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English 4700

History of Middle-Earth

4/10/2013

[10,660 words]

Bilbo's Trolls and Trials Ahead:

New Historical and Archetypal Analysis of the History and Myth of Middle-Earth as Revealed in
the Conflicts of *The Hobbit*.

Introduction

John Ronald Reuel Tolkien's Middle-Earth stories are among the greatest contributions to western popular mythology in the twentieth century. *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* exploded into print, radio, and eventually cinema as the War of the Rings earned its place in the hearts and minds of the young and young at heart and remained there ever since. The demand for more of Tolkien's mythology has led to the publication of the *Silmarillion* and The History of Middle-Earth series, along with countless imitators. Fortunately for the fans of the fantasy genre, Tolkien's life-long passion for the mythology produced a deep and rich enough world to produce these volumes. But the very depth and breadth of Tolkien's works, the fruit of a life-long effort, has presented a unique series of challenges for literary critics. The *Book of Lost Tales* alone demonstrates the fact that over the sixty-some years of their formation, the myths of Middle-Earth underwent gradual morphology, revision, and adaptation have rendered the task of literary criticism of Tolkien's mythology frustratingly akin to the task of pinning Jell-O to a wall with a nail and hammer. But the difficulties are not insurmountable. Christopher Vogler's contribution to archetypical analysis in terms of heroic journeys combined with a New Historical awareness of the biography and *zeitgeist* of the author, we have in the conflicts of Tolkien's mythology a system to analyze the history and philosophy of Middle Earth revealed in the War of the Ring.

The polymorphous nature of Tolkien's mythology demands a definition of what *is* the text before analysis can begin. For the purpose of this paper the text in question consists of the novels published during Tolkien's own lifetime (*The Hobbit* in its revised form and *The Lord of the Rings*) as well as his son Christopher's completion of the project which occupied the final years of Tolkien's life: *The Silmarillion*. The texts are selected to honor the process of revision

undertaken by Tolkien throughout his life to bring the mythos into coherent harmony, and Christopher Tolkien's role as both ideal reader and then collaborator in production. Where the published *Silmarillion* varies from the *Book of Lost Tales*, the *Silmarillion* will be taken as the authoritative work excepting only those obvious examples of editing for space as opposed to revision for content.

Analysis

The first significant conflict up for analysis is the encounter with the hill trolls in *The Hobbit*. At first glimpse this encounter seems to serve a standard archetypal purpose on the hero's journey, what Vogler describes as Crossing the First Threshold¹. Thorin and Company have set off on their quest, an act of will to enter the world, and Bilbo has his first glimpse of the true nature and danger of the world outside the Shire. The Trolls' easy defeat of Bilbo, Thorin, and Company demonstrates the magnitude of the danger that they will face, and it serves as a useful narrative device for the larger story to show how far Bilbo et al have come by the time they face Smaug and the Battle of Five Armies.

The trolls merge a pair of archetypical roles: Threshold Guardian and Shadow. As Threshold Guardians they represent a challenge and learning opportunity for the heroes as they begin their journey². They also serve the purpose of Shadow to Gandalf, who ultimately defeats them. “The archetype known as the **Shadow** represents the energy of the dark side, the unexpressed, unrealized, or rejected aspects of something”³. Trolls were initially creations and

¹ Christopher Vogler, *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*, 3rd ed, (Studio City: Michael Wiese Productions, 2007), 127-131.

² Ibid, 129.

³ Ibid, 65.

servants of Melkor, the satanic Ainur who opposed the Valar⁴. Gandalf is one of the Istari, a servant of the Valar from true West.

“But Afterwards it was said among the Elves that they were messengers sent by the Lords of the West to contest the power of Sauron, if he should arise again, and to move Elves and Men and all living things of good will to valiant deeds”⁵.

Gandalf, rescuing the company and thereby preserving their quest, fulfills his created role as one of the Maiar, the lesser angelic beings created by Ilúvatar and the mission he has been assigned by the Valar. The trolls, beings fashioned at least in part of stone by Melkor, were created to spread terror, death, and dominion across the land, and they too are acting according to their contrasting natures. As one of the Maiar, Gandalf himself would have had the chance to defect and serve Melkor even as Sauron and the Balrogs had done⁶. The trolls are the first and least of an increasing series of Shadows for Gandalf during the War of the Ring, Here in the first contest the tools of Melkor fall to the wisdom of the servant of Ilúvatar and the Valar.

This encounter illuminates some of JRR Tolkien’s own life and influences. Delaying the trolls until sunrise is a feature from the Elder Edda, where Thor does the same to a dwarf⁷. In *The Hobbit* Gandalf reveals his wisdom, using trickery to distract the Trolls until dawn.

“Dawn take you all, and be stone to you!”… And there they stand to this day, all alone, unless the birds perch on them; for trolls, as you probably know, must be underground before dawn, or they go back to the stuff of the mountains they are made of, and never move again. That is what had happened to Bert and Tom and William.⁸.

⁴ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, Christopher Tolkien, ed., (New York: Haughton Mifflin, [1977] 2004), 18-19.

⁵ Tolkien, *Silmarillion*, 309.

⁶ *Ibid.* 19.

⁷ Carolyne Larrington, trans., *The Poetic Edda*, (New York: Oxford Press, 1996), 113.

⁸ JRR Tolkien, *The Hobbit, or There and Back Again*, revised ed., (New York: Ballantine Books 1937, 1965, 1982), 41.

There is no question that Tolkien was aware of Poetic Edda. His special subject of study at the Oxford English School was Old Norse⁹.

The most remarkable of all Germanic mythological poems, it dates from the very end of Norse heathendom, when Christianity was taking the place of the old gods; yet it imports a sense of living myth, a feeling of awe and mystery, in its representation of a pagan cosmos. It had a profound appeal to Tolkien's imagination¹⁰.

Thor's delaying tactic is to ask questions, but in the Norse mythology dwarves and giants are ancient and crafty beings, full of wisdom and lore so that Thor's (unusually clever for Thor) tactic plays to the troll's nature. The stone-derived trolls Gandalf tricks are smart as a bag of rocks, so questions aren't the approach for Gandalf to take, and simple children's tricks fit the childlike mentality of the Threshold Guardians in question.

The troll encounter functions on the surface as an episode in a children's story, but to the informed reader the fundamental mechanisms of the mythos are already in play now. Gandalf is quite literally a guardian angel taken human form, and represents the subtle craft and hidden intervention of the Valar. The trolls show the dangerous legacy of Melkor's ancient rebellion which gave birth to monsters and monstrous races that continue to plague. In their position as a legacy of prior sub-creation the trolls mirror the dwarves. Both trolls and dwarves are sub-created races adopted or accepted by Ilúvatar after their formation. Though the origin of trolls (and some aspects of their intelligence and roles) is vague in the mythology, their actions as living and breathing individuals establishes them as an adopted race of Ilúvatar. This assessment is grounded upon the well-recorded origin of the dwarves. Aulë, Melkor's counterpart among the Valar, made the dwarves. His appeal for their acceptance was granted, and the proof that

⁹ Humphrey Carpenter, *J.R.R. Tolkien: a Biography*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, [1977] 2000), 71-72.

¹⁰ Carpenter, *Biography*, 73.

And the voice of Ilúvatar said to Aulë: ‘Thy offer I accepted even as it was made. Dost thou not see that these things have now a life of their own, and speak with their own voices? … Even as I gave being to the thoughts of the Ainur at the beginning of the World, so now I have taken up thy desire and given to it a place therein; but in no other way will I amend thy handiwork, and as though hast made it, so shall it be’¹¹.

This is the standard to judge those races other than Men and Elves have been accepted or adopted by Ilúvatar as part of his creation. Whatever a race moves, speaks, and thinks on its own, we have evidence that at some point Ilúvatar has incorporated them into his plans.

This knowledge leads to a question beyond the limits of archetypal analysis or mythological structure alone. If every creature with a will and voice of its own is an original or adopted part of Ilúvatar’s plan, then how can there be evil creatures such as the trolls acting on their to defeat Thorin’s group? Pagan mythological structures typically attribute the origin of monstrous and antagonistic races to sources outside of benevolent, reigning deities. Greek monsters come from the Titans. Norse monsters come from giants, dwarves, and Loki. While Tolkien was a scholar of Classical and Norse legends, he deviates from the pattern in his own mythology.

This question demands a brief turn to New Historical analysis. J.R.R. Tolkien was a young man during World War I, and the massive losses in that war had a profound effect on his life. Two of his three closest friends died during WWI, and Tolkien survived. Tolkien lived contemporary to the movement called the Lost Generation. Across Europe and the rest of the world the great colonialist systems that had been in place since the Napoleonic War began to crumble in the face of great and seemingly pointless loss of life. The questions of loss and

¹¹ Tolkien, *Silmarillion*, 32.

suffering from World War I caused an entire generation of writers to turn away from and actively scorn the traditional answers of religion and social norms.

But for Tolkien, his great sense of personal loss and the changes that society faced after the first world war led him to a different reaction. When other writers turned away from the idea of a God with a purpose or a plan, Tolkien's devoutly religious upbringing reached out to embrace the appearance of defeat as subordinate to a larger capacity for regeneration within the divine. This attitude, a singular contrast to other Lost Generation authors, shows clearly in a letter that he wrote to his own son Christopher during World War II.:

All we do know, and that to a large extent by direct experience, is that evil labours with vast power and perpetual success – in vain: preparing always only the soil for unexpected good to sprout in. So it is in general, and so it is in our own lives..... But there is still some hope that things may be better for us, even on the temporal plane, in the mercy of God. And though we need all our natural human courage and guts (the vast sum of human courage and endurance is stupendous, isn't it?) and all our religious faith to face the evil that may befall us (as it befalls others, if god wills) still we may pray and hope. I do.¹².

From a New Historical standpoint, this letter captures the answer to Tolkien's continued faith in life, and indeed it captures the answer to the question of evil races within Tolkien's own writing. Melkor, the enemy of the Valar, the fallen archangelic figure, set out to create monsters and to subvert the Children of Ilúvatar to form orcs, trolls, and other monstrous races.

The vital pattern of Tolkien's overarching plays out according to the preceding passage. Evil appears to fight and win, but the victories cannot last. Good will overcome, in large part because of the actions of evil itself. This point bears repeating as it is a touchstone of *The Hobbit*

¹² JRR Tolkien, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, Humphrey Carpenter, ed., (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), 76.

and *The Lord of the Rings*. Even though it's impossible to understand the depth of Tolkien's vision of overcoming good without understanding that the author lived through two world wars, that does not mean that the principle goes unstated within his own mythology. Tolkien deliberately and consciously applied the principle. It is explicitly stated in "The Ainulindalë," Tolkien's angelic creation myth. He puts the principle in the words of Ilúvatar, God himself as portrayed in his mythos:

Then Ilúvatar spoke, and he said: 'mighty are the Ainur, and mightiest among them is Melkor; but that he may know; and all the Ainur; that I am Ilúvatar, those things that ye have sung, I will show them forth, that ye may see what ye have done. And thou, Melkor, shalt see that no theme may be played that hath not its uttermost source in me, nor can any alter the music in my despite. For he that attempteth this shall prove but mine instrument in the devising of things more wonderful, which he himself hath not imagined.¹³

'So when creatures fashioned or warped by Melkor appear in the Third Age, this is entirely consistent with the methods of Tolkien's concept of divine activity. The thread of fallout from this seemingly random encounter continues to bear fruit throughout the remainder of the War of the Rings.

This first encounter with the trolls contains the first fruits of this principle during the narrative. The trolls are the latest keepers of famous blades from the past that would have perished if they had not fallen into evil. Elrond describes them to the party in Rivendell:

¹³ Tolkien, *Silmarillion*, 5.

They are old swords, very old swords of the High Elves of the West, my kin. They were made in Gondolin for the goblin-wars. They must have come from a dragon's hoard or goblin plunder, for dragons and goblins destroyed that city many ages ago.¹⁴

So the fall of Gondolin to treasure-hoarding villains became the mechanism to preserve swords among the greatest ever made in history, because the Noldor (High Elves of the West) learned their craft from the Valar themselves¹⁵, and these weapons were forged during the First Age, when the Noldor waged their doomed war against Melkor¹⁶. Now the swords of the greatest smiths of the First Age find themselves into the hands of Gandalf, Thorin, and Frodo some 6,500 years later, when Melkor's servant Sauron is gathering power once again.

More of Tolkien's mythos is revealed in the dwarves' capture by and escape from the goblins in the middle chapters of *The Hobbit*. Shortly after the hospitality of Elrond in Imladris Thorin's crew are introduced to a contrasting 'hospitality' from the goblins. Much about the nature of this race is revealed in the opening pages of their first encounter. The first two details about goblins given in the narrative are perhaps the most often repeated in Tolkien's works: "Out jumped the goblins, big goblins, great ugly-looking goblins, lots of goblins, before you could say *rocks and blocks*"¹⁷. Goblins are ugly, and they are numerous. Only the most powerless and isolated characters ever encounter solitary goblins, like Sam alone after the battle with Shelob. In almost every other presentation goblins are numerous, swarming creatures. Not usually more powerful than heroes, they always appear in numbers.

The captivity follows a parallel path to the stay in Rivendell that is particularly relevant to the mythological analysis. We can use the step-by-step parallels to examine the differences

¹⁴ Tolkien, *Hobbit*, 52.

¹⁵ Tolkien, *Silmarillion*, 55.

¹⁶ JRR Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin, [1954] 1994), 1010. Appendix A.

¹⁷ Tolkien, *Hobbit*, 59.

between two of the key races in Middle-Earth. The valleys of Rivendell “opened suddenly at their feet”¹⁸. The goblin ambush comes from a hidden cave in the mountains. Elves hide to protect, and the goblins to prey upon others. Elves greeted the travelers with cheerful songs, and the goblins sing of whips and captivity¹⁹. Elves provided horses and ponies, and the goblins ate them, “For Goblins eat horses and ponies and donkeys (and other much more dreadful things), and they are always hungry”²⁰. The party quickly faces the Great Goblin just as they had faced Elrond, but instead of welcome, help, and advice they receive hatred and deadly violence.

Tolkien’s structure draws the parallel too consistently for it to be accidental, and the great care that contrasts these two races indicates the importance of the distinction. Goblins (orcs in other places, the word became synonymous with the evolution of Tolkien’s mythology) are the archetypical shadow of elves. As the Shadow archetype embodies the rejected or unattained aspects of Self in Jungian analysis, goblins and orcs are the dark echo of Tolkien’s elves in quality and nature, as this conflict reveals. The Shadow relationship is conscious and explicit:

Yet this is held true by the wise of Eressëa, that all those of the Quendi who came into the hands of Melkor, ere Utumno was broken, were put there in prison, and by slow arts of cruelty were corrupted and enslaved, and thus did Melkor breed the hideous race of the orcs in envy and mockery of the Elves, of whom they were afterwards the bitterest foes.²¹

The goblins’ ageless nature, which they share with the elves, as well as the legacy of millennia of war against the elves are both visible because of the sword. The goblins recognize the blade, remember the battles against Gondolin, and hate the dwarves for holding the blade²².

¹⁸ Ibid, 46.

¹⁹ Ibid, 60-61.

²⁰ Tolkien, *Hobbit*, 61.

²¹ Tolkien, *Silmarillion*, 40.

²² Tolkien, *Hobbit*, 64.

Just as the encounter with the trolls revealed the cosmological nature of Ilúvatar as the source or adopter of all self-aware life, without whose consent nothing has the semblance of life, so too the encounter with the goblins contains another glimpse of the inner workings of Tolkien's mythos. The difference between elves and goblins rises from the difference between Ilúvatar their creator and Melkor, the goblins' corruptor, and the difference between the divine and diabolic reflects directly on Tolkien's system of values.

Page sixty-two of *The Hobbit* contains a long list of goblin qualities, and each one can be contrasted, point-for-point with Tolkien's depiction of elves. Elves make beautiful things, and goblins clever devices to kill and torture.

It is not unlikely that they invented some of the machines that have since troubled the world, especially the ingenious devices for killing large numbers of people at once, for wheels and engines and explosions always delighted them, and also not working with their own hands more than they could help; but in those days and in those wild parts they had not advanced (as it is called) so far²³.

Tolkien defined this set of values in his letters. He called it Mechanism²⁴. Mechanism as a definition of evil is the desire to control nature and the will of others, so it naturally runs towards making machines and using magic to gain power over the external world and the others in it²⁵. The goblin cavern is the first glimpse of Tolkien's concept of evil run amok. He presents a dark, sunless face full of smelting and weapons, where the strangers and travelers are fit for slavery, murder, or lunch. The themes that are presented here in brief are played large later on in Mordor, where a greater power serving the same principles of evil produces a similar effect across an entire land instead of simply within a small mountain.

²³ Tolkien, *Hobbit*, 62.

²⁴ Tolkien, *Letters*, 145.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 146.

But once again the darkest settings and seeming victories of evil sew the seeds of future victory. Gandalf's sword "flashed in its own light"²⁶. Gandalf has returned, with a literal light shining in the darkness. But in the archetypical heroic journey, Gandalf is playing the role of Mentor. His goal is explicitly to prepare the Children of Ilúvatar for bold deeds and actions, and as Mentor he cannot be the Hero forever. He is a guardian angel and a teacher figure, not a savior. Gandalf saved the heroes from the trolls completely, and in their second trial the better description is that Gandalf *παρακαλεταί*. He is called alongside the Heroes, and then he reflects the more ministerial senses of the verb as he comforts, encourages, and admonishes his charges.

This is, indeed, the final act of deliverance that Gandalf provides in the heroic journey of *The Hobbit*, for in order for his role to be successful the heroes must move beyond their dependence upon him. If he were to step beyond his role, he would commit the same error as other Istari (except perhaps Radagast who has a different failure, the love of created things above the image of God in the Children of Ilúvatar) and begin the path to the Machine.

He does not deliver the heroes completely from the goblins as he did for the trolls, but comes alongside them, running alongside them, and preserving the tools, in the form of weapons, that they will need in order to stand on their own for the remainder of their journey (Tolkien, *The Hobbit* 65-66).

Bilbo's encounter with Gollum is a turning point in the history of Middle-Earth that bears commentary for several reasons. First, the One Ring's return to the narrative begins the end of the Third Age. Second, though every theme present in this chapter appears, greatly expanded, within *The Lord of the Rings*, time and space considerations make the shorter contrast the better

²⁶ Tolkien, *Hobbit*, 62.

for analytical purposes. Third, from a new historical perspective, “Riddles in the Dark” was revised after John Ronald had already completed *The Lord of the Rings*, so this chapter represents the last refinement of the mythos published by Tolkien himself²⁷.

The encounter is also a turning in the tide of the Third Age. The seeds of overthrow that the Machine has sown through apparent victories are beginning to take root. Bilbo’s sword Sting reveals that it is one of the lost swords of Gondolin when it begins to glow in the same manner of Glamdring and Orcrist²⁸. Without the booty from those old trolls, hoarded by evil, Bilbo would be easy prey for Gollum, and Bilbo invokes the name of the ancient fortress to keep Gollum from attacking him right away. The preserved strength of the defeated people will continue to play a critical role in the struggle of light against darkness, present or enabling other struggles that the forces of Magic win over the Machine.

In “Riddles in the Dark” the threat of a Gondolin blade holds enough of a stalemate for the contest of wits, through which the un-fallen and fallen little folk compare and contrast. Gollum is an archetypical Shadow for Bilbo (and later Frodo) who embodies a rejected or unattained aspect of the hero’s psyche, and the differences are more striking because of the similarities between Gollum and Bilbo. Gollum was a hobbit named Sméagol, and he was the most adventurous and curious of his people, as Gandalf will discover in time²⁹. Their shared social and cultural background means that they both know the riddle-game and its rules, and they share enough common experience, however distant it may be for Gollum, that they can interpret the idioms and provide answers. Both Gollum and Bilbo are stealthy and small.

²⁷ Carpenter, *Biography*, 230

²⁸ Tolkien, *Hobbit*, 73.

²⁹ Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings*, 51.

“The Hobbits are, of course, really meant to be a branch of the specifically *human* race (not Elves or Dwarves)” Tolkien wrote in his famous letter #131³⁰. So the Hobbits share the Gift or Doom of mankind in Tolkien’s mythology. In death they pass beyond the world, and are not bound to it as the elves and the Valar. But in life they have a greater say over their own destiny than other races, greater freedom over their fate.

We have seen in the elves and goblins the differences between Magic and the Machine, between self-actualizing good and dominating evil. In Bilbo and Gollum Tolkien reveals the application of the principles on a personal level along with their fruit. They choose different and become different through their choice. The involvement of the Ring of Power only serves to magnify the fruit of those choices. Both Bilbo and Sméagol come across the Ring, discovered by another. Sméagol chooses the Mechanism, forcing his will upon another with murder and violence. Bilbo discovers the Ring, and just like Sméagol he has a chance to kill the previous owner when he is invisible and Gollum stands between him and freedom, but Bilbo chooses to be true to his own nature in several ways. Hobbits are stealthy, and the One Ring enhances that stealth. Bilbo is not a killer by nature, and he retains that nature in his first test with the ring’s power, leaping past Gollum instead of drawing Sting to kill him³¹.

The outcomes of their two paths, Magic and Machine, show in their old age. The ring preserves both and wears upon both, but Bilbo at eleventy-one is still himself, and Gollum is a hollowed-out shell of the person he once was, long-since driven mad. No one can resist the One Ring forever, but just as Bilbo refused to sacrifice his identity in his youth he has the strength to give the ring up before he succumbs in his old age. Just as Sméagol betrayed his nature and

³⁰ Tolkien, *Letters*, 158.

³¹ Tolkien, *Hobbit*, 86.

became Gollum, so he never regains his nature, and is forever dominated by the needs to pursue the ring.

This is a clear allegorical comparison, which at first glimpse seems out of place since Tolkien rejected allegory as a style, and deliberately avoided it³². But Tolkien's system of morality is grounded in a pervasive and foundational Christian belief, and writing the best mythology that he could. In Tolkien's own words:

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. And one finds, even in imperfect human 'literature', that the better and more consistent an allegory is the more easily can it be read 'just as a story'; and the better and more closely woven a story is the more easily can those so minded find allegory in it³³.

So the discovery of allegorical relationships may not be discounted solely because of Tolkien's preferences, though a responsible analyst must acknowledge that the relationship from Tolkien must only go from Story to Allegory, never the reverse.

The flight from the goblins on the mountain side is a conflict rich with information about the nature of Tolkien's mythology.

Several aspects of goblin nature are revealed in the pursuit away from the goblin caves. Gandalf urges his charges on because of the fading light, and we learn that goblins are creatures of darkness and night and raiders who do not venture far from their strongholds except on raids.

But the orcs are not the only remnants of Melkor's crafting that works against our heroes. This conflict reveals the Wargs, evil and intelligent wolves³⁴. They are the goblins' allies, not

³² Tolkien, *Letters*, 145.

³³ Tolkien, *Letters*, 121.

³⁴ Tolkien, *Hobbit*, 100.

their pets, as shown by the indication that they share the loot from raiding³⁵. Their intelligence is shown as they plan to react to threats, eliminate their foes, ponder the past, and consider alliances and plans of their enemies³⁶.

The Wargs reflect a greater evil from the First Age. Carcharoth the Wolf was a great demonic monster who played a large role in the battle for the Silmarils, and consumed one of the mystic jewels along with Beren's hand³⁷. A common theme in Tolkien's *Silmarillion* is the presence of archetypes of things to come, the great first examples of more numerous lesser kinds. Carcharoth's reflection in the Wargs is the first in a number of echoes that weave themselves through the War of the Ring. Lesser images of great foes arise in the form of Threshold Guardians, Changelings, and lesser Shadows from the past, and as our heroes overcome them they are, in fact, symbolically achieving the destruction of the dark legacies left by past victories. Carcharoth the Wolf was immense and black, and the Warg chieftain is gray and smaller, but he is alike in kind if not in extent of power: evil, cunning, independent (he makes plans free of goblin control), and predatory.

The goblins return, carrying fire, and the pattern of revelation in conflict turns to Gandalf. Gandalf's role as an Istari, one of the wise, is shown as he follows the Wargs' plans and discussions which neither the dwarves nor the hobbit can understand. But Gandalf is *not* a savior. He is a guardian and a guide. Gandalf is afraid when he hears that he has taken shelter at the gathering place of two dark armies, and we learn that the Istari in their mortal forms share 'human' characteristics with the other, greater Ainur³⁸.

³⁵ Ibid, 101.

³⁶ Ibid, 101-102.

³⁷ Tolkien, *Silmarillion*, 180,

³⁸ Tolkien, *Hobbit*, 102.

Gandalf uses his power over fire openly for the first time in the narrative when he hurls flaming pine cones down on the wolves and goblins beneath him. Here is one secret aspect of Gandalf's nature. Thorin and company aren't just ignorant of Gandalf's angelic nature, but none know of his role as a ring-bearer:

...in the last few days he was revealed as a lord of great reverence, and clad in white he rode into battle; but not until the time came for him to depart was it known that he had long guarded the Red Ring of Fire. At the first that ring had been entrusted to Círdan, Lord of the Havens; but he had surrendered it to Mithrandir, for he knew whence he came and whither at last he would return³⁹.

It is unclear whether Gandalf's magical fire powers come entirely from the Ring of Fire, or whether they are merely enhanced by them, but it is too great a coincidence that the ring he guards is exactly the same element that he uses for his more overt magic without some connection between them.

Ainur, ring, and all, Gandalf's power has a limit, and the many foes before him surpass that limit. But Gandalf is, in the end, one of the Ainur, an angelic servant, and he plans on sacrificing himself in his mortal form before he allows his charges to come to harm⁴⁰.

This conflict is key because it demonstrates one of the hidden mechanisms of Tolkien's mythology in the moment of crisis: For the first time in *The Hobbit* the eagles come to the rescue, plucking the heroes from certain doom and delivering them to safety. The eagles are significant as another accepted race, having thought and motion of their own, but there is more to the rescue than that. This *Deus ex machina* is exactly that, nothing less than a divine

³⁹ Tolkien, *Silmarillion*, 313.

⁴⁰ Tolkien, *Hobbit*, 106.

intervention. Just as Sauron is a lesser successor to his master Melkor⁴¹ so Gandalf is a lesser representation of something far greater: the Valar.

The Valar are the greatest of the Ainur who have come to the world of Arda⁴². Even though by the Third Age they live in a separate land physically cut off from the rest of Arda, they are not separated from the proceedings in Middle-Earth. Manwë is the King of the Valar and Melkor's counterpart⁴³. In the Elves' record of the Valar, the "Valauenta," they describe him thus: "Súlimo he is surnamed, Lord of the Breath of Arda. All swift birds, strong of wing, he loves, and they come and go at his bidding"⁴⁴. Not only do the eagles fall within Manwë's angelic demesne, but they have an explicit mission, as he explains to Yavanna in the *Silmarillion*: "In the mountains the Eagles shall house, and hear the voice of those who call upon us"⁴⁵ (*Silmarillion* 35).

So when the Lord of the Eagles is full of a sudden curiosity that leads him to rescue Gandalf and the heroes he is doing nothing more or less than acting out the will of Manwë. It could be argued that his sudden curiosity is itself the inspiration of Manwë. Regardless, his existence and role are the will of Manwë made manifest in the rescue. The rescue here is one of many dating back to the arrival of the Noldor themselves in the First Age, when Thorondor, King of Eagles, rescued Fingon and Maedhros from Melkor's mountains⁴⁶.

More importantly, the intervention of the eagles demonstrates that in Arda the Valar and their agents remain at work, howsoever indirectly. This is not a deficiency in divine function, that the Valar fail to intervene in Arda with bolts of thunder from heaven (though they had done

⁴¹ Tolkien, *Silmarillion*, 19.

⁴² Ibid, 13.

⁴³ Ibid, 14.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 14.

⁴⁵ Tolkien, *Silmarillion*, 35.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 103.

so in the past and the continent isn't recognizable from the fallout). The Valar want to prepare the Children of Ilúvatar, Man particularly, to fulfill their roles and to resist evil, ruling well over the lands they fill. So as the time of mankind's ascendancy approaches the Valar should logically work ever more indirectly lest fickle men turn to dependence instead of to Magic, the full development of their own God-given potential and place. Tolkien defines the Valar's limitation and role regarding the Children of Ilúvatar in one of his letters that speaks of the Númenorian rebellion at the end of the Second Age:

The Valar had no real answer to this monstrous rebellion – for the Children of God were not under their ultimate jurisdiction: they were not allowed to destroy them, or coerce them with any ‘divine’ display of the powers that they held over the physical world.⁴⁷

With an explicit understanding of the Valar's limitations, it makes perfect sense that they would act through intermediaries such as the eagles. The Valar were not the Children's (all sentient races, created or adopted) judge, but the Children were the object of great care and love from the Valar. Intermediary intervention allows them to obey the dictates of that love without violating the boundaries of Ilúvatar.

Gandalf fulfills one of the roles of Mentor in the story of Mirkwood, and that is to leave his charges on their own to discover and use their own strength, which leads to yet another token battle with a lesser mirror of a greater menace from the past. Bilbo must rescue the dwarves from monstrous large spiders⁴⁸. The nature of hobbits comes to light in conflict with the lesser shadows of Ungoliant, the terrible light-drinking spider of legend.

⁴⁷ Tolkien, *Letters*, 206.

⁴⁸ Tolkien, *Hobbit*, 154-165.

The spiders, which Bilbo taunts with the title *Lob*, spider in Old English, are descendants of the ancient Ungoliant, a demonic entity that took the form of a spider⁴⁹. An ally of Melkor, Ungoliant drank the light of the great trees, killing the original true light of Arda which then lived on only in Fëanor's Silmarils⁵⁰. The Valar formed the sun and the moon as replacements for the great trees (*Silmarillion* X). So it is fitting that the spawn of the source of Arda's darkness live in darkness, ever hungry just as she was. Ungoliant's insatiable appetite consumed her from within. Her children's hunger in Mirkwood leads many of them to a more mundane end at the hands of a surprising rescuer: a hobbit.

Bilbo enters open conflict for the first time in the story, and much more about his nature is revealed. Not all identity is revealed in conflict. Sometimes it is created. The portion of Bilbo that makes him a hero is created or discovered in this conflict:

Somehow the killing of the giant spider, all alone by himself in the dark without the help of the wizard or the dwarves or of anything else, made a great difference to Mr. Baggins. He felt a different person, and much fiercer and bolder in spite of an empty stomach, as he wiped his sword on the grass and put it back into its sheath.

“I will give you a name,” he said to it, “and I shall call you *Sting*.”⁵¹

Since one of the rolls of Threshold Guardians in to strengthen the hero through the trials, Bilbo's spiders have fulfilled their archetypical roles, and Bilbo fights with hobbit virtues. Naming his sword, Bilbo is taking up more of the heroic mythos for himself, but he is still a hobbit. He is quiet, smart, and a ring-bearer (invisible). He uses tricks, stealth, and cleverness to draw spiders off of the dwarves where a larger or more typical hero would. The hobbit love of story and verse shows up in Bilbo's songs “Attercop” and “Lazy Lob” that he uses to taunt the spiders while

⁴⁹Tolkien, *Silmarillion*, 65.

⁵⁰Ibid, 68, 93.

⁵¹ Tolkien, *Hobbit*, 155.

sneaking around all over⁵². So in becoming a hero, Bilbo steps into Magic as opposed to the Mechanism. He finds his victory by becoming more of what he already was, throwing rocks and darts like the hobbits love, singing, and confronting his Shadow with this own inner nature. He does fight when he must to save himself or his friends. It also earned Bilbo more of the dwarves respect than he ever enjoyed before. Here the motif repeats itself, that those things like respect and social power, that the Mechanism would seize by force, are better won by the Magic of one's own nature. It was for this very nature that he was chosen, as Tolkien explains in a letter to Rayner Unwin:

Bilbo was specially selected by the authority and insight of Gandalf as *abnormal*: he had a good share of hobbit virtues: shrewd sense, generosity, patience and fortitude, and also a strong 'spark' yet unkindled.⁵³

The spark that Gandalf saw in Bilbo is kindled to full flame in the darkness of Mirkwood, where heroic and moral light is as badly needed as the literal and physical versions.

The next conflict in *The Hobbit* is the encounter with the Wood-elves where the dwarves are the involuntary guests of an entirely different sort of elf. The captivity under the Sindarin demonstrates a major portion of Tolkien's mythology, which has always been primarily about the story of the elves. The difference in reception between the Woodland Realm and Rivendell illustrates much of the difference between two great kindred of elves, which Tolkien describes openly:

These are not wicked folk. If they have a fault it is distrust of strangers. Though their magic was strong, even in those days they were wary. They differed from the High Elves of the West, and were more dangerous and less wise. For most of them (together with

⁵² Ibid, 158-159.

⁵³ Tolkien, *Letters*, 365.

their scattered relations in the hills and mountains) were descended from the ancient tribes that never went to Fairie in the West.⁵⁴

The nature of the dwarves is also revealed, as Thorin's proud secrecy about his family's treasure mirrors the elf king's desire to build a treasure to match the great kings of old⁵⁵. Here, too, is some more of the mythology revealed, because the Sindarin elves of the Woodland Realm were founded in part by refugees from Doriath, the great Sindarin kingdom that stood for so long against Melkor in the First Age. So even the seemingly simple encounter and escape has roots in the depth of Tolkien's mythos.

The Woodland Kingdom itself is a reflection of past glory, because it recalls the fallen Sindarin realm of Doriath, a forest realm that resisted Melkor during the First Age, just south of the borders of Melkor's rule in Dorthonion⁵⁶. The Wood-elves' thirst for riches, distrust of dwarves, and proud resistance of evil in the face of its borders all hearken back to Doriath, because Menegroth the King of Doriath died at the hands of dwarves, arguing over a crown that held one of the Silmaril, a precious treasure, in an hour when Melkor's power was growing all around his borders⁵⁷. Even the quarrel over the Silmaril has its echo in *The Hobbit*'s chapters to come, for the Arkenstone, the greatest jewel of the dwarven treasure, is stolen by Bilbo to let the elves and men bargain with the dwarves in his pursuit of peace⁵⁸

In the Woodland Kingdom Bilbo saves the dwarves a second time through his same gifts, now more confident than before, but the gifts and qualities that lead to Thorin and company bobbing down the river in barrels like so many wooden apples have already been revealed and commented on above.

⁵⁴ Tolkien, *Hobbit*, 166.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 167-168.

⁵⁶ Tolkien, *Silmarillion*, 115.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 238-239.

⁵⁸ Tolkien, *The Hobbit* 266-276.

Now the narrative comes to the mountain, and to the dragon Smaug. Smaug is a great and terrible threat who overthrew an entire dwarven kingdom in its prime, on his own⁵⁹. For all of his power, the great Shadow of this story is himself a lesser reflection of an even greater evil out of the older legends of Middle-Earth. Glaurung was the first and greatest of dragons, and many aspects of his existence are reflected in his descendent Smaug. Glaurung destroyed armies, killed the great dwarf king Asaghâl in the Fifth Battle of the First Age, and laid waste to the elven realms of Nargothrond⁶⁰. Smaug has overthrown the dwarven realm, killed Thorin's grandfather, and ruined the human kingdom of Dale⁶¹. In terms of Mechanism, Smaug is an embodiment of avarice and pride. He will use force and fear to force others away, or to submit, for the pure purpose of *possession*.

And just as the Shadow archetype reveals unaccepted or rejected aspects of self, it should be noted that Smaug reflects the same selfish desire in both the king of the Wood-elves and Thorin himself. This is perhaps part of why Smaug's downfall will not come through the hands of any of the mighty who share in his sinful natures. Tolkien's letters contain some thoughts on the matter:

There exists the possibility of being placed in positions beyond one's power. In which case (as I believe) salvation from ruin will depend on something apparently unconnected: the general sanctity (and humility and mercy) of the sacrificial person.⁶²

Tolkien's letter is actually about Frodo's self-sacrificial choice to bear the ring to Mordor, knowing he was unequal to the task, but the principle applies to Smaug's downfall. Bilbo has refrained from the traps of greed and selfishness that disqualify the dwarves, and he will go on

⁵⁹ Ibid, "An Unexpected Party"

⁶⁰ Tolkien, *Silmarillion*, 147-148, 193, and 215. There are many other evils but these are the primary parallels to Smaug.

⁶¹ Tolkien, *The Hobbit*, 22-24.

⁶² Tolkien, *Letters*, 252.

to sacrifice all of his share of the treasure for the Arkenstone to try and bring peace. His encounter with Gollum demonstrated Bilbo's mercy. Bilbo's humility is found more than anything else in his hopes and dreams. He dreams of being home and eating a good hot breakfast after sleeping in a comfortable bed. He doesn't dream of fortune or glory. He is the fit deliverer, but he is not alone.

The chosen champions who deliver Smaug reveal as much about Tolkien's theology as his mythology, since the worthy, humble, and pure are rarely the same people as the mighty, famous, and strong. Smaug does not fall to the dwarven prince who has come against him, but to the servant/partner hobbit who uses his ring to see the dragon, his wits to find Smaug's weakness, and his good-natured kindness means that he has a bird friend to carry the message to someone who could deliver it. The message is not carried by one of the great eagles, or even the venerable raven who is waiting in hiding from the old kingdom, but a little old thrush of the old nature, who could understand the speech of men⁶³. And if no bird comes or goes except with Manwë's knowledge or consent, then it is no accident that the same thrush found Bard, the one humble guardsman, loyal to his family in the classic Roman virtue so that he has guarded the arrows of his ancestors, who is of the old blood and can understand the message about Smaug's weakness⁶⁴. So the terrible serpent who has ruled for centuries, defeated nations and armies, and who Gandalf fears has the power to destroy even Rivendell⁶⁵, does not fall to the exiled dwarven warriors, the might of any army, or the power of the wizards. It is a humble burglar, a (divinely guided?) one-pound bird, and an unranked archer who shoots the dragon down with a family heirloom.

⁶³ Tolkien, *The Hobbit*, 226.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 248.

⁶⁵ Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings*, "Appendix A," 1052.

A new historical look at the text must reach back to Tolkien as a lifelong and devout Catholic. There is more than a little bit of David and Goliath in the fall of Smaug, where the hopelessly outclassed hero wins out, informing Tolkien's application of Magic against Mechanism. In medieval thought much of identity had to do with inheritance, as fathers tended to pass down their own roles to their children, and Bard appears to be an archer born of archers. Both Goliath and Smaug were giant, both were strong enough to intimidate entire armies, and both of them fell to a single blow the moment someone faithful shows up with the divine on their side.

The final conflict in *The Hobbit* is the battle of five armies. There is little to be learned from this conflict from mythological standpoint, but a great deal to gain from these scenes in new historical context, because Tolkien's often cynical views of politics and war meld with the now-familiar mythological structure. We have already seen the avarice, pride, and greed of both dwarves and elves as they claim the treasure, and Laketown wants reparations for Smaug's rage, which itself has echoes of the Treaty of Versailles. There are no perfect races in Tolkien's mythology. Even the Valar have limited understanding, and have been known to fail in some aspects of their tasks. But the differences between men, elves, and dwarves are quickly forgotten when armies of goblins and Wargs arrive under a cloud of bats⁶⁶. Even then it is only when an army of eagles arrive that the Children of Ilúvatar win their victory. It is not difficult to see Tolkien's own disillusioned take on battle carry over from World War I to Bilbo's tongue:

Misery me! I have heard songs of many battles, and I have always understood that defeat may be glorious. It seems very uncomfortable, not to say distressing. I wish I was well out of it⁶⁷.

⁶⁶ Tolkien, *The Hobbit*, 279.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 284.

Bilbo, like Tolkien, loses dear friends and companions to the battle, most notably Thorin.

Analysis

The overarching theme that can be drawn from the history and myth tied into *The Hobbit*'s conflicts cannot be properly understood without the history of Middle-Earth. Taken alone, Tolkien's *Hobbit* is an entertaining children's story. Taken as part of the tale of Arda, it is something different entirely, it is a story of redemption that reveals the action of a plan and a power more subtle and greater than even the Valar, Eru Ilúvatar (God) himself.

The First Age of Middle-Earth featured the unwise and doomed battle of the Noldor, ageless but still mortal elves against an evil angelic super-power to which they inevitably lost. *The Hobbit* as a tale contains a turning point in the history of Middle-Earth, the beginning of the end of the Third Age. In the Third Age elves and men have been diminishing, their kingdoms crumbling while the power of Sauron grows in the shadows through the millennia.

That pattern of decay, slowly slipping into shadow, reverses in *The Hobbit* and its backstory. Gandalf worried about Smaug, because he knew that Sauron could use the dragon to crush Rivendell when the inevitable conflict came, and just then he encounters Thorin, the dwarf with the motivation and means to go against Smaug⁶⁸, who walks straight up to him and proposes his quest! This was not Gandalf's plan, but either an incredible coincidence or the working of Ilúvatar, for dwarves are not eagles to be moved about by Manwë or even Ulmo their creator. No sooner do they set out on their quest than the lost swords of Gondolin are found in the most impossible of places. Without Glamdring and Orcrist there is no telling whether or not they would have ever escaped goblin captivity, but they would all have died had Bilbo not had sting as protection from Gollum and weapon against spiders. The seeds of the First Age's tragedies brought victory after victory. Three times the swords of Gondolin fought echoes of ancient evils,

⁶⁸ Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, "Appendix A," 1052.

symbolically redressing the earlier defeats. The Warg chieftain, the giant spider descendants of Ungoliant, and Smaug who was descended from Glaurung all perished at the hands of those they had symbolically defeated.

Like a pendulum shifting, the pattern of redemption gains momentum as the story continues. First the swords save the heroes from Goblins. Then Bilbo saves his friends. Then together they defeat a dragon and two evil armies of Wargs and orcs. Three great kingdoms rise out of it, Dale, the Lonely Mountain, and the Woodland Kingdom all survive and grow stronger now that the evil in their lands have been defeated. These strong kingdoms fought an unreported war as the eastern front in the War of the Ring, where they held off the forces of darkness that pressed in at Sauron's bidding. Gandalf himself, at the end of the Third Age, sums up this redemptive arc in a single paragraph:

Yet things might have gone far otherwise and far worse. When you think of the great Battle of Pelennor, do not forget the battles in Dale and the valour of Durin's Folk. think of what might have been. Dragon-fire and savage swords in Eriador, night in Rivendell. There might be no Queen in Gondor. We might now hope to return from the victory here only to ruin and ash. But that has been averted – because I met Thorin Oakenshield one evening on the edge of spring in Bree. A chance-meeting, as we say in Middle-earth.⁶⁹ Gandalf is not all-knowing, or perhaps the last phrase indicates that Gandalf is using a saying to hide a certainty, for in Arda the divine is ever-present and rarely mentioned openly. But there are too many coincidences for the tale to be chance after chance. Gandalf himself lets us peek behind the curtain at the subtle hand of fate (Ilúvatar) when he spoke hints that Bilbo and Frodo were meant to have it. It was certainly not the plan of Sauruman, Sauron, the Eldar, or even Gandalf who arranged it, so this must be the action of Ilúvatar once again.

⁶⁹ Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, "Appendix A," 1053.

And so the analysis comes full circle. *The Hobbit* can be read on its own as a children's story, but it has a more encouraging message for those who know the history of Middle-earth, because it is the story of a truth that Tolkien believed. Evil's efforts and apparent victories sow the seeds of its own defeat, in unlooked-for paths. The defeat of Gondolin armed the heroes of a later age, and their armament won them through to reestablish a nation, that nation defended the West, and the West endured to see the defeat of Sauron, the last incarnation of evil in Middle-Earth. Without the trolls there would be no *Sting*, without *Sting*, no ring, without the ring, Middle-earth was doomed to fall under Sauron's power.

Further exploration: The Lord of the Rings

But if this mythological pattern is truly that of Tolkien, then it must bear up through repeated scrutiny. That means that *The Lord of the Rings* should demonstrate the same redemptive pendulum-swing, the symbolic reclamation of victory from old defeats, the subtle intervention of the restricted Valar, the David and Goliath victory of the righteous weak over the unworthy powerful, and the 'coincidental' hand of Ilúvatar.

The redemptive momentum is easily demonstrated within the Fellowship itself. Frodo is the ring-bearer because Bilbo was the ring-finder⁷⁰. Both Gimli Gloin's son and Legolas of the Woodland Kingdom would be dead or enslaved if the goblins had won the Battle of Five Armies, and without the princely heroes of those realms the quest could have failed in any of a dozen desperate fights. And last but not least of a quick list, not only does Bilbo's pity save his soul in *The Hobbit*, but the creature he spared becomes Ilúvatar's tool to spare the world when Gollum falls to the doom that Frodo could not embrace⁷¹.

⁷⁰ Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, I:2, 218.

⁷¹ Ibid, 6:3, 925-926.

There are three concordant victories symbolically reclaiming old defeats enough to establish the pattern.

The mound in which the barrow-wight attacks the hobbits is no random hill. This portion of Eriador used to be a proud Númenórean nation, and the Númenórean kings built great tombs for their dead:

At Fornost upon the North Downs also the Númenóreans dwelt, and in Cardolan, and in the hills of Rhudaur; and towers they raised upon Emyn Beriad and upon Amon Sûl; and there remain many barrows and ruined works in those places⁷²

So the blade that Frodo grabs to defend his friends is a blade of Númenórean make, from a time when the art of the men of Westernesse approached the Noldor of old, so it was not much less than a Gondolin blade in and of itself. “Some say that the mound in which the Ring-bearer was imprisoned had been the grave of the last prince of Cardolan, who fell in the war of 1409”⁷³. This is the blade that he used on the barrow-wight, which could not withstand it⁷⁴, but the blade perished when he used it against the Númenórean lord who had become a Ringwraith and attacked him on Weathertop, the location of fallen Amon Sûl⁷⁵.

But the failure of the Númenórean blade against the Númenórean wraith comes at a moment that is worth examining because it illustrates two critical mechanisms that support this paper’s conclusions. First, at the moment that he attacked Frodo called out to the Valar in the Elven manner: “At that moment Frodo threw himself forward on the ground, and he heard himself crying aloud: *O Elbereth! Gilthoniel!*” Elbereth is Manwë’s wife, Varda, Lady of the Stars.

⁷² Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, 301.

⁷³ Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, “Appendix A,” 1017.

⁷⁴ Ibid, I:8, 138.

⁷⁵ Ibid, I:11, 191.

And if Manwë is with her, Varda hears more clearly than all other ears the sound of voices that cry from east to west, from the hills and the valleys, and from the dark places that Melkor has made upon Earth. Of all the Great Ones who dwell in this world the Elves hold Varda most in reverence and love. Elbereth they name her, and they call upon her name out of the shadows of Middle-earth, and uplift it in song at the rising of the stars⁷⁶

So Frodo calls upon the Valar in his moment of need, and his prayers are answered within moments. The Valar are not permitted direct intervention, so Frodo's salvation does not appear in the form of a blast of light from on high, but of Aragorn with fire in hand, facing his Shadows.

Aragorn son of Arathorn confirms another mechanism of the mythology in his intervention, the symbolic redemption from past defeat. Amon Sûl was in ancient times the great tower of the Eriador, the northern of the two Númenórean kingdoms in the Third Age. But Sauron was able to divide the nobles against one another, shatter the kingdom of Eriador into three. Amon Sûl was the primary point of warfare between them, for which Sauron's enemies, Aragorn's ancestors, vied for possession until the Ringwraith Witch-King of Angmar conquered them in succession and tore down Amon Sûl⁷⁷.

So Aragorn the Númenórean heir faces a leader of the Nazgul, a fallen Númenórean lord from the Second Age, the height of Númenor's power:

Yet Sauron was every guileful, and it is said that among those whom he ensnared with the Nine Rings three were great lords of Númenórean race. And when the Úlari arose that were the Ring-wraiths, his servants, and the strength of his terror and mastery over

⁷⁶ Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, 14.

⁷⁷ Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, "Appendix A," 1015-1016. This reference is appropriate for the whole paragraph.

Men had grown exceedingly great, he began to assail the strong places of the Númenóreans upon the shores of the sea⁷⁸

At Weathertop, one of the strong places of his people, Aragorn confronts his Shadow, the rejected satanic fall of his noble blood. We do not see many details of the fight, since Frodo the point-of-view character loses consciousness, but some things must be true. Tolkien states openly that this is not a battle fought with weapons because the Nazul's power is not physical (a detail that has escaped a certain recent filmmaker who shall not be named) but ghostly, and “they have no great physical power against the fearless”⁷⁹. So Aragorn faced the deadliest ghosts in his world, in the place of their own victory over his ancestor's kingdom, and they fled from his fearlessness, or the story would have ended right there. The Númenórean heir stood effectively alone against the power that destroyed his kingdom, and triumphed. If the rest of his story were not full of kingly deeds, this alone would mark him worthy to wear the crown of Gondor.

Aragorn's own life continues the theme of victory from apparent defeat, and redemptive momentum. Dispossessed, the kings of Eriador became the Chieftains of the Dúnedain, wandering heroes with the blood of Westernes. That victory and the wandering it forced upon Aragorn created in him something better than all those who had gone before in the Third Age. The tale of the Númenórean realms in the Third Age is one of expansion in decay. Their kings led armies and sat in ivory towers, but they were manipulated, tricked, and used time and again by Sauron to undermine their power and erode them from within, because he feared Isildur's line. Aragorn had no army, no ivory tower to shield him. He spent more than forty years wandering in disguise, a friend of Gandalf, fighting Sauron wherever he could, and then he

⁷⁸ Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, 276.

⁷⁹ Tolkien, *Letters*, 272-273. The quote and preceding sentence are both taken from the same letter.

journeyed beyond the West into unknown lands, adventuring and learning about men, and the enemy. So this dispossessed heir was forged into a true king:

Thus he became at last the most hardy of living Men, skilled in their crafts and lore, and yet was more than they; for he was elven-wise, and there was a light in his eyes that when they were kindled few could endure. His face was sad and stern because of the doom that was laid on him, and yet hope dwelt ever in the depths of his heart, from which mirth would arise at times like a spring from the rock⁸⁰.

Aragorn's hope won him the victory over fear at Weathertop, saving the hobbits and the world. The wisdom, prowess, and knowledge that he gained as a king in exile (raised in Imladris, forged by battle, taught by the elves and companion to a wizard) forged out of the destroyed nation and not the preserved one of Gondor the very foe that Sauron destroyed his nation to prevent.

The final conflict that confirms this paper's conclusions is Samwise Gamgee's battle with Shelob in the chapter titled "The Choices of Master Samwise." Shelob, literally lady-spider, confirms the reflection of the ancient foes. She is another descendent of Ungoliant, that demonic spider-spirit from the First Age, and her knowledge of those times is reflected in her thoughts. Sam comes upon her about to eat Frodo, grabs Sting and goes on the attack⁸¹. Shelob's ancient nature is revealed when she thinks that neither Beren or Túrin could pierce her armor, when both of those heroes passed away with the First Age.

Once again a hobbit-hero stands where others would fall by adhering to Magic, his own inner nature. Sam's attack is driven by simple, thoughtless, protective love for his master, and he

⁸⁰ Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings*, "Appendix A," 1035. For this quote and the preceding summary as the relevant information surpassed available time.

⁸¹ Ibid, V:10, 711. Also the sentence following.

tries no tricks. When Shelob goes to crush him, he simply stands and holds his hands over his head, so that she impales herself⁸².

But Sam's greatest victory is a symbolic victory not of hobbit over monster. Just as Frodo did at Weathertop, Sam cries out, “*Gilthoniel A Elbereth!*” in the darkness and just like Frodo he is heard, help comes immediately. The first, greatest help appears in the form of words he does not know, in a fashion that the Valar could not possibly provide. Sam sings a hymn of prayer in Sindarin, and that knowledge can only come from the same source as other speaking in tongues, from Ilúvatar⁸³! The glass vial of liquid is a glass vial from Galadriel, the last of the Noldor's noble lineage in Middle-earth⁸⁴, and the gift itself is a victory beyond measure:

‘In this phial,’ she said, ‘is caught the light of Eärendil’s star, set amid the waters of my fountain. It will shine still brighter when night is about you. May it be a light to you in dark places, when all other lights go out’

But Eärendil's is no ordinary star. Eärendil put a Silmaril on his ship's bow to reach the Valar and ended the First Age. The Valar intervened, he lives forever with them, and his ship with its Silmaril is set in the heavens⁸⁵. The captured light of this star is the captured light of a Silmaril, itself the light of the original trees of light that Ungoliant killed. In order for Galadriel to capture this light she must have reached a level of lore and craft unequalled since Fëanor formed the jewels when the trees lived and the Noldor lived among the Valar!

⁸² Ibid, V:10, 712. This and the next sentence are both from this source.

⁸³ Ibid, V:10, 712. No translation is provided for the hymn.

⁸⁴ Ibid, II:8: 367. This sentence and the quotation that follows:

⁸⁵ Tolkien, *Silamarillion*, 257-258

Sam calls out to the Valar, is touched by Ilúvatar, and the light of the trees shines on the tree-killer's heir. Once again help immediately follows prayer, hidden behind the work of mortal deeds, and the divine intervenes and brings victory, driving Shelob away⁸⁶.

So the patterns revealed in *The Hobbit*'s conflict, with all their history and myth, appear again in *The Lord of the Rings*. An ancient sword saves from an unexpected monster, which leads the heroes to help. True nature wins out over the conquering false. The past defeats are redeemed in symbolic victories. Coincidence, and momentum swing from fading defeat to a restoration of hope and an ultimate victory in a pattern so well-woven that perhaps Tolkien himself has been used as an agent of Ilúvatar.

⁸⁶ Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings*, V:10, 712-713.

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