



Mythopoeic Society

mythLORE

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

Volume 40
Number 2

Article 9

4-2022

Tolkien and Bakhtin: Symphony of Time in *The Lord of the Rings*

Alex (Oleksiy) Ostaltsev
The University of Texas at Austin

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



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

Recommended Citation

Ostaltsev, Alex (Oleksiy) (2022) "Tolkien and Bakhtin: Symphony of Time in *The Lord of the Rings*," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 40: No. 2, Article 9.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol40/iss2/9>

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

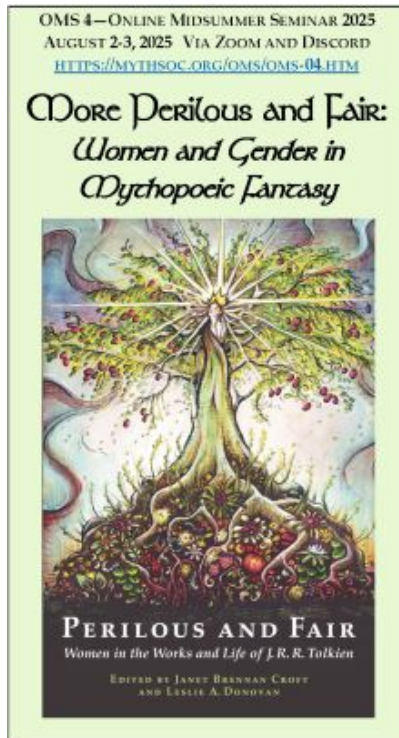
Online MidSummer Seminar 2025

More Perilous and Fair: Women and Gender in Mythopoeic Fantasy

August 2-5, 2024

Via Zoom and Discord

<https://www.mythsoc.org/oms/oms-04.htm>



Tolkien and Bakhtin: Symphony of Time in *The Lord of the Rings*

Abstract

The essay reveals the nature of time and space in Tolkien's epic *The Lord of the Rings* with the help of the *chronotope* concept proposed by Mikhail Bakhtin. Bakhtin's classification of spatiotemporal relations in the novel identifies the type of chronotope in Tolkien's major narrative as one close to folklore, idyll, and epic. Tolkien uses memory and its functioning to create a unique symphony of time in *The Lord of the Rings*. As a concept that reaches the depth of philosophical abstraction and at the same time appeals to a concrete textual context, Bakhtin's chronotope is a surprisingly flexible tool for analyzing Tolkien's experimental prose, which helps to explore the text as a laboratory of the genre (novel).

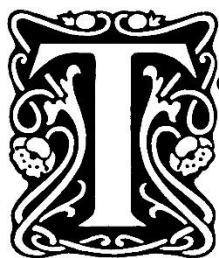
Additional Keywords

Bakhtin, Mikhail—Theory of chronotope; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Technique; Time in J.R.R. Tolkien's works

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 International](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/) license. This article is available in *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol40/iss2/9>



TOLKIEN AND BAKHTIN:
SYMPHONY OF TIME IN
THE LORD OF THE RINGS

ALEX (OLEKSIY) OSTALTSEV

LEAVING HOSPITABLE Lóthlórien along with the other members of the Fellowship of the Ring, Samwise Gamgee feels a return to reality. He can hardly remember how many days he spent visiting the kingdom of the wood-elves. Legolas even has to explain to him that several days spent in Galadriel's realm correspond to a complete change of the Moon, which Sam simply did not notice (*The Lord of the Rings* [LotR] II.9.388). Through Legolas Tolkien presents the philosophy of time he implemented in his epic:

[T]ime does not tarry ever [...] but change and growth is not in all things and places alike. For the Elves the world moves both very swift and very slow. Swift, because they themselves change little, and all else fleets by: it is a grief for them. Slow, because they do not count the running years, not for themselves. The passing seasons are but ripples ever repeated in the long long stream. Yet beneath the Sun all things must wear to an end at last. (LotR II.9.388)

Sam's example shows how Tolkien combines the internal, subjective motion of feelings with the external movement of the Fellowship beyond the borders of the elven kingdom, exposing the main stylistic feature of the narrative—the deep synchronization of the internal and the external, subject and object. On the border of Lórien, Sam is experiencing not only the bitterness of farewell but the dramatic complexity of spatiotemporal dynamics of the Middle-earth. This happens to everyone who goes out of their doors and steps onto the Road (LotR I.3.72).

Exclusively for the study of the artistic forms of space and time in literature, Mikhail Bakhtin in the middle of the twentieth century introduced the concept of *chronotope*. A critic and author of original literary theories¹ and one of

¹ Bakhtin's ideas have been widely interpreted in Europe and the United States of America since the moment they became available for English-speaking readers. Critics who currently use not just Bakhtin's ideas but practice his approach to literature include Gary Morson and Benjamin Saxton. Morson has definitely grasped the main specific of Bakhtin's criticism saying that this Russian scholar "inherited the moral urgency of Russian literature and turned it into a theory" (Morson 350). Bakhtin's ethics is considered in Morson's and Saxton's criticism in terms of the

the most prominent representatives of Russian critical tradition, Bakhtin was also a contemporary of J.R.R. Tolkien. It looks like a happy coincidence that Tolkien in his experiments literally reformed the novel—a genre that Mikhail Bakhtin devoted his life to studying. In my mind, Tolkien's fantasy accepts Bakhtin's chronotope as an effective tool of aesthetic analysis because, among other reasons, it not only finds, considers, and describes the 'supporting columns' of Tolkien's 'secondary world'—space and time as poetic categories—but also preserves *The Lord of the Rings's* poetics in its wholeness. First of all, it helps to keep the autonomy of Tolkien's myth, to take the mythological consciousness of the writer into critical account, and reveal how ancient forms of textual time and space gain completely new interpretation in the trilogy. Interpreting Tolkien through the lens of Bakhtin's aesthetics will place mythopoetic narrative in the context of Russian criticism on its highest—philosophical—stage.

The first, theoretical, part of this essay establishes chronotope as a valid tool for Tolkien's interpretation and demonstrates how Bakhtin's classification of spatiotemporal paradigms in literature contributes to interpretation of fantasy. The result of this work is clarification of the chronotope's nature of Tolkien's "hybrid mythology" (Chance 78). The second, practical, part is the exploration of memory in *The Lord of the Rings*, which is a main chronotopic element of the narrative with a strong cognitive component. Through the characters' memory Tolkien presents his concept of time as a harmonious and complex unity that combines and elevates cyclicity and linearity to a new level that I call the *symphony of time* and describe in terms of Bakhtinian theory.

FANTASY AND ANCIENT CHRONOTOPES

To define time and space in a literary text, as well as the elements which these two categories represent themselves through in the narrative, Bakhtin proposed the term "chronotope" in his essay "Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel" (1937), and proceeded to apply this idea in all of his subsequent texts. It would be a mistake to think that Bakhtin merely admitted the presence

theory of *polyphony*, a specific relationship between the author and characters (Saxton 167). Polyphony that Bakhtin discovered, for example in Dostoevsky's novels, is definitely not just a formal feature of the narrative, but a kind of moral postulate that has a deep religious meaning: The full freedom that author gives to his imaginary characters is a reflection of freedom people receive from God. In Saxton's criticism, polyphony has acquired this specific moral characteristic which was something new in terms of Bakhtin's context. Influenced by Russian formalism, Bakhtin predominately explored and enjoyed literal (textual) effects of polyphony rather than considering it a moral decision of the author. Thus, Bakhtin's polyphony opened a new sphere of discourse: moral relations between a narrator and his creation, when narrative is not just a fruit of imagination but a kind of a personalized subject with its own voice and tone.

of time and space in the text; he came to a conclusion that time and space, first, work together as an indivisible category of the narrative, and, second, Bakhtin notes that this new spatio-temporal category does not coincide with reality mistakenly perceived as an obvious picture of the world.² He explored different models or modes of time/space reflection in the narrative and explained them with deep social, historical, and cultural analysis. Bakhtin's chronotope has obvious connections with the author and his consciousness and can be understood as a kind of a textual DNA—a code which can distinguish the literary roots of a text and diversify the spectrum of its interpretation.

Bakhtin understood chronotope as “intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature” (“Forms” 84), i.e. as a complex poetic structure (or a group of elements) which explains the nature, mutual dependence, mutual influence and correlation of time and space as basic artistic categories of a literary text. Bakhtin developed his chronotope theory studying historical varieties of the novel and came to the conclusion that each of these varieties has its own specific chronotope—in other words, time and space in literature are always elaborated differently depending on the cultural and historical development of society. Bakhtin derived his concept from the epistemological theory of Immanuel Kant, who considered space and time the main “forms of any cognition” (“Forms” 85n). For Bakhtin, they are the key to understanding the literary text and explaining genre:

The chronotope in literature has an intrinsic *generic* significance. It can even be said that it is precisely the chronotope that defines genre and generic distinctions, for in literature, the primary category in the chronotope is time. The chronotope as a formally constitutive category determines to a significant degree the image of man in literature as well. The image of man is always intrinsically chronotopic. (“Forms” 84, 85)

Thus, chronotope occurs as a specific mode of existence, an individual way of self-representation in time and space of a person, a thing, or an event in the text. In his analysis, Bakhtin pays attention not only to particular (motivic) chronotopes of narrative elements, but also to general chronotopes, which as

² The modern “a priori” model of space-time, or the “world-as-it-is,” is rooted in the aesthetics of the Renaissance. Here, as Alexey Losev said, paraphrasing Erwin Panofsky, the Universe becomes a “continuous quantity consisting of three physical dimensions” which precedes all the bodies and contains all of them (qtd. in Лосев 276). This Renaissance model of the Universe can be thought as a limitless box. Surprisingly, such a “universal” box is depicted in one of Stanislaw Lem’s *Cyberiad* stories.

widely as possible describe the way time and space, even Existence³ as a whole, are rendered in the literary world.

Among the types of historical chronotopes presented in Bakhtin's analysis, two in particular are worth special attention when considering Tolkien's fantasy narrative. The first one is the *folklore* chronotope which, according to Bakhtin, exhibits "historical inversion." It means that "mythological and artistic thinking locates such categories as purpose, ideal, justice, perfection, the harmonious condition of man and society and the like in the *past*" ("Forms" 147). Such a chronotope is most obviously embodied by the "once upon a time" formula and is expressed in Golden Age motifs, references to the age of heroes, the ancient truth—echoes of this type of chronotope are clearly heard in *The Lord of the Rings*. The second one is the *idyll* chronotope, which is very static and characterized by the unity of place, the cyclical time tied to the cycles of nature and the main events of a human's life (birth, marriage, labor, eating, death). The features of the idyllic chronotope are visible in the Tolkien's Shire, where self-sufficiency, unity with nature, and the enjoyment of its benefits are cultivated.

If Tolkien somewhat follows ancient genres, then what kind of chronotope does he create or re-create in *The Lord of the Rings*?

Bakhtin's attention to the evolution of the spatio-temporal paradigm in literary genres corresponds in notable ways with Tolkien's deep interest in experimenting with English literary history, particularly his fascination with and utilization of the epic (*Beowulf*). The chronotope of epic, as it is described in Bakhtin's classification, shows proximity to the space/time model in Tolkien's novel. In his essay "Epic and Novel," Bakhtin identifies three stylistic (and chronotopic) features of the epic, which, with some modifications, are present in *The Lord of the Rings*.

Firstly, "a national epic past—in Goethe's and Schiller's terminology the 'absolute past'—serves as the subject for the epic" ("Epic" 13). This fundamental feature of the epic, according to Bakhtin, is revealed not so much in the fact that the epic text speaks of "heroes" and their exploits, but in the fact that the epic is a story about a past inaccessible to the listener or reader and separated for ever from the present moment with the help of special spatio-temporal features. There is no direct historical connection with this heroic past, like something, for example, that a modern European may feel about the recent past of his country (for example, World War II, or Napoleonic wars). Therefore, the past of the epic is the "absolute" past, closed in itself and narrated from "the reverent point of view of a descendant" (13). Tolkien's desire to separate

³ "Existence" here has almost mathematical meaning when time and space are perceived as physical dimensions which are highly influenced by a third variable—the consciousness of a character or author, i.e., the way that the world in all its aspects is depicted in the literary text.

Middle-earth from conventional reality is the desire to recreate in his text the “absolute past” of the epic, and, as Verlyn Flieger says, present time in his narrative as “the traveled road between past and present” (21).⁴

Secondly, the source of the epic is a “national tradition (not personal experience and the free thought that grows out of it)” (“Epic” 13). At first glance, this feature is absent in Tolkien’s text: indeed, following the traditional novel, he seeks to convey the story through private individuals—first of all, Bilbo who writes a personal memoir, a literary genre that may be far from fiction, yet it does have some kind of subjectivity. In *The Lord of the Rings*, The Red Book of Bilbo (which refers to *The Hobbit*) goes by the wayside and is pronounced lost (its original “has not been preserved, but many copies were made” [*LotR* Prologue 14]), and finally it became a part of the legends and local folklore of Hobbits. The very fact of the formal transfer of authorship to the hero, the further division of this authorship between the heroes (Bilbo and Frodo), the fragmentation of their fictional text into rare quotes, and finally, the dissolution of this source in the flow of time shows how Tolkien consistently approaches anonymous prosodic storytelling method in his narrative, which is a characteristic of the epic.

The third feature underlines the distance between the author or storyteller: “[b]oth the singer and the listener [...] are located in the same time and on the same evaluative (hierarchical) plane, but the represented world of the heroes stands on an utterly different and inaccessible time-and-value plane, separated by epic distance” (“Epic” 14). The author of the epic emphasizes the otherness of the world he describes, which is fundamentally different from the one where he tells his story. The world of reality and the world of the heroic past are different worlds; their values in the eyes of a rhapsode and his audience, and the quality of their spatio-temporal structure are different—and the narrator cannot juxtapose the high status of the epic world with the current state of things; he speaks about heroic past from the distant profane future. Such an impenetrable, absolute separation of the epic past is the main poetic feature of *The Lord of the Rings* that Tolkien emphasizes in the text (multiplicity of epochs) and defends in his correspondence with friends (e.g. to Milton Waldman, *Letters* 143-161, #131).

Thus, placing the chronotope of the Tolkien’s trilogy between the epic, idyll, and folklore in Bakhtin’s classification, we get the opportunity to study and understand what kind of world Tolkien built on the basis of the literary

⁴ In general, Flieger stays within the framework of two worlds model, Primary and Secondary, that Tolkien clearly follows in “On Fairy-Stories.” She presents the functionality of Tolkien’s time and admits its “frequent correlation with space, a characteristic that reviewers and critics have noted but have failed to put into its deepest context” (22). Thereby, Flieger indirectly legitimizes Bakhtin’s “chronotope” in Tolkien studies.

archaic that he loved so much, and see how elements of Bakhtin's chronotopes work in fantasy, a genre that was obviously unknown to Bakhtin.

The result of this brief application of chronotope theory to Tolkien's narrative coincides with Martin Simonson's analysis of the generic nature of *The Lord of the Rings*. Simonson agrees that Tolkien's text is built as an "intertraditional dialogue," which refers to almost all genres of European literature, but lists epic and romance as the main literary models for Tolkien. In *The Lord of the Rings in the Western Narrative Tradition*, Simonson seems somewhat inspired by Bakhtin's systematizing approach and suggests a complex vision of "narrative levels" (114). One of the "situational" levels includes physical space, which in Simonson's classification represents a concrete setting of each episode of the story rather than the model of Existence as author imagines it.

Stressing the existential, i.e., chronotopic, meaning of time and space in the narrative, Brian Attebery considers fantasy as "a way of reconnecting to traditional myths and the worlds they generate" (9).⁵ Analyzing George MacDonald's "The Fantastic Imagination," Attebery shows how first generation of fantasy writers embrace their texts chronotopically, as new Existence that they discover. In his essay, MacDonald speaks of "harmony between the laws by which the new world has begun to exist" (qtd. in Attebery 29). Thus, the European literary fairy tale in MacDonald's essay for the first time in its history leaves the content of myth behind and directly refers to its form, which it perceives as "the world," i.e. new space and time. Attebery shows how, since the moment of birth, a literary fairy tale moves towards the fantasy genre, which not only reconnects to traditional myth, but freely uses this myth as a model for presenting a text as a specific chronotope.

As we see, Bakhtin's spatiotemporal narrative unity is easily engaged with fantasy critical discourse. However, modern criticism does not always fully correspond to the potential of the concept. For instance, Maria Nikolajeva in her "Fairy Tale and Fantasy" shares that "one element that we immediately recognize as characteristic of the fantasy chronotope is the presence of magic" (141). In my opinion, magic should not be considered as the cause of the fantasy chronotope, but as one of its symptoms. Bakhtin, in his classification of chronotopes, does not distinguish magic as an element of the spatiotemporal

⁵ Understanding fantasy as a "world-building" seems a commonplace in modern fantasy criticism. Audrey I. Taylor uses "world" as "the most basic term" in her analysis and understands it almost chronotopically—as "a contained space together with all its people and features" (*Patricia A. McKillip* 7). In her interpretation, the fantasy world looks like an alternative detailed model of reality; while the chronotope is, rather, the mechanics of time and space in the text. This is why Bakhtin sees and describes this mechanics in all texts of European literature, but Taylor finds "world-building" only in fantasy.

structure of the imaginative world and finds it in all the chronotopes that he discusses: in the Greek romance, in the chivalrous romance, in the Rabelaisian chronotope which goes back to the folklore one, etc. The chronotope as an element belongs rather to representation of reality in the text than to its content; it is the structure-forming basis of any narrative.⁶ A Bakhtinian approach to the problem is seen when Nikolajeva directly works with textual time: “In fantasy literature, the characters are temporally displaced from modern, linear time—*chronos*—into mythical, archaic cyclical time—*kairos*—and return to linearity at the end of the novel” (141). Such a general picture does not fully present an impressive transformation of mythical time in Tolkien’s fantasy and, of course, needs further elaboration.

Sometimes researchers too literally understand the term “chronotope.” For example, considering the problem of time in *The Lord of the Rings*, Andrzej Zgorzelski calculates the duration of each era preceding the one in which the narrative unfolds (129). Thus, the researcher reduces the problem of mythological time mainly to chronology. Outside chronology, at the center of narrative, there is epic time which the critic calls “time of events” (132). This time is a small part of the chronology, emotionally colored by the narrator and enriched with the details of the characters’ lives—this “time” covers six books of *The Lord of the Rings*. In the exposition of events, Zgorzelski finds a peculiar “rhythmic pulsation” of time: a rather vague and long current of time in the chapters on Shire is being changed with “more observant, more detailed [...] clearly defined” time “of the dangerous journey” (133). Adding space as a category to this passage, we receive a clear picture of static and dynamic chronotopes of Middle-earth.

FANTASY’S CHRONOTOPE: FORMULA AND ELEMENTS

The most significant chronotopic elements in *The Lord of the Rings* include geographical locations, their boundaries (edges), water in all its forms

⁶ Nikolajeva in her analysis follows the traditional juxtaposition of fantasy and reality understood as “world-as-it-is.” Such an approach was offered by Tzvetan Todorov and inspired a whole range of critics who built their understanding of Middle-Earth’s specifics on comparison of the Tolkien’s “secondary world” with post-Renaissance positivistic “reality.” Carl Malmgren, for example, believes that the fantasy begins when “the laws of physical science have been suspended” (261). Through relationships with such physical “reality” William Irwin also tries to define the fantastic, calling the latter “antireal subject matter” (8). In his interpretation, the fantastic is the antipode of reality, its complete opposition. S.C. Fredericks strengthens this antithesis and considers fantastic as “deliberate violation of norms and facts” (37). Obviously, these critics understand fantasy as something antinomian in relation to the world-as-we-know-it, i.e., a spatio-temporal axiom observed in everyday life. In terms of Bakhtin’s theory, “reality” in literature is questionable, and a critic deals with different representations of time and space in the text.

and kinds (rivers, lakes, streams, Sea), the chronotope of the Road and the path. Also, all artifacts and all the characters have their own chronotopic aspect. One of the most important and contextually rich carriers of chronotopic meanings within the narrative is the memory that shapes itself in the annals, manuscripts, memoirs, legends, poetry, and songs. All aforementioned elements of the text are often intertwined; together they create the unique spatiotemporal wholeness of Middle-earth. But before they start weaving a delicate web of textual time and space, Tolkien writes a Prologue, which contains the trilogy's chronotopic formulae. Essentially, the Prologue is the formula.

In his article "A Kind of Mid-Wife," Andrew Lazo cites Walter Hooper, a friend of Tolkien, who said that when Tolkien started writing his novel, he "had already written up much of the background material, such as genealogies and geographies" (40). In other words, Tolkien does not begin Middle-earth with a plot or characters, but considers it necessary to present it primarily as a physical space first, which is also described in time through the genealogy of its inhabitants. Thus, space and time became the first stage of the creative process for the writer—namely, Tolkien started his Middle-earth with chronotope. The fact that Tolkien specifically stipulates and presents the concept of time and space sharply distinguishes his epic from contemporary literature, where the chronotope is given *a priori*. Thus, time in *The Lord of the Rings* is formalized and formulated as a separate theme of the story.

As a poetic formula which opens *The Lord of the Rings*, the Prologue explains the essence of the conflict and unfolds it in a clear chronotopic framework. Listing the tribes inhabiting Middle-earth⁷ in the formula, Tolkien attributes space to elves and dwarves: "under the sky," "halls of stone"—and assigns time to people who "doomed to die" (*LotR* frontispiece). The spatial attributes indicated in the formula—sky and stone—correspond to the biblical "heaven" and "earth" from the first chapter of the book of Genesis which means the highest and lowest point in space. "Heaven and earth" in the Hebrew's text of Genesis, *hashamayim ve'et ha'aretz*, is close to Greek *cosmos*. Thus, elves and dwarves occupy the cosmos, and in this confined space the concept of measure becomes necessary and significant. The gift of "measure" is owned by mortal people, because the finiteness of their life is a way of measuring time in the world of immortal beings. The measure brings value to the new world, helps to comprehend and "measure" it not only in a geographical sense, but also in a spiritual one. The humanistic meaning of the measure relates the Tolkien's epos with the ancient Greek formula, "man is the measure of all things," and fits the epos into the frame of traditional antique understanding of man as a spiritual

⁷ Tribes are collective actors in Tolkien's trilogy where the individual and collective as categories are equally involved in the conflict; moreover, each hero—a human, a hobbit, a dwarf, or an elf—is a symbol of a community he belongs to on the arena of global conflict.

being located in the center of the Universe, far from the extremes of a purely spiritual existence (elves) or material one (dwarves).

Beyond space and time, there is a “Shadow” mentioned twice in the Prologue. Mordor and its darkness are an unaccounted and inappropriate location in the opening formula. This location does not have its chronotopic address on the map of Middle-earth: heaven and earth are occupied; time is given to mortals. Because of its foreignness to the chronotope, the “Shadow” wants to rule the world—it does not know any other type of interaction with the Universe.

Neither does the formula mention the Hobbits. Does this mean that the Hobbits do not have their own chronotopic address, just as “Shadow” does not have one? How to explain that a tribe without a “residence permit” becomes the main acting force of the global conflict? Tolkien constantly emphasizes the surprise that Frodo provokes when other characters meet him and understand his mission—the mission of the One Ring’s keeper. Hobbits are an element of the equation that no one has taken into account, and the result of including of such a surprising variable into the equation of global conflict is a new spatiotemporal configuration of the world. If the formula is clear and precise in its message and does not imply any other solution than the death of the world (“in the darkness bind them”), then the unaccounted element of this pessimistic equation completely changes the final resolution because of its unexpectedness.

Hobbits are also not included in the formula because initially there was no ring for them; they did not have access to power and received the One Ring accidentally (the meaning of an *accident* in Tolkien’s narrative is discussed further). Their lack of magical power makes Hobbits invisible in the eyes of the formula’s author. This circumstance indicates that the author of the opening lines may be Sauron or the nameless ancient Evil that he represents. Therefore, the chronotope of the poetic formula is the desired chronotope of Middle-earth from the point of view of the one who seeks the absolute power of Evil. But the narrative contradicts the formula and draws other, more complex, chronotopic relations. The collision of the trilogy, therefore, can be represented as a struggle between two concepts of space and time in Tolkien’s myth: a closed monochromatic chronotope of power (“Shadow”), in which time and space essentially no longer exist, and an open, emerging, changeable, and progressing chronotope, the essence of which is movement, development, constant metamorphosis, i.e., life.

CHRONOTOPE AND MEMORY: SYMPHONY OF TIME

Time in *The Lord of the Rings* is always experienced by the heroes as a moment of the present that is shown as a part of the mythological cycle. The main events of the trilogy always reveal this cycle, making it visible. Each event

is an echo, reflection, or variation of its paired similar mytho-historical event(s).⁸ Temporal layers in Tolkien's narrative are always superimposed, resonating with each other: current events always appeal to a context consisting of similar or related events that took place before. Speaking in musical terms, each event is not a single note but sounds always as a chord—thus, time in the trilogy is always *symphonic* (from old Greek *syn*—together, *phone*—sound). The past burdens the present and experiences itself as the present again in every step Frodo and other characters make. It creates a space of meanings in every moment of the story, enriching it with a historical, psychological, cultural, and religious perspective. To ensure the unity of such a complex time, Tolkien turns to the memory of his characters—individual and collective, reflected in writing and in oral tradition.

The time and space of epic and myth are always antipathetic with respect to history and geography—real space and real time. Tolkien exacerbates this feature of the myth, eroding the chronological framework even more, and building the space and the “history” of Middle-earth as a sort of matryoshka doll: each chronotopical layer of narrative hides (or reveals) another one, which is deeper and more ancient. The time and space of Middle-earth, as it appears on the first pages of *The Lord of the Rings*, is not the primary time of the myth, not the “beginning of the beginnings.” This is a measurable local chronotope immersed in a potentially infinite and immeasurable time and space. Therefore, already at the beginning of the first book, Tolkien refers the reader, who wants to localize Middle-earth, to *The Hobbit*, which, in turn, also represents a local history in an unlimited chronotope of myth. Tolkien uses the “matryoshka” method elsewhere in the story as well. For example, it is seen in Elrond's speech at the council where the Fellowship of the Ring is formed. Listing the defeats of Sauron in the past, Elrond recalls the Last Alliance of Elves and Men and compares the ancient battle with those that preceded it:

‘I remember well the splendour of their banners,’ he said. ‘It recalled to me the glory of the Elder Days and the hosts of Beleriand, so many great princes and captains were assembled. And yet not so many, nor so fair, as when Thangorodrim was broken, and the Elves deemed that evil was ended for ever, and it was not so.’ (*LotR* II.2.243)

Elrond's speech embeds Frodo's story in the context of a thousand-year history, giving the journey an epic dimension. In Elrond's speech, there are four time

⁸ A similar idea of time and space appears in late antique literature. Erich Auerbach in his *Mimesis* writes about a “figural interpretation” which he noticed in Jerome's and Augustine's writings. Auerbach understands it as a “connection between two events or persons in such a way that the first signifies not only itself but also the second, while the second involves or fulfills the first” (73).

layers involved: *the moment of the present*, where the reader, along with Frodo, reinterprets the story as a new (and yet another) link in the eternal battle of good and evil; *the moment of the future*, where the story, by analogy with the past, is seen as a future direct clash between Sauron and the united forces of different nations of Middle-earth (the Fellowship of the Ring in this context seems like a new alliance of Men and Elves, which is moving at full speed toward a new battle in the finale of the third volume); *a moment of the past* associated with the previous holder of the Ring—Isildur; and, finally, *a moment of the distant past*, to where only Elrond’s memory leads—“hosts of Beleriand” and “when Thangorodrim was broken.” Multilayered symphonic time is a wonderful stylistic feature of the trilogy, which makes the world of Middle-earth contextually localizable, but infinitely far from the absolute beginning. Within this temporal infinity, Middle-earth at this time, at the dawn of the Time of Men, is only a random aberration of time and space, concretized in the measurable and finite storylines of the heroes and in an exhaustive conflict.

Memory as a chronotopic tool allows Tolkien to create complex, multilayered symphonic time on the level of individual memories of characters, but also situates substantial changes in the local chronotope on the level of collective memory—in a manuscript, annals, a book or a family tree. At the same time, individual or collective memory does not violate, but contributes to the manifestation of the peculiarity of the narrative noted above—the erosion of the chronotopic borders of Middle-earth which leads to a contextual chronotopic infinity, against which the story develops. This trend is demonstrated by the Red Book attributed to Bilbo.

In the first lines of the Prologue, Tolkien refers the reader to the Red Book of Westmarch’s manuscript, which is present only as an artifact (and not as a text) on the pages of *The Lord of the Rings*. Thus, even before the story begins, Tolkien establishes his layered symphonic chronotope: the events of the trilogy are inextricably bound to the events of *The Hobbit*, which in turn are recorded in the Red Book which is lost. The Red Book, which is not accessible to the reader, contains remarks on the history of Hobbits and, being a main source for *The Hobbit*, can be seen as the Shire’s heroic epic. In *The Lord of the Rings*, the Red Book is placed among other local sources (like “Herblore of the Shire” by Meriadoc Brandybuck) and provides some facts of secondary nature. For example, one can learn from it about “Bandobras Took (Bullroarer), son of Isumbras the Third,⁹ [who] was four foot five and able to ride a horse. He was surpassed in all Hobbit records only by two famous characters of old” (*LotR* Prologue 2). This reference to the lost book mentions someone who had lived

⁹ Pre-2004 editions have him as son of Isingrim the Second, but this has been corrected for consistency with the family trees in Appendix C (Hammond & Scull 6).

before the records about him were made in the book, and who is compared in this reference to a third person who had lived far before the compared one became a part of records—that is how Tolkien creates his symphonic time flow. An informative source, which the Book was before, becomes an instrument of style. The reader will also learn from the Red Book a brief history of the One Ring, which contains Bilbo's "memoirs" (*LotR* Prologue 13) that were "disbelieved" by Gandalf who played a great role in all described events. Even within his own imaginary world, Tolkien is fighting against the concept of what can be called "objective reality," which is far too often used in modern criticism as something crucially important for understanding of fantasy's nature (Malgrem, Fredericks, Mendlesohn, Blisset, Plank, etc.)

Thus, the basic source of the narrative is claimed lost and extremely subjective. Reference to a lost source is a popular element of the poetics of postmodernism.¹⁰ Obviously, Tolkien applies it before the postmodern experiments and with slightly different goals. As I have thus far argued, Tolkien removes the "beginning of beginnings" from the chronotope of Middle-earth; the world, as the reader sees it on the pages of the novel, has no beginning and no end; it is not localized in the time and space of the reader. The lost original of the Red Book is also a peculiar rejection of the textual "beginning of beginnings," a rejection of the only true source containing the only true account of events. Preventing the reader from relying on a clear chronological framework of the story, Tolkien also deprives the reader of a reliable source of interpretation of events— "holy scriptures," of which only "copies" remain.

Why does the author need this blurring of time and space in his narrative? Why does he permanently claim the relative, and sometimes dubious, reliability of manuscripts and chronicles of the Shire? Firstly, as already noted, this makes the chronotope of the story voluminous and multilayered. Tolkien deliberately moves away from the "beginning of beginnings," from a strict chronological sequence, deliberately refers to several parallel chronologies (elven, hobbit, human ones)—and he does not do this to confuse the reader, but to reveal the plasticity of time, and thereby its relativity. The adventure of Frodo is compared to the adventure of Bilbo; the fight of Middle-earth peoples with Sauron for the Ring with similar episodes in the past. A complex echoing (or mirroring) of events arises, each of which is a continuation and reflection of the other one. Thus, Tolkien offers his philosophy of history: on the one hand, it shows the cyclical tradition of ancient mythology, on the other hand, the author, changing the scale of events and exposing subtle causal relationships, introduces the idea of development, evolution, and qualitative change of man

¹⁰ Compare, for example, the history of the Adso's manuscript in Umberto Eco's *Name of the Rose*, or analysis of texts which never existed in "A Survey of the Works of Herbert Quain" by Jorge L. Borges.

and the world—concepts which were absolutely unfamiliar to ancient myth and literature.

Tolkien's mythological cycles are open: they repeat each other in general terms (the struggle between good and evil, light and "shadow"), but at the level of a private person (Frodo, Bilbo, Galadriel, Aragorn, Gandalf, etc.) there is no cyclicity but linearity. The path to "there" implies a mandatory "back," and this return of the pendulum to the point of departure is possible only in a geographical aspect. In the spiritual sense, the hero never returns to his previous state of body and mind: both Bilbo and Frodo will always remain where they went, even after returning to the Shire. This is the second reason for the chronotopic "blurring" of the narrative: Due to the lack of the fixed external space-time boundaries, to the absence of external sources regulating the interpretation of events, the author shifts the focus to what is happening "here and now" regardless of the historical and literary context. And this gives the reader the privilege to interpret the text—not the events, but the primarily spiritual (internal) metamorphosis that occurs within heroes during their adventure. Internal is always ahead of external in Tolkien's world. Historical time and space lose their absoluteness in the world of Middle-earth, but this does not mean the loss of absoluteness as a category of narration. According to Tolkien, absolute value is given to the moment of Adventure, and to individual and global metamorphosis as its result.

Memory is a key mechanism for the actualization of time as a category in the narrative. The endless and formless time is structured and ordered by the memory of the creatures that inhabit Middle-earth, but it is not exhausted by their memory, neither it is fully described in different kinds of texts: "their [Hobbits] own records began only after the settlement of the Shire, and their most ancient legends hardly looked further back than their Wandering Days" (*LotR* Prologue 3). The relatively limited and localized memory of Elves, Hobbits, and Men does not so much diminish the significance of the nations of Middle-earth, as it emphasizes the infinity of time, which seems autonomous and independent of the events narrated in the book. The endless current of time was wordless and speechless before chronicles (or memory as it is) appear, but it still was present as a category of Being, and all the nations of Middle-earth accept this as an axiom of their existence.

This boundless time is consonant with the endlessness of space, which undergoes conditional changes approximately corresponding to the geography of the settlement of nations. Tolkien uses the namelessness of large locations to emphasize the conventionality and fragility of the connection between physical space and the history of Middle-earth (which is a product of memory). If relatively small areas that coincide with the habitat of nations have specific names (Khazad-dum and Moria; the Shire and its locations—Bucklebury,

Westmarch, Crickhollow, Bree and others; Rohan and Gondor with its cities), then global locations sometimes lose their names and become equal to their essence: the sea is just the Sea, the largest river, Anduin, is often called the Great River. The situation is the same with the division of time: the reader is a witness to events leading to the end of the Third Epoch; obscure hints about previous eras are scattered along the text but eventually lead to the impenetrability of "Elder Days" (*LotR* Prologue 2). Thus, the chronotope of Middle-earth concentrates, thickens, and becomes extremely concrete in the context of the Adventure which the heroes go through, and returns to the original uncertainty and namelessness outside the hero's storyline.

Memory of the peoples of Middle-earth does not fill the speechless time mechanically with all available facts. Memory does this selectively and always coexists with forgetfulness: "The beginning of Hobbits lies far back in the Elder Days that are now lost and forgotten. Only the Elves still preserve any records of that vanished time, and their traditions are concerned almost entirely with their own history, in which Men appeared seldom and Hobbits are not mentioned at all" (*LotR* Prologue 2). The narrator points out the fragility of the people's memory, its temporary nature, subjectivity, and imperfection, the disproportionality of memory and the millennial stream of time which this imperfect memory is trying to grasp: "Of their original home the Hobbits in Bilbo's time preserved no knowledge" (2). In addition to forgetfulness, memory selectively changes objects, events, and their participants, giving them a sense that makes them meaningful and understandable for a particular community. For example, immediately after the disappearance of Bilbo, his image undergoes a change in the memory of the Shire:

It became a fireside-story for young hobbits; and eventually Mad Baggins, who used to vanish with a bang and a flash and reappear with bags of jewels and gold, became a favourite character of legend and lived on long after all the true events were forgotten. But in the meantime, the general opinion in the neighbourhood was that Bilbo, who had always been rather cracked, had at last gone quite mad, and had run off into the Blue. There he had undoubtedly fallen into a pool or a river and come to a tragic, but hardly an untimely, end. (*LotR* I.2.41)

Thus, the memory of times, spaces, and people in the interpretation of Tolkien is an extremely subjective and important element of culture, which speaks more of its carrier (people) than of the facts. Collective memory functions in a strictly mythological way by preserving and transmitting the subjective "truth" of reality, which always remains elusive. This thesis is clearly substantiated by the difference between real Bilbo and his folklore counterpart from the legends of the Shire. Technically, Bilbo's storyline may be considered Tolkien's experiment

with folklore reconstruction, which defines the ways reality is transformed into an object of culture.

What does the memory of Middle-earth's peoples keep? It speaks of events that became *milestones* (or "great events" [LotR Prologue 14]), as well as the turning points of history, which Tolkien and Bakhtin call "chances" or *accidents* (*Forms* 94).¹¹ Milestones and accidents become the content of chronicles and manuscripts mentioned in the narrative, and embed the history of Middle-earth in the context of Adventure. These are mainly battles such as the ones that conclude *The Hobbit* and *The Return of the King*. But taking the importance of "smallness" as a category of Tolkien's poetics into account, it can be said that particular "accidents" are much more important than "great events" of chronicles, and very often such small occasions lead to great events. One such accident, which is central to the whole narrative, opens Tolkien's book—Bilbo's eleventy-first birthday.

This event is extremely multifunctional and involves, which is typical for Tolkien's poetics, several chronotopic plans at a time, which, again, creates a symphony of temporal layers. First, the birthday year marks not only the year of a character's life that passed, but the end of a whole long period. The constant alternation of two modes—dynamics and statics—in the global chronotope of Middle-earth and in the individual lives of the main characters is a cross-cutting feature of *The Lord of the Rings'* poetics. In the particular case of Bilbo's birthday, it's especially visible: Tolkien makes it clear that this year's birthday has the meaning of an "accident." This meaning is emphasized by the figures: 111 years of Bilbo and 33 years of Frodo are celebrated on the same day. Both numbers contain the triple as their element and mean completeness, maturity, the end of the ripening period, and readiness to use the accumulated force and resources in a new field. For Bilbo, this means the end of a quiet life in the Shire (statics) and the return to the space of adventure and creativity (dynamics); Frodo becomes the owner of Bag End and the owner of the One Ring. Second, Bilbo's legacy transferring to Frodo, Frodo's moving to Bilbo's house, and the "coincidence" of their birthdays (Frodo will keep on celebrating Bilbo's birthday every year) establish the young nephew as a literary double, who continues adventure of his predecessor, and develops and enriches it with his own

¹¹ Bilbo found the One Ring "in the black orc-mines" because of "an accident by the way" (*LotR* Prologue 11). Therefore, the whole Frodo's mission (and Tolkien's longest narrative) is based on the accident happened in the Misty Mountains. "Accidents" in *LotR* have important compositional meaning: Tolkien uses them to introduce new characters and storylines that often impact significantly on chronotope of the narrative. "It was sheer accident!" Frodo explains his disappearance amidst the crowd in the Prancing Pony—this is the moment when Strider becomes the part of the future Fellowship and changes the map of Frodo's journey (*LotR* I.10.164).

storyline. Finally, on Bilbo's birthday, the Ring gains its new guardian and thereby paves the way for the inevitable ending of its own story and the history of the Third Age. Thus, the symphony of time creates symphony of meanings.

Tolkien directly calls the finding of the Ring described in the manuscript of Bilbo an "accident" (*LotR* Prologue 11). Interpreting this situation later, Gandalf mentions the hidden causes of it:

There was more than one power at work, Frodo. The Ring was trying to get back to its master. [...] So now, when its master was awake once more and sending out his dark thought from Mirkwood, it abandoned Gollum. Only to be picked up by the most unlikely person imaginable: Bilbo from the Shire! Behind that there was something else at work, beyond any design of the Ring-maker. I can put it no plainer than by saying that Bilbo was *meant* to find the Ring, and *not* by its maker. (*LotR* I.2.55-56)

Thus, in the eyes of the reader, Bilbo's "accident" is slowly moving into the category of "event" in order to become a milestone at the end of the trilogy that determined the decline of the Third Age. The driving force of any "accident" of such a kind, according to Bakhtin, is the intervention of "irrational forces" ("Forms" 94), which is confirmed by Gandalf's interpretation. Summing up all these "irrational" reasons, Tolkien introduces the category of *fate* into the narrative as the broadest generalization of story's highest logic: accidents lead to events which become milestones that reveal the will of fate. In the light of the highest logic of fate, each step of the heroes is endowed with a metaphysical meaning besides a purely contextual one. The actions of the heroes fit into the logic of the mission, allowing the reader to evaluate every deed of the character from the highest point—from Providence's point of view. Fate, as events unfold, turns the story of the stolen ring into a drama of a truly cosmic scale that determines the future of the universe.

SYMPHONY OF CHRONOTOPES

Memory is the most flexible element of the chronotope, in which the spectrum of realization of narrative's time is the widest. The road and trail are also of great interest from the point of view of the organization of space in the novel. Both of these elements divide Middle-earth into series of dynamic and static spaces, where time manifests itself in different ways. The water chronotope (rivers, lakes, sea) has a deep connection with memory and also functions as the last, and at the same time blurred, geographical border of Middle-earth. Each of the artifacts is endowed with their own symphonic time. The most chronotopically rich magical item, of course, is the One Ring, which appeals to several time layers at a time and is able to withdraw its owner from his time and place him in its own space-time continuum. The Ring is a unique

artifact, which very often acts as a character. Among the characters, Aragorn demonstrates unique chronotopic functions: performing the religious and folkloric role of the “trickster,”¹² Aragorn visits all locations of Middle-earth, uniting them in a global conflict and leading them through a painful spatio-temporal metamorphosis (change of “eras”). Thus, it is obvious that Bakhtin’s concept of chronotope is applicable to all layers of the Tolkien text and is able to reveal new meanings in each of them. As a unique concept which reaches the depth of philosophical abstraction and at the same time appeals to concrete textual context, chronotope is a surprisingly flexible tool for analyzing Tolkien’s experimental prose, which helps to reveal the writer’s work as a laboratory of the genre (novel). Besides this, total respect to the implicit potencies of the text makes chronotope a highly moral and ethical approach to literary criticism. Chronotope helps to study the unique world of fantasy in its autonomy and describe its laws in accordance with artistic principles of the author. It seems that this is what Tolkien always wanted.

WORKS CITED

- Attebery, Brian. *Stories About Stories: Fantasy and the Remaking of Myth*. Oxford UP, 2014.
- Auerbach, Erich. *Mimesis. The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*. Princeton UP, 2003.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail. “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel.” *The Dialogic Imagination. Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin*, ed. by Michael Holquist. University of Texas Press, 1981.

¹²Levi-Strauss distinguishes four features of a trickster in folklore: *absence of family* (trickster is an orphan or an adopted child), *peculiar appearance* (an attractive maiden or an ugly looking young man), *sentimental status* (a girl is not loved, a young man is rejected), *transformation* (luxurious dress or physical attractiveness are gained supernaturally). Aragorn has enriched this pattern and preserved it at the same time: ugliness is replaced with secretiveness; he is loved but he tends to reject love for his mission’s purposes; he is also rejected as Gondor’s ruler and lives like Strider, and finally he gained his kingdom back through a ritual performed by a magician. As a trickster, Aragorn hides his true nature under the range of masks: he is a Strider, a warrior, a guide, a guard, a politician, a lover, and a King. Unlike other characters, Aragorn easily interchanges his roles in order to achieve his goals. He appeals to his hidden nature and uses his true name in rare critical moments (for example, on the Paths of the Dead, *LotR V.2.772*). Unmasked Aragorn—Elessar, Isildur’s heir of Gondor—appears just at the end of the story, at a coronation ceremony, when his trickster’s mode is not necessary anymore. The chronotopic dialectic of a trickster, according to Levi-Strauss, “is associated with a change from a spatial dimension (mediation between Sky and Earth) to a temporal dimension (mediation between summer and winter, that is, between birth and death)” (310). Aragorn’s geographical maneuvers are aimed to shift the temporal aura of Middle-earth for a better new level (which is a fourth epoch).

- . "Epic and Novel." *The Dialogic Imagination. Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin*, edited by Michael Holquist. University of Texas Press, 1981.
- Chance, Jane. "Tolkien's Hybrid Mythology: The Hobbit as Old Norse "Fairy-Story." *The Hobbit and Tolkien's Mythology*, edited by Bradford Lee Eden, McFarland, 2014, pp. 78-97.
- Flieger, Verlyn. *A Question of Time: J.R.R. Tolkien's Road to Faërie*. Kent State UP, 1997.
- Fredericks, S.C. "Problems of Fantasy." *Science Fiction Studies*, March 1978, pp. 33-44.
- Hammond, Wayne G. and Christina Scull. *The Lord of the Rings: A Reader's Companion*. Houghton Mifflin, 2005.
- Irwin, William. *The Game of the Impossible: A Rhetoric of Fantasy*. U of Illinois P, 1976.
- Lazo, Andrew. "A Kind of Mid-wife." *Tolkien the Medievalist*, edited by Jane Chance, Routledge, 2003, pp. 36-49.
- Levi-Strauss, Claude. "The Structural Study of Myth." *European Literary Theory and Practice: From Existential Phenomenology to Structuralism*, edited by Vernon W. Gras, Delta, 1973, pp. 289-317.
- Malmgren, Carl D. "Towards a Definition of Science Fantasy (Vers une definition de la fantaisie scientifique)." *Science Fiction Studies*, November 1988, pp. 259-281.
- Morson, Gary S. "At Last: Bakhtin and the Teaching Literature." *Research in the Teaching of English*, vol. 41, no. 3, 2007, pp. 350-357.
- Nikolajeva, Maria. "Fairy Tale and Fantasy: From Archaic to Postmodern." *Marvels and Tales*, vol. 17, no. 1, 2003, pp. 138-156.
- Saxton, Benjamin. "Tolkien and Bakhtin on Authorship, Literary Freedom, and Alterity." *Tolkien Studies*, vol. 10, 2013, pp. 167-183.
- Simonson, Martin. *The Lord of the Rings and the Western Narrative Tradition*. Walking Tree Publishers, 2008.
- Taylor, Audrey I. *Patricia A. McKillip and the Art of Fantasy World-Building*. McFarland, 2017.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, edited by Humphrey Carpenter, George Allen & Unwin, 2000.
- . *The Lord of the Rings*. 50th Anniversary edition, Houghton Mifflin, 2004.
- Zgorzelski, Andrzej. "A Fairy Tale Modified: Time and Space as Syncretic Factors in J.R.R. Tolkien's Trilogy." *Zeitschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Linguistik*, no. 92, 1993, pp. 126-140.
- Лосев, Алексей. *Эстетика Возрождения*. Мысль, 1998.

ALEX (OLEKSIY) OSTALTSEV is a Ph.D. student at the University of Texas at Austin (Comparative Literature). He currently studies the evolution and representation of the literary hero in European Literature of different periods. He holds a BS in Russian language and Literature (Ukraine, 2000) and MA in British and American Literature (Florida Atlantic University, 2018), and is the author of two books of fiction.