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A Secondary Fantasy World in

J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*

In the fine arts, including drama, film, poetry and prose fiction, the patrons are better able to appreciate and enjoy the art by becoming enveloped in the illusion that the characters, situations and events depicted in the art are, in fact, real. Of course, they really know that the art is not real, but are able to use their imagination to pretend that it is. In prose fiction, there are two important components in this process. First, the reader must have sufficient imagination and the ability to pretend that the fiction he or she is reading is real—an ability which varies from person to person. Second, the writer must have the ability to paint mental pictures, with words, that draw the reader into the illusion. This is especially crucial in fantasy literature.

This process is often identified as “willing suspension of disbelief” a term which was first coined by Samuel Taylor Coleridge in his *Biographia Literaria*. Coleridge states that the writer “does not require us to be awake and believe, [but] to yield ourselves to a dream [. . .] with our eyes open [. . .], ready to awaken [. . .] at the first motion of our will, and meantime, only, not to disbelieve” (217-18). Tolkien, however, saw the process not of suspending disbelief, but of actual believing—stating that “literary belief” is possible “when the story-maker’s art is good enough to produce it.” Tolkien believed that “what really happens is that the story-maker proves a successful ‘sub-creator,’ [by making] a Secondary World, which [the readers’] mind can enter. Inside it, what [the writer] relates is ‘true’; it accords with the laws of that world. [The readers]

therefore believe it, while [they] are, as it were, inside it” (Tolkien, “Fairy” 37). However one perceives this process, Tolkien was able to achieve the desired result successfully in *The Hobbit*.

Tolkien wrote *The Hobbit* in such a way that his readers can enter his “secondary world” of fantasy. Tolkien accomplishes this by combining elements of “the real world,” elements of existing mythology, and elements unique to the novel in such a way that it lends credibility to the fictional characters, situations, and events—and by writing action scenes with such detail that it is easy for his readers to visualize them.

A Secondary World

Fantasy literature does more than simply restructure a reality which we already know—it offers a parallel reality which gives us a renewed awareness of what we already know (Timmerman 1). Secondary worlds, or “otherworlds,” such as Humbaba’s Forest from the ancient Sumerian *Epic of Gilgamesh*, or Scheria, the magical land of the Phaeacians from *The Odyssey*, are as old as literature itself (Swinfin 75). Fantasy stories have been with us for awhile, but man's thirst for “otherness” has sharpened in recent years (Timmerman 2). The main difference between the secondary worlds of these older works and modern fantasy literature is that although “strangeness and wonder” are still present, the secondary worlds of the modern works are more concerned with the decision of detail (Swinfin 75). Such a world now has a precise geography, often including maps, whereas the older works were “shadowy and imprecise” (Swinfin 75). But why do we need a secondary world? Timmerman quotes Eric Rabkin:

The problem with the real world [. . .] is that it is the only one we have. [. . .] The real world is a messy place where dust accumulates and people die for no good reason and crime often pays and true love doesn't conquer much. [. . .] [Fantasy] worlds are not merely *different* from our own, but *alternative* to our own [and] are

defined for us and are of interest to us by virtue of their relationship to the real world we imagine to have been thought normal when the story was composed (55).

Timmerman notes that Tolkien carries his readers in a “circular movement” from our primary world through the fantasy world of the sub-creation and back to our primary world. Tolkien's fantasy is a means of engaging our world of daily fact with renewed perspective and “clarity of insight” (58).

However, Tolkien takes it one step further. According to Bradley Birzer, Tolkien held a “firm conviction that *God* authored the history of Middle Earth, in all its manifestations” (emphasis added), and that [Tolkien] “merely served as a scrivener of God's myth.” Tolkien claimed that he had “long ceased to invent,” but waited until he seemed to know what “really happened.” Tolkien further claimed that the true writer was “that one ever-present Person who is never absent and never named.” Birzer concludes that “Tolkien believed that he served as a poet-recipient of God’s secondary myths,” and that “he was a recorder rather than an inventor” (25-6). I conclude that Tolkien was either a divinely-inspired instrument through which God Himself revealed an alternate reality that is as real as our own, or he was a deluded man with visions of grandeur. Either way, if Tolkien truly believed that his secondary world was directly revealed to him from God, and was therefore real, it helped him to share that belief with his readers.

The Real World

After reading *The Hobbit*, I listened to the audio version of the novel. While listening, I jotted down occurrences of various elements of the novel into three categories: the real world, existing mythology, and things unique to the novel. I organized these components into an

outline, which is found in the Appendix of this paper. I did my best to include everything, but I may have missed a few things. The overwhelming majority of these elements found in *The Hobbit* are also found in the real world. By incorporating so many common things that we, the readers, easily recognize and relate to, Tolkien made the novel more accessible to us, and made it seem more real.

Ann Swinfin makes the following comments regarding the relationship of the primary and secondary worlds:

The first essential in making a secondary world acceptable to readers is that its physical nature should seem comprehensible and logical. The physical laws of nature and the vegetation may not be the same as those of the primary world, but they should have a similarity of structure, and a reasonable cause-and-effect relationship. [. . .] The fundamental physical laws of gravity, heat and cold, dark and light, are the same. [. . .] The seasons move in their regular cycle [. . .]. The moon and stars have their appointed stations in the sky. [. . .] Certain differences from the natural laws of the primary world may occur, but these are rarely arbitrary (77).

In *The Hobbit*, we learn that hobbits are short creatures with oversized hairy feet who live in holes in the ground. If that is all we knew about them, we might logically assume that they are loathsome creatures who eat worms. However, when we learn that they have furniture in their dwellings, enjoy cake for breakfast, keep their woolly toes neatly brushed and that they measure time in hours and minutes (Tolkien, *Hobbit* 3-5, 11, 33), they now appear more human-like. As I was typing this paragraph, my grammar checker objected to my use of the relative pronoun

“who” to signify hobbits—but as Tolkien describes them, they are sentient beings, and it is appropriate to refer to them as “who” not “that” or “which.”

One of the elements that Tolkien incorporates from our real or “primary” world into his secondary world that he creates in *The Hobbit*, is the race of men. His mythological creatures such as elves, dwarves, hobbits and dragons interact with ordinary human beings like you and I. The hero who slew the dragon, Bard, was a *man* who did so with a bow and arrow—without the benefit of supernatural powers (*Hobbit* 270).

I was particularly impressed with the many references to food in *The Hobbit*. It is a realistic premise that a group of adventurers travelling to far-away places would face many dangers—one of which would be death by starvation. These non-human fictional characters seem more real when they, despite their special qualities, still must have food to survive. Ironically, not only are these characters concerned with finding food, they are also frequently in danger themselves of being eaten by a variety of aggressive creatures, some of which are other sentient human-like species such as the trolls (39-47).

Aside from the obvious literal meaning, one might also infer an allegorical meaning to the idea of “eat or be eaten,” which could represent human society, the business world, etc. Tolkien’s readers may have never been in the situation where they were in fear of being eaten by a dragon; however, they have experienced predators of a different type, such as lawyers, bill collectors, or ex-spouses. In *The Hobbit*, Smaug is a thief who victimizes those who are weaker than he is—a concept with which the readers can relate.

Previous Mythology

Tolkien's use of previously existing mythology adds another familiar element to the mix. My stepmother, who grew up in a working-class family in London and spoke with a distinctive

cockney accent, once told me that when she was a little girl, her mother would tell her that she should go to bed on time, and say her prayers every night or Grendel would catch her, and eat her. My stepmother had never read *Beowulf*, and did not know who Grendel was—even as an adult. I suspect that many of Tolkien's original readers in 1937, especially the children, had only vague notions about mythological creatures such as elves, dwarves and trolls, and what they did know, they learned from oral tradition. However, detailed knowledge of this mythology is not necessary to make Tolkien's fiction seem more familiar and realistic. Even a vague idea of the mythology is enough to make it seem familiar.

Tolkien used elements of pre-existing mythology in *The Hobbit* by creating speaking characters who were dwarves, elves, goblins, trolls and other such beings. Tolkien made his nonhuman characters seem realistic by giving them human qualities. For example, even if his readers have never met a real elf, they have met people who have qualities similar to Tolkien's elves. Although these creatures existed in previous mythology, Tolkien created his own versions of them, and refined them. In the case of the elves, Tolkien actually revived an earlier version of the mythological creatures. Apparently, sometime around the 16th century, the idea of an elf changed from a man-sized creature to one who could hide in a flower (Gasque 152). By making the elves more human-like in nature, Tolkien made them more credible to his readers.

One of the most interesting characters in the novel is Smaug—the dragon. When I read *The Hobbit*, I immediately recognized the story of the dragon as being very similar to *Beowulf*. In both stories, a dragon who is guarding a treasure is driven to rage by the theft of a cup. When he wakes up, and discovers the theft, the dragon flies out at night to burn the nearby town, and is eventually slain by a human hero (Lee and Solopova 109). Many of Tolkien's readers may not have read *Beowulf*, but like my stepmother, they have heard of it or at least had some sense of it.

The Hobbit also has elements of the Eddic poem *Fáfnimál*, in which a hero by the name of Sigurðr encounters and slays a talking dragon named Fáfnir. Similarities between this poem and *The Hobbit* include a vulnerable spot on the dragon's belly, both Bilbo and Sigurðr refusing to give their names to the dragon, the dragon trying to turn the hero against his friends, and talking birds (Lee and Solopova 109-10). In *The Hobbit*, the talking birds are thrushes and ravens (247-49, 270, 277-79), birds with whom Tolkien's readers are familiar, and are likely to have an idea of their "personalities."

Another source Tolkien may have used in the creation of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* as well, is *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (The Ring of the Nibelung), commonly known as "The Ring Cycle," which is a series of four operas, *Das Rheingold*, *Die Walküre*, *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung* written by the German composer Richard Wagner. These operas, which were first performed in 1876, are based on legends from the Scandinavian Edda and the *Nibelungenlied* (Apel 734), a German epic poem from the Middle Ages, which was rescued from near oblivion in 1757 (Rather 1). Sigurðr, who I discussed earlier, now known by his German name Siegfried, is the human hero who comes to possess a magic ring. In Wagner's operas and in Tolkien's novels, a ring of power is central to both stories and lends its name to their titles; also, dragons and a broken sword to be mended by a warrior occur in each (Fuller 18). Both Tolkien's and Wagner's creations are rendered in four works—a shorter, relatively childlike wonder tale followed by a trilogy (Fuller 18). But did Tolkien borrow liberally from Wagner, or simply use the same source materials? Alex Ross, in an article he wrote for *The New Yorker* states the following:

Tolkien refused to admit that his ring had anything to do with Wagner's.

"Both rings were round, and there the resemblance ceased," he said. But he

certainly knew his Wagner, and made an informal study of "Die Walküre" not long before writing the novels. The idea of the omnipotent ring must have come directly from Wagner; nothing quite like it appears in the old sagas. True, the Volsunga Saga features a ring from a cursed hoard, but it possesses no executive powers. In the "Nibelungenlied" saga, there is a magic rod that could be used to rule all, but it just sits around. Wagner combined these two objects into the awful amulet that is forged by Alberich from the gold of the Rhine. When Wotan steals the ring for his own godly purposes, Alberich places a curse upon it, and in so doing he speaks of "the lord of the ring as the slave of the ring." Such details make it hard to believe Tolkien's disavowals (161).

I tend to agree with Ross. Wagner's operas would likely have been well known to Tolkien, and to many of his readers. While admitting to the similarities between Tolkien and Wagner, Fuller considers Tolkien's work to be "astonishingly underivative in terms of any specific sources or borrowings," and that Tolkien "has drawn, as all must do, from the common cultural heritage of the human race" (18). Whether or not Tolkien was directly influenced by Wagner, any of Tolkien's readers who were aware of the operas, even slightly, would perceive a sense of familiarity, which would help Tolkien's readers enter his secondary world.

Unique to the Novel

The final component in the mix is the elements of *The Hobbit* that are unique to the novel. One of the most important of these distinctive elements is the character names such as Bilbo, Gandalf, and Elrond. Tolkien incorporated Old English and Gothic lexical elements in the creation of these names but they are, nonetheless, original inventions (Lee and Solopova 51). These names are not English names, but they sound as if they could be. They are easy to

pronounce and easy to remember, yet they are unique. The only characters in the novel who have real English names are the trolls—William, Tom and Bert.

Perhaps the most important original element of *The Hobbit* is the race of hobbits.

Edmond Fuller offers the following regarding them:

Hobbits are Tolkien's authentic contribution to the lore of imaginary species. They are a small folk, manlike in shape and manner, someone furred, seldom attaining more than three feet in stature, but well formed. [. . .]

Although hobbits belong to the large and mysterious genre of little people, they are a distinct and fresh invention, richly elaborated in all their histories, habits, and generic idiosyncrasies. [. . .]

The sheer creative feat of bringing a new creature into the realm of fairy story is almost too much for some to accept. [. . .] [T]he first negotiations for German publication of *The Hobbit* were broken off abruptly when the publishers wrote that they had searched through all the encyclopedias and found that there was no such thing as a hobbit (18-9).

Although hobbits themselves are solely the product of Tolkien's imagination, there is evidence for hobbit-like dwellings in the British Isles. The Picts of the third and fourth centuries A.D. are thought to have lived in underground homes, or “souterrains” (Gasque 159). The simple fact that there is archaeological evidence of hobbit-like dwellings adds to the believability of the hobbit legend.

Action Scenes

Another way that Tolkien makes *The Hobbit* seem believable is by writing action scenes with such detail that it is easy for his readers to visualize them. As I read this scene in Chapter 12, the imagery became so vivid in my mind that it almost seemed real:

Something in his voice gave the dwarves an uncomfortable feeling. Slowly Thorin shook off his dreams and getting up he kicked away the stone that wedged the door. Then they thrust upon it, and it closed with a snap and a clang. No trace of a keyhole was there left on the inside. They were shut in the Mountain!

And not a moment too soon. They had hardly gone any distance down the tunnel when a blow smote the side of the Mountain like the crash of battering-rams made of forest oaks and swung by giants. The rock boomed, the walls cracked and stones fell from the roof on their heads. What would have happened if the door had still been open I don't like to think. They fled further down the tunnel glad to be still alive, while behind them outside they heard the roar and rumble of Smaug's fury. He was breaking rocks to pieces, smashing wall and cliff with the lashings of his huge tail, till their little lofty camping ground, the scorched grass, the thrush's stone, the snail-covered walls, the narrow ledge, and all disappeared in a jumble of smithereens, and an avalanche of splintered stones fell over the cliff into the valley below (251-52).

This section of text begins with an “uncomfortable feeling”—that strange unexplainable sense of foreboding that “something is wrong.” I am reminded of the words of Han Solo from *Star Wars*: “I’ve got a bad feeling about this.” Many of Tolkien's readers have had some experience with that inexplicable sense of apprehension. The feeling of being locked up, or

confined without the option of escape is also a concept that many of Tolkien's readers would understand. Even for those who have never experienced such confinement personally, such as being in jail and hearing a cell door slam shut, the fear of being trapped is nonetheless a primal phobia with which many can relate. When we read “the rock boomed, the walls cracked and stones fell from the roof on their heads,” we are given a glimpse at what the dwarves are physically experiencing at that moment.

Tolkien now shows us what the dwarves are thinking and feeling. At first, the dwarves do not know what is causing the noise they hear, but only that it sounds “like the crash of battering-rams made of forest oaks and swung by giants.” Their imagination generates a simile that they can understand until they actually heard the dragon’s roar, and are able to envision a more accurate mental picture of what is really occurring—Smaug is smashing the very spot where they were standing just a few moments earlier with his tail. The mental image of “their little lofty camping ground,” including such details as the “thrush’s stone,” the “snail-covered walls,” and the “narrow ledge,” is still fresh in their memory, and now they combine these memories with the sounds they hear and generate a mental image of these things disappearing “in a jumble of smithereens.” By writing this section of text with such descriptive narrative language, Tolkien draws us into his secondary world by painting a mental image of the physical action. Tolkien then draws us into an even deeper level of his alternate reality by letting us experience the thoughts and feelings of his characters.

A New Mythology for England

After examining some of the ways that Tolkien created a secondary world that his readers could enter, one might wonder *why* he did it. Did Tolkien simply write a series of great stories intended only to entertain his readers, or did he have a larger purpose in mind? Margaret Hiley

states that “not only the question of how Tolkien's mythology was created should be attended to; surely equally important is the question of *why* and *to what end*” (838). Hiley states the following:

Tolkien was highly suspicious of what he regarded as the "foreign" cultural influences of French and classical Greek and Latin. He thought that Norse mythology was far more closely related to the English temperament than was Greek and deplored the fact that nevertheless classical mythology was regarded as far more important. It is also true that no distinctly "English" mythology survived the repeated invasions of Britain in premedieval times [. . .]. The nearest is the cycle of Arthurian legend, which, however, developed comparatively late and, moreover, is strongly influenced by French tradition (850).

Tolkien wrote that he intended “to restore to the English an epic tradition and present them with a mythology of their own” (*Letters* 231). Tolkien also wrote the following:

I was from early days grieved by the poverty of my own beloved country: it had no stories of its own (bound up with its tongue and soil), not of the quality which I sought, and found (as an ingredient) in legends of other lands. [. . .] I had a mind to make a body of more or less connected legend, ranging from the large and cosmogonic, to the level of romantic fairy-story—the larger founded on the lesser in contact with the earth, the lesser drawing splendour from the vast backcloths—which I could dedicate simply to: to England; to my country (*Letters* 144).

We know, then, that Tolkien intended to create a new mythology for England. But did he succeed? Hiley notes that Tolkien used source material from “fragments of Anglo-Saxon and Norse that had survived” and that because they were “incomplete,” Tolkien was compelled to

“try to reconstruct a new whole out of the surviving ruins”—with his imagination (850). Hiley further states:

[The creation of] a new whole from preexisting fragments gives Tolkien's newly created secondary world a sense of authenticity because it is created from actual ancient sources. This makes his mythology new and old at the same time, for its tales still carry their roots, ancient but nonetheless historic. His mythology can truly be seen as a mythology for England because it consciously uses Old English sources, and it also appears authentic in relation to the primary world because it uses real, preexisting material. The boundaries between the Primary and Secondary World here become blurred (851).

Unlike the Arthurian legends, Tolkien's new mythology is not about England. Although the hobbits' Shire has some resemblance to medieval England, Middle Earth, for the most part, is a secondary or alternate world that really does not resemble England—the geography just does not match. Tolkien's fiction, then, is a new mythology *for* England—but not actually *about* England.

Note that Tolkien uses the word “dedicate” in his written statement regarding his intention, instead of “write,” “create,” or “invent” (Flieger 6). Verlyn Flieger examines several definitions of the word “dedicate” found in the 1933 edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* and finds that definition number 3 could apply in this case: “to inscribe or address a book, engraving, piece of music, etc. to a patron or friend, as a compliment, mark of honor, regard or affection.” However, definition number 1, “to devote to the Deity or to a sacred person or purpose with solemn rites, or to surrender, set apart, and consecrate to sacred uses,” also could apply. Flieger concludes that “a middle course comes nearest to Tolkien's intent”—a

combination of the two definitions. By saying “dedicate,” Tolkien addressed his works of fiction to the “patron,” in this case, England, the “fosterer of his life and his hopes” but implying the “weightier sense of ‘consecration’ or ‘devotion’ to a higher purpose” (6).

Conclusion

In his novel *The Hobbit*, Tolkien makes it possible for his readers to enter his secondary fantasy world by skillfully blending elements of the real world, existing mythology, and unique elements—and by writing action scenes with vivid detail. By incorporating many common things which are in his readers’ experience, and to which readers can relate, Tolkien gives the novel credibility. He also adds elements from previously existing mythology, which enhances the feeling of familiarity. Tolkien then puts his personal touch on *The Hobbit* by adding distinctly original elements to the mix. The most important thing that is unique to the novel is the race of hobbits, to which his protagonist, Bilbo, belongs. Finally, Tolkien writes action scenes in *The Hobbit* with such vivid imagery as to make it possible for his readers to create their own mental images—almost as if they were actually there. Tolkien wrote *The Hobbit*, and his other works set in his secondary fantasy world, with the intention of creating a new mythology for England.

Tolkien's works of fiction may have been intended to be a new mythology for England, but has since become a mythology for the entire world. A few days ago, I watched *Star Wars: Episode II* on television; Christopher Lee portrayed the character Count Dooku, a Jedi Knight who “turned to the dark side” and now served the evil Palpatine. Having recently watched all three of the *Lord of the Rings* films, I noticed that Christopher Lee also portrayed Saruman, who once had been a colleague of Gandalf until he turned to evil and now served Sauron. The two characters are very similar—almost identical. Of course, Tolkien did not invent the “good guy

turned bad” archetype; it is as old as Lucifer himself. However, Tolkien's mythology has had an undeniable effect on the fantasy fiction that has followed. Our concept of dwarves, elves, goblins, wizards, etc. has been transformed by Tolkien's mythology. Tolkien's secondary fantasy world has “crossed over” into film, video games, graphic novels and other media. A *Google* search on the word “Tolkien” indicates that there are almost 16 million sites on the internet about the author. Serious academic study continues despite the embrace of popular culture. Tolkien's fiction has had a profound effect on the fantasy genre, an effect which will continue in the future.

Appendix

Things in The Hobbit in common with “the real world”

Sentient Beings

Man

Animals

Horses, Rabbits, Pigs, Sheep, Owls, Fish, Dogs, Deer, Squirrels, Bats, Rats,
Oxen,* Wolves, * Bears

Birds

Starlings, Finches, Crows, * Ravens, * Thrushes, * Eagles

Insects, etc.

Bees, Flies, Snails, Butterflies, * Spiders

Trees

Pine, Oak, Elm, Beech

Food/Drink/etc.

Tobacco, Tea, Coffee, Beer, Wine, Mead, Honey, Cheese, Butter, Eggs, Bacon,
Mutton, Strawberries

Musical Instruments

Fiddles, Flutes, Clarinets, Harps

Weapons

Swords, Knives, Axes, Spears, Bows and Arrows, Armor

Measurement of Time

Clock time (i.e. 11am, midnight), Months (i.e. May)

English Names (Trolls)

William, Tom, Bert

Things in The Hobbit in common with previous mythology:

Sentient Beings

Dwarves, Goblins, Dragons, Trolls, Elves, Giants, Shape Shifters (Skin
Changers), Wizards

Magic Rings

Themes

Prophecy, Destiny, Reluctant Hero

Things in The Hobbit that are unique to the novel:

Names

Bilbo, Gandalf, Elrond, Beorn, Smaug, Bard, Thorin, Balin, Dwalin, Fili, Kili,
Oin, Gloin, Dori, Ori, Nori, Bifur, Bofur, Bombur

Sentient Beings

Hobbits

* Although these creatures exist in the “real world,” Tolkien gives them extraordinary qualities such as intelligence, ability to speak, longevity, or unnatural size and strength.

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