Fantasy: Its Definitions, Its Critics, and J.R.R. Tolkien

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George Clendenning

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George Clendenning

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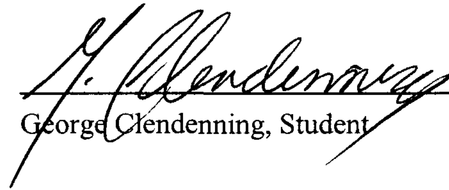

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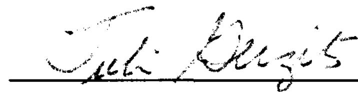

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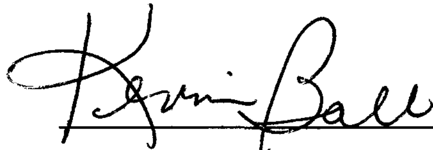

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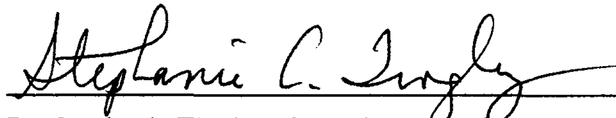

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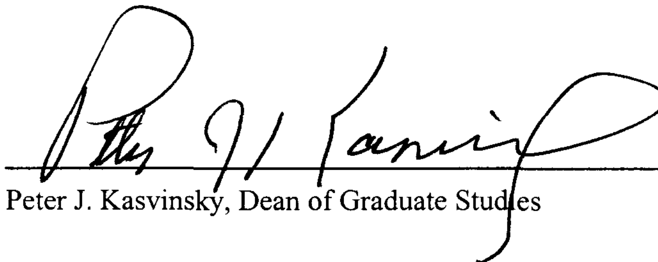

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ABSTRACT

In 1996 the Waterstone's chain of British bookstores conducted a poll of its readers in conjunction with the BBC. The readers were asked to list the five greatest books of the century. In a surprising decision, the readers selected J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings.*

The result of the poll sent ripples throughout the literary community. On one side of the debate sits the fans and supporters of Tolkien's epic. Opposite them are the critics of Tolkien and fantasy as a whole. The clashes that followed spawned an interest in Tolkien as well as the genre of fantasy. What soon became evident in this new look at fantasy was that it is difficult to define. Standard dictionary definitions fail, as do many of the literary attempts. J.R.R. Tolkien also examines fantasy in some of his own writings. He also fails to discover a definition that stands up to analysis.

The thesis will examine the results of the Waterstone poll as well as the responses of some of the critics and readers. It will also trace the path of Tolkien's attempt to form a theory on fantasy through the idea of Primary and Secondary Worlds in comparison to the definitions currently being used.

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INTRODUCTION

— *Lord of the Rings* is a mythology. It is a fairy-tale. It's an adventure story. It never happened. I think, except somewhere in our hearts. And yet, there was Hobbiton in three dimensions, with smoke coming out of the holes where they live underground. And I believed.

— Ian McKellen

In this quote from an interview for the movie version of *The Lord of the Rings*, Ian McKellen captures some of the most important and poignant perceptions of what fans of J.R.R. Tolkien have known for years. In his books, Tolkien takes his readers from the world they know and into the world of his creation, Middle-earth. As McKellen describes, *The Lord of the Rings* is fiction, myth, adventure story, and fairy-tale. Yet, despite its apparent unreality, many people believe in the reality of Middle-earth. This unreal world has in some way changed their lives. At the very least, authors have been inspired by Tolkien's world to create their own worlds. From Harry Turtledove's claim that " . . . the greatest debt of gratitude fantasists of all stripes . . .owe to Tolkien is what his success did for the genre as a whole" (71), to Lisa Goldstein's prediction that " . . . if the twenty-second century has any taste at all, they will still be reading Tolkien" (196), fantasy has been changed by Tolkien's writings.

How is it that fantasy can manage to become so very real to so many readers? The answer is found in Tolkien's unique method of portraying fantasy and his creation of a fantasy world. Tolkien created his fantasy world from aspects of his own reality as well as that of his readers, allowing touchstones upon which his readers could build. It is this very real basis that allowed him to form a fantasy so believable and complete that it, in turn, has altered the reality from which it was created. In chapter one of this thesis, I will examine the definition, or lack thereof, of fantasy, including an examination of Tolkien's own struggle with defining the elusive term. This chapter will also investigate the concepts of Primary and Secondary Worlds that were so crucial to what Tolkien based his own definition and own writing upon. The conclusion will begin by analyzing the claim that Tolkien was not attempting a fantasy at all, but a mythology for England.

The genre of fantasy has pervaded modern culture. Fantasy writing became one of the best-selling and popular genres of fiction in the previous century, selling millions of copies of books annually. Evident in many aspects of even everyday life, fantasy and its permutations - horror, science fiction, and fairy-tale - have gained popularity throughout the world.[1] In books, magazines, on the World Wide Web, in music, art, and even dance, fantasy has become a powerful influence. Firmly placed in the very center of the fantasy genre is the work of J.R.R. Tolkien, one of the most popular and well-known fantasy writers of all time. Contrary

to some of his fan's beliefs, however, fantasy did exist before Tolkien. In fact, it has existed for a great deal of time before Tolkien was even born. Instead, it is the success, and more importantly criticisms, of J.R.R. Tolkien's writings that have brought the debate of fantasy to the modern reader.[2]

Often credited, and possibly incorrectly credited, as the "Father" of fantasy, Tolkien's writing has become a common facet of popular and fantasy culture. The author's books are widely translated; his life has been the subject of numerous biographies, and recently his popular trilogy *The Lord of the Rings* has been turned into a successful series of films. Hundreds of fan websites have been created which promote everything from *Lord of the Rings* merchandise to philosophical debates on the nature of Elvish religion. Numerous annual festivals occur throughout the world that in some way honor the spirit of Middle-Earth. Despite the overwhelming appeal of Tolkien and the genre to his readers and fans, some scholars and critics often view fantasy with confusion and even derision. As a result, fantasy is rarely taken seriously and is also barely represented in the canon of literature, even though it is widely read.

Perhaps this lack of representation is due to the general opinion of fantasy as not even being "real" literature. Examples of this criticism are examined in the first section of Chapter One of this thesis. The conclusion will also reveal the testimony of best selling fantasy authors

such as Raymond Feist, Terry Pratchett, and Orson Scott Card as they explain the impact that Tolkien had on their own careers. However, other than a minimal number of examples, there are remarkably few scholarly responses to J.R.R. Tolkien's work. A search on both the OhioLINK and Electronic Journal Center reveals that out of the literally hundreds of thousands of scholarly articles documented in the past decade, roughly only one hundred between both databases refer to Tolkien. Out of these responses, most are book reviews, comparisons of Tolkien to his friend C.S. Lewis, or analyses of Tolkien as a Christian mythologist. Scholarly critical analysis of Tolkien is severely lacking.

Both supporters and critics of the genre consider fantasy a method of escaping reality. J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and other writings created a fantasy world that has allowed just such an escape for millions of readers all over the world. In the roughly sixty years since first publication, Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* has sold over 100 million copies. Although his books are read so frequently, Tolkien is rarely represented within canonical lists. Although fantasy contains in many instances the same complex themes and elements of more accepted forms of literature, it is not usually taught. Considered mere amusement for the young or unintelligent, fantasy still remains in the shadows of literary world.

Is fantasy simply a place to escape? Is this a method of defining fantasy? J.R.R. Tolkien himself wrestles with this question, as do many

others in modern criticism. Part of the hazard in criticizing and analyzing fantasy is that fantasy itself is hard to define. *The Handbook of American Popular Literature* concedes that, "In general, the nature of fantasy still has not surrendered to a definitive single author. It is unlikely that it ever will; it is too expansive and seminal to yield a single point of view" (Inge 146). Some would argue that Tolkien is the one author who has managed to form that single point of view. Is Tolkien the one author who has been able to lock down the quintessential pattern by which all fantasy should be measured? Does his work define the genre? The answer is simply, no. Although few authors have had such an impact as Tolkien on the genre of fantasy, the careful scholar must search further into the past to begin to form a definition of fantasy that encompasses all of its nuances. It then becomes clear that fantasy can allow an escape from *one* reality, but places the reader firmly into *another* reality. It is this dichotomy of reality versus unreality that makes fantasy so hard to define.

As a result of the nature of fantasy, confusion on its evaluation reigns. Varied definitions of fantasy abound. Most of these still include as a primary component an escape from reality.[3] This confusion complicates the question as to what fantasy really is, and how J.R.R. Tolkien and his writing fit into this definition. What changes were wrought on fantasy by Tolkien's contributions? Through his writing and the readers who love it, Tolkien has changed the face of the fantasy genre. He may have, in fact,

paved the way for fantasy to break from the escapist stereotype. Admittedly, the readers of Middle-earth do have a chance to enter somewhere else through the pages. According to Tolkien himself, however, fantasy has its most important basis in the reality of the author. His life and the reality of it greatly affected the creation of his fantasy. The effect on his readers results from this identity. Instead of entering a fantasy world that merely escapes reality, the reader enters a fantastic *reality* that doesn't end when the last page is turned. Tolkien's fantasy, a supposed unreality, actually begets reality, and in a significant way. To understand this effect, the reader must first understand what fantasy actually is. In the first chapter of this thesis, I will examine various definitions of fantasy that exist as well as their validity. Then, the chapter will continue to examine the elements that Tolkien's writing added to complicate the issue.

Almost as important as understanding fantasy itself is the understanding of what sparked the controversy. The first chapter will discuss the critical responses to Tolkien's fantasy writing. It is in the response to critics, most of which made comments that were derogatory, that trust scholarship and interest in Tolkien's writing became debated. It is from a possibly misunderstood honor that the controversy of Tolkien's work sparked. From that spark, the scholar may be able to find an accurate definition of fantasy. For this reason, chapter will also review some of the current definitions possible for fantasy as well as Tolkien's

attempt to define it. Based upon this basis for Tolkien's contribution to the definition, Chapter Two will examine the intricate details that involve the Primary and Secondary Worlds that are vital to understanding Tolkien's creations. Finally, the conclusion will connect the contributions that Tolkien and his fantasy made not only to a definition of fantasy, but also examine the impact his writing had on the genre as a whole. First, however, the Chapter One will begin this analysis of Tolkien's critics who inevitably led to a debate on fantasy as a genre.

Introduction Notes

[1] Although subject to debate, most sources consulted concede that fantasy has evolved from the earliest imaginations of man, some claiming it began with cavemen. From this earliest of times, fantasy was born. Therefore, several theorists argue that science fiction, horror, and fairy tale of evolved from the "parent" – fantasy. The chapter "Fantasy [through] 1985" in *The Handbook of American Popular Literature* edited by M. Thomas Inge examines a theory of fantasy as "parent" to these other forms of fiction.

[2] It was discovered that the modern reader of Tolkien, especially his most ardent fans actually do participate in the debate. Tolkien fans in many ways are as educated about his life and writing as any literary scholar also studying the writer. In particular, "The Ring of Power," an article in the October 2001 issue of *Wired* magazine written by Erik Davis examines the fans and their participation in the debate. An addition, "Hobbits Go Hollywood," written by Angela Gunn in the December 2001 issue of *Yahoo! Internet Life* offers insight into the hundreds of thorough fan sites created by Tolkien fans.

[3] For alternative definitions of fantasy, Tom Shippey's books (see citations in Works Cited) examine several. *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art* by Susanne Langer also provides a very complex look not only at the definition, but the sociological input to the term.

CHAPTER ONE

— An overgrown fairy story, a philological curiosity – that is, then, what *The Lord of The Rings* really is. The pretentiousness is all on the part of Dr. Tolkien's infatuated admirers, and it is these pretensions that I would here assail.

— Edmund Wilson, "Oo, Those Awful Orcs!"

THE CRITICS VERSUS THE READERS

Critics have analyzed fantasy and the various elements that it is composed of in a cursory manner on the whole. There was little need to evaluate fantasy in a scholarly manner since it was dismissed as an escapist and popular form of writing. More recently, however, readers in Great Britain chose J.R.R. Tolkien as the Author of the Century.[1] The 1997 poll, conducted by the Waterstone chain of over one hundred bookstores, surveyed over 25,000 readers. *Lord of the Rings* received over one thousand more votes than the second place in the poll, awarded to George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty*-Four. Only in the stores in Wales did Tolkien's epic not receive the first place vote of book readers.[2] Although being chosen Author of the Century should be a positive fact, the honor has given rise to more criticism of Tolkien, much of it negative. This negative response has, in turn, placed fantasy under the literary

microscope. A quest for determining what defines fantasy and defines quality fantasy has begun.

Not all of Great Britain embraced the news of Tolkien's title of Author of the Century. In fact, many of the critics were vehement in their denial of such a choice. At the heart of many of the criticisms was a basic distrust and dislike of fantasy as a form of literature. In his biography, *Tolkien, Man and Myth*, Joseph Pearce examines the criticism of the decision of Author of the Century and of *The Lord of the Rings*. His observations point out the clear division between popular readers and supporters of the literary canon. He writes, "Rarely has a book caused such controversy and rarely has the vitriol of the critics highlighted the cultural schism between the literary illuminati and the views of the reading public" (2). What Pearce stumbles upon is a literary bigotry in regards to works of the fantastic. Pearce looks at the reactions of the "literati" to a fantasy book that would place someone like Tolkien into the spot of Author of the Century in any poll. Pearce provides many examples of harsh criticism of Tolkien, fantasy, and its readers.

One example Pearce provides is that of Susan Jeffries in her article in the *Sunday Times* in 1997 where she wrote, "A depressing thought that the votes for the world's best 20th century book should have come from those burrowing an escape into a nonexistent world" (1). Jeffries clearly exhibits one of the common conceptions of fantasy as mere escapist literature. Pearce goes on to quote writer Howard Jacobson's

attack on fantasy, which shows yet another bias common to critics of fantasy, "Tolkien – that's for children isn't it? Or the adult slow . . . It just shows the folly of these polls, the folly of teaching people to read" (1). Pearce describes the response to Tolkien as vitriol, yet vitriol seems a mild word to relate to a genre of writing that would cause a critic to question teaching people to read, as Jacobson does. It also highlights the perception that works of the fantastic are clearly for those of diminished mental capacity.

The response of the public helped to spur this apparent polarity between the literary critics and the average reader. It seemed as if the critics felt that the public was trying to raise the equivalent of a comic book as the best choice for their country's reading habits. Although this debate has been most helpful in bringing Tolkien's work into the light of critical day, so to speak, perhaps the critics made a critical error. Terry Pratchett, author of a successful series of fantasy novels, examines this debate in "Cult Classic." It is in this essay that Pratchett makes a simple, yet profound comment on the nature of Tolkien's work, his fans, and his critics. He highlights a possibility: that Tolkien's critics overreacted because they didn't pay attention to the words of the poll. He writes, "After all, the bookshops were merely using the word 'favorite.' That's a very personal word. No one ever said it was a synonym for 'best'" (76). The critics did seem to respond as if the fans were trying to state that Tolkien's epic was best. In fact, this was not the case. The critics missed

subtle difference and began their assault on Tolkien. However, what the critics also failed to note was that they were launching such an attack even more so at the average reader. The resulting backlash of publicity from the comedy of errors brought even more critical attention to the differences between the "literati" and the public. The canon and its critical defenders had begun a comparison that may bring about change, thanks to a work of "escapism."

fan•ta•sy (fan' tɘ-se, -ze) → n., pl. **–sies 1.** The creative imagination. **2.** A product of the fancy; illusion. **3.** A delusion. **4.** Fiction marked by fanciful elements. **5.** A daydream **6.** *Mus*. See **fantasia**. [<Gk. *Phantasia,* appearance.]

— American Heritage Dictionary 4th Ed.

A DEFINITION OF FANTASY

As the *American Heritage Dictionary* shows so succinctly, fantasy has a slippery definition at best. One common theme in the several meanings presented is that fantasy is unreal. From this example, the first definition states fantasy is a product of imagination. The second plainly states illusion, while the third ***de***lusion. The fifth definition describes fantasy as a daydream, which is certainly unreal. Each of these

denotations clearly shows that fantasy is defined as something that is not part of reality. Perhaps the most useful of the definitions listed is the fourth when describing fantasy as a writing genre. Fantasy *is* a form of fiction, yet the definition includes the term "fanciful elements." "Fanciful" as a term is not helpful in refining the definition in that it too merely refers further to elements of the imagination. All fiction by definition would also be a product of the imagination in the simplest of terms. Fantasy seems to somehow exceed the normal imagination. Standard definitions fail when applied to fantasy.

Another definition of fantasy that should be examined can be found in *A Handbook to Literature*. This text explains that fantasy "usually designates a conscious breaking free from reality" (Holman and Harmon 198). This seems comparable to the *American Heritage Dictionary* definition; however, this handbook goes a bit further. Fantasy is further explained, "The term is applied to a work that takes place nonexistent and unreal world, such as fairyland, or concerns incredible and unreal characters, . . . or employs physical and scientific principles not yet discovered or contrary to present experience, . . ." (Holman and Harmon 198). The inclusion of nonexistent and unreal worlds and characters complicates the issue even further. Also, by referring to physical and scientific principles, it seems as if the handbook's definition could easily include other forms of fiction, such as science fiction. As we

will discover later in this chapter and the next, the term unreal does not fit into Tolkien's description of fantasy.

It is easy when examining definitions[3] of fantasy to see how the authors of *The Handbook of American Popular Literature* could be doubtful that fantasy will ever fall under one simple yoke. Besides the simplistic and fairly useless definition from the dictionary, there are as many definitions of fantasy as there are those interested in the topic. Some of invented classification systems in order to rank help define fantasy. For example, a common system is to break fantasy into "High" and "Low" categorizations. "High" fantasy is explained as ". . .those books where action takes place in an imaginary, secondary world peopled by the supernatural (a hierarchy of deities concocted by the author) or the magical powers of faerie and wizards . . ." (Wakefield) "Low" fantasy, on the other hand, "features our real world as the primary place of action where odd occurrences remain unexplained and magical and supernatural beings exist" (Wakefield). These definitions are somewhat helpful, but only if the primary component, fantasy, is clear.

"Heroic" fantasy is another potential classification. Poul Anderson, himself an accomplished fantasy author, defines this type of fantasy in an essay titled "Awakening the Elves." He writes:

> In this [heroic fantasy], heroes, usually male but occasionally female, do battle against terrible odds in an archaic setting. That setting may be historical, but is most

> often imaginary; there has been no scientific or industrial revolution; supernatural forces and beings are real. (27)

This definition, however, could be aptly applied to any number of examples of fiction. This definition allows fairy tales and religious stories to be fantasy. This, as with many definitions of fantasy, merely makes the genre less clear. "Heroic," "High," "Low," do any of these classification help to explain what fantasy is? Unfortunately, no. For any of these definitions to apply, fantasy itself must be explained to complete the picture.

Fantasy critics, fans, and fantasts themselves have argued the definition of fantasy for many years. Some use Tolkien's writing as the actual template by which fantasy is defined. Tom Shippey, one of the foremost biographers of Tolkien, examines fantasy in perhaps the most succinct manner to date. Shippey begins by pointing out that there are elements of the fantastic even in most "realist" fiction. These elements of the fantastic form the basis of the definition of fantasy but not the complete definition. They are not enough to create a true fantasy, but fantasy must begin there. As Shippey points out, these elements are found in numerous other forms of writing that are not truly fantasy. He explains, ". . . and 'the fantastic' includes many genres besides fantasy: allegory and parable, fairy-tale, horror and science fiction, modern ghost story and medieval romance" (Shippey viii). According to Shippey, all of

these genres possess elements of the fantastic, including, but certainly not limited to worlds or creatures that are not real.

Elves, orcs, goblins, dragons – all of these are easily seen as small samples of fantastic elements found in Tolkien's books as well as others. As shown previously, Poul Anderson's attempt at defining "Heroic" fantasy includes such "supernatural" beings. These elements appear in other works of fantasy, however, especially fairy-tale. The mere presence of such elements or creations does not constitute a fantasy. Varying degrees of these elements are not enough to make a piece of fiction a true fantasy. Although Shippey accurately shows that elements of the fantastic are part of the picture, he fails to say what completes the picture. To complete Shippey's definition, the reader who quests to understand fantasy must look further into Tolkien's own writing. It is in Tolkien's analysis of fantasy and his own work that the finishing touches can be applied. It is Tolkien's complete definition that provides the potential archetype for a definition of fantasy.

IN HIS OWN WORDS

As perhaps the most widely known author of fantasy, what does Tolkien himself write about the fantasy genre and its value? It is perhaps shocking to discover that Tolkien doesn't write anything about fantasy as a form of writing per se. It is evident in one of Tolkien's most poignant

essays, "On Fairy-stories" that he doesn't revere fantasy as a form of writing at all. Tolkien's primary focus in life was actually scholarship, not fantasy writing. His first love was language, and he remained a philologist his entire life. He also served as professor of Old and Middle English language and literature at Oxford University for the years of 1925-1959. This field of study, rich with fantastic imagery, fueled his writing. He also edited sections of the first edition of *The Oxford Dictionary*. To Tolkien, the definition and origin of the term "fantasy" was as important as its creation. Tolkien committed himself to the letter of the definitions of all words and their origins. Tolkien wasn't what he himself considered a fantasy author; he wanted to create more than a work of fiction. Instead his goal was to create a myth for his country, a country that had lost most of its traditional mythology in time. He wanted a myth that could stand for England, much as the myths of the Norse and Scandinavians he studied had been passed along for hundreds of years.[4]

For such a scholar, fantasy is clearly unreal because it simply is defined as unreal. Instead of a genre of fiction, fantasy is a power to Tolkien, not a product. This power is what allows a writer or reader to enter other worlds of fantasy and myth. It frees the participant from the shackles of the world. In "On Fairy-stories," Tolkien writes that fantasy provides "freedom from the domination of observed 'fact,'" It is this "domination" by facts to which Tolkien objects. (Oddly enough, facts

based on philology were clearly exempt from this rule.) He does not see fantasy as a method to deny reality, nor to simply escape it. It merely allows travel from one reality to another. Tolkien continues, "Fantasy (in this sense) is, I think, not a lower but a higher form of Art, indeed the most nearly pure form, and so (when achieved) the most potent" (Tolkien, 69). It is this Art that allows the reader to use fantasy to the fullest and therefore allows the traveler to step into what Tolkien calls a "Secondary World."

It is through the power of the fantastic that Tolkien describes that a writer or reader can be drawn into this Secondary World. The Primary World is our own, where people, places, and things are clearly defined and regimented. This is the world dominated by fact. The Art of fantasy can help create and sustain another world. A Secondary World to Tolkien is no less real the Primary and therefore also has a set of facts. Tolkien describes the difference between a writer and a person capable of manufacturing a Secondary World when he writes, "What really happens is that the story-maker proves a successful sub-creator" (Tolkien, 60). The basic writer of fiction creates a story within a world, while the sub-creator crafts the world in which stories are written. Properly crafted, a Secondary World possesses as many "real" traits as our Primary one. It is merely based on a different set of rules. Changing the rules and making them valid is a sort of magic. It is the magic of sub-creation. Tolkien illustrates:

> When we can take the green from grass, blue from heaven, and red from blood, we have already an enchanter's power-- . . . We may put a deadly green upon a man's face and produce a horror; we may make the rare and terrible blue moon to shine; or we may cause woods to spring with silver leaves and rams to wear fleeces of gold, and put hot fire into the belly of the cold worm. But in such 'fantasy,' as it is called, new form is made; Faerie begins; Man becomes a sub-creator. (49)

It is the sub-creator who paves the way for the true fantasy by taking elements of the Primary World such as colors and turns them into the new rules of the Secondary. The strength of those rules allows the reader to embrace this world, making it more like the Primary. This connection between the two worlds, in turn, makes the Secondary more real within its own boundaries, regardless how fantastic it may seem compared to the Primary. These commonalities between the Primary and Secondary Worlds become touchstones by which the reader can compare the two. This comparison can, in fact, strengthen the reality of both worlds.

For anyone using this model, all fiction could be seen as a form of fantasy. This, however, is too simple a solution. Although all fiction could be perceived as set in an alternate version of the Primary World, not all fiction contains the primary element that Tolkien demonstrates - realism. Altering the Primary World to contain fictional elements may create a

Secondary World, but it does not necessarily create a fantasy. For example, a writer who invents an imaginary character that operates in a version of the commonly excepted Primary World has created a fiction. Now, presume the character does something fantastic, such as walking across burning coals unharmed. If that character performs such an act, which is possible in the Primary World, yet has no logical explanation in that world, this is a world of magical realism. The same character that performs the act, which could only reasonably take place in the future of our Primary World, is part of a science fiction. In a fantasy world, however, the act of crossing burning coals would have an explanation of some sort that follows the rules of that world, commonly magic. Only when the explanation of a fantastic act is clearly part of the rules of a world that is based on the Primary, and is not part of the rules of the future of that Primary World, is a fantasy created. Therefore, although fantastic elements such as magical creatures or beings may appear in several forms of writing, only in fantasy is it based on a set of clear rules of the Secondary World.

So far, it seems that there are several aspects collected that can help to create a yet incomplete definition of fantasy. Poul Anderson's classifications are not enough by themselves without knowing what fantasy is. Tom Shippey's contribution allows the researcher to see the elements of the fantastic, although they alone do not define fantasy. Is the lacking piece of the equation Tolkien's creation of the Primary and

Secondary Worlds? An examination of this concept will further illuminate a definition of fantasy.

How does the reader get to the Secondary World? Travel to a Secondary world can only take place in the mind through the Art, yet this matters little to Tolkien. The journey to this other world is merely a different path to a different place, not an escape from one to another. He discusses the journey and requirements for the stay in the Secondary World:

> He [the sub-creator] makes a Secondary World, which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is 'true': it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside it. The moment disbelief arises, the spell is broken; the magic, or rather art, has failed. You are then out in the Primary World again, looking at the little Secondary World from outside. (60)

While he is inside this world, Tolkien considers it very real. For many of his readers it becomes real as well.

This is not to say that all readers see the same Secondary World simply because an author has created it. Quite the contrary is the case. Sub-creator can be taken a step farther than the role of the author. In a strong Secondary World such as Middle-earth, which is filled with common touchstones, the reader also becomes sub-creator. Though readers are consuming the same text, their individual reaction to the

touchstones of the Primary World influence their view of the Secondary. Are these mere differences in visualizations? This is too simple an answer. In a Secondary World that is well crafted, the answer is much more complicated and revealing. In his essay "How Tolkien Means," Orson Scott Card realizes the complex answer as well. He argues that it is not merely the visual imagery that differs between readers. Instead, it is the re-creation of the author's world by the individual reader. He writes:

> When readers are not 'serious,' but rather are deeply, personally, and emotionally involved in a story, the story is transformed to at least some degree by their preexisting view of how the world works. They do not realize it at the time or, usually, ever. They *think* the story they love so much is Tolkien's story. But in fact it is a collaboration between the-Reader-at-This-Moment and Tolkien-at-the-Time-He-Wrote. (162).

This example of reader/writer interaction demonstrates the further alteration of the Secondary World by each reader. The sub-creator begets a co-sub-creator. In Tolkien's framework, the sub-creator may have carried a myth back from the land of Fairie, but the reader still manages to make it personal. This dynamic between the reader and author creates an ownership that may explain some of the popularity of this form of "escapist" fantasy.

Although Tolkien believes that fantasy allows a necessary means of escaping reality, it is not an excuse to ignore the reality within the Secondary World. Tolkien rigorously referred to the place of his inspiration in his writings as a world called Faerie. Faerie is a place that has rules and boundaries, which must be taken seriously. The fantasy that allows the traveler to enter Faerie is a process of thought, not escape from it. To embrace fantasy in order to enter Faerie, the reader or writer must think harder, more clearly. Tolkien addresses this clarity of thought when he writes, "Fantasy is a natural human activity. It certainly does not destroy or even insult Reason; and it does not either blunt the appetite for, nor obscure the perception of, scientific verity. On the contrary. The cleaner and the clearer is the reason, the better fantasy it will make" (75). It is evident that Tolkien does not consider his work or any other work of the fantastic to be a weakening of the mind, as detractors such as Howard Jacobson would often argue. This is not the reading of those of low mental faculty. Instead, it is the reading of those who wish to expand their imaginations using Tolkien's Art.

Some more recent analysts of fantasy have discovered what Tolkien knew and Jacobson did not. Orson Scott Card argues the intelligence of fantasy with Tolkien, proceeding a step further by turning the idea of fantasy as a vehicle for the dull-witted around on those whole believe the genre is merely for the stupid or young. He begins by mocking opponents like Jacobson as he writes, "So, there we have it: 'serious' literature is a

complicated business, requiring experts to extract meanings, while 'escapist' literature is so simple it needs no mediation" (158). However, Card negates the argument and Jacobson's complaints effectively when he continues:

> Wait. That's not how it works at all. On the contrary, 'serious' literature is so simple that it *can be decoded*, [emphasis mine] its meanings laid out in essay for, while 'escapist' literature is so complex and deep that it cannot be mediated, but must be experienced; and no two readers experience it the same. (158)

Card here lands upon an idea that most fans of fantasy have always known. Fantasy is not simple, and it is not for the dull-witted. Rather, fantasy is for those who are capable of using their wit to let go of the need to constantly decode.

The complexity of fantasy also makes is difficult to define. In "On Fairy-stories," Tolkien examines the idea of the fairy-story from its definition, which provides as little help to him as the definition of fantasy does in modern dictionaries. He begins with an examination of the definition of fairy-story from the very *Oxford English* Dictionary he himself helped write. Fairy-story wasn't even in the listings. The closest he could find was fairy-tale. That definition was filled with vague references to other terms as was found in the more recent definition of

fantasy. Instead of elements of the fantastic, Tolkien found a definition filled with the terms like "about fairies," "unreal," and a "falsehood."

Like the more modern definition presented in *The American Heritage Dictionary*, the definition Tolkien had to work with left him little room to explain his own writing. He wrote of his frustration with examining fairy-tale in "On Fairie Stories," "The last two senses [unreal and falsehood] would obviously make my topic hopelessly vast. But the first sense [about fairies] is too narrow" (34). This definition took him in circles. As a philologist, he needed a definition to explain his view and justification of Fairie. He then moved to the definition of fairy. There, he found the term "supernatural," which he also rejected. He writes, "*Supernatural* is a dangerous and difficult word in any of its senses, looser or stricter" (34). As with the previous section's breakdown of the dictionary entry for fantasy, Tolkien struggles to discover a modern definition of fantasy using his own available source. The interesting twist to his reasoning is that for Tolkien, the definition exists in his own work. To find it, he travels to the land Faerie itself.

To Tolkien, the land of Faerie is as real as any other, with clear boundaries and borders as stated previously. Faerie is a reality that can be journeyed to and written about, but is not a fantasy in its own right. Fantasy is merely the power that allows the mind to see the gate, knock on the door, and enter. Tolkien's essay reflects this connection to a Secondary World. For example, when examining the definition of a fairy,

he explains what fairies themselves think of our portrayal of them, "For it is man who is, in contrast to fairies, supernatural . . ; whereas they are natural, far more natural than he. Such is their doom" (34). Tolkien relies upon the concept of the "reality" of fairies as both a rhetorical device and a way to inspire his writing. He does not write about the elements of Fairie as if they are fantasy. Instead, he addresses them as if they too are readers and part of the discussion. His essay is for the Primary World, yet it discusses the Secondary. Tolkien's faith in Faerie is so strong that he will not allow it to be treated as a third-person creation. He addresses the population of Faerie as they are to him – real. Real in that he attempts to provide veracity to himself and his readers by placing himself as a writer in the role of recording facts and events about fairy instead of the pose of creating it.

In fact, Tolkien treats the elves of Faerie as real. He writes as if they can teach us much of sub-creation when he explains, "Of this desire [for self-centered power] elves, in their better (but still perilous) part, are largely made; and it is from them that we may learn what is the central desire and aspiration of human Fantasy . . ." (74). Elves as one of the actual inhabitants of Faerie are therefore more capable of dealing within the confines of the world. To them, Faerie is the Primary World and we are in the Secondary. Tolkien is merely one of the people who help to reveal the world of Fairie to us for those of us who need to know the way. Fairie itself provides the definition of fantasy since its existence *is*

fantasy. Fantasy can only be defined when the reader journeys from the Primary World to seek the answer.

This subjective answer is not enough for analysis of the entire genre of writing. Instead, the reader who quests for the definition must accept the aspects of dictionary, author, and Faerie itself to understand fantasy. To date, only one model has been put forth that seems to clarify the definition of fantasy. This model comes a surprising source. Instead of from the literary field, this contender for the definition of fantasy comes from the world of computer science.

Virtual Middle-earth?

virtual reality → *n.* A computer simulation of a real or imaginary system in real time.

-- American Heritage Dictionary 4th ed.

Tolkien's critics have in many ways attempted to retrace his paths to Faerie, often in rather unique ways. As is evident from the writing of Susan Jeffries, Howard Jacobson, and those who agree with them, fantasy, (in their opinion) is a simple form of writing, suitable for mass-market consumption and not true literature. Even this credit is given grudgingly. Fans, of course, see Middle-earth and its inhabitants as everything from merely entertaining to a way of living. Others see a much

more sophisticated application for fantasy and Tolkien's vision of it in particular. One such theory is that Middle-earth is, in fact, the first virtual reality. "The Ring of Power," an article written for the pop culture magazine *Wired,* presents this theory. Writer Erik Davis argues that a Secondary World has the characteristics of a virtual reality. With a little of what he terms "metaphoric license," Davis feels that the two are one and the same. His article attempts to prove that Middle-earth is the first virtual reality ever created. "And Middle-earth," he writes, "remains the original and supreme VR, the ultimate imaginative simulation" (122). Davis recognizes the mental discipline that Tolkien describes as necessary to enter the Secondary World. Davis continues, " . . . Tolkien knew that successful Secondary Worlds were not wild flights of fancy, but products of consistent detail and clever technique . . ." (122) These factors also contribute to a virtual reality. VRs have the same characteristics of Secondary Worlds, but are they one and the same? Did Tolkien, in fact, create the first virtual reality?

Again, looking at the *American Heritage Dictionary* definition for an answer, a virtual reality is dependant upon a computer to formally exist. It *has* to be a computer simulation, not a product of imagination. A virtual reality can simulate a Secondary World, and can, in fact *be* a Secondary World. However, not all Secondary Worlds can be considered virtual realities. By the definition of a VR, Tolkien could not have created a virtual reality. Besides not having the technology in his own time,

Tolkien would never have used it to create Middle-earth. Throughout his lifetime, Tolkien rejected as many forms of technology that he could. Erik Davis himself points this fact out in his article as he writes, "The irony is that Tolkien himself, a confirmed Luddite, would have had rejected computers as strongly as he rejected trains and automobiles, television and refrigerated food" (125). Obviously, even Tolkien's own rejection of technology does not convince Davis that even with "metaphoric license" that Middle-earth could never have been a true virtual reality.

Even supposing Davis' theory is fundamentally incorrect based upon the definition of virtual reality, there is still merit in what he proposes. In the strictest of senses, a Secondary World can be a virtual reality; however, Middle-Earth cannot be a VR. Instead, what Middle-earth can be is a reality, and it can be virtual. Once again calling upon the *American Heritage Dictionary*, the word "virtual" has two definitions. One is as follows: "Created, simulated, or carried on by means of a computer or computer network" (908). This, of course, is the basis for the definition of virtual reality. Another definition of virtual exists in the same entry, "Existing in essence or effect though not in actual fact or form" (908). In the same listing, the *American Heritage Dictionary* also provides the following usage for virtual, "*Virtual* often refers to things that mimic their physical equivalents: *a virtual tour*" (908). Although Middle-earth cannot be a true virtual reality, the definition of virtual may ultimately be valuable in defining it and fantasy as a whole.

As the alternate definition and usage demonstrate, the term "virtual" deserves comparison to fantasy and the Secondary World concepts. Middle-earth certainly is "virtual." It does mimic the realm that Tolkien calls Faerie. More importantly, however, it mimics the Primary World that Tolkien drew it from. It will be shown in following sections how the dependence and connection to the Primary World allows Tolkien's reader to have an even firmer foothold in the land of Faerie and the realm of Middle-earth. These touchstones of reality connected to reality perhaps best explain the popularity of his work.

Tolkien's writing exhibits what is commonly considered a model for true fantasy. Tolkien himself explains fantasy as a journey to a Secondary World, which is based on the reality of the Primary World. For proponents of this method of fantasy creation, the Secondary World does exist in essence or effect. It has specific characteristics that are valid within its confines. For the reader, the well-crafted Secondary world is a reality. There are rules and order to this Secondary World; yet, it is not there in actual form. The physical basis, or equivalent, is the Primary World. For these reasons, the term virtual, not virtual reality, does apply to Tolkien's definition of fantasy.

It is evident that to create a believable Secondary World, a writer must capture reality. Tolkien's ability to create a virtual world is based upon his ability to base its formation on his Primary World. With this new perspective on how to define, or at least examine fantasy, it will

become even more important to understand Tolkien's reality since it is the Primary World upon which Middle-earth was formed. The next chapter will delve into Tolkien's life and how it served to influence his fantasy and Secondary Worlds. The chapter will also deconstruct Tolkien's first Secondary World.

Chapter One Notes

[1] Tolkien's selection as Author of the Century is discussed in several recent biographies. *J.R.R. Tolkien: Architect of Middle Earth* by Daniel Grotta discusses the award. Joseph Pearce provides a more detailed explanation in his book, *Tolkien: Man and Myth.* The most extensive discussion of this topic is found in Tom Shippey's *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century*. This entire book was inspired by the controversy surrounding Tolkien as the choice for the award.

[2] As both Pearce and Shippey explain, Tolkien only placed second in Wales after James Joyce's *Ulysses* because the Welsh consider Joyce a national hero.

[3] See Notes from intro for other sources of fantasy definitions. Page 8

[4] Although many biographies highlight Tolkien's love and admiration for Finnish and Scandinavian myths, Tom Shippey's *The Road to Middle-earth* goes into greater detail about Tolkien's attempt to craft Middle-earth on such legends.

CHAPTER TWO

— But that [*The Hobbit*] drew me to the Mythology shelves. The Mythology shelves were next to the Ancient History shelves. What the hell . . . it was all guys with helmets wasn't it? On, on . . . maybe there's a magical ring! Or runes!

The desperate search for the Tolkien effect opened up a new world for me, and it was this one.

— Terry Pratchett

The Birth of a World

As the previous chapter demonstrates, definitions of fantasy are varied. Tolkien also struggled with the issue of defining his art to himself, his fans, and his critics. At this point, it has been well established that an important factor in defining Tolkien's fantasy is the concept of the Primary and Secondary Worlds. The Secondary World, which is born from the Primary, becomes more vivid and real through the connections that the reader can make between the Primary and Secondary. Tolkien explains how the reality of the Secondary is built upon solid facts. These can be considered touchstones that directly translate between the two worlds. True to form, Tolkien himself based many aspects of Middle-earth on his own Primary World. It is clear that Tolkien created a very complicated and vast world in his fiction. The formation of this Secondary World from reality is integral to understanding his philosophy and his fantasy. The next section will examine the key events in Tolkien's reality that helped form his Secondary World. It will also delve into the

first Secondary World that J.R.R. Tolkien created. Clearly evident are the connections to Tolkien's life and key elements of Middle-earth. As discussed in Chapter One, Tolkien's particular attempts to explain fantasy relied heavily upon the Primary and Secondary Worlds. It is important to see how the Primary World of Tolkien came to influence him, resulting in an influence in the creation of his Secondary Worlds.

A now-famous legend among fans and scholars of Tolkien is the story of how *The Hobbit*, and ultimately, *The Lord of the Rings*, came into being. As a struggling college instructor during an era of uncertain economies after the First World War, Tolkien took on extra jobs. As a young professor, these jobs included menial tasks such as grading entrance booklets for various schools. A student, possibly lacking inspiration, left a large white space unwritten upon in one such exam booklet. Tolkien recalls the exact details of the day in a 1955 letter to one of his publishers, W.H. Auden. Tolkien wrote of his own confusion as to why and how he even created the basis for his novels, "On a blank leaf I scrawled 'In a hole in the ground there lived a Hobbit.' I did not and do not know why" (215). Although he was unsure why exactly he wrote the sentence, Tolkien could not forget about it. From this scribble came *The Hobbit* and ultimately *The Lord of the Rings*. However, this was not the birth of all fantasy, as some would believe, nor was it even the beginning of Tolkien's own version of fantasy.

In fact, fantasy existed before J.R.R. Tolkien. The elemental archetype existed in the form of fairy-tales for several hundred years prior to Tolkien's writing. Elements of the fantastic can be seen in the early-American romantic writings of Washington Irving. "The Birthmark" and "The Man of Adamant," both short stories of Nathaniel Hawthorne, show clear paths from the Primary World to the Secondary. Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* brings fantasy to the end of the 19th century, while L. Frank Baum's OZ books begins the 20th. Fantasy, in the form of pulp magazines and books, would expand the genre through the modern era as well. The 20th century would see the birth of the many permutations of fantasy such as science fiction. Even through the end of the 20th century, however, fantasy had been rarely examined as such. It was not until Tolkien's writing with the creation of Middle-earth and its criticism that fantasy would be carefully studied.

Middle-earth is not, however, where Tolkien's fantasy writing truly began. Tolkien's first Secondary World sprang from a completely different and seemingly unlikely place. This first foray into the Secondary World did not arrive quickly either. Instead, the actual roots of Tolkien's mythos began years before he scrawled about a hole in the ground on that blank page of the exam booklet. The sub-creation of Middle-earth is founded in the reality of J.R.R. Tolkien's life. It is from Tolkien's Primary World that the basis for his Secondary World was formed. It is fairly easy to see the

evolution of Middle-earth in the growth of a young child born in South Africa.

A few short years after his birth on January 3, 1892 in Bloemfontain, South Africa, Tolkien's mother moved John back to her home in Birmingham, England. This occurred in 1895. Several months after, his father died in 1896 of fever in Bloemfontein, where he had remained to continue his work with the South African Bank. J.R.R., his brother and mother moved away from Birmingham by their mother. In the pastoral setting of Sarehole, England, the widowed Mabel Tolkien showed J.R.R. and his younger brother a simple life. This time taught Tolkien the most basic principles of what was to become the Secondary World of Middle-earth. [1]

An important seed would be planted during Tolkien's childhood that would grow into perhaps the most influential factor in his Secondary World. Mabel Tolkien made several physical and financial moves while her sons were growing up to assure that they both received an education. Before her death in 1904, Mabel Tolkien spent some years schooling her sons at home, and imparted on J.R.R. a love of languages and culture, especially stories and myth as well as a love of learning in general. She considered these languages and tales very important and encouraged her young son to take an interest as well. This continued when, after her death, her sons came under the care of their guardian, a Catholic priest. With this educational foundation, Tolkien soon began to focus his

studies on languages. This eventually became a significant factor in the creation of Middle-earth after many years, but not before several other influences would affect the young man.

Tolkien's formative years in the small village of Sarehole and others had another impact on him. The village of his childhood was directly comparable to the simple setting of the Hobbits in the Shire. Chris Upton, a British historian, explains the relationship between Sarehole and Tolkien's Middle-earth when he writes, "I think landscapes have a powerful effect on any writer. You can see quite close connections between, say, the Sarehole area and what comes out in the [*Lord of the Rings*] books" (*National Geographic*). During Tolkien's boyhood, Sarehole's influence was profound. The village of Sarehole in 1896 was devoid of most city influences[2] and veritably lost in the countryside, surrounded by the bogs and forests that are so prominent in his writings. The Industrial Revolution had not yet reached the village. Here, Tolkien's love of nature so evident in his writings took root. He developed a love for this type of life, which he describes as an important impact of Sarehole on his life in his writing: "Four years, but the longest-seeming and most formative part of my life" (Pearce 17). In a response to an editor of the *New* Republic in 1956, Tolkien answers the question of whether or not England is reflected in the Shire as he writes, "There is no special reference to England in the 'Shire' - except of course that as an Englishman brought up in an 'almost rural' village . . . I take my models

like anyone else - from such 'life' as I know" (235). As he admits, reflections of Sarehole are quite prominent in the Shire, as Tolkien placed the simple and idyllic life as the primary motivation for his Hobbit characters to wish to save Middle-earth from the machinations of evil.

During this time, a growing dislike, even a hatred, of modern mechanical innovations took hold of J.R.R. Tolkien. He was very fond of the wild and natural world that surrounded him in Sarehole. As he grew, however, the industrial machine of the era began to grow stronger. Factories were beginning to spring up nearer and nearer his small village, taking away his favored fields and wild lands. Tolkien did not like the impact upon his home as a child, especially the destruction of some of his most valued trees; consequently, his disgust over modern machinery and industrialization grew. This influence would have a direct manifestation in Tolkien's Secondary World. The Ents found in *The Lord of the Rings,* giant sentient trees and guardians of the wilderness, eventually embodied the self-defense of nature in Middle-earth. Much like the change to the countryside, however, Tolkien was soon affected by industry. The young boy's paradise was soon ended as his life took him to another setting. After his mother converted to Catholicism in 1900 with her sister and was rejected by her family, Tolkien soon found himself moved in that same year due to financial reasons and better schooling from Sarehole and into a larger city, where his hatred of the new age of industry would grow with the tides of war.

World War and Middle-earth

- For we [the Allies] are attempting to conquer Sauron with the Ring. And we shall (it seems) succeed. But the penalty is, as you will know, to breed new Saurons, and slowly turn Men and Elves into Orcs.

- J.R.R. Tolkien in a letter to his son, Christopher, in 1944

This passage to his son reflects the direct connection between Middle-earth and the Primary World influences of WWII on J.R.R. Tolkien, decades after serving in his own World War. In Tolkien's early manhood, England became swept into the conflict, and young men such as J.R.R. Tolkien went to war. At this point in 1915, Tolkien had already received an education at Oxford and was teaching at Exeter. Tolkien was made an officer because he had an education. He was given commission in the Lancashire Fusiliers, which consisted mainly of common men similar to those of Sarehole. Chris Upton, Tolkien historian, chronicles this history on the special features disk one contained in the *Lord of the Rings: Fellowship of the Rings*. He explains how some of the men Tolkien fought alongside were friends had known from his childhood. These were the "Hobbiton" village men and boys who lived the simple life that Tolkien had been forced to leave in 1900. The men he commanded were also

reflections of him. In many ways, Tolkien and his men were all Hobbits going to war.

During this crucial time, Tolkien started to envision two other major facets of his evolving Secondary World: mechanized war and evil. He struggled with understanding a force that drove men to use machines of mass destruction. The author was greatly affected by these two aspects of this phase of his life, and many of its influences are evident in the Secondary World of Middle-earth. The death, the sounds, and the destruction of countryside by tanks and artillery influenced Tolkien deeply. He grew to further dislike modern machinery as he examined the dark side of a power that caused such destruction in such a mechanical sense. Here formed the basis for the character Sauron and his armies, using instruments of war, scarring the face of Middle-earth.

As an officer however, Tolkien did find a bright light during this dark time in the form of the men he led in battle. Tolkien was assigned what was known in the British Army as a batman.[3] In many ways, the batman served Tolkien very much as Samwise Gamgee assists Frodo in *The Lord of the Rings*. The person who filled such a position was taken from the ranks of the common soldiers. Tolkien identified very strongly with such men for several reasons. The jovial nature of the commoners who fought under his command in the trenches reminded him strongly of the people of Sarehole. These men were fighting for their lives and their homeland. Even in the face of such conditions of war, these men

continued to fight. It was this loyal and dedicated outlook in the face of darkness and evil that inspired Tolkien. He came to realize that even the simplest of good-natured creatures could stand up to the greatest of trials to fight to save their homes. This is the primary theme in both *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, as well as the basis for such characters as Samwise Gamgee.

As is evident in the selection from his letter to his son Christopher at the beginning of this section, Tolkien made direct parallels between war and his mythology. He equates the Ring with what he perceives as the evil inventions and mechanisms of war: bombs, tanks, and automatic weapons. The One Ring represents technology. The fear evident in the letter is that by using the "Ring" to fight evil, the result could be that Men and Elves will become Orcs themselves. In other words, the use of machines of destruction to fight evil can merely lead to more evil, and more Saurons. It is almost prophetic that Tolkien made this connection of escalation of mechanized war begetting more such acts. Tolkien witnessed much destruction and death of not only his troops, but also of the rural countryside of Europe. These images and details appear heavily as influences in Secondary World of Middle-earth.

A final major influence on Tolkien's writing was the family he would form with his wife Edith. As a young adult just prior to the War, Tolkien was placed in the care of the Catholic Church after his mother's death. Father Francis Morgan was given charge of Tolkien and his

brother for many years. Father Francis was a rather strict but loving man in both parental and religious senses. When the young Tolkien at age eighteen was found to be keeping company with an older woman named Edith Bratt, Father Francis was alarmed. He became further upset by the fact that Edith was not a Catholic. As a result, Father Francis forbade Ronald from ever seeing or even communicating with the woman again until he was of age to do so without consent. [4]

As a good son of the Church, Tolkien agreed, asking Edith to wait three years for his freedom. Years later, Tolkien wrote of the event to his son relating the sense of duty, " . . . and I had to choose between disobeying and grieving (or deceiving) a guardian who had been a father to me . . . and 'dropping' the love-affair until I was 21. I don't regret my decision, though it was very hard on my lover" (53). Edith's response was to accept that fate, though she was displeased with the decision. This began a three-year separation that was very hard, yet painfully romantic, to Tolkien. The separation was also complete - he in no way was permitted to communicate with Edith. This strain of forbidden love only made what the two shared more epic to him. This was the type of love that was part of the legends and myths he had begun to study as part of his love of languages, reminding him in particular of tales of the Norwegians. Once Tolkien returned from war, he was able to devote his efforts to these kinds of scholarly pursuits.

After returning from the Front due to illness, Tolkien received a post at Oxford, and he continued to pursue this love of languages and their myths more formally. His primary focus was on the writings and language of Old English. In particular, he studied the Anglo Saxon language and its history. Perhaps his greatest frustration with his passion was the lack of myth from the history of England. With the exception of *Beowulf*, much of the myth and legend was lost. He loved his own language and its roots as much as any other he studied, but all of the ancient languages and culture he studied were rich in myth. Tolkien felt the English people had been robbed of their identity with the loss of their own historical myths, and wanted to replace it. He exhibits this frustration inn a letter to a prospective publisher of his work. Tolkien writes about his passion for " . . . above all for heroic legend on the brink of fairy-tale and history, of which there is far too little in the world (accessible to me) for my appetite" (144). Tolkien was forced to look elsewhere to fill this need. He looked finally to one of the roots of the English language, the Norse. Tolkien searched for an ancient model through the legends of the Norwegians, hoping to find a way to replace what England had lost from its own historical background.

As with all of Tolkien's scholarly studies of other languages, his literary replacement for England's loss would have to be based in fact and history. To accomplish this, he looked to the ancient Norse legendary epic *The Kalevala*, which he had read initially as a teenager. This ancient

collection of stories in verse, much like *Beowulf*, comprised many tales about a single mythical hero. In *The Kalevala*, this hero is an old man with a snowy-white beard who is capable of great magic. The stories tell of great battles, wisdom, and love, elements which influenced Tolkien's formation of the Secondary World. There are obvious connections between the hero of *The Kalevala*, and the wizards Gandalf and Sauruman in *The Lord of the Rings*.

Also, as proven by his romanticized courtship with the young woman named Edith Bratt, Tolkien's life in the Primary World was changed by his love of these stories. Tales and legends of forbidden love like those found in many cultures that Tolkien identified contributed to his outlook. Although epic, these examples of love were often tragic. When dealing with his love for Edith, J.R.R. exemplified the role of the tragic and forbidden suitor as he pursued her. Tolkien knew the risks, however, as he admits in the same letter to his son Michael shown previously, "She was perfectly free and under no vow to me, and [I] should have had no just complaint (except according to the unreal romantic code) if she had got married to someone else" (53). The "unreal romantic" code to Tolkien was one that would allow no other option for Edith except to wait for her true love. Also, he had to accept the potential that such a choice could end as tragically as in some of the legends.

On his twenty-first birthday in 1913, Tolkien wrote Edith, only to find that she had given her hand to another man. Tolkien's risk

embracing the romantic code had not paid off; it seemed the ending would be tragic. Not to be undone, however, Tolkien immediately traveled to the town to which she had moved to win her back, and he was successful. It does not take much to connect this epic Primary World love to the many examples of love lost and found in the pages of Tolkien's books. The most famous examples are inevitably between a human and an elf. Immortality is the gift to elves in Middle-earth. In order for love to be complete between such a pair, the elf must surrender immortality. This feeling of loss and great risk for the pursuit of love is rooted in the reality of Tolkien's love for Edith, and is one of the many examples of Primary World elements that are evident in the Secondary World of Middle-earth. As we have seen in the description of Tolkien's relationship with his men during the War, again something of value must be fought for, regardless of the risk, a theme that is often evident in his writing.

Although these elements from the Primary World are surely evident in the Secondary World of Middle-earth, these elements did not first appear there. Tolkien's first Secondary World was actually not Middle-earth but something much closer to home. Tolkien was married just prior to being sent to the battlefields of WWI where he would learn so much about evil. Shortly after Tolkien was discharged for trench fever, he started what would soon be their family of four children with his wife Edith. The economy after WWI made life difficult for the small family, especially considering Tolkien was also just starting his career in the

university system as a teacher. As a result of these financially difficult times, the Tolkien family faced some rather bleak Christmas holidays. Not only did this lead to Tolkien taking the odd jobs that led to the legendary scribble on the examine booklet, but it also inspired Tolkien's first fully formed Secondary World from the foundations of the Primary World. The next section of this chapter will examine how Tolkien's recreation of the popular myth of Santa Claus began his first complete Secondary World.

REMEMBERING FANTASY

You are seven years old. It is four in the morning on December 25th, and you are just awake. In fact, you barely slept from the anticipation of the night before. You slip out of bed, hoping not to wake your parents as you creep down the hallway to the living room. The Christmas tree is shinning; it wasn't when you went to bed. You follow the glow to the room where there are boxes wrapped in multicolored paper sealed in ribbons of gold. A stocking is hanging on the wall for you, bulging. You look to the table where some of the cookies are gone and the glass of milk is now only half-full. You think you hear the chime of bells jingling. You are sure you would see the prints of tiny reindeer on the roof in the snow. He was there. You have proof. Santa Claus was there. It is Christmas, and you believe.

Obviously, Santa Claus isn't real. He doesn't exist. He is an element of fantasy. Or is he? A large section of the American populace (admittedly most are under the age of eight) *does* believe in Santa Claus. We can still remember the time when he was real to us. A supreme work of the imagination of generations, Santa Claus has a power over reality. This fictional jolly man, a creation of myth, has been the cause of drastic changes in our world. Most of us can accept that the man in red is not real, yet we still spend months preparing for his arrival, even if we have no children. In the business world, the retail market depends upon and is dominated by this imaginary man and his yearly arrivals. Jobs, industries, and even whole economies depend on the revenue inspired by Santa Claus, a man who does not exist.

Although the day will come when you stop believing, for a certain period of time everything about Santa Claus is real. He *is* a jolly man with elves for helpers. He *does* put on a red suit. He *does* have a sleigh pulled by reindeer that fly. There *is* a North Pole workshop where Santa and his elves compile a list of good children who receive presents. You do good things to be on that list. Santa Claus alters your reality. This is fantasy of the highest order. You have left your own world and entered one where elves, flying reindeer, and St. Nick are as real as you are.

You have become involved in a Secondary World. In this instance, it is the Secondary World of Santa Claus and Christmas. J.R.R. Tolkien also became involved strongly with this Secondary World. It is important

to examine this particular aspect of Tolkien's writing as it is the example of Tolkien's first Secondary World.

Tolkien's First World: The Father Christmas Letters

As his children grew, Tolkien felt a strong need to not only encourage their imaginations but also to invent convenient reasons to explain why their Christmas presents were small and inexpensive. This seemingly simple struggle with the everyday task of keeping children happy led to a young father creating stories to help them understand their world. What followed was a very elaborate creation of Tolkien's first Secondary World. Years before he wrote his explanation of Primary and Secondary Worlds in "On Fairy Stories," Tolkien began a series of detailed letters to his children from Santa Claus, known as Father Christmas in Britain. Each missive was painstakingly drawn and lettered by hand and included artwork.[4] He drew a stamp for each letter every year and developed stories that were told by one of North Pole characters that he invented or elaborated upon. Every year, the letters from Father Christmas became more involved, as did the stories. By the time his children were too old for such letters, Tolkien had created a detailed Secondary World at the North Pole based upon a combination of established Santa Claus myth as well as reality. Tolkien's Father Christmas letters are his first true formation of a Secondary World. They

also demonstrate that a Secondary World not only can be based closely upon the Primary, but also that the fantastic elements of that world can be rather simple.

Tolkien had some rather strong opinions about the relationship between children and fantasy. Unlike some adults, he did not see fantasy or fairy stories as directly connected. He feared that this type of reasoning led adults to discount fantasy, much as his critics did. He writes in "On Fairy Stories," "Among those who still have enough wisdom not to think fairy-stories pernicious, the common opinion seems to be that there is a natural connexion between the minds of children and fairy-stories, of the same order as the connexion between children's bodies and milk (58). Tolkien disagrees with this opinion, and he is quick to point out later in the same essay as he describes those who, " . . . tend to think of children as a special kind of creature, almost a different race, rather than as normal, if immature, members of a particular family, and of the human family at large" (58). Tolkien clearly does not consider fantasy or children as a whole to be taken lightly. To associate one to the other obviously is an incorrect assumption to him.

Instead, Tolkien theorizes that children should be approached no differently than adults. He writes further:

> Children are capable, of course, of *literary belief* [emphasis Tolkien's], when the story-maker's art is good enough to produce it. That state of mind has been called 'willing

> suspension of disbelief.' But this to me does not seem a good description of what happens. What really happens is that the story-maker proves a successful 'sub-creator.' He makes a Secondary World in which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is 'true': it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside. (60)

In describing how this form of storytelling works for children, Tolkien is also telling us how it works for adults as well. This foundation is what leads into much of his theory as examined in the previous chapter. He also explains what can remove us from the Secondary world as he writes, "The moment disbelief arises, the spell is broken; the magic, or rather art, has failed. You are out in the Primary World again, looking at the little abortive Secondary World from outside" (60). This rules applies to both adults and children. It is merely lack of experience that changes the way children can approach a story. Here is the grain of truth that Tolkien eventually exploits with the letters he eventually writes in the name of Father Christmas.

Beginning in 1920 with his three-year-old son John, J.R.R. Tolkien began to send what would eventually be published into a book, *The Father Christmas Letters*. This practice of letter writing would continue for over twenty years. Each envelope was addressed in an elaborate calligraphy to the family, often including gingerbread designs of holly and

greenery. At times, he sent them to the children via the postman; at other times they magically appeared the day after Christmas. Letters to Father Christmas from Tolkien's children were left by the fireplace and always vanished with no explanation. Tolkien created handwriting distinct to each character that evolved over those twenty years to add to the realism of the fantasy. Inside the colorful envelopes were further illustrations of Father Christmas, his home, and his often comic adventures. Father Christmas created some of these illustrations, but others were "drawn" by other characters from the North Pole.

The first letter from Father Christmas to John Tolkien in 1920 began fairly simply. Father Christmas included a picture of himself as well as his home at the North Pole. Over the years, the Secondary World evolved around the letters. Santa acquired an assistant named the North Polar Bear who caused more trouble than anything else by clumsily failing at most of his duties. The North Polar Bear's nephews soon arrived for a visit as well. This "short" visit by the nephews continued for several years, filled with their mischief. Other characters eventually were added including the Snow-elves, Red Gnomes, Snow-men, and Cave-bears. Finally, Father Christmas began to employ an Elf named Ilbereth, which readers of Tolkien's Middle-earth will recognize as a major historical figure in that world as well. To balance these forces of good at the North Pole, Tolkien added the Goblins, who constantly attempted mischief.

The detail that Tolkien added to make this Secondary World seem more real is little short of astounding. The elaborate artwork and imagery that were added to the look of the letters and envelopes was just the start. Some of the letters were written or appended by other characters in their own dialects and handwriting. Tolkien invented a Goblin language of pictograms that required a decoding sheet so that the children could understand the messages sent by the North Polar Bear. Each of these elements increased the veracity in the stories. Father Christmas began to have increasingly fantastic adventures with each passing year that became more adult as the children grew. In the beginning, the North Polar Bear would merely threaten Christmas with some prank or mischief that would leave Santa scrambling for last-minute fixes. Eventually, the characters would become far more complicated as Tolkien made them more real and as influences of the Primary World necessarily intruded on the Secondary.

Over the two decades that Tolkien crafted these letters, he continually improved them. He also added more of the various devices this paper has already outlined that would make the fantasy more believable. For example, the 1926 letter describes one of the misadventures of the North Polar Bear. In the tale, Father Christmas keeps the valve that turns on the Northern Lights in his basement. The North Polar Bear turns on two years' worth of the Northern Lights by mistake instead of just one year's worth. Tolkien draws this bright

display for his children as the illustration of what occurred. In the following year's letter, Tolkien must continue to make the illustrations realistic. As a result, he draws a completely black and white image of Father Christmas' workshop and the North Pole. Of course, it has to be dark since the Northern Lights were used up the year before. This device between the 1926 and 1927 letters reinforces the veracity of the fantasy. Tolkien knew that his children might logically realize that using two year's worth of lights would mean a consequence. He validates this consequence by making the next Christmas dark. The technique also displays evidence that Tolkien didn't simply add trivial details to his story. He created a story line that developed and built upon previous changes in the prior year.

In 1932, several noticeable changes occur in the stories in the characteristics of the stories in the letters. For one, they are sometimes as much as triple the length of previous examples. These changes could simply have been an increasing desire by the children to read more or for Tolkien to write more. However, it could as easily be seen as a natural evolution of expansion of the legend. The letters had to get longer to incorporate the many elements that begun to grow with the telling. Also, Tolkien begins to add more drawings. Perhaps the most pivotal addition is the appearance of the Goblins. At first, the Goblins merely frustrate and harass Father Christmas much as the North Polar Bear does. Eventually, these adventures grew from minor annoyances to full-blown

battles with the ravaging Goblins attempting to ruin the holiday for all the good children of the world. As previously examined, it is valuable to note Tolkien's clear disdain for the effects of war. He made a conscious choice to begin exposing his children to the concept instead of hiding it from them, as will be discussed later in this chapter.

In addition, it is important to note the increase in adventure in the letters coincides with the time that Tolkien was writing *The Hobbit*, which was also written somewhat for the amusement of his children as a bedtime story. The two Secondary Worlds of the North Pole and of Middle-earth began to develop more rapidly as he carried his writing further, perhaps drawing upon one to fuel the other. *The Father Christmas Letters* began, as a simple reflection of the myth of the Primary World of Father Christmas soon became a Secondary World in its own right that altered the reality of the young Tolkien children.

Other than contributing to the imagination of his children, this Secondary World managed to explain some basic facts of life. John and Edith were not wealthy in those early years before J.R.R. became an author and scholar at Oxford. The Father Christmas Letters, though fantasy, gave Tolkien a vehicle to explain this lack in the Primary World. For example, the letter sent in 1931 was written during the earliest manifestations of The Great Depression. This would have been one of the hardest of years financially for the world at large, and the Tolkien family was no exception. Tolkien needed a way to explain to his children,

especially three-year-old Priscilla, why they would not receive all they asked for. Through Father Christmas he writes in one of the letters, "If you find that not many of the things you asked for have come, and not perhaps quite so many as sometimes, remember that this Christmas all over the world there are a terrible number of poor and starving people" (18). Here, Tolkien's Secondary World helps his children understand the Primary. The fantasy was a much better tool for explaining the reality of the situation.

During the over two decades in which Tolkien created his letters there were many realities that he felt his children must face. Besides the low income of some of the Christmas years, he had to face again the tides of war. For several of the later years, Tolkien was sending letters to his children during another time of war. Again, he relied upon the reality of his Secondary World to assist in explaining the difficulties of the Primary. In his last letter, Tolkien is writing during the attacks on Britain during WWII. He is not only faced with daily threats from the Axis powers, but the end of his need for writing letters. His oldest child Priscilla was becoming a teenager and soon would leave Tolkien's Secondary World behind. Disbelief was destined to arise in his daughter's mind, and as Tolkien was quoted earlier, this causes the spell to break.

Once again he calls upon Father Christmas one last time to explain some of the troubles faced in the world. He writes, "The number of children who keep up with me seems to be getting smaller. I expect it

is because of this horrible war . . ." (41). This is also a time of rationing, a fate suffered at the North Pole as well, "And even up here we have been having trouble. I don't mean only with my stores; of course they are getting low" (41). Again, this is also meant to explain why Tolkien cannot get everything his children want. Father Christmas again explains, " . . . so that now I have to send what I can, instead of what is asked for" (41). These tidbits of reality transcend the boundary of the Primary and Secondary Worlds. Tolkien can help his children grasp certain facts more easily through the fantasy than in other ways.

As Tolkien explains in the previous examples, not only children can see aspects of the Primary World while inside the Secondary. The journey to the Secondary World is not merely a one-way escape from the Primary for either children or adults. The two worlds are completely interdependent upon each other and should be seen more as a symbiosis. As already shown, the Secondary World is also no mere virtual reality that can be disconnected from once the reader has turned the last page. Information passes between the two worlds, often with the benefit of changes to each. Tolkien used the Secondary World of the North Pole to not only give his children another place to journey for entertainment but also to show them the Primary World in a new way. This ability to provide insight into the Primary via the Secondary would also serve Tolkien as he wrote the *Lord of the Rings*.

When Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* is taken as more than a vacation spot from the "real" world, it is evident that it is a "real" world that is capable of supporting and shaping its inhabitants. In creating a Secondary World as opposed to a mere fantasy, Tolkien left a completed landscape for others not only to find, but also to use to discover themselves. Middle-earth will never stop growing and changing, much like the Primary World. Although the differences between Middle-earth and the Primary World that helped form it are seemingly vast, the basic principles that rule and govern it are not so dissimilar. Inside Middle-earth, there are complex themes of war, love, race, and even the environment that mimics not only Tolkien's Primary world of WWI and WWII Britain, but also the world as it is today.

The traits of this Secondary World are clearly similar to the important elements of a mythology. Tolkien's fascination with myth from the language he studied drove him to create his own myths. Mythology contains fantastic elements in a completed world. At first, Tolkien expanded upon the existing Father Christmas myth for the sake of his children. It has been shown that he had purpose in creating that expanded myth. The legends and stories spun from myth are also capable of explaining the Primary World from the vantage of a Secondary. It was Britain's missing mythology that frustrated him. His answer was to create a new mythology.

Chapter Two Notes

[1] The specific sources consulted for biographical information of J.R.R. Tolkien are as follows: *Tolkien: Man and Myth* by Joseph Pearce, *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century* by Tom Shippey, and *J.R.R. Tolkien: Architect of Middle-earth.* Some of the most recent research available on Tolkien's life is found in connection with the release of *The Lord of the Rings* DVDs. The special features sections of the DVDs also delve into the biographical information. Joseph Sibley, Tom Shippey, and other Tolkien scholars are interviewed on these disks. The National Geographic DVD release *The Lord of the Rings, Beyond the Movie* also provides visual images of Tolkien's home of Sarehole as well as biographical references in an interview with Chris Upton. In addition, there are numerous websites that chronicle Tolkien's life.

[2] As above, *The Lord of the Rings: Fellowship of the Ring* DVD has a biographical special feature section, which visually and biographically compares Sarehole with other parts of England at Tolkien's time.

[3] For a discussion on the relationship between Tolkien and his batman in WWI, see the *Lord of the Rings, The Two Towers* DVD. In the special features section titled, "J.R.R. Tolkien: Origins of Middle-earth," Brian Sibley, chronicler of the movie trilogy, explains the connection between the batmen and their officers.

[4] Joseph Pearce's book delves most deeply into the impact that this romance had on Tolkien. Also, Tolkien himself comments on the relationship's impact several times in his own letters.

CONCLUSION

myth (m[1]th) → n. **1.** traditional, typically ancient story dealing with supernatural beings, ancestors, or heroes that serves as a fundamental type in the worldview of a people, as by explaining aspects of the natural world or delineating the psychology, customs, or ideals of society: *the myth of Eros and Psyche; a creation myth.*

myth•thol•o•gy (m[1]-thŏl'ə-jē) → n., pl. **–ies 1.** A body or collection of myths belonging to a people and addressing their origin, history, deities, ancestors, and heroes.

American Heritage Dictionary 4th Ed.

TOLKIEN'S NEW MYTHOLOGY?

Some theorize and often attribute to Tolkien a desire to create a mythology specifically for England.[1] Many of the aspects of his creation of Middle-earth do, in fact, resemble myth. Using the *American Heritage Dictionary* definition as a comparison may make it seem that J.R.R. Tolkien did, in fact, create a collection of myths. The story of Middle-earth is fictional and set in an ancient time. His characters are heroic and embody ideals of a society. There are supernatural beings in Middle-earth. Based upon these ideals alone, it seems that there is direct correlation between the tales from Middle-Earth and a mythology.

In the same venue, the Secondary World of Father Christmas also seems to be included in this possible definition of myth. Again, we see

examples of characters that embody ideal of a fundamental worldview. Father Christmas and his companions exhibit supernatural abilities. These characters also explain natural aspects of the world. If the stories of both worlds of Father Christmas and Middle-earth are a collection of myths, then it must be seen that Tolkien did create a mythology.

As with the previous definitions examined, however, there is usually a more in-depth aspect to consider. The last section of the definition of myth lends a more complicated angle to viewing Tolkien's work as a collection "myths." To what "people" do Tolkien's heroes "explain" aspects of the world or "delineate" customs or psychology? Also, the definition calls for a fundamental worldview for this people. What is the worldview at which Tolkien's "mythology for England" aims? It would be clear that for Tolkien to have created a mythology for this purpose, then the people in the definition would have to be the people of England. Is this the case with Middle-earth? In this answer lies the truth as to whether or not Tolkien created a mythology for England.

In many ways, the explanation or delineation cited in the definition is basically referring to instruction and is derived from the heroic characters and their actions. As we have seen, Father Christmas' actions and stories demonstrate ideals that Tolkien wanted his children to understand. Father Christmas also has been proven to embody certain customs of a people. Much like Father Christmas explaining aspects of war in allegory to Tolkien's children, some of the actions of characters in

Lord of the Rings also serve as examples of a worldview. On the surface, it may seem that Tolkien simply created a character named Sauron who is evil and drives the plot. Frodo Baggins could be easily be characterized as the force of good to counter that evil. The truth is much more complicated. Tolkien instead attempts to create archetypes of good and evil with his heroes. Sauron is not a character that demonstrates evil; he is evil itself personified. Sarumon does not merely act out the ideas of war, power, and machinery; he is the embodiment itself of those things. Frodo is himself the symbol of simple goodness that battles complicated that evil. These characters, much like Father Christmas, can be seen as symbols of a worldview. Is this the worldview of a people? And if so, which people is it?

Perhaps the graffiti of the 60's sprayed by peace-loving hippies in England and the United States reflects the people of Tolkien's mythology in this endeavor. At least this one group of people in Tolkien's lifetime recognized the symbolic structures he was attempting to present and embraced them. They *believed.* They believed not in the reality of Middle-earth per se, but more the reality of its ideals. The early fans who scrawled "Frodo Lives" in subway stations or who wished to see Bilbo as President managed to do what few others in their time had; they attempted to change their reality by carrying the ideals of a fantasy character. Not only did they journey to Middle-earth, but they also managed to bring back some of the "reality" that Tolkien may have

wanted them to from it. These followers of Tolkien's characters represent a desire to bring the qualities of one detailed corner of Faerie into that reality. They did not actually believe that Bilbo Baggins could actually be President. Instead, they called for the ideals of Bilbo as a peaceful Hobbit who enjoyed a good cheer and smoke over an argument or especially a war.

In addition, there are Tolkien's children. Were they the people of Tolkien's worldview? If Tolkien's children had managed to understand a little of the Primary World from the adventures of Father Christmas and the North Polar Bear, might they not be considered the people who received the enlightenment of the myths of Tolkien's North Pole? As explained previously, they could be seen as a group of people who were shown a worldview through the actions of heroic characters. Tolkien's children and any who read the stories after could be viewed as having learned of the natural world as well as aspects of society's ideals through the stories contained in the letters. Again, is this a clear example of Tolkien's creation of a mythology?

If we return to Tolkien's belief that the Primary World supports the Secondary for a moment, this mythology argument becomes even more complicated. The connection between the Primary and Secondary Worlds may be seen as the ultimate proof of a successful mythology. Elements of the Primary are placed in the Secondary, which are then carried back. This was the case with Father Christmas, as the Tolkien children would

have come to better understand the effects of war through the letters. It is this type of didactic connection between the Primary and Secondary Worlds, which have lead several theorists such as Joseph Pearce to argue that Tolkien was attempting to create a "mythology for England."

Tolkien did often lament the apparent loss of England's mythology and the lack of an adequate replacement. He did find in his studies myths that he loved, but they were usually from other cultures and countries. There were some myths available that centered on his own culture; however, he felt there were few that were typically "of England." He continues in the same letter to lament what he sees as a deficit in English mythology when he describes his research in myths,

> 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), nor of the quality that I sought, and found (as an ingredient) in legends of other lands. There was Greek, and Celtic, and Romance, Germanic, Scandinavian, and Finnish (which greatly affected me); but nothing English, save impoverished chap-book stuff. (144)

This disdain for what he perceived as the few remaining stories from England's mythology has further led some to believe that he was attempting to create one of his own in Middle-earth. The motivation was there for Tolkien to create a mythology for England. He did create

characters that embodied ideals. It becomes clear with further study, however, that this is not as simple an answer as it may seem

Tom Shippey in *The Road to Middle-Earth: How J.R.R. Tolkien Created a New Mythology* examines this very facet of Tolkien criticism. He delves into the question of whether Tolkien did in fact create a mythology for England by looking at the basis of Tolkien's writing process and the times in which he wrote. He presents a different, more subtle answer to the question of whether Tolkien created a mythology for his country. Shippey does see where Tolkien had the desire to see a mythology for England and agrees with Tolkien on the Spartan nature of English myth when he writes, "England must be the most demythologized country in Europe" (304). However, although Shippey understands that this lack of mythology might have influenced Tolkien to create a mythology for England, he argues that it is something else entirely as he writes, " . . . in Tolkien's attempt, not so much to create 'a mythology for England' – an intention and a phrase which have often been ascribed to him – as a mythology *of* England" (303). This is a rather subtle turn of phrase. However, the change is rather profound. The shift does not refute the nature of the fact that Tolkien created a mythology. Instead, it changes the focus for which the mythology is intended.

Returning to the definition of myth, we see that important reference to "a worldview of a people." If Tolkien had created a mythology for England, the people in that phrase would have been the English

themselves. Isn't this the case? Didn't he create these stories with the intent of expressing a "worldview" of his people? In reality, the opposite is true. As is already evident from the previous chapters, Tolkien did not share the common worldview of the rest of England. He rejected technology in a country that raced to embrace the Industrial Revolution. *Lord of the Rings* reflects Tolkien's Luddite nature in its worldview depicting heroic characters and their actions. The characters who are consistently considered heroic and good such as Frodo and Samwise reject technology and respect nature. Evil characters embrace it. Tolkien promotes a worldview that rejects machinery that Tolkien advances. This in itself is a sign that his mythology is not "for" England. If this were the case, then Tolkien would be implying that all of England was evil. As noted on the aforementioned letter to his son during WWII, Tolkien feared this, but he did not believe it true. Instead, as Shippey uncovers in his book, it is a mythology *of* England. Middle-earth is a mythology of a place where in its ancient past technology was rejected. Good cast technology out and destroyed the Ring. The characters in *Lord of the Rings* do not delineate the ideals of any culture other than their own. They are not a reflection of England, but of an England that took another possible path.

Another reason is clear as to why Tolkien did not, in fact, intend to create a mythology for England. Tolkien despised allegory. He has no intention of creating characters designed to explain a worldview. This

seems in stark contrast to what we have already seen in his writing. Yet again, however, the truth lies in understanding meaning. First, Tolkien explains his clear rejection of allegory in a letter written in 1959 for an interview for the *Statesman*, "I have no didactic purpose, and no allegorical intent (I do not like allegory (properly so called: most readers appear to confuse it with significance or applicability) but that is a matter too long to deal with here)" (298). Yet, it is already proven that there are lessons that can be taken from Tolkien's writing, and his characters.

How can it be resolved that Tolkien's stories are seemingly didactic and allegorical when he clearly refutes the claim? In another letter, dated 1951, it becomes a little more obvious when Tolkien elaborates on his feelings as he writes bluntly:

> I dislike Allegory – the conscious and intentional allegory – yet any attempt to explain the purport of myth or fairytale must use allegorical language. (And, of course, the more 'life' a story has the more readily will it be susceptible of allegorical interpretations: while the better a deliberate allegory is made the more nearly will it be acceptable as a story.) (145)

Another example of this is seen in a letter to Unwin Raynor in 1947, "Of course, Allegory and Story converge, meeting somewhere in Truth. So that the only perfectly consistent allegory is a real life; and the only fully

intelligible story is an allegory" (121). Here Tolkien provides the answer to the apparent contradiction. He dislikes allegory, but he understands that to make a myth means to use allegorical language. There is a very subtle difference between the two.

The difference? The difference is in the intent. Tolkien uses allegorical language to support the myth, not the allegory. He does not intend to create a mythology for England because he does not wish to influence England. Tolkien felt that allegory is forced by the author upon the reader, whereas interpretation was open to the reader. He explains the difference in the foreword to the second edition of *The Lord of the Rings*, "I think that many confuse 'applicability' with 'allegory'; but the one resides in the freedom of the reader, and the other in the purposed determination of the author" (169). It is this freedom that exhibits the difference between Tolkien's myth of England and a myth for England. In not attempting to force England to accept his views as allegory, he presents them with a story that they can choose to apply as myth. If not, it is simply a story that uses allegorical language.

Again, we find that Tolkien's writing does not fit a concrete pattern as assigned by scholars and critics. It is a myth that uses allegorical language, yet is not intended to be allegory. It is based upon the reality of England, yet is not a myth for England. It has the ability to instruct; yet it is not intended as such. This leaves the initial question. What is fantasy and what role does Tolkien's writing play in its definition?

FINAL THOUGHTS

In all of the varied questions about Tolkien and the effect of his writing that this thesis has examined, one point is clear. J.R.R. Tolkien's success dramatically changed the genre of fantasy writing. He did not invent fantasy. He did, however, alter it in its most practical of sense. The popularity of his books coupled with the almost rabid reception by numerous fans opened the very floodgates of fantasy as a popular form of reading. Raymond Feist in his essay "Our Grandfather" credits Tolkien with having changed the face of fantasy publishing, paving the way for those fantasy authors to follow by opening the fantasy market when he writes, "Before Tolkien, there were no international bestsellers written by fantasy authors, at least not in the sense we think of 'bestseller' today" (15). Raymond Feist credits Tolkien with exposing fantasy to popularity and also becoming a role model to other writers. Tolkien showed the publishing world that there was a place for fantasy on the bestseller lists.

Feist is not alone in recognizing this influence on the genre. George R. Martin, in his introduction to *Meditations on Middle-earth*, the collection of essay that contains not only Feist's essay, but also the essay of many other fantasy authors, dramatically describes Tolkien's influence on the genre of fantasy from another angle:

> Tolkien *changed* fantasy; he elevated it and redefined it, to such an extent that it will never be the same again. Many different flavors of fantasy continue to be written and published, certainly, but one variety has come to dominate both bookstore shelves and bestseller lists. It is sometimes called epic fantasy, sometimes called high fantasy, but it ought to be called Tolkienesque fantasy. (3)

George Martin goes beyond Raymond Feist's praise of Tolkien as someone who paved the way for others. Martin here argues that many of the popular fantasy books that followed owed their very style to Tolkien's writing and popularity. In addition to showing the publishers that fantasy had a place in popular fiction, Tolkien laid down a pattern for popularity.

Another influence of Tolkien's success is the impact of his work on other authors. As George Martin demonstrates, some of this influence was in simple imitation. Some authors, however, claim Tolkien as inspiration for their more original work. Douglas Anderson, a best selling fantasy and science fiction author writes that Tolkien's Middle-earth "was what started me on my present course" (125). Tolkien's influence goes even further. Not only did authors like Anderson become inspired to write, they also were led to other reading. Some even tracing the same paths of historical myth and culture that Tolkien did. Robin Hobb recalls how reading Tolkien introduced her to other books as she writes, "I was

suddenly mining whole new sections of the library" (94). From examples like these, it is clear that Tolkien changed the fantasy genre in several ways.

The final example, however of Tolkien's Effect on the genre of fantasy is how his work has changed its definition and credibility. The authors of *The Handbook of American Popular Literature* are correct. Fantasy will not fall under any one author's view. Nor, does it seem likely that fantasy will yield to one definition. As we have seen, no single definition has adequately described fantasy. What is clear, however, is that although Tolkien's contribution to the definition does not necessarily clarify it, his contributions help enlighten us as to why the definition will never yield to one answer. Fantasy is so intertwined with reality that it changes as often as reality does. This is why fantasy cannot bend to a single author, even one as popular and commonly accepted as J.R.R. Tolkien.

This popularity, as this thesis has shown, is not without price. Tolkien's popularity during his time and after has drawn the attention and often ire of the critics. As the Waterstone poll exhibits, hosts of Tolkien fans not only enjoy but also vehemently support the concept of fantasy and its place as literature. Lined on the other side of the debate are those who criticize Tolkien's work. These critics, such Edmund Wilson and Susan Jefferies, contend that fantasy only serves as a way to avoid "proper" reading. Oddly enough, it is the occasionally derogatory

comments of such critics that further fueled the fervor of Tolkien studies. This, in turn, led to examinations of fantasy and its definition. To better understand the genre of fantasy, critics and fans looked for a way to classify it.

Instead, it is far easier to see what fantasy is *not.* By examining fantasy through this angle, Tolkien's struggle with a definition of fantasy is more applicable. The more a reader attempts to grasp and contain the concept of fantasy, the more complicated the attempt becomes. Fantasy is not merely a form of escape from reality as some critics contend. Clearly, fantasy is not a rejection of the Primary World. Instead, it is an immersion inside of a Secondary World grounded in the Primary. Tolkien's theories and writings demonstrate this as fact. As *The Father Christmas Letters* demonstrate, the readers of fantasy do not simply escape reality and come back unchanged. These readers are not running away, they are journeying towards a reality. Fantasy readers often return understanding a little more of the Primary World than they did before entering the Secondary. Fantasy is therefore not merely an escape from the world.

Tolkien has also shown us that fantasy instead is directly involved with the Primary World of the author and the reader. This requires thought. As Tolkien's supporters argue, fantasy is not for the un-intellectual. Tolkien demonstrates in his writing that fantasy requires a great deal of thought in order to be successful. Fantasy has the power to

instruct as a myth, yet without forcing morals or ideals upon the reader. The reader as we have seen has the option of carrying away these pieces from the Secondary World. This ultimately proves that readers of fantasy do not have to be of low intelligence.

Critically, there is little scholarly argument to the definition of fantasy or Tolkien's role in it. No other examples have been found, for example, that thoughtfully analyze *The Father Christmas Letters*. There are volumes of Tolkien's writing that has never been critically or scholarly reviewed. What is perhaps the most regrettable aspect of this lack of critical response is that J.R.R. Tolkien's work and the genre he favored ultimately lies as hidden and undiscovered as much of the mythology that was lost for England. Tolkien's lament for this loss and his joy at reading its type inspired him to write. He, in turn, inspired other fantasy authors to create their own response. Perhaps, in the end, it will be the simple, everyday readers who will be responsible for preserving Tolkien's mythology through simple joy of reading. Some of those readers may then continue the line.

Finally, fantasy is not simple. "High" or "Low," intelligent or simple, real or unreal, all can apply to fantasy. At the heart of these questions rests J.R.R. Tolkien who also struggled to find the answers. In the end, perhaps neither Tolkien not his fans or the critics will ever truly understand. Perhaps Brian Sibley who has chronicled the making of *The Lord of the Rings* movie trilogy explains what really matters most of all

when he says, "I mean, the whole thing aught to collapse under the weight of all this stuff. But it doesn't! It holds up because regardless of all this erudition that led to all these subtleties and textures, the story itself is a damn good tale."

Notes

[1] Joseph Pearce is one such theorist. He is not one of a larger number who emphasizes, however, that it is specifically a Christian myth.

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