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## The Shell-shocked Hobbit: The First World War and Tolkien's Trauma of the Ring

Michael Livingston  
*The Citadel, SC*

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### Abstract

Describes the Battle of the Somme and Tolkien's participation in it. Pointing out the parallels between the battle-scarred landscapes of Northern Europe and Middle-earth, Livingston notes that while they are worth cataloging, it is Tolkien's nuanced and sympathetic depiction of Frodo's post-traumatic stress disorder that is the most compelling result of the author's war experiences. Provides a good overview of Tolkien's war experiences and his literary response to them.

### Additional Keywords

Shell-shock; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Influence of World War I; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Military service—World War I (1914–1918); Tolkien, J.R.R. The Lord of the Rings; World War I in J.R.R. Tolkien

## The Shell-shocked Hobbit: The First World War and Tolkien's Trauma of the Ring

Michael Livingston

In a letter to Professor L. W. Forster written on New Year's Eve, 1960, J.R.R. Tolkien reemphasized his insistence that the mythology of Middle-earth was not reliant on the events of the two World Wars that spanned much of the first half of his life: "Personally I do not think that either war (and of course the atomic bomb) had any influence upon either the plot or the manner of its unfolding. Perhaps in landscape. The Dead Marshes and the approaches to the Morannon owe something to Northern France after the Battle of the Somme" (*Letters* 303).<sup>1</sup> There are some critics who have fought Tolkien on this point, insisting that *The Lord of the Rings* be read as a massive allegory for one or both of the World Wars, and it is certainly tempting to do so.<sup>2</sup> There are, after all, a number of intriguing parallels between Tolkien's Middle-earth and twentieth-century Europe: Saruman's destruction of Fangorn, for example, has much in common with modern industrialization at the expense of nature, and his technological tampering with nature is eerily reminiscent of the arms race of the World Wars that culminated in the Manhattan Project. Even a quick glance at the geography seems strangely familiar, with the island-like Shire representing England, Gondor for France, and Mordor in the place of Germany.<sup>3</sup> And,

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<sup>1</sup> For further contemporary descriptions of the Western Front and its relation to the Dead Marshes in particular, see Wayne G. Hammond and Christina Scull's *The Lord of the Rings: A Reader's Companion* (453).

<sup>2</sup> Tolkien's fellow Inkling C. S. Lewis perhaps unintentionally provided fuel for just such a search when he commented in an early review that the War of the Ring "has the very quality of the war my generation knew. It is all here: the endless, unintelligible movement, the sinister quiet of the front when 'everything is now ready,' the flying civilians, the lively, vivid friendships, the background of something like despair and the merry foreground, and such heaven-sent windfalls as a cache of choice tobacco 'salvaged' from a ruin" (C. S. Lewis 39-40).

<sup>3</sup> Such contemporary similarities were noticed even before the book was printed: on 12 November 1949, Warren Lewis (brother of C. S. Lewis) read a MS copy of the text and noted in his diary that "a great deal of it can be read topically—the Shire standing for England, Rohan for France, Gondor the Germany of the future, Sauron for Stalin [...]" (W. Lewis 231).

even though he vociferously denied the accusation that his work was an allegory for the events of the twentieth century, Tolkien admitted: "An author cannot of course remain wholly unaffected by his experience [...]. One has indeed personally to come under the shadow of war to feel fully its oppression" (*LotR I: Foreword*, xvii). And as a young man Tolkien had, indeed, "come under the shadow of war," for he lost some of his best friends to the First World War, and he personally fought at the Battle of the Somme.<sup>4</sup> No surprise, then, that the psychological realities of the horrors that Tolkien saw at the "carnage of the Somme," as he called it (*Letters* 53), should have left indelible marks on his writings. Tolkien, as we have already seen, admits that the geography of the Somme might be reflected in his portrayal of parts of Middle-earth, but he denies further specific influence.<sup>5</sup> The purpose of this essay, then, is two-fold: I would like not only to recall some general influences of the Somme on Tolkien's Middle-earth, but also to delve a bit deeper into the strong influence of Tolkien's war experiences on the character of Frodo in *The Lord of the Rings* and in particular on his odd behavior following the destruction of the One Ring at Mt. Doom. Frodo, as we shall see, bears all the qualities of a veteran soldier returning from combat. To put a modern term to the transformation in Frodo's character at the end of *The Return of the King*, it appears that Frodo is suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, more commonly known as "shell-shock."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The argument that follows might be thought to imply that the Second World War had little impact on Tolkien, but this is not my intention. Indeed, one need look no further than the criticism of Tom Shippey for positive signs of Second World War influence on his work ("Post-War"). Also of note is John A. Ellison's "The Legendary War and the Real One: *The Lord of the Rings* and the Climate of Its Times."

<sup>5</sup> The most specific study of Tolkien's war experiences is the recent work of John Garth: *Tolkien and the Great War: The Threshold of Middle-earth*. Though Garth's project is primarily biographical in nature, he does provide many insights into how this period gave new impetus to Tolkien's mythology.

<sup>6</sup> Since the completion and acceptance of this essay, a number of other studies have appeared, making similar connections between Frodo's behavior and that of traumatized war veterans. Chief among these studies are Anne C. Petty's *Tolkien and the Land of Heroes: Discovering the Human Spirit*, especially p. 282, and Janet Brennan Croft's *War and the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien*, especially pp. 133-38. To Ms. Croft is owed particular notice, since after taking editorship of *Mythlore* she allowed the publication of this present study despite its being pre-empted and out-classed by her own fine and far-ranging work.

That Tolkien was at the Battle of the Somme is without question, yet it is still worth recalling the nature of this five-month slaughter in order to begin to understand its effects on the young writer:

The British began with a week-long artillery barrage that chewed the ground into a pockmarked obstacle course and obliterated the German outposts and front trenches, but left the main body of defenders untouched in their meticulously constructed dugouts, some as deep as forty feet underground. When the bombardment lifted on 1 July [1916], all possible resistance seemed to have been blown apart, and the British advanced almost nonchalantly in formations learned on the parade ground—six feet separating each man across the line, a hundred yards between each assault wave, and each soldier carrying a minimum backpack of sixty-six pounds. The Highland Regiments marched into battle behind their pipers. Meanwhile the Germans had scrambled up their steep tunnel-like shafts, pulling their machine guns with them, and were ready for action. (Kleine-Ahlbrandt 30)

Thus the battle proper began when roughly 100,000 men rose up out of the Allied trenches and marched across the crater-torn and razorwire-strewn waste of what was called No-Man's Land. The official opening day casualties for the British army alone have gone down to history as 57,470, of which 19,420 were fatal. Both numbers still stand as gruesome world records for loss of life in one day's fighting.<sup>7</sup> By contrast, the United States lost less than 60,000 men during the entire duration of the Vietnam War. In his memoirs, David Lloyd George writes of the course of the battle:

It is claimed that the Battle of the Somme destroyed the old German Army by killing off its best officers and men. It killed off far more of our best and of the French best. The Battle of the Somme was fought by the volunteer armies raised in 1914 and 1915. These contained the choicest and best of our young manhood. The officers came mainly from our public schools and universities. Over 400,000 of our men fell in this bullheaded fight and the slaughter amongst our young officers was appalling. (Lloyd George 9-10)

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<sup>7</sup> Arguments have been made that the Battle of Towton on 29 March 1461 in Yorkshire, the battle in which Edward IV won his crown over Lancastrian forces, saw heavier death-tolls: some estimates hover around 28,000 killed. It is also worth noting that the fall of Singapore on 15 February 1942 saw 60,000 soldiers of the British army taken captive, though that day's fatalities were far fewer.

The addition of at least another 200,000 casualties among Allied forces by the time the campaign ended in November brings the total Allied losses to nearly 600,000 men—all lost in order to press the lines 10 kilometers closer to Germany.

Tolkien was in reserves on the day of the opening battle, but one of his best friends, Rob Gilson, was killed in the first wave (though Tolkien would not learn of his death until some weeks later).<sup>8</sup> And even in reserves Tolkien would have witnessed “clear signs that things had not gone according to plan on the battlefield: wounded men in their hundreds, many of them hideously mutilated; troops detailed for grave-digging; and a sinister smell of decay” (Carpenter 82). Then, on 14 July, Tolkien and his company were called into action and he saw for himself the results of what he would later call “the ‘animal horror’ of trench warfare” (Carpenter 84). The account of another participant in the Battle of the Somme is perhaps useful here for another perspective on the events that Tolkien witnessed. John Raws had to apply to the Australian Corps twice before he was accepted, and just weeks before his own death in the battle, he described what he saw in a letter to a friend:

The glories of the Great Push are great, but the horrors are greater. With all I'd heard by word of mouth, with all I had imagined in my mind, I yet never conceived that war could be so dreadful. The carnage in our little sector was as bad, or worse, than that of Verdun, and yet I never saw a body buried in ten days. And when I came on the scene the whole place, trenches and all, was spread with dead. We had neither time nor space for burials, and the wounded could not be got away. They stayed with us and died, pitifully, with us, and then they rotted. The stench of the battlefield spread for miles around. And the sight of the limbs, the mangled bodies, and stray heads.

We lived with all this for eleven days, ate and drank and fought amid it; but no, we did not sleep. Sometimes, we just fell down and became unconscious. You could not call it sleep.

The men who say they believe in war should be hung. And the men who won't come out and help us, now we're in it, are not fit for words. Had we more reinforcements up there many brave men now dead, men who stuck it and stuck it and stuck it till they died, would be alive today.

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<sup>8</sup> A fuller account of Tolkien's war experiences is provided by Garth in *Tolkien and the Great War*.

Do you know that I saw with my own eyes a score of men go raving mad!  
I met three in 'No Man's Land' one night. Of course, we had a bad patch.  
But it is sad to think that one has to go back to it, and back to it, and back  
to it, until one is hit. (Raws)

For the next months, Tolkien was in and out of these trenches, somehow managing to survive unscathed until he was felled by trench fever on 27 October; he was pulled from the lines and eventually sent back to England. He had survived the war, but he had not left it. On 3 December he learned that another of his best friends, Geoffrey Smith, had died from gas gangrene in northern France. By the end of the First World War, Tolkien later wrote, "all but one of my close friends were dead" (*LotR* I: Foreword, xvii)

That the "shadow of war" would leave marks in Tolkien's writing, then, is not surprising. And, in addition to Tolkien's admitted borrowing of geographical description in the Dead Marshes and the approaches to Morannon, critics have discovered a number of intriguing parallels between the Somme (and the First World War in general) and *The Lord of the Rings*.<sup>9</sup> Barton Friedman, for instance, points out the similarity of the faces in the bogs of the Dead Marshes to specific descriptions of the Somme, of the Norman's Lands of northern France to the "Noman-lands" (*LotR* IV:2, 617) between the Dead Marshes and Morannon, of the shrieking of the Nazgûl to incoming mortar rounds and their respective effects on men (Friedman 121). Hugh Brogan has also seen similarities: in how the description of Sauron's destruction echoes contemporary descriptions of shell-bursts, in the polarizing of consciousness between "us" and "them," in the reversal of day and night, in the road that leads from home to the front, and in even such small details as the orc who snarls "Don't you know we're at war?" (*LotR* VI:2, 910)—perhaps an echo of the wartime "Don't you know there's a war on?" (Brogan 362). William H. Green has shown that the technological leanings of Tolkien's goblins owe much to the machinery of war that the

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<sup>9</sup> I have limited this discussion to *LotR*, but traces of the First World War are to be found in his other works, as well. Garth, for instance, shows how the Hammer of Wrath in "The Fall of Gondolin" is quite possibly a partial allusion to the actions of the "C" Company of Tolkien's 11<sup>th</sup> Lancashire Fusiliers (294-95). A more lengthy account of war influences on Tolkien's work can be found in Croft, pp. 16-32.

author saw utilized to such horrible effect at the Somme (Green 70-71),<sup>10</sup> and Wayne G. Hammond and Christina Scull have pointed to the similarities between the vast camps of Mordor and the "extensive army camps to which Tolkien was posted during the First World War, in particular those situated in Staffordshire on Cannock Chase," and between Sam and the "typical foot soldier" (Hammond and Scull 608, 610). In his recent study of Tolkien's war experiences, John Garth lists a number of additional reminiscences:

the atmosphere of pre-war tension and watchfulness, Frodo Baggins's restless impatience with his parochial countrymen in the Shire, the world's dizzying plunge into peril and mass mobilizations; tenacious courage revealed in the ordinary people of town and farm, with camaraderie and love as their chief motivations; the striking absence of women from much of the action; the machine-dominated mind of Saruman. (Garth 311)

Brian Rosebury perhaps goes furthest of all in likening "the emotional ambivalence" of Tolkien's works to "the mingled relief and regret of the war-survivor," concluding that *LotR* "might indeed be seen in certain respects as the last work of First World War literature, published almost forty years after the war ended" (126). These are all interesting observations, of course, but few of them contain what I would call real substance: they are mostly the cataloging of Tolkien's borrowing of details (probably inadvertent for the most part) from the memory of one terrible event in the describing of another. Frodo's behavior at the end of *LotR*, however, is no small thing. And it is my belief that his change in personality directly reflects the real changes that Tolkien witnessed in surviving veterans of the Great War.

As the historian Ben Shephard has observed, the term "shell-shock" was coined in February 1915 by Dr. C. S. Myers on the battlefields of the First World War (1).<sup>11</sup> But it was at the Somme that that psychiatrists and psychologists really began to take note of the condition now known clinically as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder since

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<sup>10</sup> Tom Shippey's observation that the Rammas Echor in Gondor has certain similarities with the Maginot Line in France might also be worth including in this list (*Century* 165).

<sup>11</sup> A good, albeit dated, bibliography of work on combat stress can be found in John Keegan's *The Face of Battle: A Study of Agincourt, Waterloo, and the Somme* (337-43).



On the Somme, shell-shock and ‘nervous disorders of war’, hitherto a marginal medical problem, became a major drain on manpower. According to the British official history, ‘In the first few weeks [of July 1916] several thousand soldiers were rapidly passed out of the battle zone on account of nervous disorders and many of them were evacuated to England’. The inadequate official figures show that the numbers of men returned as ‘shellshock battle casualties’—suffering ‘shell-shock’ after actually being shelled [...] tripled in the last six months of 1916 [...]. These are the only surviving British figures and do not cover ‘Shell-shock Sick’. They probably need to be multiplied by at least three to give a real sense of scale of the problem. (Shephard 41)

The earliest doctors to study Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder found that symptoms could last anywhere from months to years, and that the cause of the condition, not surprisingly, was the experience of a disturbing trauma that led to persisting recollections of that trauma over long periods of time. In psychiatric terms, the traumatic event that is the first criteria for diagnosing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder is termed a *stressor*, and it must meet two basic requirements: the situation must have mortal consequences, and the person’s reaction to the situation must have been one of “intense fear, helplessness, or horror” (“Posttraumatic Stress Disorder” 467).<sup>12</sup> War, especially of the brutal, horrific kind that was trench warfare, clearly meets such criteria; but what of Frodo’s experiences?

Like many of the members of the Fellowship, Frodo saw war, and he certainly was in mortal danger on many other occasions: his injuries on Weathertop and in Shelob’s lair, for instance, or the flight from Moria, or his capture at Cirith Ungol. While none of these events substantially sets him apart from other members of the Fellowship, they are, taken as a whole, indicative of a clear history of trauma. And setting Frodo even further apart, of course, is the Ring. As bearer of the One Ring, the Ring of Power that is ever-leeching upon his mind and upon which the fate of Middle-earth itself rests, Frodo exists in psychological state that is unnaturally tenuous: for him, even small moments of trauma carry substantial weight and make substantial impact. In clinical terms, then, we might say that

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<sup>12</sup> I am pleased to acknowledge that the appropriateness of a direct clinical diagnosis of Frodo via the *DSM-IV* was first pointed out to me (independently) by two observant students in one of the courses that I taught on Tolkien at the University of Rochester many years ago. My thanks, then, to both Jennifer Case and Lisa Richards.

Frodo is under two stressors: the primary stressor of the weight and power of the One Ring and the secondary stressor of life-threatening physical situations at the hands of monster, demon, and man alike.

Once the existence of a stressor is established, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder is typically diagnosed by one of three distinct symptoms: (1) the reliving of the event in the form of nightmares and, particularly, flashbacks; (2) the "[p]ersistent avoidance of stimuli associated with the trauma and numbing of general responsiveness"; and (3) the changing of personal demeanor and behavior ("Posttraumatic Stress Disorder" 468). The third of these symptoms, a generalized change in demeanor and behavior, is clear enough throughout the course of Frodo's journey to Mordor; but it is only after the destruction of the One Ring (his primary stressor) at Mount Doom that we can begin to speak of Frodo post-trauma.

The first sign of lasting change in Frodo's character occurs within hours of his rescue from Mordor, immediately after his reunion with the surviving members of the Fellowship in Ithilien. Removing his old raiment and preparing to dress for a feast in his honor, Frodo is very reluctant to wear a sword, even an ornamental one (*LotR* VI:4, 933).<sup>13</sup> Such behavior would be familiar to Tolkien from his war experiences, as an aversion to violence is a common post-traumatic symptom of combat veterans in particular. This is not to say that Frodo was a violent, hardened warrior before his journey to Mordor—just as one cannot say the same for the generation of young men who went to the trenches of northern France—but Frodo *had* previously worn (and used) blades with pride. His unwillingness to wear one in Ithilien seems to be the result of a change in his character: he is simply no longer comfortable with bearing a weapon. The lingering trauma of his experiences destroying the Ring is already beginning to prey upon his still-fragile mind.

Frodo's symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder grow stronger as he begins to journey back toward the Shire. Indeed, it is at the Ford of Bruinen, the site of his miraculous escape from the Ringwraiths, that the form of Frodo's anxiety comes into startling clarity:

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<sup>13</sup> It is worth noting that Frodo's aversion to violence is so strong that he is later unwilling to shed the blood of Saruman, who has caused so much grief to the Shire (VI:8, 996). For more on Frodo's pacifism, see Croft, pp. 130-33.

At last the hobbits had their faces turned towards home. They were eager now to see the Shire again; but at first they rode only slowly, for Frodo had been ill at ease. When they came to the Ford of Bruinen, he had halted, and seemed loth to ride into the stream; and they noted that for a while his eyes appeared not to see them or things about him. All that day he was silent. It was the sixth of October.

"Are you in pain, Frodo?" said Gandalf quietly as he rode by Frodo's side.

"Well, yes I am," said Frodo. "It is my shoulder. The wound aches, and the memory of darkness is heavy on me. It was a year ago today."

"Alas! there are some wounds that cannot be wholly cured," said Gandalf.

"I fear it may be so with mine," said Frodo. "There is no real going back. Though I may come to the Shire, it will not seem the same; for I shall not be the same. I am wounded with knife, sting, and tooth, and a long burden. Where shall I find rest?"

Gandalf did not answer. (VI:7, 967)

All the major symptoms of shellshock are here. Frodo is "ill at ease," a far cry from the young and vibrant hobbit who set out from the Shire. Surely all of the members of the Fellowship have been changed by their journey, but Frodo's change in demeanor is set out in particular: they do not need to ride slowly for Sam, Merry, or Pippin, but for Frodo alone. One year had passed since Frodo's injury on Weathertop, and no doubt seeing the Ford again—where he nearly died of the Ringwraith's wound—helped to trigger the recollection of that trauma. The Ford therefore represents multiple traumas for Frodo: the fight with the Ringwraiths and its resulting wound, as well as the near-death experience that resulted from it. Frodo's unwillingness to cross the stream is symptomatic of both an avoidance of trauma-related stimuli (i.e., the stream), and a sign of Frodo's flashback to his wounding on Weathertop.

Frodo's unwillingness to wear a sword in Ithilien has, by the time the hobbits return to find the Shire in the hands of Saruman/Sharkey, turned into outright pacifism. At *The Green Dragon* in Bywater, the hobbits encounter the first of the ruffians who have overrun their beloved country. When one of them insults "King's messengers," Pippin is so incensed that he draws his blade (VI:8, 982). Merry and Sam do likewise, but Frodo most conspicuously does not. And after the ruffians flee, Frodo is alone in his pity for Lotho. When Pippin remarks on the irony in their fighting to rescue

Lotho, Frodo makes his irenic hopes clear: "nobody is to be killed at all, if it can be helped" (VI:8, 983). Merry's reaction is perceptive, and worth note:

"But if there are many of these ruffians," said Merry, "it will certainly mean fighting. You won't rescue Lotho, or the Shire, just by being shocked and sad, my dear Frodo." (ibid.)

That Frodo is characterized by shock, sadness, and an unwillingness to partake in violence is, once again, evidence of shell-shock. His pacifism could stand alongside similar impulses among veterans from any number of wars, though Tolkien would, of course, know it from the Somme. Again and again, Tolkien makes it a point to emphasize Frodo's pacifism: as the folk begin to gather for what comes to be known as the Battle of Bywater, Frodo once more makes clear that he has hopes for no killing, and he demurs from helping in the planning of the fight, leaving such things to Merry (VI:8, 987). Though he does play a role in the battle, Tolkien pointedly states that he did not draw his sword "and his chief part had been to prevent the hobbits, in their wrath at their losses, from slaying those of their enemies who threw down their weapons" (VI:8, 993). And when they surround Saruman, it is Frodo who refuses to see him slain, even after Saruman tries to stab Frodo with a hidden blade (VI:8, 996). When Wormtongue kills Saruman and tries to flee, he is felled by arrows before Frodo is able to "speak a word," an implicit testament to the fact that Frodo would surely have tried to save even that miserable wretch (ibid.). Like many victims of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, Frodo simply cannot bear to see more violence enter the world.

Even after the Battle of Bywater is finished and Frodo is home in Bag End, he is unable to escape from his experiences. On 13 March, one year after being attacked by Shelob, Frodo is found ill in bed, "clutching a white gem that hung on a chain about his neck and he seemed half in a dream." The white gem is Arwen's, given to Frodo in order to help him when he is troubled by "the memory of the fear and the darkness" (VI:6, 953). Frodo's half-conscious mutterings as he grasps Arwen's pendant could just as easily be the words of a shellshocked veteran of the Somme: "'It is gone for ever,' he said, 'and now all is dark and empty'" (VI:9, 1001). Most critics have assumed that what is gone forever here is the One Ring, but this is not explicit in the text: we are not told what exactly "it" is. Might we also here understand a loss of innocence, or of hope? Answers, since they cannot

be found in the text, must lie in the eye of the beholder. But perhaps knowing precisely what Frodo believes he has lost does not matter so much as the fact that it was something entirely vital to him: without it “all is dark and empty.” It is well worth remembering here that it wasn’t those who died in the Great War who made up Europe’s Lost Generation; it was those who survived.<sup>14</sup> It does not seem like a stretch of the imagination to posit that Tolkien, like other writers of his generation, was somewhat disillusioned by the slaughter of the First World War.<sup>15</sup> Verlyn Flieger makes a similar connection when she argues that the “The literature of the post war period in which Tolkien, like many others, began to write, spoke with the voice of the ‘lost generation’ trying to come to terms with incommunicable experience” (219).<sup>16</sup> But, unlike many of his counterparts—T. S. Eliot in *The Waste Land*, for example—Tolkien does not appear to have perceived that the slaughter, incommunicable though it might be, was senseless and indicative as a loss of meaning; quite to the contrary, even while he is at the Somme he writes in a letter to his friend Geoffrey Smith that the nature of the war was “for all the evil of our own side with large view good against evil” (*Letters* 10).<sup>17</sup> Not a senseless slaughter, then, but its antithesis: a slaughter of the most profound importance; a position that is not surprising from a man who would create such equally profound battles between good and evil in his fiction. Still, Tolkien realized that the horrors he witnessed at the Somme were a sign that something had gone terribly wrong in the world. In the same letter to Smith, he writes that his “chief

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<sup>14</sup> The Lost Generation, technically, refers to a group of American literary figures in 1920s and 1930s Paris—figures such as F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, Sherwood Anderson, and Gertrude Stein—who might be generally categorized as being disillusioned by what they perceived as the senseless slaughter of the First World War; they were cynical and “disdainful of the Victorian notions of morality and propriety of their elders” (*The Lost Generation*).

<sup>15</sup> Tom Shippey gets close to this perspective when he writes that Tolkien’s “work expresses along with a strong belief in (a kind of) Providence, the disillusionment of the returned veteran” (*Century* 156). Going even further, Verlyn Flieger speculates that Frodo is more than just a disillusioned veteran: he also represents the loss of youth and future that comes from war (224).

<sup>16</sup> In *The Great War and Modern Memory*, still one of the finest overviews of the literary repercussions of World War One, Paul Fussell makes much of this gap between veterans and civilians, even seeing it as a parallel development to that yawning gap between pre- and post-Great War culture.

<sup>17</sup> For discussion on how Tolkien’s notions of evil can be associated with that of other post-war writers, see Shippey (“Post-War” 92).

impression" about the war's effect on his relationship to his friends "is that something has gone crack" (*Letters* 10). Even if, like Frodo, Tolkien could not be specific about what was wrong, he could not deny that *something* was wrong.

One would hope that time could heal the psychological scars of trauma, but, at least in Frodo's case, we see that this is not so. Sam notes that "Frodo dropped quietly out of all the doings of the Shire" (VI:9, 1002), and his deeds are not celebrated by the Shire-folk. If I might be clinical once more, Frodo appears to be entering into that "vicious cycle of rejection and recrimination" that is so common with victims of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder; he cannot escape the incommunicable fear and trembling of his past and the inexplicable guilt of living (Miller 9). And the specific pains of his past continue to recur in nightmarish flashbacks:

One evening Sam came into the study and found his master looking very strange. He was very pale and his eyes seemed to see things far away.

"What's the matter, Mr. Frodo?" said Sam.

"I am wounded," he answered, "wounded; it will never really heal."(VI:9, 1002)

Sam later realizes that it is 6 October, the second anniversary of Frodo's wounding at Weathertop. Time has not healed his wounds, any more than time would make the loss at the Somme of Tolkien's best friends any easier to bear.

Frodo is again ill the following March (the second anniversary of the fight with Shelob) (VI:9, 1002), and in September, as the third anniversary of Weathertop approaches, Frodo and Sam meet Elrond, Galadriel, Gandalf, Bilbo, and the remaining elves for the journey west to the Grey Havens; in taking the ship west, Frodo admits that he cannot find solace even in his beloved Shire. Like veterans returning to England, Frodo finds that he is a stranger in the land that he fought so long and hard to save. He might well have been speaking for the veterans of the trenches when he says to Sam: "I tried to save the Shire, and it has been saved, but not for me. It must often be so, Sam, when things are in danger: some one has to give them up, lose them, so that others may keep them" (VI:9, 1006). Tom Shippey has pointed out the similarities between Frodo's words and those inscribed on a monument in honor of those who died at Imphal-

Kohima in the Second World War (*Century* 156),<sup>18</sup> but perhaps it is more fitting to hear an echo of Siegfried Sassoon, an English poet who wrote some of his finest work in the trenches of the First World War, including some written during the opening days of the Battle of the Somme:

You smug-faced crowds with kindling eye  
Who cheer when soldier lads march by,  
Sneak home and pray you'll never know  
The hell where youth and laughter go. (Sassoon)

I find that Sassoon's melancholic tone—delved in the actual horrors of warfare—is quite apt of Frodo and the end of *The Lord of the Rings*: Frodo does not desire to be a martyr; he does not wish to be celebrated or even remembered. He simply wishes to be whole once more. But his trauma is too great. This world, for which he fought so hard, holds nothing but continued pain for him. He cannot be healed here (Shippey, *Century* 155). The world he has saved, sadly, is one to which he can no longer relate. As Mark Eddy Smith states the matter:

Some injustices cannot be remedied in this Middle-earth. Fingers don't grow back. Nor do friends. The Ring, though he did not ask for it, has corrupted Frodo. [...] At the final test he chose the Ring for himself alone and refused to cast it into the fire. There is no condemnation possible for this, for the task, by anyone's standards, was too big for him. But a part of Frodo was broken during the long journey to Mordor, and no one and nothing, neither plant nor animal, can restore him to wholeness. (Smith 133)

Ultimately, and perhaps inevitably, Frodo had to leave Middle-earth: only in the Undying Lands would he be able to find succor.

Sadly, there was no such "cure" for Tolkien and his fellow veterans. Like the members of the Lost Generation, they had to continue to try to continue on with their lives, to live past what they had lived through. It is interesting in this light to recall that Tolkien once said of Sam Gamgee that he was meant to be "a reflexion of the English soldier, of the privates and batmen I knew in the 1914 war, and recognised as so far superior to myself"

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<sup>18</sup> The inscription reads "When you go home tell them of us and say / For your tomorrow we gave our today."

(Carpenter 81). What it is that Tolkien sees as "far superior" to himself in other veterans might be their ability to make that final step away from the field of battle, their ability to move on. Frodo sees precisely this in Sam, saying to him: "you will be healed. You were meant to be solid and whole, and you will be" (*LotR* VI:9, 1003). Tolkien, it seems, relates himself more closely with the shell-shocked Frodo than he does with the resilient Sam: for him, the scars of the Somme have cut too deeply to heal fully.

Gandalf's exchange with Bilbo at the end of *The Hobbit*, a tale written before the outbreak of the Second World War, is often taken as a foreshadowing of that event. Tolkien, according to this argument, was well aware that the resonance of the First World War was still working itself out, the Great War not yet finished:

Even as they left the valley the sky darkened in the West before them, and wind and rain came up to meet them.

"Merry is May-time!" said Bilbo, as the rain beat into his face. "But our back is to legends and we are coming home. I suppose this is a first taste of it."

"There is a long road yet," said Gandalf.

"But it is the last road," said Bilbo. (*Hobbit* 311)

It is true, I think, that we can hear in this passage that the resonance of the Great War was still working itself out. But I think it equally true that we should not be looking forward to the Second World War here, but backward to the painful memory of the First World War, of the blood-mixed mud of northern France, of the trench-scarred Somme and its No-man's Land, its fields of bloating corpses, its dead faces floating in water-filled craters. Tolkien often spoke about how his "mythology (and associated languages) first began to take shape" during the First World War (*Letters* 221). Gandalf and Bilbo's exchange is doubly appropriate, then, since the journey to Middle-earth was, for Tolkien, a journey into the Undying Lands, where he might eventually find healing for the wounds of war that would not heal. The road to healing is, as Gandalf observes, a long one. And, perhaps spiritually as well as physically, it is the last road.



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