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How did you become involved in doing research?

My research developed out of my final paper for English 598, Mapping London. We were given the freedom to work with any texts which we could use to facilitate an examination of British culture, and so I turned to an area of my own interest, fantasy literature and Tolkien.

How is the research process different from what you expected?

The research process spread my focus out from the primary texts with which I was working and quickly intermeshed my argument in the larger scholarly community. I was involved in the debate in a much more direct manner than I had expected I would be during undergraduate research.

What is your favorite part of doing research?

My favorite part of the research process was the actual writing of the final paper and the way in which I could see a single argument forming from the myriad of research strands and ideas which I had examined.

Concerning Hobbits: Tolkien and the Trauma of England's 19th/20th Century Transition

Ryan W. Smith

Fantasy is often purported to be a contextless genre, defined by escapism, a secondary world of literature springing entirely from the mind of the author and, thereby, independent of any historicism; however, despite codifying the very genre, the works of author J.R.R. Tolkien, and in particular *The Lord of the Rings*, subvert this expectation through Tolkien's premier creation: hobbits. These diminutive creatures, hobbits, function as an anachronistic

culture of 19th century Midland farmers placed within the larger Dark Age setting of Middle-earth. Tolkien's depiction of this hobbit race, in general, amounts to a caricature of rural Englishness, a warm picture of a simple people who love to "laugh... and eat, and drink, often and heartily, being fond of simple jests at all times, and of six meals a day (when they could get them)" (Tolkien *Lord of the Rings 2*). But this initial, static image of hobbit culture is changed

by the events of the War of the Ring, and, likewise, the characters, Frodo, Bilbo, and Sam, who once stood as emblematic templates of a 19th century, rural, English ideal, are forever altered and unsettled by their trials. In this fashion, the journey undertaken by Frodo and his Halfling companions can be understood as the painful transition between the literary modes of the 19th century fairy tale (as found in *The Hobbit* and initial chapters of *The Lord of the*

Rings) and the 20th century postwar novel (as found in the concluding chapters of *The Lord of the Rings*). Tolkien uses the anachronistic hobbit culture as a means through which to understand the trauma of the shift in English identity between the idealized Victorian era and the urban, industrialized, postwar 20th century, coming to terms with modernist fracture through the euphemism of the fantasy genre.

The primary contextual difference between the two works, at least in regards to their compositional history, is that *The Hobbit* was written during peacetime (published 1937), whereas much of *The Lord of the Rings* was written during World War II (published 1955). Many, for this reason, attribute the darker themes and more mature literary style of *The Lord of the Rings* to its situational context; however, one must not overlook Tolkien's own words on the subject: "An author cannot of course remain wholly unaffected by his experience, but the ways in which a story-germ uses the soil of experience are extremely complex, and attempts to define the process are at best guess from evidence that is inadequate and ambiguous." Nevertheless, he continues, "As the years go by it seems now often forgotten that to be caught in youth by 1914 was no less hideous an experience than to be involved in 1939 and the following years" (Tolkien *Lord of the Rings* Location 368). While this is important to note at the outset, moving forward in analysis, however, my intent is neither to singularly identify the personal traumas in Tolkien's history nor to make claims of immediate causality between authorial experience and written production; instead, this essay will attempt to link the literary modes and content of these particular compositions to larger cultural traumas, which extend beyond the individual.

The Hobbit, which serves as the

entry point for many into Tolkien's larger Middle-earth Legendarium, functions undoubtedly as both a children's story and a fairy tale. This early tale of Bilbo Baggins originally took place outside the more detailed mythology of Middle-earth which Tolkien had begun to draw up through his many tales. This ahistorical status of *The Hobbit*, unconnected to the intensely mapped and elaborated setting of Middle-earth, loosened the rules within the created universe, thus allowing for many species to feature which otherwise have no origin story within the mythos, namely, for our sake, hobbits. *The Hobbit* story would later be retroactively adopted into the Middle-earth context, with limited editing on Tolkien's part, becoming a precursor then for its sequel, the larger epic saga of *The Lord of the Rings*. In reference to the lack of firm placement within the established fantasy-universe alone, meaning the lack of qualities which denote *The Lord of the Rings* as a particular brand of fantasized historical-fiction, *The Hobbit* can be labeled a fairy tale. In his essay, "On Fairy-Stories," Tolkien elaborates on the particular goals of fairy tale fiction, which are as follows: recovery, escape, and consolation. *The Hobbit*, I argue, contains all three of these elements, thus denoting it as a proper fairy tale, while *The Lord of the Rings* lacks properly carried out consolation, which limits its placement within Tolkien's strict fairy tale genre and demonstrates the larger English trauma latent within its creation.

However, before delving into the matter of consolation, mention must first be given to the concepts of recovery and escape, which are to be found in both examined works of Tolkien. Tolkien defines recovery, as "a re-gaining—regaining of a clear view" (Tolkien "On Fairy-Stories" 146), by which he means, the narrative of the secondary world

allows the reader to regain a true understanding of the familiar, seeing it through a new lens. Both narratives demonstrate this fairy tale function, and, as Reilly notes, this capability is what grants fantasy a level of practical application: "It follows that Fantasy, far from being irrelevant to reality, is in fact extremely relevant to moral reality" (Reilly 146). In this fashion, the traumas of Middle-earth become reflections of the traumas of reality, especially so in regards to the larger cultural shifts occurring around the time of the works' compositions. Likewise, both narratives demonstrate the fantasy function of escape, and it is in this particular capability that the fantasy genre might be understood as a euphemistic tool, allowing readers to approach topics of painful reality through their seemingly unconnected, and therefore, safe, secondary world settings. On the subject of the euphemistic function of fantasy, Flieger claims that *The Lord of the Rings* only cloaks itself in a façade of medievalism "while in specific places in the narrative *sounding like*—in spirit, in character, and (most important by least noticed) in tone—a surprisingly contemporary twentieth-century novel, very much in and typical of its time" (Flieger 22-3). In this manner then, *The Lord of the Rings* is able to confront cultural traumas precisely because it represents them with half-fantastical resemblances and not blunt realities.

Tolkien's final function of a fairy tale—consolation—separates *The Hobbit* from *The Lord of the Rings*, for, understanding Bilbo and Frodo to be the respective protagonists of the two works, Bilbo receives a happy ending with little emotional trauma or scarring, while Frodo meets a more tragic end, despite the larger success of his quest. As Frodo explains to Sam: "I have been too deeply hurt, Sam. I tried to save the Shire, and it has been saved, but not for me"

(Tolkien Lord of the Rings 1029).

Tolkien elaborates on consolation:

“Almost I would venture to suggest that all complete fairy-stories must have it. At least I would say that Tragedy is the true form of Drama, its highest function; but the opposite is true of Fairy-Story. Since we do not appear to possess a word that expresses this opposite—I will call it *Eucatastrophe*. The *eucatastrophic* tale is the true form of the fairy-tale, and its highest function” (Tolkien “On Fairy-Stories” 153).

By this, Tolkien suggests that the fairy tale provides consolation through the happy ending, the *eucatastrophe*, during which joy is suddenly found at the most climactic and catastrophic moment during the story—a tragedy wherein the unfortunate end is threatened but not met. In this way, fairy tales mingle the structure of a tragedy with the conclusion of a comedy, thus providing the reader with consolation. *The Hobbit* meets this expectation of the genre; however, Frodo’s melancholy end inhibits true consolation in *The Lord of the Rings* and this, I argue, forces reconsideration of the text’s representation of trauma.

As a critical tool, trauma theory has of late been increasingly applied to texts in order to better understand the coping and recollection mechanism of memory in regards to traumatic experiences. And while Tolkien texts are not often read or thought of as trauma literature, one can see how they might “position their readers in ethical dilemmas analogous to those of trauma survivors” (Vickroy 1). Continuing, Vickroy explains, “Traumatic experiences can alter people’s psychological, biological, and social equilibrium to such a degree that the memory of one particular event comes to taint all other experiences, spoiling appreciation of the present”

(Vickroy 11-2). Proximity to the One Ring, for example, in *The Lord of the Rings* and, interestingly, not *The Hobbit*, has this corrosive effect on the past and present ring-bearers: Bilbo, Frodo, and Gollum. Gandalf explains how this experience stunts their lives to the point that a ring-bearer “does not grow or obtain more life, he merely continues, until at last every moment is a weariness” (Tolkien Lord of the Rings 47). Having begun to undergo this traumatic unwinding by the beginning of *The Lord of the Rings*, Bilbo attempts to articulate his weariness: “Why I feel... sort of *stretched*... like butter that has been scraped over too much bread” (Tolkien Lord of the Rings 32).

The bearing of the One Ring, as a moment of trauma, captures the lives of these hobbit characters, to the point that even after its destruction, Frodo “clutch[es] a white gem that hung on a chain about his neck” as if a surrogate ring, muttering to himself, “It is gone forever... and now all is dark and empty” (Tolkien Lord of the Rings 1023). This example of the ring-bearer experience with the One Ring stands merely as a singular example of the trauma that arises within *The Hobbit* characters between their literary inception in *The Hobbit* and their conclusion in the final chapters of *The Lord of the Rings*. However, to fully understand the implications of this claim in regards to this particular traumatized culture, we must first explore the connections Tolkien creates between hobbits and the 19th century rural English.

Yet before we draw these aforementioned connections, a word must be said about Tolkien and the subject of allegorical representation. Tolkien, in his foreword to *The Lord of the Rings*, is very clear that “as for any inner meaning or ‘message’, it has in the intention of the author none. It is neither allegorical nor topical” (Tolkien Lord of the Rings Location

356). Elaborating, he explains:

“I cordially dislike allegory in all of its manifestations, and always have done so since I grew old and wary enough to detect its presence. I much prefer history, true or feigned, with its varied applicability to the thought and experience of the readers. I think that many confuse ‘applicability’ with ‘allegory’; but the one resides in the freedom of the reader, and the other in the purposed domination of the author” (Tolkien *Lord of the Rings* Location 368).

We can easily connect this “applicability” of the text to the earlier-discussed concept of recovery, through which readers can input their own traumas into the framework provided by the fantasy. With this conditional statement from the author in mind, we may then understand that the connections drawn between *The Hobbit* race and the 19th century rural English, as well as the connections between the postwar Shire and 20th century England, function not through allegorical means but through the dual mechanism of recovery/applicability.

Further analysis on the present subject necessitates an examination of the hobbit culture as a fantasized English ideal, drawing inspiration from traditional images of English country life. The iconic character of the hobbit can be understood as a codified representation of a particular strain of stereotyped English identity—the quaint farmer, the lovable glutton, the homey friend. As critic Sale explains, “The hobbits are not strictly human, but, like Mole and Toad in Kenneth Grahame or Pooh and Rabbit in Milne, they are based on recognizable English types” (Sale 249). Enjoying a life of simplicity, for example, on his adventure Bilbo dreams of “eggs and bacon” (Tolkien *Hobbit* 259) and wishes in dark moments to be back

home by his "own fireside with the lamp shining" (Tolkien *Hobbit* 164). They eat, drink, and are merry, tied close to their beloved land, the Shire, which Tolkien himself calls "more or less a Warwickshire village of about the period of the Diamond Jubilee" (Tolkien *Letters* 230). In these resemblances, Hobbit life is a uniquely English life, and Sale points out "C.S. Lewis' reminiscences of life at Oxford with Tolkien and others are often descriptive of hobbit life" (Sale 249). But while much focus is given to their cozy comforts, Tolkien never lets hobbits fall to straight materialism, always insisting they are a tough people who can "survive rough handling by grief, foe, or weather in a way that astonished those who did not know them well and looked no further than their bellies and their well-fed faces" (Tolkien *Lord of the Rings* 6). Behind the façade of simplicity and, perhaps, moral apathy, there waits "some courage and some wisdom, blended in measure" (Tolkien *Hobbit* 247). Continuing on the subject of hobbits, Tolkien writes:

"They love peace and quiet and good tilled earth: a well-ordered and well-farmed countryside was their favorite haunt. They do not and did not understand or like machines more complicated than a forge-bellows, a water-mill, or a hand-loom, though they were skillful with tools" (Tolkien *Lord of the Rings* 1).

Despite their preindustrial lifestyle, hobbits still maintain a level of anachronism within Middle-earth, for they resemble 19th century Englishmen in regards to their culture and attitudes, not fitting properly with the setting that amounts to a fantasized Dark Age Europe. For example, hobbit custom dictates the use of surnames (Frodo Baggins, Samwise Gamgee, Meriadoc Brandybuck), while all other extant Middle-earth cultures follow more

medieval patterns of naming (Aragorn son of Arathorn, Gimli son of Glóin). Subtle societal differences such as this alter audience perception of the various created cultures; in this case, the resemblance to modernity allows for hobbits to serve as more effective narrating characters, requiring, for example exposition from other races about the technical intricacies of Middle-earth.

And, in what I will term the Case of the Potato, potato consumption on the part of hobbits functions as another element of support in the hobbit-English correlation, for, simply put, like any proper English caricature, hobbits eat a lot of potatoes. This would not be of any particular interest to this study were it not for the fact that the presence of potatoes in Middle-earth at this period upsets the historical fiction nature of *The Lord of the Rings*, in which Tolkien makes the claim that he translated his Middle-earth books from the original hobbit manuscript of the Red Book of Westmarch. With this authorial conceit, Middle-earth comes to be understood as Europe in a mythical, prehistoric age; the potato, as a New World plant, should not be present in this Old World setting. Nevertheless, Tolkien chooses to include the potato as part of the hobbit identity, just as it forms a part of the traditional, 19th century English identity. One might initially assume some authorial overlook as an explanation for the presence of the potato in the Shire; however, Tolkien does provide an explanation for the presence of pipe-weed, or tobacco, another New World plant, making the absence of explanation in regards to the potato all the more conspicuous. Despite their, relatively speaking, newness in England, potatoes have been integrated so readily into English culture that Tolkien does not question their similar presence in the Shire, despite the fact that it unravels his conceit of

authorship and authenticity.

Through these descriptive means and an understanding of Tolkien's previously discussed 'applicability,' the culture of the hobbits comes to function as a fantasy equivalent of the culture of the agrarian 19th century English. This apparent equivalency is fitting, for the broader hobbit culture of *The Lord of the Rings* is based almost entirely on the expansion of the singular example of Bilbo and his individual personality in *The Hobbit*, which, for previously discussed reasons, we can categorize as a 20th century iteration of a fairy tale. In this particular manner of expansion from personality to culture, hobbitness again becomes intimately linked to the 19th century, the golden moment of the fairy tale, for hobbitness comes to be understood as a product of the fairy tale genre. With this conclusion, we have then a template of a 19th century English identity, and, through the literary mechanisms of applicability and recovery, as well as the euphemistic nature of fantasy, we might now examine the traumas which affected English identity between the Victorian and Postwar eras, identifying the sources behind *The Lord of the Rings'* non-consolation and its resulting modernist fracture of the fairy tale genre.

The first and primary trauma of the transition between the 19th and 20th centuries is England's rapid industrialization and consequent transfer of national identity between the rural and urban settings. Williams explains the significance of this shifting locus of identity: "England, from about the middle of the nineteenth century, had become the first society in history in which a majority of the population was urban" (Williams 9). This transformation fractured the prior 'hobbit' ideal of Englishness, removing the homey, homogenous, rural nature of England's prior self-identity. In a loop

of positive feedback, urbanization and industrialization feed off of each other, linking both concepts intimately into a singular master-trauma, which afflicts both the historical England and the imagined Shire. Tolkien heavily criticizes industrialization and progress at the expense of quality of life in *The Lord of the Rings*; characters condemn Saruman, chastising him because “he has a mind of metal and wheels; and he does not care for growing things, except as far as they serve him for the moment” (Tolkien *Lord of the Rings* 473). Similarly, the hobbits reject the changes brought in “the Scouring of the Shire”:

“Take Sandyman’s mill now. Pimple knocked it down almost as soon as he came to Bag End. Then he brought in a lot o’ dirty-looking Men to build a bigger one and fill it full o’ wheels and outlandish contraptions... Pimple’s idea was to grind more and faster, or so he said. He’s got other mills like it. But you’ve got to have grist before you can grind; and there was no more for the new mill to do than for the old” (Tolkien *Lord of the Rings* 1013).

The Shire of their memory is no more, and this loss captures the trauma of the industrial-urban shift, for no longer does the land itself resemble the land which these hobbit-English once imbued with the identity of Shire-England—home. A smoke-stained city of bricks and stone has begun to spring up around these new industrial mills, the imagery evoking the painful cultural shift from agriculture to industry. Prior to his departure on his quest, Frodo said, “I feel that as long as the Shire lies behind, safe and comfortable, I shall find wandering more bearable: I shall know that somewhere there is a firm foothold, even if my feet cannot stand there again” (Tolkien *Lord of the Rings* 62). This loss of stability tests the hobbits’ connection with the land upon their return, and one wonders

if they can truly call the Shire home, for the land no longer resembles the identity they had placed upon it. The industrialized Shire is a mockery of itself, the hobbits traumatically forced to mechanize and reject thousands of years of an agrarian tradition. And, as a result of the war, it all occurred so rapidly that the hobbits do not recognize their native land after being gone only a year:

“It was one of the saddest hours in their lives. The great chimney rose up before them; and as they drew near the old village across the Water, through rows of new mean houses along each side of the road, they saw the new mill in all its frowning and dirty ugliness: a great brick building straddling the stream, which it fouled with a steaming and stinking outflow. All along the Bywater Road every tree had been felled” (Tolkien *Lord of the Rings* 1016).

The trauma of this moment is the loss of the ideal memory, the localized identity of the culture. Frodo attempts to articulate the horrid anxiety of the moment: “This is worse than Mordor... Much worse in a way. It comes home to you, as they say; because it is home, and you remember it before it was all ruined” (Tolkien *Lord of the Rings* 1017). For Sam as well, the trauma of the moment comes in the loss of the identifiable place of memory: “The trees were the worst loss and damage... For one thing, this hurt would take long to heal, and only his great-grandchildren, he thought, would see the Shire as it ought to be” (Tolkien *Lord of the Rings* 1022). The Shireness of the location is lost, and, thus, a unique part of hobbitness is lost through the process of industrialization-urbanization. Williams correlates this rural-urban shift in 19th century English society with the transition to literary modernism in the 20th century. Narratives contrast within the two settings, due to the loss of the “knowable community” in the

city, which leads to disassociation and fracture. Williams explains: “In the city, by contrast, we find not so much narrative, and especially not this weaving narrative in time, as presentation, appearance, a lively but typically disconnected flow” (Williams 2). Disconnection with prior identity awakens the trauma of this moment and results in a population unable to settle or understand the full consequence of the changing times.

This modernist fracturing extends beyond the shared cultural space of the changed landscape, affecting individual Englishmen-hobbits in the form of post-traumatic stress from the Wars. Much of 20th century English society centered on the war effort, with entire generations, for the most part, being sacrificed for the apparent good of the nation. The Wars’ sudden spurts of mass-violence shook the pacified 19th century English ideal of rural pastoralism to its foundations. Elaborating on the subject, Croft writes: “The Great War seemed particularly ironic because it contrasted so sharply with the prewar peace and innocence of early-twentieth-century England, which had not fought a major war for a century” (Croft 14). This trauma, this supreme anxiety, seeps into the fantasy sister-culture of the hobbits, which, likewise, had not fought in a battle for over two centuries. Frodo and Sam’s journey into Mordor functions for the hobbit culture as a war experience; “The desolate Great War landscape of trenches, mud, shell holes, corpses, and total deforestation is associated with Isengard, the Paths of the Dead, or Frodo’s and Sam’s journey into Mordor, rather than with the book’s actual battlefields” (Lynch 87). Indeed, Tolkien describes the lava fields of Mordor as a hellish no-man’s-land battered by artillery fire: “The whole surface of the plains of Gorgoroth was pocked with great holes, as if, while it was still a waste of soft mud, it had been smitten with a shower of bolts and huge

slingstones" (Tolkien *Lord of the Rings* 934). Frodo and Sam's return to the Shire then can be understood as the journey home for two tired veterans following the end of the Great War. Sam readjusts to hobbit society soon enough; however, he always feels somewhat distanced from his fellow hobbits, requiring Frodo, for the sake of Sam's young family, to explain to him: "You cannot be always torn in two. You will have to be one and whole, for many years. You have so much to enjoy and to be, and to do" (Tolkien *Lord of the Rings* 1029). Sam finds in this way a limited consolation, but Frodo receives none of this and cannot share in the victory which he sacrificed so much to earn. This lack of consolation, one of Tolkien's chief goals of a fairy tale, on the part of the novel's protagonist marks the greater transition between the literary modes of the two examined works. Frodo lives through the events of the War of the Ring, but like a soldier with post-traumatic stress, he can find peace neither in the Shire nor any place in Middle-earth. He laments:

"The wound aches, and the memory of darkness is heavy on me. It was a year ago today... there is no real going back. Though I may come to the Shire, it will not seem the same; for I shall not be the same. I am wounded with knife, sting, and tooth, and a long burden. Where shall I find rest?" (Tolkien *Lord of the Rings* 1031).

Eventually Frodo leaves Middle-earth for the semi-mythical Undying Lands, hoping there to find the solace and consolation which he cannot find amongst his own kind. Frodo's sacrifice on behalf of his people and subsequent trauma, coupled with the lack of respect which he receives upon return, mimic the further breakdown of English identity as the 20th century grew in violence. Without consolation, *The Lord of the Rings* no longer functions as a proper fairy tale according to Tolkien's definition, for Frodo's tragic continuance and suffering fractures the straight narrative and transforms the literary mode of the work to the 20th century style.

The eternal Englishness represented by the hobbit, the nostalgic image of a static 19th century ideal identity, ends with the passing of Frodo to the West, for it cannot survive the traumas brought by the transition to the new century. England has changed, and one cannot survive by clinging to a past which has faded away. In this fashion, the mythologized Third Age of Middle-earth, the fantasy era of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* ends with Frodo's departure, for he, the last vestige and memory-holder of the old order cannot function in the new. Frodo must leave, Sale explains, "because he too was part of their age, the instrument of its end and the world's living still to have more cycles and more ages. There

is a bang, then, in the destruction of Mordor, and a whimper too in Frodo's discovery that he will never be well again" (Sale 282). *The Hobbit* caricature of Englishness no longer describes the reality of the cultural zeitgeist, and so in the Fourth Age of Middle-earth, which continues perhaps to this day, the fairy tale-produced race of hobbits fades away into legend and memory. Lynch argues that Tolkien's establishment of an ideological continuity with the 19th century into the 20th "can be seen as a way of 'getting over' the war" (Lynch 82); however, I feel this simplifies Tolkien's relationship with the changing times. I instead propose that Tolkien acknowledges the modernist fracture of the 20th century and the trauma which English culture has undergone and that the literary shift between *The Hobbit* to *The Lord of the Rings* euphemistically captures the breakdown in identity formation between the two eras. In this manner, Tolkien intends us not to 'get over the war' and cling to past nostalgia, but to acknowledge the reality of change and come to terms with it, fostering memory of the bygone time while focusing our primary thoughts always towards the future. As Frodo begs of Sam, "keep alive the memory of the age that is gone, so that people will remember the Great Danger and so love their beloved land all the more" (Tolkien *Lord of the Rings* 1029).

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