between Men and Elves. Tolkien called his Elves "embalmers" of time, and said of them:

They wanted to have their cake and eat it: to live in the mortal historical Middle-earth because they had become fond of it... and so tried to stop its change and history, stop its growth, keep it as a pleasure... (*Letters*, 197).

Musing on the function of time, Augustine wrote "For there never could be a whole sentence unless one word ceased to be when its syllable has sounded and another took its place." (*Confessions*, 53). On the same subject and with a strikingly similar image, Tolkien wrote

The Elvish weakness is... naturally to regret the past, and

to become unwilling to face change; as if a man were to hate a very long book still going on, and wished to settle down in a favorite chapter... they desired... to arrest change, and keep things always fresh and fair. (*Letters*, 236).

Now, of course, you cannot capture timelessness in a world of time and using the tools of time, one of which is language. If Tolkien were to succeed in creating actual timelessness, he and his elves and all their lands would be suspended in mid-step, unable to finish an action, or a sentence, or a book. The concept is compromised in its very presentation. But within the limits of linear narrative Tolkien uses his Elves and their land to illustrate the dangers of arresting time. Human as we are, it is hard to face death, hard to accept loss, hard, therefore, to find consolation in escape from deathlessness. Swift's *Struldbrugs* illustrate one danger: they grow old, but cannot die. This, in a way, makes it too easy. Tolkien takes the hard way. His elves in all their timeless youth and beauty, illustrate to a fallen world the danger to faith of preserving the present, which inevitably becomes living in the past. His Men (and Hobbits) illustrate with the consequent pain and loss of all that seems most precious, the necessity of letting go, of trusting in the unknown future, in God.

And so, time does not count in Lórien. It cannot change; it cannot move. Its beauty is frozen and its perfection is its flaw. Frodo's pain and also his salvation are contingent on the fact that he must move and will change. Having known Lórien, he must love it and leave it, and continue his journey down the Great River toward his unknown destination, ever on and on, but not, in this world at least, there and back again.

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