

Tolkien and the nature of war

The generations of the 20th century have lived through some of the most catastrophic events in human history – World Wars I and II. Consequently, man began to attentively examine human nature, evil, and systems of morality, and literature was one of the tools through which that examination occurred. Many authors directly confronted the realities of war and conflict through allegory and specific imageries, but J.R.R. Tolkien produced a work about a world apart from our own, with fantastic creatures and idealized heroes – the overly romantic fantasy labeled as “escapist” by critics, The Lord of the Rings. Critic Tom Shippey, however, has recently raised the critical viewpoint that Tolkien’s works are not escapist but rather a powerful response to the horrors of the 20th century wars, and that in fact that genre of fantasy is an effective tool for examining the war in retrospect. By stripping the wars of the setting of Earth and instead clothing it with the skin of fairy-story, Tolkien creates focus on what he leaves intact – the nature of mankind and the conflict between good and evil. C.S. Lewis, who fought in the trenches of World War I, does something similar in his science-fiction novel, Out of the Silent Planet, in which he reflects on human nature by comparing mankind to alien races. Both Tolkien and Lewis focus on the theme that, in the conflict of good and evil, good fights not against evil beings or things, but against evil itself; therefore true war is not against one’s physical enemy but in the struggle to do what is right.

In The Lord of the Rings, Tolkien heavily characterizes evil as invoking a desire for great power: “‘Wise the Lady Galadriel may be,’ she said, ‘yet... I do not deny that my heart has greatly desired to ask what you offer... The evil that was devised long ago

works on in many ways, whether Sauron himself stands or falls... And now last it comes. You will give me the Ring freely! In place of the Dark Lord you will set up a Queen... All shall love me and despair!” (Tolkien 356). This desire for power is not for power alone, but one of domination over others -- to be a “Dark Lord”, or a “Queen”. Note that Galadriel says herself that the evil works “whether Sauron himself stands or falls”. This idea of an overarching evil that goes beyond the major antagonist of the book is also reflected in the constant personification of the Ring throughout the text of The Lord of the Rings. It is in fact a force of will and purposed intention, as Gandalf carefully emphasizes to Frodo upon giving him the Ring: “It was not Gollum, Frodo, but the Ring itself that decided things. The Ring left *him*” (Tolkien 54). The main struggle throughout The Lord of the Rings is not one of combat but of resistance; it is a struggle between two wills within oneself -- desire versus wanting to do the right thing. The Quest of the Fellowship was not a military campaign against Sauron but a mission to destroy the One Ring, and the horrors of the World Wars did not stem directly so much from having an enemy than the decision for violence.

In Out of the Silent Planet, Lewis uses a cosmic setting to depict evil as something that stems from the twisting of what is originally good. By using a cosmic setting, Lewis allows us to see Earth and Malacandra (Mars) side-by-side, as if we had zoomed out, so that we are able to compare a twisted world against a virginal one. The protagonist, Ransom, after being kidnapped to Malacandra, escapes from his two captors and stumbles upon a giant otter-like alien race called the *hrossa*. After living with them for a while, Ransom is struck by the similarity between *hross* and human morals and the

difference in behavior of the two races despite the fact: “Among the *hrossa*... it was obvious that unlimited breeding and promiscuity were as rare as the rarest perversions... That the *hrossa* should have such instincts was mildly surprising; but how came it that the instincts of the *hrossa* so closely resembled the unattained ideals of that far-divided species Man whose instincts were so deplorably different?” (Lewis 78). These are *instincts* being compared; Lewis is saying that the way man acts is not a mere twisting in mind or choice; rather, the twisting of our lifestyle is deep, somewhere in the roots of our very natures.

Professor Weston’s (one of Ransom’s kidnappers) debate with Oyarsa (a god-like character, much like a Valar that watches over Malacandra) also makes apparent Lewis’s opinion that this twisting is not rooted so much in self-decision than in the action of an outside force: “... a bent *hnau* [Malacandrian for “human”, but not limited to beings with human bodies] can do more evil than a broken one. He [the Bent One] has only bent you; but this Thin One who sits on the ground he has broken, for he has left him nothing but greed. He is now only a talking animal and in my world he could do no more evil than an animal. If he were mine I would unmake his body for the *hnau* in it is already dead. But if you were mine I would try to cure you” (Lewis 150-151). The Thin One is Devine, the other of Ransom’s kidnappers, and has come to Malacandra because of its abundance of gold. Weston, however, strives to seek a way to enable the human race to live forever, and intends to take over the planet if Earth were to die – in essence of purpose, a noble intention. Through this passage we can see that while a “bent” being has a greater capacity for evil, there is at the same time a greater capacity for hope, for being bent does

not mean completely broken. Unlike Tolkien, Lewis very much puts the fight of evil into the hands of outside powers; humankind is bent by an ultimate evil force, and Oyarsa mentions that is in his power to cure *hnaus* of bentness. But the Malacandrians do not fight the human invaders; they are chiefly concerned with the characters' moral states.

Tolkien's depiction of how the war against evil may actually be fought is best seen through the quest and character of Frodo, the Ringbearer. This may seem somewhat strange, because in the end Frodo failed to give up the Ring by his own will. However, as Tolkien explains to a reader in one of his letters: "I do not myself see the breaking of his mind and will under demonic pressure after torment was any more a *moral* failure than the breaking of his body would have been – say, by being strangled by Gollum, or crushed by a falling rock" (Tolkien, The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien, 327). Frodo failed in the actual achievement of the objective, but he did all that he possibly could – acceptance of the quest, making it to the destination, and, above all, resisting the power of the Ring until the last moment. What, then, can we do in face of our inevitable shortcomings of will? The first thing is to understand it – that is, perceive evil as damaged good. The pity that stays Bilbo's hand, as well as Frodo's and even Sam's, from Gollum's life saves – indeed – the world, as mercy is in turn given to the Ringbearer and the One Ring is destroyed by fated event.

Which brings us to the second thing: there is the intervention of what Tolkien coined Eucatastrophe. It is needed, as the failing will of Frodo showed – not only in the destruction of the Ring, but in the face of no escape while Orodruin erupted. But this joy is more than a plot device; it shows hope in the midst of none and thus gives us a glimpse

of “rightness”, a “correctness”, that is not yet gone from the world. What is only bent, you may try to cure. Through this unexpected – and so convenient! -- presence of hope, Tolkien emphasizes the importance of recovery after disaster.

However, the fight against evil is not without its scars. The struggle between wills is tied to a sense of ruin that Tolkien continually alludes to in The Lord of the Rings. Frodo’s hand was not the only thing maimed; in the last pages of the The Return of the King, Frodo says to Samwise Gamgee: “But I have been too deeply hurt, Sam. I tried to save the Shire, and it has been saved, but not for me” (Tolkien 1006). And soon after those words Frodo leaves Middle-earth for the Grey Havens, for even after the destruction of the Ring, Frodo still finds himself longing for it, but also longing for rest. This, perhaps, is the horror of war for Tolkien.

The fight against evil as depicted in Out of the Silent Planet is more raw and physical than in The Lord of the Rings. Soon after the *hnakra* (a water-dwelling snake like creature) hunt, Ransom’s *hross* friend Hyoï is shot to death by Weston and Devine, who are looking for Ransom, and Lewis describes the death in detail: “Then there came a contortion of the whole body, a gush of blood and saliva from the mouth” (Lewis 86). Lewis focuses on the very physical aspects of the consequences of evil, whereas Tolkien, though Frodo’s hand *is* maimed, does not dwell on the hand for long and rather focuses the rest of The Lord of the Rings on Frodo’s mental and emotional wounds, and on his passing.

Tolkien expresses the theme that war must be fought against the Enemy – evil itself – and in doing so veers away from the horrors of 20th century warfare characterized

by gore and violence; he veers away from the *evil* humans are capable of doing. Instead, he first focuses on humankind's capacity to struggle to choose for the *good*, and secondly, though we will inevitably fail and be scarred even if we do choose for the right, there is an ever-present hope. With this in mind Tolkien's works cannot be seen as escapist because they indeed are narratives inextricably about humankind; The Lord of the Rings is about the mortal state of man and the results of our fears and desires, and our fight as humans against human nature. Tolkien was still talking about the British and the Germans when he wrote about Middle-earth; just, in that world, the British and the Germans were all on one side, and evil, on the other.

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