

TOLKIEN LITERARY ANALYSIS

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Summary

Tolkien's works are all written in vastly different styles -- "The Hobbit" is written like a fairy-tale, "The Lord of the Rings" has a darker tone and introduces morality and sacrifice, and "The Silmarillion" introduces complex concepts of godhood and religion. This paper provides a scholarly analysis on how Tolkien's works differ in tone, content, and values.

The Quest as Fairy Tale: *The Hobbit*

- "Thematically, *The Hobbit* is primarily concerned with increasing maturity. As Bilbo travels with the dwarves through adventures with trolls, goblins, and giant spiders, he changes from a frightened, passive, ineffectual lover of domestic comfort to a brave, realistic, active planner of events who is willing to take responsibility for himself and others." (Crabbe 31-32)
- "Fairy tales are stories that take place in a secondary world – a world in which nature is alive in a nearly human way, and the laws that govern man and nature are not the same as those of the world we occupy. Thus, in the world of a fairy tale, animals may talk, magic may happen, people may come back to life, or live for extraordinarily long expanses of time. The heroes of fairy tales tend to be the small and the weak – youngest brothers or sisters, for example, or people who are thought to be dullards. But they have virtues that allow them to overcome the strong and the powerful – a good nature, or a streak of kindness, or an amazing cunning quickness. . . . By

contrast, the hero of myth or legend tends to be a godlike being, if not in fact a god. Though we may admire such a hero and may long to be like him, we know we cannot, simply because he is too far above us." (Crabbe 33)

- "We can see [that] Bilbo steadily increases in maturity and responsibility throughout the story. It is not just Bilbo's character changing that seems so right in this linear struggle of episodes. Tolkien has also taken pains to give Bilbo opponents who become consistently more elemental, that is, less human and more nearly forces of nature. In doing so he has used the principle of repetition, particularly in developing a series of three descents into the underworld [Goblin's cave ~ Gollum ; King of the Wood-elves ; Hoard of Smaug]." (Crabbe 37)
- Smaug loses the cup ~ Beowulf's dragon loses the cup
- "Where [Bilbo] had been committed to saving himself and those to whom he had a personal attachment, he is, in the Smaug episode, acting in what he takes to be the best interest of humankind. That is, from a parochial view it may be that he has betrayed Thorin and Company, but from a broader view he is acting in what he thinks are the best interests of all civilized being. So the trial by fire is a greater trial than that by darkness or by water, and as such it comes in response to a greater effort and a more heroic intent." (Crabbe 39)
- "By the closing chapters of the story, the reader has long understood that Bilbo's capacity for physical bravery is far greater than he thought, so we are not surprised when, in the Battle of the Five Armies, he draws his sword to stand with the Elvenking. But the side of heroism Bilbo reveals in giving up the Arkenstone, the sacrificial act that repudiates the heart of the mountain and the heart of Thorin, is a binding force: It draws men to it and binds them. Bilbo's giving up the Arkenstone, that is, his expressing a commitment to the wider world that comes before his commitment to Thorin and Company, unites him not only with Gandalf but with the high-mimetic hero, Bard." (Crabbe 47)

The Quest as Legend: *The Lord of the Rings*

- "... although the theme of *The Lord of the Rings*, like that of *The Hobbit*, is the unending struggle of good and evil, in the later work Tolkien has managed to make that basic dialectical struggle complex and interesting by daring to entertain the idea that a range of goods as well as a range of evils is possible in the world." (Crabbe 67)
- "The first difference one notes in moving from *The Hobbit* to *The Lord of the Rings* is the tone" (Crabbe 68)
- "Structurally, as Randel Helms points out, *The Lord of the Rings* is *The Hobbit* writ large in that both works participate in the vision of the whole life of man as a quest. That quest, however is marked for all men by two great events: the coming of adulthood, the coming of death. To borrow the paradigm developed by Joseph Campbell, author of *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, there is one heroic life, and quest stories differ only as to how they make use of different parts of it. *The Hobbit* clearly makes

- use of only the first of the cycle, ending with the hero's passage into maturity. As a story of the beginning of a full and fulfilling adult life, the specifics of which we are left to imagine for ourselves, and as the tale of a young hobbit with his life before him, it is appropriately sunny, even comical, in tone. *The Lord of the Rings*, however, takes the hero completely through the cycle to the point of his essentially sacrificial death. Its somber tone is appropriate to the story of inevitable decline and death. In fact, the only time in *The Lord of the Rings* sounds at all like *The Hobbit* is when Pippin and Merry, in the early chapters, indulge in some youthful foolishness. Even Sam, who is often seen as a vehicle for comic relief, is identified as serious from the early stages of Book One by his reverence for elves." (Crabbe 69)
- "As the nature of the nature of the transitional event toward which the plot moves differs in seriousness, so does the social status of the characters. Bilbo is an ordinary hobbit, comfortable, but surely not aristocratic – not, in fact, extraordinary in any way. It is the function of his story to show how the most ordinary young hobbit may 'have more to him than anyone suspects.' The dwarves with whom he travels are also identified as ordinary folk. The party travels in weather-stained cloaks, regards the adventure as a commercial enterprise, and, unable to find or afford a hero, settles for a burglar instead. / *The Lord of the Rings*, however, selects its personae from the higher social orders. By virtue of Bilbo's fortune and his status as Elf-friend, Frodo's social and moral position is higher than Bilbo's was at the opening of *The Hobbit*. The backgrounds of Pippin and Merry are traced in the Prologue in such a way as to establish their status as descendants of some of the first families of the Shire. / Similarly, while the elves of *The Hobbit* are silly, capricious, and given to singing nonsense rhymes, such as 'tra-la-la-lally, come back to the valley,' the elves of *The Lord of the Rings* are glorious, responsible, and poetic. Much has been made of Tolkien's evolving ideas of the nature of elves, and by the time the first group of elvish travelers appears in *The Lord of the Rings*, driving off the black riders with their hymn to Elbereth, it is clear that we are dealing with a race in whom the attributes of divinity are legion. The appearance of the Elf-Lord, Glorfindel, whom Frodo sees for a moment at the ford 'as he appears on the other side,' Elrond's status as acknowledged leader of all the free people of Middle-earth, and Galadriel's mystical insights in Lothlórien all succeed in mirroring the seriousness of the tone in the depiction of the elves." (Crabbe 70)
 - Parallel previous statement for men of Gondor and Númenor
 - "*The Hobbit*, with its steady focus on Bilbo and his development, is a singularly good example of a quest story that is primarily concerned with personal or individual issues. Though some mention is made of issues that involve whole societies, especially in the recognition of one's duty to mankind and the vision of the responsibilities of a leader to his people, the central thematic and structural concern is Bilbo's growth and development, and through him, individual human growth and development. *The Lord of the Rings*, however, though it is still concerned with the individual struggle as depicted in Frodo, is much more a social work, reflecting ideas about broad issues of social roles and responsibilities and cultural attributes." (Crabbe 73)

- Languages are very important for this reason – "[Quotation by Waclaw Lednicki] Each language represents centuries of tragic efforts on the part of human beings to find an adequate expression for their feelings and thoughts about the universe. Indeed every great language is a unique mirror of the landscape, of the air, of the sky – of all the natural surroundings in which it has developed."
- **Warrior Heros**
 - "In the heroes of men in *The Lord of the Rings*, we can see a whole hierarchy of heroic possibilities. In the men of Rohan, we see man as a purely physical hero, the warrior who was in such short supply in *The Hobbit*. The Rohirrim are 'fair to look upon,' and 'love war and valour as things good in themselves, both a sport and an end.' The power of the idea of the warrior hero is so great that, though it is an unpopular notion in our own time, it actually moved Tolkien to unite the image of warfare with that of creativity: In the battle of Pelennor fields, the men of Rohan 'burst into song, and they sang as they slew, for the joy of battle was on them, and the sound of their singing that was fair and terrible came even to the city.'" (Crabbe 75)
 - "... the heroic qualities Frodo does possess, though of less dramatic proportions than those of high-mimetic heroes, are sufficient to the task given him. Despite his fear, he has an unwavering commitment to the quest once he has undertaken it. He is able to feel pity for even the tormented Gollum and the fallen Saruman, and he is willing to accomplish by sacrifice what he cannot hope to accomplish by strength. Most important, he is capable of carrying on when there is no hope" (Crabbe 77)
 - Strength to Carry on: "in Frodo's willingness to sacrifice himself for the Shire; in Bilbo's commitment to his 'Translations from the Elvish'; in Faramir's desire to study the archives of Gondor under the tutelage of Gandalf; in the histories compiled by Pippin and Merry; and in the Red Book Westmarch, kept by Sam and handed down through Elanor." (Crabbe 77-78)
- **Sacrifice**
 - "[Frodo's] agreement to carry the ring into Mordor and probable destruction is a triumph of the will to serve over the will to live . . . despite the continual subconscious longings to give in to the power of the Ring, symbolized by his hand's continual straying toward it, Frodo never gives up his conscious decision to offer himself as a sacrifice until he stands at the crack of Doom" (Crabbe 78)
 - "When at that moment [see prev.] the subconscious will to live and to *assert power* breaks through the conscious desire to sacrifice himself to *destroy power*, the result is symbolically the sacrificial death required, though the body sacrificed is that of Frodo's alter-ego, Gollum . . ." (Crabbe 78) (italics mine): At this point, Frodo really dies, and remains an 'inactive hero' and lives only until he completes the Red Book.

- "For Aragorn, the sacrifice is appropriately one that only a ruler can make – to hold his own claims to happiness and well-being in abeyance until he can provide for his subjects. His sacrifice is therefore his long and lonely life as an outcast Ranger and his enduring love for Arwen Evenstar. Gandalf, like Frodo, is called upon for a sacrifice in a more circumscribed context. Like Frodo, Gandalf must offer his life, and like Frodo, he is willing to do so. Though the apotheosized Gandalf returns from his fall into the bottomless pits of Moria, his sacrificial offering of himself to save his friends from the Balrog is none the less heroic. Nor is Boromir's defense of Pippin and Merry from the Orcs less heroic because it fails, culminating in their capture and his death." (Crabbe 79)

- ***Courage***

- "... like Frodo, those men are heroes who feel the fear, acknowledge it, and then do what they must do despite it" (Crabbe 79)
- "at the parting of the paths that marks the breaking of the Fellowship, Frodo says to Boromir, 'I know what I should do, but I am afraid of doing it, Boromir, afraid.'" (Crabbe 79)
- "... though Aragorn moans that without Gandalf, the fellowship has no hope of succeeding in its mission, he also says 'We must do without hope'" (Crabbe 80)
- "... Sam, guarding the sleeping Frodo on the plains of Gorgoroth, suddenly realizes that if they do reach Mound Doom, they have no chance of returning: 'But even as hope died in Sam, or seemed to die, it was turned to a new strength'" (Crabbe 80)

- ***Mercy***

- "Similar to Frodo's treatment of Gollum [e.g. Frodo has compassion for Gollum] is Gandalf's treatment of the fallen Saruman when he offers Saruman the freedom to leave Orthanc, and Treebeard's release of Saruman after the defeat of Sauron. Aragorn's mercy is illustrated in his treatment of the army he leads to the Black Gate."

- ***Selfless Love***

- Sam (going with Frodo) Frodo (love of the Shire and love of mankind) Frodo (leaves at Fall of Rauros to stop the company from going into further danger): "Sam, as Frodo's servant and as a being with free will, exhibits a selflessness that yields perseverance unmatched by any of the abject slaves of Sauron, and in doing so, illustrates the superiority of love freely given over force, no matter how strong." (Crabbe 83)

- Degrees of Good (not that important)-> Evil (Gandalf, Aragorn, Boromir, Hobbits, Sackville-Bagginses, Bill Ferny, Gollum, Orcs, Shelob, Balrog, Sauron)
- "As it is reflected in Sauron, evil is closely allied with a quest for power. Here the notion of power goes beyond the simple acquisitiveness of *The Hobbit* to include the ultimate control – control over being. Sauron's power, or the power he seeks, is a power that parodies the power of the creator. Rather than create, Sauron will destroy; rather than set free, he will enslave; rather than heal, he will harm. The desire of Sauron to make everything in Middle-earth less than it is capable of being is clear in his repeated threats to 'break' captives, in the ruined and desolate lands that were once fertile and productive, and in the Orcs and trolls, his parodies of men and dwarves." (Crabbe 86)
- ***Impossible Victory***
 - "Sauron's title, The Lord of the Rings also suggests the enduring quality of evil, the quality that makes a final victory impossible. Though Sauron was 'vanquished' when Isildur, the patriarch of Aragorn's line, cut the Ring from his finger, and though Sauron was caught in the wreck of Númenor and 'the bodily form in which he long had walked perished,' evil cannot be completely destroyed. It can be temporarily defeated; it can be set back; in the vision of *The Lord of the Rings*, it cannot be finally removed from the world" (Crabbe 86)
 - Ring is evil; evil is represented as a balance; everyone is a specific shade of grey instead of all black and all white; the danger is not to lose the battle with evil, but to 'become incorporated into it'.
 - Evil is wholly unable to create; it must merely pervert
 - 'The Wanderer' and 'Beowulf' was set in a time past the "golden age"; same as *The Lord of the Rings*.

The Quest as Myth: *The Silmarillion*

- "As the narrative quality of *The Silmarillion* resembles that of *Beowulf*, so does the strategy Of The Poet . . . " (Crabbe 129)
- "The pagan or pre-Christian eschatological view, as Tolkien explained in his essay on *Beowulf*, is based on 'the creed of yielding.' In the northern mythologies, at least, the heroic assumption was that the destruction of man and his creations was inevitable. The creed of unyielding, then, holds that chaos will eventually triumph and that, for that reason, human life can be made meaningful only by opposing chaos with all one's strength and will until death inevitably comes. The heroic life may end, but the heroic will is indomitable." (Crabbe 130)

- "Among the elves, the greatest protagonists are Fëanor, maker of the Silmarils, and Turgon, Lord of Gondolin. However, the tragedy of the elves is that, thanks to the oath of Fëanor and the ensuing doom of the Noldor, they have only heroes whose actions bring catastrophic results. Allegiance to the code of the will can not bring victory; it can only bring, at best, glorious defeat" (Crabbe 134)
- Fëanor brings defeat by refusing to sacrifice his Silmarils to the Valar. "In addition, because [this] act of disobedience puts Fëanor in a state of sin, the doom of the Noldor must be construed to be an observation of what must naturally happen to those who indulge their own wills rather than a curse originating with the Valar." (Crabbe 135)
- Turgon builds a hidden city [Gondolin] "whose fame and glory is mightiest in song of all the dwellings of the Elves in the Hither Lands". However, ". . . from the moment Turgon fails to repudiate the oath and his own will and make himself subject to the will of the Valar, the fall of Gondolin is foretold" (Crabbe 136).
- "The fall of the city is brought by the same heroic flaw that drives Fëanor to his death: the overweening pride of the creator in his own creation. Having built his beautiful city, Turgon cannot leave it, although he remembers the warning of [the Valar] Ulmo: 'Love not too well the work of thy hands and the devices of thy heart; and remember that the true hope of the Noldor lieth in the West.' This is a clear warning against pride, and an exhortation to follow the Valar; the failure to heed it leads to the sacking of the city, the death of Turgon, and the end of the Noldor as a culture. Lacking a state of grace and a willingness to bend one's will to those naturally superior, such as the Valar, even a leader as strong, wise, and creative as Turgon cannot survive the relentless onslaught of evil." (Crabbe 136)
- "Among the race of men, heroes suffer less because they transgress the rules of obedience and responsibility than because they are victims of a world that fails to reward action with justice. For men, the world visits evil on the just and unjust alike. And as men are frailer, shorter-lived, and more limited in understanding than elves, they are even more susceptible to the evil of the world and less able to believe that a greater power loves and protects them than the elves." (Crabbe 136)
- Exceptions (Beren): "[Quote from *The Silmarillion*] Among the tales of sorrow and of ruin that come down to us from the darkness of those days, there are yet some in which amid weeping there is joy and under the shadow of death light that endures."]
- "When one man is saved from physical pain or spiritual isolation it is never by his own skill or cleverness. Such beings as these are ultimately powerless against the pervasive nature of a Morgoth or a Sauron. Though elves and men are brave and skillful, they can only be saved (of a Lúthien for a Beren, or an Eärendil for the two races) or by mercy (of the Valar for the two races)." (Crabbe 138)
- Eärendil is like Frodo, is a sacrificial character; Eärendil sacrifices himself for the benefit of the elves and men.

- "In the heroic figures of *The Silmarillion*, two modes of conduct are consistently reflected – the creative and the sacrificial. The creative, In Morgoth and Fëanor in particular, is of necessity associated with the life-force, with the expansion of the hero's being. But among the subtle and skillful creators the joy of creation is replaced by the joy of control. The mind that perceives creations as possessions instead of creatures with wills and beings of their own is a mind that attempts to gain by power what can only be freely given. There is, then, a lack of respect for the hierarchical principle of willing allegiance to one's betters." (Crabbe 139-140)
- **IMPORTANCE OF LANGUAGE:** "By attributing the development of the Fëanorian alphabet to the rebellious son of Finwë, Tolkien suggests that the development of language, a Promethean step, can be both a blessing and a curse. In perceiving the world around him, the user of language also responds to his own creation, and in responding to it, he defines himself as separate from other parts of creation. It is not until the concept of separation exists that one can exercise free will, because until a sense of separation exists there is nothing from which to be free. Language is a blessing because it allows man to define and thus create his world, and it is a curse because it brings him to the consciousness that he is distinct, perhaps even isolated from the rest of his world" (Crabbe 142)
- "[Benjamin Worf] . . . every language is a vast pattern system in which are culturally ordained the forms and categories by which the personality not only neglects types of relationships and phenomena, channels his reasoning, and builds the house of his consciousness." (Crabbe 142)
- **BASAL PRINCIPLE:** "*The Silmarillion*, then is the story of a world that is too dangerous and unforgiving to be comic; it is also the story of a world that is far too capricious, far too capable of rewarding even the good with ashes, to be really tragic. Instead, Tolkien here portrays a world that is ironic: Danger is everywhere, villains may be banished but not vanquished, the longed-for apple is rotten at the core. The inhabitants of this world live lives in which conventional notions of relations between actions and rewards are exploded. They live lives in which the odds against good winning over evil are almost absurdly high. However, caught in this trap between high odds and bad bets, Tolkien's heroes do the most heroic thing ironic heroes can do: They endure." (Crabbe 144)

The Quest Realized: Secondary Worlds

- "[Charles Nicol] Words meant something different to [Tolkien] than to the rest of us: they were multilayered objects through which he could detect the pentimento of an earlier world, and the brilliance of his scholarship lay in his ability to reconstruct the milieu of a Middle English romance through a subtle analysis of its vocabulary." (Crabbe 145)
- **FARMER GILES OF HAM:** "Like Bilbo and Frodo, Giles is an unwilling hero, and his unwillingness lasts through the story. But he is pragmatic, too. He doesn't want to fight a giant, but 'property is property.' . . . Even Chrysophylax [the dragon, opponent of Giles] comments on [Giles] shortcomings as a hero, saying, 'It used, sir,

to be the custom of knights to issue a challenge in such cases, after a proper exchange of titles and credentials.'" (Crabbe 148)

- Giles is an ordinary fairy-tale hero; has three trials, lived happily ever after, and he, like Bilbo, has the 'virtues of the powerless', namely prudence, discretion, a reverence for the past, luck, and a sharp wit.
- **LEAF BY NIGGLE:** "The great journey of Niggle from his home and his workshop to the workhouse is paralleled by the implied journey at the end, when Niggle sets off for the mountains. The commitment to good works and service to others that Niggle should have achieved at home, the application to the task and the discipline he lacks, are all learned in the workhouse. He also learns through recollection to appreciate his neighbor, Parish. Thus Niggle's journey, like Bilbo's in *The Hobbit*, brings him to maturity, though in Niggle's case the maturity is spiritual rather than physical." (Crabbe 159)
- **SMITH OF WOOTON MAJOR** (Sorry, nothing on this yet :))

The Quest Continues

- "The value system working in 'The Quenta' seems to be one that values a heroic code based on hardihood, courage, and public duty. For example, Finweg (called Finweg the Valiant) resolves to rescue Maidros from the face of Thangorodrim, he does not do so out of any personal regard for Maidros but in determination to end the feud resulting from the treachery of Fëanor in abandoning the others to the Grinding Ice. Note also the feckless challenge of Fingolfin at the breaking of the siege of Angband. Fingolfin understands that he is going to his death, but his rage and anguish at the defeat of his people is such that he challenges Morgoth anyway." (Crabbe 205)

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- This book was found at the Elmhurst Public Library