The Magic of Humour

Comic Effects in J.R.R. Tolkien's The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings

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Abstract

This study shows how humour is not only an important tool in the sub-creation of Middle-earth, but also demonstrates humour’s many similarities to the fantasy Tolkien theorised. Humour, its sources and its manifestations, aids in creating a believable ideological framework in building a convincing secondary world. Riddles, jokes, and laughter create communal atmosphere and feeling of belonging, even when a physical environment is alien to us. Comrades, especially in anxiety-inducing situations, together sub-create a reality of their choosing. The humour in Tolkien’s narrative art, like “fantasy”, offers recovery, consolation, and escape. My aim in this thesis is to give humour, a rarely discussed aspect of Tolkien’s The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings, the attention it deserves. I explain how his subtly humorous effects are achieved, and to show what they contribute to the overall design of the sequence of four novels which narrate the story of the Hobbits’ contribution to the history of Middle-earth. In particular, my interest in this thesis is in determining where the comic effects of these books, whether “latent” or actively funny, fit in the grand design of Tolkien’s two most popular works of fantasy.

By using Tolkien’s own theory alongside narrative, humour, riddles, jokes, and laughter I explore the reciprocal relationship between fantasy and humour. Historical information will be used to a sketch the “Englishness” of the Hobbits, an important transplantation of personality from our world to Middle-earth, which has since been identified with and claimed by cultures around the world. Additional insight will be gained through the union of Tolkien criticism with theories of literature, humour, riddles, jokes, and laughter.

The first chapter of my thesis, “Humour”, analyses the sources of humour in Middle-earth and its situational usages. The second chapter, “Riddles”, shows how the riddles of Middle-earth, embodiments of humour, emulate the ways we perceive and interpret our physical and spiritual realities. The third chapter, “Jokes and Laughter”, looks at the magical power of words in Tolkien’s work, the joke’s relation to this concept, and laughter’s role in divinity, truth, and the moral landscape of Middle-earth.
Acknowledgments

I’d like to thank Dr Rose Lovell Smith for all the effort spent “scouring” my thesis.

I’d also like to thank Dr Claudia Marquis for the orientation into Tolkien studies.

To my friends and family,

It has been quite a ride the last two years, thanks for taking care of things back home, I owe you all a drink at the Green Dragon. Cancer is rotten, but like my thesis shows, only when things are at their worst can we experience the ones we love at their best.

Dedicated to my better half, the science to my arts, my wife Michelle, lady of the snails. . .
Notes on the Text

A few quick details are needed concerning the referencing of my primary sources and capitalisation of Middle-earth’s races.

True to Tolkien’s style, references to a specific character or set of characters will be lowercase, such as “the four questing hobbits”. When referring to a race in general, I will capitalise said race, for example: “Hobbits are a happy race”.

The abbreviation for *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* will be THOB and LOTR, respectively.

The edition of LOTR that I am using consists of three separate books. However, the page numeration continues as if it were one continuous piece, as Tolkien intended it to be. As such, I often refer to LOTR as a singular novel in my discussion, but my in-text citations reflect the specific volume in which the citations may be found. Primary in-text citations will be listed as follows:

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Introduction

John Ronald Reuel Tolkien can hardly be claimed as a great comic writer. His critics rarely discuss the comic effects in his works, and Farmer Giles of Ham, probably Tolkien’s best attempt at a funny book, has also never been seen as his most interesting book. Readers of Tolkien’s later and more serious fantasy fictions seem to mostly value them for other literary qualities than their humour: nobody, as far as I know, has reported that their pleasure in The Hobbit or Lord of the Rings relates to the way these books made them laugh as they read. The comic, although it protrudes occasionally, most often works subtly in Tolkien’s great fantasies, which are more likely to be described as occasionally humorous or amusing rather than funny. Yet THOB has an amused feel to it and the more elevated and melancholy tone of LOTR is accentuated by a wealth of bright spots. My aim in this thesis is to give these rarely discussed aspects of Tolkien’s narrative art the attention they deserve, to explain how his subtly humorous effects are achieved, and to show what they contribute to the overall design of the sequence of four novels which narrate the story of the Hobbits’ contribution to the history of Middle-earth. In particular, my interest in this thesis is in determining where the comic effects of these books fit in the grand design of Tolkien’s two greatest works of fantasy.

One generally accepted notion about Tolkien is that he was an accomplished scholar before becoming a published author. His seminal piece, Tree and Leaf (1964), demonstrates his knowledge in the field of fairy tales and mythology. In this work, Tolkien shares his theory on how to view the “faerie” element, specifically faerie’s perilous realms, both old and new. His position is that the perilous realm housing the story is more important to the genre than the presence of actual fairies.1 In the case of a fantasy fiction, behind this realm is the author, the sub-creator, who wields godlike power.2 Much of Tolkien’s thought revolves around the divine power the sub-creator exerts while constructing the Secondary World. This sub-created world must be recognizable enough to inspire literary belief, or “the willing suspension of disbelief”3. The question at the heart of this thesis, simply put, asks “how does humour function in the sub-creation [of Middle-earth] and in the reader’s perpetual realization of Middle-earth?” Other questions create a subset to this one. What is the

2Ibid., 23.
3Ibid., 36-37.
relationship between the humorous and the suspension of disbelief necessary to enter the secondary world? How do the dwellers of Middle-earth use humour in the face of eternal evil and despair? Why is there so much attention paid to the riddle-device throughout the text? Is there somehow a relationship between laughter and higher truths? What is the comic’s place in the cosmic design of Middle-earth, and how does this affect, and how is it affected by, our own reality?

Middle-earth is certainly as beautiful as it is perilous, and it satisfies a key primordial desire of man, to hold “communion with other living things” and nature. Thus, the level of detail spent on the landscapes and environs in Tolkien’s fantasy narrative is remarkable. The reader, once willingly surrendered to the secondary realm, can taste the air whilst hearing the crunching of snow or crackling of leaf-fodder. However, as Tolkien the theorist wrote, the magic of the sub-creation process cannot be properly invoked without populating the realm with inhabitants and infusing them with personality. As Paul Kocher has pointed out in his article *Middle-earth: An Imaginary World?* (1981), without any sense of familiarity there would exist a merely tenuous connection between primary and secondary world. The reader would find it hard, likely impossible, to “feel sympathy or interest for persons or things in which they cannot recognize a good deal of themselves and the world of their everyday experience”. Our use of humour on a daily basis, whether dealing with adversity or broaching a touchy subject with a friend, is perhaps one of the largest connections between Tolkien’s Middle-earth and our own realm. The critics have, until this point, not adequately analyzed humour’s role in creating a believable ideology nor studied how comic effects, whether “latent” or in fact funny, perform a plethora of functions throughout the books and play an important role in the continued relevance and success of Tolkien’s great works.

I regard the process of sub-creation as a joint achievement between author and reader. For the reader, entering a secondary world requires a degree of “humility and innocence”. Literary belief also depends on the readers’ shared understanding of the inhabitants and their characterizations. Refuting the 19th century arguments that everything in fairy / folk tales and myths was an allegory for the natural (sun, moon, seasonal change, etc), Tolkien claims that

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4 Ibid., 15.  
6 Ibid., 147.  
7 In that the comic effect is present but are not actively “funny”  
8 Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*: 43.
while gods take their beauty from nature, “personality can only be derived from a person”, and that men sub-create these gods in their own image. Thor serves as an example of mixing nature with man’s personality. Moving from the gods, Tolkien confronts “something higher glimpsed” in all levels of mythology: divinity and myth are “entangled despite being two distinct things”. This divinity intertwines with the “essential face” of the fairy tale, that of “the magical towards nature”. Still, as divine or mythical the secondary world’s inhabitants may be, they are derived from the same dynamics experienced by man and woman. Sub-creating the wind and climate, geography and topography, and other foundations of the secondary world is not enough alone, personality must be added and recognized. Tolkien has instilled in the Hobbits elements of the English character, particularly in the face of mass devastation, and readers from around the world have since identified with his understanding of English behavior and claimed the mythology of Middle-earth as their own.

Tolkien transplanted a believable personality into his writing of Middle-earth, derived from the “Englishness” he knew, and what larger part of personality is there than a shared sense of humour? By taking a short look at the “Englishness” of Tolkien’s time, accepted at communal levels as being humorous and truthful, and as documented by the humorists, including caricaturists such as Pont (Graham Laidler) and the Punch team. I will show how much Tolkien’s humour has in common with this popular idea of being English. These artists illustrated satiric and dry cartoons, which were laughed at because of the universally acknowledged truths behind them. Many of these cartoons are relative to Middle-earth, some are written about with a measure of affinity, and some (like Fig. 1, below) Tolkien takes a more violent stances towards. Please take a moment to consider this picture:

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9 Ibid., 24.
10 Ibid., 25.
11 Ibid., 26.
12 Ibid., 30.
13 *The Lord of the Rings’* great success came from sales in the United States during the 1960s and 1970s. Spurred on by the success of Peter Jackson’s movies, New Zealand has recently made the mythology of Middle-earth a part of its own. Readership in Germany and Europe has always been strong. Recently there has also been a significant rise in readership in Eastern countries such as Japan. The applicability and relativity of Tolkien’s work seems endless.

The systematic felling of trees became more and more common during Tolkien’s generation. The way Fig. 1 is drawn, with one single tree in the foreground and a completely treeless town in the background, shows the determination of these men to track long distances to chop the thing down. It seems to have reached a point of personal vendetta, where men of all classes, like Saruman’s orcs, see it as their duty to fell every tree in the interest of urban expansion. Even the lake-island is congested with houses as thick as a forest should be. In Middle-earth, however, it is the trees, via the Huorns and the Ents, who embark on a crusade of vengeance. Saruman and his minions unsuspectingly reap the wrath drawn by their industrialisation and destruction of the forest. Tolkien spends many words on bringing the Ents alive and instilling in them personalities that make the reader sympathetic to their cause. Like their history, the thoughts and speech of the Ents are long and drawn out. They demonstrate (through Treebeard’s and Quickbeam’s relations with the Hobbits) entirely different concepts of the pace, time and language. They are not easily roused, but their wrath is formidable. By creating a tree that is humorously like us and yet not like us (Tolkien even based the way Treebeard talks on his friend, C.S. Lewis) yet can defend itself, *LOTR*’s narrative causes us to consider, if only for a moment, taking trees seriously.
There are many other themes shared between Pont’s “British Character” cartoons and Tolkien’s work. Those most prominently linked to Tolkien’s sub-creation include an affinity for pipe smoking, refusal to admit defeat, refusal to admit there being any danger at all, attraction to historical sites, belief that all things used to be better, complacency, and a reluctance to change. All of these thoughts are a part of Tolkien’s work, and are particularly prevalent amongst Hobbits.

While Pont’s cartoons provide a basis for comparing “life in the Shire” to English ideas about themselves, Mr. Punch’s History of the Great War (1919) demonstrates more specific examples of the humour caused by bringing the suburban way of life to the trenches of the First World War. In this picture, a wounded solder confronts a German P.O.W., points at the wound he has suffered at German hands, and then offers the man a cigarette.

Fig. 2. Punch, “TOMMY (finding a German prisoner who speaks English): ‘Look what you done to me, you blighters! ‘Ere—’ave a cigarette?’”, 1919, London (Project Gutenberg, http://gutenberg.org)

Fig. 2 is comparable with the pity Merry shows to Saruman, offering him pipeweed during the trip back to Hobbiton. Behind the humour is forgiveness and respect, something Saruman fails to recognise, instead seeing the gesture as patronising and insulting, since the pipeweed once belonged to him.
Fig. 3. Punch, PADDY (who has had his periscope smashed by a bullet): "Sure there's seven years' bad luck for the poor devil that broke that, anyhow.", 1919, London (Project Gutenberg, http://gutenberg.org)

The man in Fig. 3 demonstrates concern for the wrong things, commenting on the bad luck the German who destroyed the mirror on his periscope will receive. The questing hobbits, Merry and Pippin in particular, also focus on seemingly insignificant things in a rejection of their peril. Other themes of this so-called trench humour that are often seen in *THOB* and *LOTR* include attacks on civilian complacency, attacks on the duplicity, manipulation, and incompetency of leaders, food and eating, and staying calm in the face of danger. The mules and donkeys, which were used to transport ordinance, were also humorous subjects, and shades of this may be seen in Tolkien’s Bill the Pony.

I have found that researching war history and cartoons concerning war-time Britain, along with Tolkien’s personal war experience and the wider historical aspects of the war, has helped me understand his fiction, particularly his humour. Some well-documented components of the war Tolkien experienced that I have found most relative to the purpose of my thesis include the humour that defined life in the trenches, the ravaged landscapes, the
maintenance of normalcy in the face of horrific events and scenes of destruction, the battle of the Somme’s ironic nature, the renewal of an oral tradition and mythology, the effects of trauma and of nostalgia. Through reading about the Somme I came to realize the importance of the constant communal effort soldiers spent keeping the memory of their pre-war existence alive and how together the fighting soldiers used humour to reject their present reality. The slapstick, sometimes violent or even cruel humour exhibited by the generation of scholar-soldiers and warrior-poets that experienced the trenches seemed to me not only applicable to Middle-earth, but perhaps a key construct of the gateway where the Tolkien’s secondary world meets our own. John Garth’s biographical book, Tolkien and the Great War (2003), has been especially enlightening in this regard. I will outline (and later draw upon) certain moments of Tolkien’s life to demonstrate the aforementioned traits and their presence in the text.

Perhaps even more important than the creation of individual personalities, is the emphasis LOTR seems to place on unity and fellowship. The individual protagonists are only small parts of the whole and are responsible to and for each other. Tolkien lived a life full of fraternal societies of differing levels of formality. One of the earliest of these, before the war, was the Tea Cup and Barrovian Society (TCBS), an informal club of friends who, if together, felt they could make a difference in the world. When reading the letters shared between these talented young men, I noticed a trend in the use of the word “spirit” or “spirits”, and a further relationship between this word and humour. After the early death of Vincent Trought, Wiseman writes to Tolkien: “I am in the most miserable of spirits . . . you mustn’t expect any TCBSiness in this letter.”14 Gilson writes to Tolkien about Wiseman’s depression attributed to “health problems that had stopped him playing college rugby”.15 Gilson describes how he and some friends came to the rescue by spending time with Wiseman at a pub: “We were all in the best of spirits.” Even so, Wiseman wrote to Tolkien that he remained “anxious to breathe again the true TCBS spirit fostered by the Oxford branch.”16 To speak in this way of “spirits” remains a phrase used in English today, although its popularity has seemingly decreased.

Shared humour in all it manifestations, whether boisterous laughter or inward amusement, or as morale, results from communal knowledge, such as references to

15 Ibid., 32.
16 Ibid., 32.
recognisable characters, experiences and ideas, or assumptions about fundamental beliefs held in common. Shared humour also helps to define or recall these manifestations, and so makes the bonding process (between characters, readers, and narrator) that much easier. Through shared humour, the protagonists, reader, and narrator unite within the ethical framework of Middle-earth, and so literary belief in the secondary world is sustained and sub-creation succeeds.

The level of intimate connection found in the letters between Tolkien and his friends would magnify tenfold as the lost generation descended from “a time of material comfort and tranquillity [which stretched] into futurity”, 17 into the trenches of The Great War. Unsurprisingly, the reliance on humour in the face of hardship would increase as well. As pre-war rationing began, Tolkien, running a college society, “turned to humour, poking fun at the first-year intake for not taking baths, ‘no doubt’ he said, because they were ‘economising with the best of intentions in this time of stress’.” 18 This is a very schoolboy joke, which in a way marginalises (and in its innocence, misunderstands) the seriousness of the looming threat.

Affirmation of humour’s role in fostering group “spirit” can be found in most wars and their narratives, but the trenches of The Great War became known for the production of parody, irony and satire. A chaplain at the Somme, the battle where Tolkien fought and where Robert Gilson and G.B. Smith died, wrote: “If one got at all down the cure was to go and visit the men in a dug-out; the worse the conditions the cheerier they were and one came away cheered up oneself.” 19 TCBS friends also reaffirmed their fellowship through their letters, such as this excerpt from a letter by G.B. Smith to Tolkien as noted by John Garth:

‘My Career in the Army has not been a success, because I cannot set myself or realise the Army ideals in business matters. What is clean? What is just? What is severe? I know not, nor ever shall, although I have tried very hard, from a sense of duty.’ Now he joked bitterly, ‘The Corps Commander is in the yard . . . and your humble servant sits in his Adjutant’s rabbit hole and simply shivers. I am so much afraid he will rush in and ask me why I haven’t complied with his XYX/s7/u5/3F of yesterday’s date or something.’ 20

Smith’s letter leaves a sense of an intelligent mind feeling misplaced and misemployed. Paul Fussell notes in The Great War and Modern Memory (1976) that, outside of the American Civil War, (and perhaps at a larger scale) the First World War was the first armed conflict

17 Ibid., 22.
18 Ibid., 49.
19 Ibid., 188.
20 Ibid., 209.
where “it was possible for a soldier to be not merely literate but vigorously literary”.\textsuperscript{21} Words that Smith had perhaps previously took for granted, “severe”, “just”, and even “clean” are now, he proposes, beyond his cognition. Is this a humorous letter? Yes, but tragically so.

The letter is, like Fig. 3, concerned with all the wrong things. Afraid more of his own commander than the enemy, Smith is clearly ill at ease with the lack of control he has over his own life. Steven Brett Carter echoes another of Fussell’s sentiments that the glorious heroism of old faded as hand-to-hand combat left Earth’s battlefields. “The role of the individual soldier,” Carter states, “was altered in World War I from a warrior in control of the battlefield to that of a pawn at its mercy”.\textsuperscript{22} Letters like Smith’s, of which there were many, paint a picture of men who huddle in their trench-holes with various levels of unrealized courage and potential, waiting to fight for unclear causes, during one of the least romantic of wars. Bilbo perhaps best echoes Smith’s sentiments, as he too finds himself entangled in the business of others, following the orders of a dubious leader, for an unclear cause. The cause in \textit{LOTR} is clear and just, but we are often reminded of how easily we can be led by our noses to believe that. Still, much of the humour that emanates from Smith’s letter, such as misplaced concern, understatement, and irony, all finds its way through into the Hobbits and other elements of \textit{THOB} and \textit{LOTR}’s text.

I do not here intend that my relating of Middle-earth to war-time England implies that \textit{LOTR} or \textit{THOB} are best read as simple allegories of World War I; the works transcend such a claim. The applicability of Tolkien’s two great fantasy novels is endless; it is an exploration of resilience, an experiment with humour, a test of ability to nurse the psyche through anxiety and terror. Tolkien has vehemently denied any allegorical intention in his work, and writes in \textit{LOTR}’s foreword: “I cordially dislike allegory in all its manifestations . . .” (F; xxvi). His rejection of allegory, however, “does not mean that \textit{LOTR} had nothing at all to do with Tolkien’s early twentieth-century experience”.\textsuperscript{23} I agree with Tom Shippey and John Garth that Tolkien’s work was that of a traumatized author who mixed fantasy with realism.\textsuperscript{24} Tolkien’s mythological creation was very much a reaction to the terrible carnage he witnessed. Tolkien admits his love for fantasy was “quickened to full life by war.”\textsuperscript{25} In \textit{LOTR}, we have a work that has an abundance of high mimesis. There are great characters

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{22} Steven Brett Carter, "Faramir and the Heroic Ideal of the Twentieth Century; or, How Aragorn died at the Somme," \textit{Mythlore} 30, no. 3-4 (2012).
\item \textsuperscript{24} Ibid., viii.; Garth, \textit{Tolkien and the Great War : The Threshold of Middle-earth}: 300.
\item \textsuperscript{25} Tolkien, \textit{Tree and Leaf}: 42.
\end{itemize}
(such as Gandalf, Saruman, Sauron, Elrond . . .) who are “superior in kind both to other men and to the environment of other men”, thus (according to Frye) rooting the work firmly in romance. 26 And yet, we also find heroes that “are very much on a level with ourselves”. 27 These low mimetic characters are commonly found in “most comedy and realistic fiction”. 28 World War I, particularly the events of The Battle of the Somme, greatly informed the characterizations of the common characters, specifically the Hobbit heroes of the book.

In my view, by pitting Hobbits against the evil Shadow of Sauron, Tolkien found a way past the limited “conventional explanations for the evil [he] had seen”. 29 By thrusting the weight of Middle-earth on the shoulders of these innocent, jolly characters he has created situational irony, which “arises from a collision between innocence and awareness.” 30 This collision is a result of (often naïve) expectation meeting conflicting reality. The process is inverted for the Hobbits of THOB and LOTR. It is made quite clear that Bilbo suspects from the start that no good will come of his quest, and yet he remembers his experience with a peculiar fondness, as evidenced by his first proposed title to his book: “There and Back Again, a Hobbit’s Holiday” (H; 284). In LOTR, although it doesn’t take long for Frodo to show increasing worry, the Hobbits (Merry and Pippin in particular) embrace their quest with a kind of innocence and with elation, even with a pompous air (F; 354). Expecting adventures, they are in fact destined to endure mental and physical torture, and will return to a Shire in disarray. Yet as their humorous attitudes evolve through hardship, they mature from buffoon characters to heroes. Their sense of humour, once little more than an annoyance to Gandalf, is slowly revealed as their foremost virtue.

There is a strong ironic vein in Tolkien’s great fantasies, often resulting from, in Shippey’s words: “the frequent gaps between what the characters realize and what the reader realizes”. 31 An ironic motif that is widely recognised in LOTR is that evil often defeats evil, and performs goodness that it does not intend. I’d add to this point, however, that the good in LOTR stands vulnerable to committing unintended evil as well. LOTR stays true to the old saying that the road to hell is paved with good intentions, and this is why neither Gandalf nor Aragorn ever attempt to take or accept the Ring. Boromir is a prime example of this motif.

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28 Frye, Anatomy of Criticism : Four Essays: 34.
29 Garth, Tolkien and the Great War : The Threshold of Middle-earth: 300.
30 Fussell, The Great War and Modern Memory: 5.
his well-intentioned spiral towards evil is well documented, even though he is granted amnesty for his valiant death in defence of the hobbits. Thus the nature of good and evil itself is ironic in LOTR, for as Frodo tells us, only good can create and evil can only exist as a distortion of the good. Saruman is wise and pure, and falls into evil through trying to save Middle-earth in his own way. As Elrond tells Boromir, “nothing is evil in the beginning. Even Sauron was not so (F; 349)”. Jane Chance is a prominent name amongst scholars who have in some way acknowledged LOTR’s ironic nature in her book Lord of the Rings: The Mythology of Power (2001). Using a relatively obscure work by Helen Catherine Mark, entitled A Parametric Analysis of Antithetical Conflict and Irony in J.R.R. Tolkien’s The Lord of the Rings (1971) as reference, Chance identifies a handful of ironic instances within LOTR, such as Gollum’s role in destroying the Ring. John Garth, Tolkien’s most recent biographer, who has also shown a spark for the literary, contends that Tolkien “recognized that ironic circumstance exists and must be portrayed, but it is clear that he did not account irony a virtue”. Although a comment made about Tolkien the man, the same proves true in Tolkien’s fiction. Irony in its most sardonic form, as we will see in Chapter 3, is tethered tightly to the wicked and fallen characters of Middle-earth.

As my discussion has hinted, humour is also associated with, and derives from, membership in a fellowship or brotherhood of good comrades. A good model for this notion is the Inklings (to which Tolkien belonged), whom would meet irregularly at a local pub or C.S. Lewis’s home to converse on intellectual matters, read each others’ work, trade criticism, or just to share good beer and tobacco. According to Humphrey Carpenter, such fraternal groups were formed on a basic concept “that each friend added to a group brings out some special characteristic in the others.” For Tolkien the Inklings filled “an element missing from his life” ever since his school-boy days spent with the TCBS. Although many of these inner rings were (and are) built on foundations of power, the Inklings was built on foundations of friendship. The central interest of the Inklings was more focused than Tolkien’s former fellowship: writing was the group’s lifeblood. The Inklings’ communal humour, like the TCBS before it, included customised nicknames, jokes and in-jokes, words,

32 Garth, Tolkien and the Great War : The Threshold of Middle-earth: 304.
34 Ibid., 143.
insults, feigned threats, rhymes, mottoes, proverbs and more. In a way, these groups of talented men “sub-created” their own world through the use of sheer humour.

Fellowship is an important concept in Middle-earth. To be privy to a community’s inside information, to understand a friend’s lingo or the unsaid context in between his/her words, is to experience a sense of belonging. To acknowledge wit whence humour derives is to be considered a true friend. Contributing to the oral canon of the community yourself might instil in you the feeling of becoming a builder. To be a part of a fellowship is to be a part of something greater than yourself and together you and your friends (through the processes such as argument, repartee, joke and story telling) construct unanimous truths about life as we know it. At the roots of this process we see the similarity between a shared humorous discourse and sub-creation’s need to create the “inner consistency of reality”. Tolkien’s experience among fraternal associations is therefore a relevant example of the camaraderie that LOTR’s fellowship displays. The four hobbits in particular best display the accompanying formation of intimate bonds amongst men and the formation of a communal view of reality, especially in a time of crisis (as will be discussed in Chapter 1). At the platonic level, they share riddles and songs, and the sharing of riddles will become a key link between the hobbits and Gollum as a “fallen” hobbit (as will be discussed in Chapter 2). The hobbits often say things that are humorous while keeping a straight face, such as when Merry and Pippin are tortured by the Uruk-hai orcs (as will be discussed in Chapter 3), for, as it seems to me, just about everything in the sub-created Middle-earth comes with an opposite, or at least a pairing of some sort. The humorous element is no different. Humour can create fellowship, but it can destroy it as well. Tolkien saw first hand cynicism’s tendency to demoralize and alienate individuals. He became disenchanted with the TCBS once it became overrun with cynics, who like Saruman covered their cynicism with verbal elegance. Subjects of discourse once treated seriously were made light of. The sarcasm was infectious, and cast an “alien spirit” which Tolkien did not want to be a part of. He also noted how people would change their masks to match the prevailing spirit. Later, in the Great War, these conflicting spirits would likely have crept their way through the trenches. On the one hand, there would be fellowship, and on the other hand there would be sardonic irony with its seeds of dissent and ambition. War, as a child of politics, sees some men grow intimate as a

37 Tolkien, Tree and Leaf: 48.
38 Garth, Tolkien and the Great War: The Threshold of Middle-earth: 54.
unit while other men undercut each other in search of promotions and fame. As we will see, these conflicting spirits are locked in an eternal struggle in *THOB* and *LOTR*.

As the subject of my thesis is Tolkien’s fiction (not his life), I must clarify that in *THOB* and *LOTR*, the reliance on group wit and chemistry is more formulaic than allegoric. The TCBS, the trenches, and the Inklings serve as examples for my discussion as I believe them to be the easiest way to better understand the concept of “esprit de corps”, a group’s morale, its ability to “sub-create” a shared view of reality, and the role humour plays in its manifestation. These elements in Middle-earth are offered as persistent truths on how people come together in a time of crisis by modifying their communal sense of humour. The psychological element of warfare is as important in Middle-earth as it is in our primary world, and I’ve included this short discussion of some events Tolkien experienced as important because, as he theorizes, the “sub-creator hopes the qualities of the sub-creation flow in from and into reality”.\(^\text{39}\) To me, certainly, *THOB and LOTR* are masterworks, and the qualities of Middle-earth are to be found in our primary world, whether in the trenches of the Somme or at the garden table of this 1940 *Punch* cartoon:

\(^\text{39}\) Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*: 70.
Fig. 4. Punch, "Three hundred and seventy-six, three hundred and seventy-seven, three hundred and seventy-eight. Swastikas as plain as pikestaffs.", 1940, London (Punch Limited, http://punch.photoshelter.com)

Fig. 4 represents the English quality of calm in adversity, finding it to be an especially English kind of joke. The man and women are bravely counting warplanes as if they are birds. They draw their calmness (and especially the look of contentment on the lady on the right) from each other, “sub-creating” a picnic fantasy while rejecting present circumstance. Tolkien’s Hobbits reflect this “Englishness”, and, as discussed earlier, this transplanted personality of Middle-earth continues to be identified with and adopted by readers of multiple cultures and backgrounds.

Tolkien uses humour in part to sub-create a recognisable, ethical framework familiar to us. Through humour, deviations from the social norm can be ridiculed or affirmed. Sometimes this may be detrimental, to individuals, or when there really is a need for social change in real life, but Tolkien’s work avoids the negative effects of ridicule by working from basic moral foundations. The inherent dualisms of his work contrast, at its core, virtues such as sacrifice and humility with immoral qualities such as greed and the will to obtain power over and dominate others. Moreover, by placing the peaceable Shire against the rest of a turbulent Middle-earth, Tolkien shows how the vices of Sauron and Saruman are seeded in our own society. While portrayed as small-scaled and petty in THOB and in the opening
chapters of *LOTR*, imperfections and corruptions among unimportant characters are often shown to germinate into the causation of more severely dire events. The greed, suspicion, false sincerity, and manipulations of the dwarves in *THOB*, often portrayed comically, are taken to a more serious and dangerous level with the dragon Smaug. Lotho Sackville-Baggs, a hobbit whom Frodo fails to take seriously, uses the status and wealth acquired with Bag End to begin the corruption of the Shire (R; 1324-1325). Hobbits like Lotho and Ted Sandyman instigated industrialisation and tyranny before Saruman set foot on Hobbit soil, and these scheming hobbits demonstrate similar characteristics as Saruman, for in Tolkien’s great fictions every grand character shares something with the lesser. As Tolkien the theorist points out, literary men and gods live alike, just as kings and peasants share the same life, and are driven by similar desires. In this light, *LOTR* is very much a cautionary tale. Eternal evils, often shrouded by humorous treatment and lack of outspoken ridicule, are rooted in many complacent societies. *LOTR* uses what Tolkien calls *Recovery*, the “regaining of a clear view”, to show that things we often consider trite ought to be re-evaluated.

The problems Middle-earth face often stem from unwillingness to abandon the status quo. That Middle-earth’s inhabitants allow Sauron to rebuild his forces to overwhelming numbers whilst Gondor’s power fades is a testament to this. So too does complacency lead to the corruption of the Shire. Familiar aspects of social character, accepted without second thought, are shown “from a new angle” once moved into the secondary world. So it is that *LOTR* begins in the Shire, and, as I will show later, the Shire is carried by our hobbit heroes through Middle-earth. For “these simplicities are made all the more luminous by their setting”. The Hobbits, silliness and all, had to be pitted against the threat of Saruman and unfathomable darkness at a much more serious level than *THOB*’s amused and playful narration that mediates between the reader and Bilbo’s peril. Recovery does not only include the unravelling of the bad, however, it also exposes latent virtues, such as the ability to laugh and show courage in the face of death and despair. Perhaps to best trace fantasy’s function of recovery in *THOB* and *LOTR* we need only to trace the humour. Another of fantasy’s functions, as described in *Tree and Leaf*, is that of consolation. The primary use of consolation is the (previously mentioned) satiation of ancient, primordial desires.

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40 Ibid., 24.
41 Ibid., 57.
42 Ibid., 57-58.
43 Ibid., 59.
44 Ibid., 68.
Consolation also rejects defeat and despair. The chief consolation in the fairy-tale is the *eucatastrophe*, “a sudden joyous turn from defeat” and despair. An example of the *eucatastrophe* is the fairy-tale’s archetypal happy ending, which is an artificial device. Both of these consolations, in the Ents’ victory, the saving of the Shire, or Frodo and Sam’s unexpected success, are represented in *LOTR*.

My thesis will rest upon a number of assumptions about Tolkien’s work well-established by earlier critics. I read Tolkien’s great works as those by a traumatized author scarred by war and loss. His work is philological in nature, which means that chapter names and single words may have the capacity to bear complexes of meaning beyond their apparent lowly narrative status. I also read the text as a historical document, written by subjective narrators, who may even (as in Bilbo’s case as narrator of *THOB*) be less than reliable. These books have internal narrators who stand between us as readers and the author. The history of Middle-earth is a fragile one which could have looked drastically different had Sauron not been defeated. As Tolkien the theorist says, history and myth, both created through oral tradition are of the “same stuff”. With this in mind, it is crucial to pay attention to the “alternate history” that the wicked, especially (but not only to) Saruman and Wormtongue, attempt to create using manipulative orations and will to power. As Tolkien wrote (especially in *THOB*) for the sake of his own children, both books are moralistic and spiritual, dealing with the unsaid as much as the said. In relation to this previous point, the work is also spiritual piece that deals with the unsaid as much as the said. For Tolkien the spiritual meant (Roman Catholic) Christianity, for the reader it may be whatever we want, but particular attention always needs to be paid to passing references to unseen forces at work (such as during Gandalf’s early recounting of Bilbo’s adventure to Frodo, or Gandalf’s hint that the manner of Boromir’s death had pardoned his past ethical transgression). Lastly, but furthest from least, these texts were written as a continuous story to be enjoyed during an age where modernists sought to pack their work full of complex meaning; yet it stands in opposition to modernism in its approachability.

By using Tolkien’s own theories as outlined in *Tree and Leaf* and *Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics* (1936) alongside narrative, satire, irony, riddles, jokes, and laughter I will explore the reciprocal relationship between fantasy and humour. Both share many

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45 Ibid., 68.
46 Ibid., 68.
47 Ibid., 30.
traits needed to inspire the reader’s belief in a sub-created, secondary world. Tolkien warns against “quarrying” forms of academic writing, where picking through a piece of work and pulling out only some details “often results in strange judgments . . . [including] forgetfulness of the nature of a story as told in entirety”. But my project aims to provide the reader with a novel way to view the narrative of *THOB* and *LOTR*. As a whole it provides a survey of the comic effects, including humour, riddles, jokes, and laughter, in these works. These elements are rooted firmly within the existing themes of importance in Tolkien, including nostalgia, language and philology, power and its corruption, manipulation, nature and the environment, history, politics, and war. By marrying ideas of Tolkien experts, such as Jane Chance, Tom Shippey, Humphrey Carpenter and John Garth, with ideas derived from the multi-disciplinary thinking of influential theorists such as Northrop Frye, Sigmund Freud, and Friedrich Nietzsche I hope to draw forth new angles through which to view Tolkien’s Middle-earth.

My road through Middle-earth begins and ends, however, with Tom Shippey, one of the leading Scholars on Tolkien. Much of my understanding of Tolkien and his fiction derives from two of his books: *The Road to Middle-Earth* (1992) and *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century* (2011). It is in the first of these that Shippey discusses cheerfulness, laughter, and courage. He points out that bravery in *LOTR*, in contrast to the many sources from which Tolkien derived his work, is centred on “laughter, cheerfulness, refusal to look into the future”. He cites Treebeard’s feelings concerning the sterility of his race, that he is “sad but not unhappy” (TT; 634). From philological evidence, Shippey explains that this combination of words, etymologically, means “determined face” and furthermore concludes that “stout pretense is more valuable than sincere despair”. With this in mind, he points out that the hobbits’ “schoolboy” humour somehow fits in with this connection between laughter and courage. He goes little further than this claim, however, and this is what I plan to explore at points along my road.

Frye has assisted me in dealing with the characters and narrative of the story, since, like Tolkien’s work, his *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) is highly focused on the archetypal and historical. His interest on narrative-as-ritual is particularly vital to my work—ritual aimed at recovering our lost connection to nature. This concept aligns with Tolkien’s aforementioned “primordial desire”, to hold communion with living things. Tolkien’s academic and fictional

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48 Ibid., 17-18.
50 Ibid., 142.
51 Ibid., 142.
work both share this feeling. Fascinated by the ancient, Tolkien concerned himself with the characteristics of folk tales and mythology that withstand the test of time, and set his fantasies in a pre-industrial world where the human and the natural are closely affiliated. The difference between Frye and Tolkien is that Tolkien believed that the recurrent patterns inherent in literature were specifically fragments of God’s eternal truths. If we marry Tolkien’s divinity with Frye’s nature, both of these scholars’ theoretical systems are rather close. Frye’s theory accommodates the well documented shifting of Tolkien’s writing styles, characterisations, and levels of mimesis, from the high and oracular to the low and common. While Tolkien’s theory of sub-creation and Tom Shippey’s insights play a more predominant role in the piecing together of my thesis, Frye offers perception into constructs of narrative and literature in general.

While Tolkien and Frye provide some insight into the comic and its manifestations, I have often turned to other authorities when discussing particulars. Freud’s work proves useful in Chapter 1: “Humour”. Craig Williamson influences a great deal of my thinking in Chapter 2: “Riddles”, particularly his connection between “riddles” and “creatures”. The last chapter, “Jokes and Laughter”, uses Nietzsche as the key to the dialogue concerning the power struggle between Saruman and Gandalf. Nietzsche fits well here with his insights into the will to power, and laughter. Lionel Trilling’s discursive Sincerity and Authenticity (1972) is used to lay out the relationship between language, manipulation, and power. Viktor Raskin’s semantic theories provide a basis for the “Jokes” section, demonstrating how the events of Saruman’s humorous and ironic downfall function as a narrative joke. Uniting the variety of literary and comic theories represented in this thesis, are the dualistic concerns of these theorists, as these best fit Middle-earth, a world of eternal opposites.

The first chapter of my thesis, “Humour”, will demonstrate the sources of humour in Middle-earth and its ability to unify. In this chapter I will explain the satiric aspects of the Hobbits and the Shire. I will then analyse the humorous tone of THOB, and how it translates into LOTR. THOB will be described as an enculturation device to the young reader, which explores the relationship between self and society. Through Bilbo, the reader is often put into anxiety inducing situations mediated by the narrator’s humorous tone. Wanting to provide the English people with a more serious mythology, Tolkien peels back the Hobbit’s silliness to expose the virtue of their humour, and explores the relationship of communal humour, morale, and courage by transporting the complacent Shire through the perilous realm of Middle-earth. This feat is accomplished through exploring all the ways a travelling fellowship ritualistically
draws humour from sources that have been discussed before in Tolkien studies, including: 
nostalgia, landscapes, objects and objectification, fantasy, and the intimacy of fellowship.
By comparing situational instances with the kind of humour derived, I hope to present a new
lens with which to view Tolkien’s secondary world.

My second chapter, “Riddles”, shows how the riddles of Middle-earth, embodiments
of humour, emulate the ways we perceive and interpret our physical and spiritual realities.
Once explained, the riddle-concept will be shown as inhabiting different facets of Middle-
earth’s structure. The riddle is embedded deep amongst the bones of Middle-earth, in its
narrative, plot, and characterisations. The riddle links us to our past, much in the same way
Tolkien uses it to link Gollum with the Hobbits. By looking at the riddle with new eyes I also
grasp at what Tolkien the theorist refers to as “something higher glimpsed in mythology”.
This chapter will therefore also deal with the “entanglement” of myth and religion. Much of
this discussion will be based on the riddle’s tendency in LOTR to mimic the prophetic and
oracular functions of its origins. By the end of the chapter, I hope to have shed some light on
the riddle’s relationship to the unseen, to the long ago and the future, and to the overall
fragility and obscurity of reality as the inhabitants of Middle-earth perceive it.

In the third chapter, “Jokes and Laughter”, I look at the magical (and non-magical)
power of words in Tolkien’s work, the joke’s relation to this concept, and laughter’s role in
divinity, truth, and the moral landscape of Middle-earth. The morality of Middle-earth’s
denizens is tested by a contest of wills between Saruman and Gandalf, their laughter
representing two different paradigms of power. Special attention will be paid to irony’s
place in this power struggle and particularly to its adhesion to the wicked characters of
Middle-earth. In conclusion, I hope to relate all of these comic elements to the cosmic force
at work in THOB and LOTR. Spirituality, albeit undefined, plays a large role in Tolkien’s
great fantasies, but inside that spirit beats a humorous heart.

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52 Tolkien, Tree and Leaf: 25.
Chapter 1: Humour

This thesis, like *The Hobbit* and *Lord of the Rings*, “is largely concerned with Hobbits” (F; 1). What is a Hobbit? They are J.R.R. Tolkien’s creations, embodiments of rustic ideals - “they love peace and quiet and good tilled earth: a well-ordered and well-farmed countryside was their favourite haunt” (F; 1). Hobbits are “relatives of ours” (F; 2). They enjoy the simple things in life and, aside from over-valuing respectability, small-scale snobbery, greed, and selfish ambition, along with accompanying gossip (of which the Sackville-Baggins offer many examples), their society as a whole remains conservative, peaceable, and tidily in order. Hobbits show little interest in the outside world, and are more frightened of social exposure and scandal than they are of any mounting evil. All in all, the Shire is the epitome of peace time complacency.

Hobbits are comic by nature yet satirical by design. They are comic since to be comic means merely to induce amusement.\(^\text{53}\) Satire, however, uses humour as a weapon.\(^\text{54}\) Satire ridicules\(^\text{55}\), and Tolkien certainly creates humour at the Hobbits’ expense. Since the Shire was based on suburban England of Tolkien’s time, then this society too is criticised. Through the use of Hobbits Tolkien criticises the existing English society of his time by comparing the traits that should be favoured (the Hobbits’ hidden courage, their love of trees, good food and friendship, etc) with those that ought to be derided (excessive snobbery, fastidiousness, gluttony, laziness, industrialisation, ambition, and so on). Satire often uses magnification of human physical traits, as in Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*. Judging the Hobbits’ physical characterisations alone remains inconclusive: their small stature may be seen as accompanying their trivial concerns at home, and fat bellies their festive ways, but their animal-like, hairy, and elongated feet demonstrate a spiritual attachment to nature (a quality Tolkien surely saw, and portrays in the book, as one of their most redeemable). So while Hobbits’ odd appearance does work towards the comic, it is not wholly satirical. The satire, then, is created not through the magnification of physical human traits but rather through Tolkien’s mimicry of ordinary life in an unordinary world. Hobbits scheme, gossip, share


\(^{54}\) Ibid., 353.

tobacco and beer, and aim to please others, even at their own expense. They may embody rustic ideals, but they are certainly not idealistic creations. The Sackville-Bagginses, for example, are scowling, greedy, demanding, “rather offensive”, and the list goes on (F; 39, 49, 50, 52). One might consider them true “sons of bitches”, which is precisely how Frodo thinks of them, “whatever happens to the rest of my stuff, when the S.-B.s get their claws on it . . .” (F; 89). Yet, for all the squabbling of the Sackville-Bagginses, the Hobbits are ultimately harmless when left to their own devices.

There are two brands of satire: Horatian and Juvenalian. Juvenalian satire is severe in its judgment, like that of Alexander Pope or Jonathan Swift. In Horatian satire, as defined in the Abram’s and Harphams’ *Glossary of Literary Terms*:

...the speaker is an urbane, witty, and tolerant man of the world, who is moved more to wry amusement than to indignation at the spectacle of human folly, pretentiousness, and hypocrisy, and who uses a relaxed and informal language to evoke from readers a wry smile at human failings and absurdities...

This is Tolkien’s type of satire; while subjecting his characters to ridicule, he does it in a mild and affectionate way (his friend C.S. Lewis’s *Screwtape Letters* was written in this same mode). To clarify, I am not stating that *LOTR* is primarily a satire—this work blends many modes, tones, styles and genres. I am arguing; however, that Tolkien (like Shakespeare, Goethe, and Lucretius before him) uses satire as a parergon. It is an embellishment that serves as a part of the whole, and it offers an entry into Tolkien’s deployment of humour in his work. By placing the Shire against dire circumstance, Tolkien analyses the superficiality of the English people when faced with war. Everyday social contrivance seems humorous when all are threatened by pillaging hordes of demonic creatures.

Satire makes things (usually social or political) to expose serious conditions. In *LOTR*, the satire of the Hobbits largely happens within the space of the Shire. The Shire follows us throughout Middle-earth, however, such as through the Hobbits’ fondness of storytelling. One example of this device is when Merry, in Bree, shares a story about when “Will Whitfoot, the Mayor, and the fattest hobbit in the Westfarthing, had been buried in chalk, and came out like a floured dumpling” (F; 204). The witty simile linking the archetypal fat-cat politician to the food he eats is an extreme example of a common hobbit

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56 The choice of abbreviation in this sentence, knowing Tolkien’s penchant for wordplay, likely mirrors S.O.B.s
characteristic, that they “are inclined to be fat and do not hurry unnecessarily, they are nonetheless nimble and deft in their movements” (F; 1). Right here, on the first page of the book, the paradox of the Hobbits is shown. They tend to be fat because they are often lazy and complacent, not because they don’t have the ability to be active. The narrator assures us they are quite capable when they need to be. Silly creations such as the Mayor and the uppity Sackville-Bagginses represent symptoms of a society interested only in itself. Tolkien even twists words to add detail to the satirising of the Hobbits. By using “gentlehobbit” instead of gentleman, “shiriffs” instead of “sheriffs”, Tolkien keeps both wordplay and satire in the forefront of the portions of the narratives concerning anything “hobbitish”. The humour lurks even when the situation (such as the taking over of the Shire) is anything but funny.

Another related source of amusement for the reader is Tolkien’s use of the ironic, which will be explicated further in this chapter and reappear in chapter three. Irony differs from satire in that instead of using the silly make a serious point, the serious is made silly. The chief example of this is the fall of Saruman, and the ironic scheme of vengeance he perpetrates against the Shire. Jane Chance puts a finger on the ironic pulse of LOTR: “Tolkien’s joy in creating characters is to reverse suspicious expectation in his ‘heroes’ and his readers”. She cites Gollum and Farmer Maggot as two examples of the ironic in LOTR. Gollum’s disobedience to Frodo saves the day when he bites the Ring off of Frodo’s hand, finger and all. Maggot, whose reputation to the young hobbits matches his name, protects them.

Shippey believes, and I agree, that the hobbit’s “schoolboy humour” is related to courage. As the narrative wears on, the hobbits’ jovial side is revealed as a quality of resilience in the face of mounting anxiety. Early demonstrations of the Hobbits’ silliness provide contrast for this later virtue. As LOTR unfolds, the superficiality of the Hobbits becomes more acceptable flaw than tedious annoyance. Even the wicked Lobelia Sackville-Baggins’ ferocity becomes endearing when we hear the story of her umbrella-wielding assault on a ruffian leader (R; 1326). Our hero hobbits are inherently good, yet they only learn the hard lessons of life once removed from the Shire’s bounds. Food, which they are used to eating six times a day, becomes a commodity (F; 193). Beer, highly coveted by the hobbits, will be similarly rare. Before leaving the Shire, Sam says “fare-well to the beer-

59 Shippey, The Road To Middle-Earth: 143.
barrel in [Bag End’s] cellar” (F; 92). One can’t help but think that the drinking that happens before the quest is as appreciated as it is vacant of meaning when compared to draughts obtained along their way. The former experience is that of mischievous young men, the latter is a welcome respite and jovial reconnection with missing war comrades. After their rations run short, Pipe-weed too becomes even more of a rare find on the various Hobbit quests and is obtained as a spoil of war. Friendship, however, is the most valued and readily available of these comforts, as it is immaterial and ever able to be replenished.

By dragging his hobbits across a Middle-earth rife with war and world-changing events, Tolkien presents us with a fair view of the petty things that sustain our reality, for better or worse. As Tom Shippey puts it, the “good” characters of LOTR “have to make the best of things and not confuse ‘sorrow’ with ‘despair’ . . . stout pretence is more valuable than sincere despair”. The prototype of this behavioural pattern is first seen in THOB’s first chapter, “An Unexpected Party”. Bilbo’s manners are pushed to the extreme as his home is taken over by an enigmatic magician and a band of rugged dwarves. He puts on a happy face in the foreground while brooding, panicking and getting angry in the background. He kindly offers them tea, beer, seed-cakes, red wine, raspberry jam, apple-tarts, mince-pies, cheese, and so on, but beneath the hospitable surface, he feels “flustered” at best (H; 19-21). Making the thirteen dwarves supper and cleaning up after them is surely a considerable task, but this scene is only the first step in a stress and relief pattern, present in both THOB and LOTR, that marches through an escalating scale of terror.

The Hobbit is a children’s book. A prepubescent clumsiness seems ever-present as we watch Bilbo bumble along, nevertheless managing to grow as a hobbit and find his place in the world. This dynamic is one piece in a whole complex of effects in Tolkien’s THOB that leaves us with a book that reads as always amused but not necessarily funny. Bilbo navigates moral landscapes with the dexterity of a child, showing (where appropriate) polite

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60 The Hobbits apparently drink a great deal at Bilbo and Frodo’s birthday parties, The Green Dragon, and at Farmer Maggot’s house.
61 The prime example of this would be when Merry and Pippin reunite, and share a drink with, Gimli and Legolas.
62 Merry scavenges pipe-weed from the ruins at Orthanc and later smokes it in Théoden’s remembrance (TT; 733, R; 1138). Food, water and tobacco would have been scavenged off the dead at the Battle of the Somme in similar fashion.
63 Shippey, The Road To Middle-Earth: 143.
manners, heroism, even deceit. Compounding an impression of anxiety is the fact that the narrator does not overtly signal that this is funny. What is or isn’t supposed to be comical is neither hinted nor dictated to the child reader. Although *THOB* was originally crafted as a children’s book, which is inherently a device of enculturation, the reader is never *told* that something should seem funny to them. The narrator’s humour remains dry; he never acknowledges the comic content of his work.

One result of this writing style is that *THOB* reads in mirror-like fashion. Instead of being taught and indoctrinated by the text, the reader is left to explore what Charles Horton Cooley called the “Looking Glass Self”. This socio-psychological term means simply that a person’s identity is determined by how that person imagines society sees them. Tolkien’s work can be seen as a measuring stick of the reader’s literary aptitude. The narrator’s voice is so paradoxically authoritative and amicable that it beckons the mind’s penchant to assess “the judgments of the other mind.” It poses a challenge to the young reader, and this is an inherently anxiety-inducing way of engaging the young reader. Through identifying and sharing what the reader believes the narrator sees as humorous, the reader becomes party to a proffered club of enlightened, adept readers. *THOB*, therefore, is more of a test than a lesson; the tone of the narrative is often one of puzzlement. The reader must look to the characters’ actions and responses in order to gauge appropriate situational reactions. Since the reader is tested alongside Bilbo, the mirror-device works at two different levels. Where the reader tries to guess the mind of the narrator, Bilbo spends a good deal of the book demonstrating the same approval-seeking behaviour. The main question is, for both Bilbo and the one reading him: whose approval should he be seeking? *THOB* persistently offers Hobbit behaviours, often through Bilbo, as a foil to English values and customs. Both Bilbo and the reader develop awareness of, analyse, and perhaps indoctrinate alien beliefs into their own selves. As Bilbo judges the best way to react to the situations he is placed in, his actions are judged by the reader. We are introduced to this whole process straightaway in “An Unexpected Party”:

> He hung his hooded cloak on the nearest peg, and ‘Dwalin at your service!’ he said with a low bow.

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66 Ibid.
‘Bilbo Baggins at yours!’ said the hobbit, too surprised to ask any questions for the moment. When the silence that followed had become uncomfortable, he added: ‘I am just about to take tea; pray come and have some with me.’ A little stiff perhaps, but he meant it kindly. And what would you do, if an uninvited dwarf came and hung his things up in your hall without a word of explanation? (H; 18).

As you can see, Bilbo constantly scans his company for their expectations of him. As if the situation wasn’t awkward enough, the narrator turns the question to the reader – would you have acted in the same way? The narrator of course never gives a clear answer, allowing the child reader to respond themselves. The lesson is in the story, and if Bilbo had allowed his anxiety to overtake him and slammed the door in Dwalin’s face – well, then the entire story of THOB would have ended there. The message, like Cooley’s “Looking Glass” concept, is clear: “people [should] not lose themselves in society, but rather . . . they should examine responsibly the effects of their actions on others”67. For much of the THOB, Bilbo does lose himself in society. For example, Thorin and Gandalf begin preparations for the quest, and Thorin wonders whether they should give “thought to the Necromancer” (H; 35). Gandalf says no, that the Necromancer (who, after LOTR, we know to be Sauron) is “an enemy far beyond the powers of all dwarves put together”, and that the “dragon and the Mountain are more than big enough tasks for you!” (H; 35). Bilbo accidentally voices his scepticism of the quest by saying ‘Hear, hear!’, only for them to turn on him suddenly leaving him “flustered”. He immediately begins scrambling to save face: “Hear what I have got to say!” (H; 35). The attempt to fix his blunder, to make himself appear more brave and competent in the eyes of the dwarves, amuses the reader in an awkward, embarrassing way. For a scholar this would be equivalent to watching a presentation where it is obvious the speaker is finagling their way through it, or even failing miserably. Bilbo even offers up recompense in the form of breakfast at the end of his impromptu advice giving, something Thorin accepts in return for leaving the Hobbit alone (H; 35). Bilbo learns his lesson sorely later when Smaug attacks the innocent people of the lake because of his actions. One should not blindly appease or seek the approval of authorities. Nor should he strike out with thoughts of heroic, but individual, gain. The hero has a responsibility to society as a whole. This is something that we arrive at comically in THOB but which is taken progressively more serious throughout LOTR. When a hero puts himself selflessly in the line of danger for the sake of society then they remain part of a group spirit much more galvanized than the

67 Ibid., 87
individual. The questing hobbits of _LOTR_ never forget what purpose they are serving: to save the Shire.

_LOTR_ was created in a similar fashion to _THOB_, part of its purpose being to furnish the English people with a mythology to call their own. 686970 Ruth Noel outlines three purposes of mythology in her book _The Mythology of Middle-earth_: “to glorify history with supernatural events, to explain the unknown, and to hallow tradition”. 71 These three workings of myth may be seen as helping to “impose order on the chaotic universe around us”. 72 Tolkien’s generation, who fought in one world war and later witnessed the rise of a second, knew much of chaos. 73 It is no wonder that Tolkien saw the need to make mythology relevant again, to re-evaluate the pillars that support community, beginning with the simplest social customs. Perhaps most importantly, “the enactment of myth through ritual is a way of affirming membership of a specific group”. 74 Seen in this light, the reading (and writing) of _THOB_ and _LOTR_, as ritual, binds the participators together through the mutual conclusions we reach when judging the actions of Middle-earth’s characters. Comic ritual works in the same way, the mutual recognition of what humour is appropriate or not binds the Fellowship together. The recognition of the comic also reaffirms the reader’s own morals. At the base level, we accept that the Orc’s laughter at other’s misfortune is wrong, and that Gandalf’s laughter at silliness and folly is acceptable.

The English resemblances in the Shire are meticulously detailed. Hobbitish society is set up once again as a scaled-down microcosm of suburban and rural English life, a foil reflecting daily life with all its rituals and curiosities. We also find the narrative style at the beginning of _LOTR_ reflects this playfulness, and it is here that the narration is closest in style to its predecessor. In _LOTR_ we also find a great deal of understatement (in the humour) and overstatement (in the gossip), a sense of indirection, and a distinct gap between readers’ access to inside information while the participators are uninformed and often confused.

73 One needs only to turn to the T.S. Eliot’s Anthem-Poem _The Wasteland_ (1922) to obtain a sense of the chaos “The Lost Generation” dealt with.
74 Wainwright, _Tolkien’s Mythology for England : a Middle-Earth Companion_: 17.
Bilbo’s birthday party serves as an opportunity to re-establish all of these things, and the arrival of Gandalf again brings enigma and puzzlement back to the Shire’s orderly existence. In the chapter “The Shadow of the Past” Gandalf retells Bilbo and Gollum’s subterranean riddle-game. Through the telling of a story, the wizard pulls the Ring out of the obscure surroundings of the riddle-game and reinvents it inside Bag End. The Ring, so innocently exploited by Bilbo in the first book, turns from utility to threat. Like Bilbo’s contest with Gollum, the Ring too is now enigmatically bound in darkness. It comes complete with a riddling rhyme, and henceforward the quest begins. Frodo is forced to leave his old society, but he (and his hobbit companions), as we will see, carry this society with them. The four friends will travel through Middle-earth inside of a comic bubble, their humorous antics acting to reinforce the rituals of their daily lives, thus granting them an identity among strangers and a feeling of place in an alien world.

What was created for England, however, has since outgrown its intention. As Patrick Curry notes, people of varying cultures find “in the hobbits an accessible native tradition, centred on a ‘small,’ simple and rural people—and self—with which to begin, and end renewed.”

“Englishness” alone is not necessarily “inscribed in the text”, and many other cultures have embraced the trilogy as their own. Nevertheless, the England Tolkien knew, due in part to its fluctuating moments of peace and warfare, serves as a useful canvas upon which to lay LOTR’s narrative. LOTR relies on constant cycles of stress and release. This pattern is what Tolkien calls eucatastrophic. Eucatastrophe is the sudden joyous turn from defeat, and, to Tolkien, one of fantasy’s most defining elements. It is a denial of eternal defeat and despair, and relegates sorrow to the temporary. Tolkien’s protagonists, then, wear the best face they can while awaiting inevitable emergence from sorrow. The British people during Tolkien’s time demonstrated a similar characteristic. From the battlefields of World War I through an age of rising anxieties leading to World War II, good humour in the face of “mounting evil threatening . . . native soil” became a reality of what it meant to be English (see Fig. 4). Turning to THOB, we can sift the relativity of this claim. In THOB, there is scantily a moment to enjoy without some anxious tempering to enjoyment, such as when Bilbo cheats Gollum out of winning the riddle game. He is relieved, but we are told in the

76 Ibid., 21.
77 Tolkien, Tree and Leaf: 68, 70.
next sentence that “he could not trust this slimy thing to keep any promise at a pinch” (H; 84). When Bilbo provokes Smaug at the end of their game of words, his pleasure at his cleverness gives way to being “worried and uncomfortable” (H; 217). He then coins the phrase, “Never laugh at live dragons, Bilbo you fool!” (H; 216). This proverb stems from arrogant actions that lead directly to conflict between Smaug and the men of the lake. Even the triumph of the Battle of the Five Armies is undermined by the death of Thorin Oakenshield and overall gloom.

*THOB*'s light-hearted tone remains at the forefront of its narrative, never quite letting the reader feel terror even when exposed to terrifying events. One clear example is when Bilbo and the dwarves are abducted by the goblins in the chapter “Over Hill and Under Hill”. The narrator’s relation of the experience is riddled with repetition and alliteration (“Out jumped the goblins, big goblins, great ugly-looking goblins, lots of goblins” . . . H; 67), maintaining a playful elusiveness to the present reality. Even as the goblins appear, the narrator plays word games with the reader: “Out jumped the goblins . . . before you could say rocks and blocks . . . and they were all grabbed and carried through the crack, before you could say tinder and flint” (H; 67). While the words hint at the unpleasant plans the goblins have in store for the company, the mental pronunciation and discernment of meaning behind the words distracts the reader from the peril at hand. Instead of detailing the terror that the captives must feel, the narrator consistently redirects our attention to the detail that will eventually redeem the situation: “Where was Gandalf?” (H; 67). Of course, we know that the goblins would not have their way with anyone without Gandalf having a say. Even as the goblins’ maltreatment of Bilbo becomes more apparent, we are told that he “was more unhappy even than when the troll had picked him up by his toes . . .” (H; 67). “Unhappy” is hardly a large step towards terror, and this word choice carries with it the fortitude of the English character Tolkien knew in the face of death. Understatement has become a trademark of English humour (see Fig. 3 and 4), and it certainly reveals itself in Tolkien’s works. Funnily, the one terrifying thing is the sound of the goblins’ singing (H; 68). The “yammering and bleating” of the dwarves while they are ushered into the Goblin King’s presence summons a vision of schoolboys, ready to be scolded, being pushed in front of an authority. The humour in Tolkien’s work often results from a disjunction between what should be worried about and what is being worried about.79 A prime example of this recurring mechanism in *LOTR* takes place when Merry finds a “crumb of comfort” in

79 As demonstrated by G.B. Smith’s letter and Fig. 3
Aragorn’s and the hobbits’ predicament at the Prancing Pony, that they “can have breakfast” while waiting for Butterbur to secure a pony (F; 233).

The tempering of humour and triumph with fear, moral anxiety and loss is a theme that carries over into LOTR. The successful completion of the quest to destroy the One Ring is directly tied to the evaporation of Elvish magic. No matter the outcome of the War of the Ring, they are facing a world of lost magic. Winning means to lose less, there will be no victory without severe loss, and (as Shippey points out) the “casualties include, besides Théoden and Boromir, beauty, Lothlórien, Middle-earth and even Gollum . . . the characters are aware of their losses all the time, and bear a burden of regret.”

In LOTR, an “elemental” world ripe with consequences and desperate realities provides a stronger contrast and meaning to Tolkien’s humour than in its predecessor. Merry and Pippin’s sense of humour is in direct relation to their courage, a connection that becomes more telling as the novel nears completion. For example, as Ted Sandyman blows a horn to alert the ruffians to the hobbits’ presence, Merry laughs and blows his larger horn, an item obtained by and representative of his bravery (R; 1331).

No hobbit or human can simply brush aside a neurosis, but as Bilbo also shows, we can put on a face and carry on. In the fairy tale, maturity “often requires deliberate or accidental disobedience”. For Bilbo, this means stealing the Arkenstone and using it to broker peace. For Frodo, this disobedience is to Sam and whoever else wants Gollum dead. Only by his decision to show pity to Gollum is the Ring ultimately destroyed. After he decides to take responsibility for his actions, Bilbo gains maturity through learning how to create an image of himself that other people can respect. Even so, his eventual adoption of formal behaviour retains a whimsical feel to it. He puts on “his best business manner” (H; 255) during his negotiations with Bard and the other besiegers of his dwarf friends. Bilbo’s diction matches his assumed role of mediator; negotiating eloquently as in “I see your point of view. At the same time. . .” (H; 255). With the history of his maturation behind him, Bilbo is here portrayed as devoutly serious: for the first time, he is the agent creating the action of the story (not just reacting to a crisis). However, while the narrator gives us little reason to doubt Bilbo’s sincerity, it remains difficult to separate Bilbo in this present form from the familiar Bilbo of the past. Being exposed to the events leading up to Bilbo’s

80 Shippey, The Road To Middle-Earth: 143.
maturation, I find myself sceptical when presented with Bilbo’s “sincere” persona. Beneath his *narrated* exterior swells the reader’s experience of *THOB*’s somewhat anxiety-inducing narrative. It is not unreasonable to suppose that Bilbo’s own persisting undercurrents of self-doubt, anxiety and worry still swell beneath his exterior.

Thus Bilbo introduces us to a theme which will be carried on into *LOTR*, becoming more demanding of the reader as it acquires moral seriousness and complexity. Tolkien acts as his own critic when he writes to his publisher, stressing the need for more realistic stress to place against the hobbits’ penchant for good manners and joviality:

… Mr.Baggins began as a comic tale among conventional and inconsistent Grimm’s fairy-tale dwarves, and got drawn into the edge of it—so that even Sauron the terrible peeped over the edge. And what more can hobbits do? They can be comic, but their comedy is suburban unless it is set against things more elemental.

Tolkien’s fiction reflects likewise dissatisfaction with the face value of “suburban” humour as demonstrated in my introduction by examples from Pont. Suburban humour is put through Tolkien’s process of recovery (see page 15) so that it may be seen from a new angle. Tolkien notes that “fairy-stories deal largely, or (the better ones) mainly, with simple or fundamental things, untouched by Fantasy, but these simplicities are made all the more luminous by their setting.” A society’s sense of humour is one of these familiar things that undergo little scrutiny. We find the background of the narrative increasing in its contrast to Hobbiton. The background is increasingly “angry”, dark and menacing. The hobbits and their companions are forced to exhaust all their psychological mechanisms of defence in a persistent refusal to be “distressed by the provocations of reality, to be compelled to suffer”. The narrative is henceforward a conflict of humour and despair. The remainder of this chapter will explore “natural” sources of humour, and the characters’ artificial attempts at manufacturing them, and we will analyse: the relationship between Middle-earth’s nature and the protagonists’ psyche, the three main manifestations of nostalgia (memory, storytelling, mimicry), and the role they play in the minds of the hobbits, the differing ways characters draw their cathexis (emotional energy) from objects and fantasy, and remove this energy through the process of objectification, and the intimacy of fellowship and touch.

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84 Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*: 51.
Landscapes and Environment

First to be discussed is Middle-earth itself, the landscapes of which are engaged in constant battle with the Shadow of Mordor. The environments in which the characters find themselves serve as indicators for their base levels of morale, and are manipulated by the other means listed in this chapter. Aesthetically pleasing landscapes and environments support the hobbits’ and their allies’ resilience. Lothlórien is “[j]oy and happiness incarnate . . . [that offers] the delight of living things, especially trees, and acceptance and toleration of all creation.”\footnote{Chance, The Lord of the Rings : The Mythology of Power: 53.} Elements of the environment can heal physically, such as Aragorn’s use of the medicinal plant \textit{Athelas}, and the land also heals mentally, as the “green smell” serves Legolas (F; 259, TT; 551). The hobbits’ spirits are entwined with the landscape. Like much of Middle-earth’s recipe this ingredient can be found early in the book, specifically in the chapter “A Shortcut To Mushrooms”, where the hobbits are being tracked by a mounted Nazgul, but anxiety dissipates as they take in their surroundings.

At first they felt afraid, away from the shelter of the wood . . . [as the sun came out from the clouds] . . . Their fear left them, but they still felt uneasy . . . Soon they came into well-tended fields and meadows: there were hedges and gates and dikes for drainage. Everything seemed quiet and peaceful . . . Their spirits rose with every step. (F; 119)

Conversely, dreary spaces like the Dead Marshes work against the psyche. “The gasping pools were choked with ash and crawling muds, sickly white and grey, as if the mountains had vomited the filth of their entrails upon the lands about . . . [the land] was defiled, diseased beyond all healing” (TT; 825). Upon viewing the landscape, Sam tells Frodo that he feels physically sick.

These two opposing landscapes of \textit{LOTR} are reminiscent of landscapes’ tendency to reflect the conflict perpetrated upon them, such as the “before and after” of modern warfare. Tolkien’s painstaking (a sceptic might say tedious) detail spent on his landscapes’ differing characteristics shows little doubt that the fellowship navigates a land whose features and whose weather, even more so, reflect differing spheres of influence between warring factions. Tolkien accomplishes a great deal of this through personification. In the first chapter, Bilbo’s fireworks show presents us with “a forest of silver spears that sprang suddenly into the air with a yell like an embattled army” (F; 36). Even in the unnatural act of pyrotechnics the inherent relation between morale and nature is found. The elf-lands become like protagonists,
and the stories’ heroes receive as much aid from the landscapes as they do from the denizens that inhabit them, “such was the virtue of the land of Rivendell that soon all fear and anxiety was lifted from their minds” (F; 356). The elf-lands in particular are also in conflict with the Shadow. This dualism is described by the Elf Haldir of Lothlórien: “the Shadow has crept northward all about us. . . The mountains to the west are growing evil; to the east the lands are waste . . .” (F; 453). Mordor and the places enveloped by the Shadow are seen collectively as a “wilderness of fear” (R; 1220). We even see an ecological invasion in the form of the Crebain, who “are not natives here . . . [and are] spying out the land” (F; 371). Other environments (The Old Forest, Mirkwood, Fangorn) encompass differing ratios of both elements.

Much has been written about Tolkien’s love and depiction of nature and perhaps even more so about his affection for flora, particularly trees. 87 Patrick Curry suggests that it “wouldn’t be stretching a point to say that Middle-earth itself appears as a character . . . [and] the living personality and agency of this character are none the less for being non-human”. 88 What is the personality of the land, though? It performs bodily functions, vomits and belches, but on the whole seems unconcerned with, or unaware of, what takes place on it. Middle-earth is a trusting, beautiful creature; it daydreams unable to see the good and evil forces fighting over its fate. In short, Middle-earth’s personality is Tom Bombadil. Tom is enigmatic, and is often “set apart from or alongside the mainstream of the narrative and the underlying mythology”, 89 because Tom and Goldberry represent the most basic, elements of nature. They are embodiments of Middle-earth’s primordial aesthetic, celebrations of natural love, procreation and nature’s design. Even Tom’s dialect is aesthetic; his nonsensical “words” are meant to be experienced and felt more than interpreted. The constant melody that pours forth from his lips brightens the foreboding Old Forest into a lighter contrast. The hobbits, feeding off his unbridled jolliness, persevere through the Old Forest: “Already half their weariness and all their fears had fallen from them” before they reach Tom’s house, which stands as a symbol of Bombadil’s humour: a beacon of “golden light” (F; 160) in the middle of an “ominous” (F, 159) forest. The Old Forest, previously introduced as “dangerous as the black riders” (F, 140), is all but forgotten by the hobbits. Tom’s elemental

87 Curry, Defending Middle-earth : Tolkien, Myth and Modernity: 50-51.
88 Ibid., 50.
glow is similar to that of the “wood that burn[s] merrily” before the fellowship’s descent into Moria (F; 379).

And this is why the best place for Tom is where Mathew Dickerson and Jonathan Evans place him, as a personified symbol of Middle-earth. Like Middle-earth itself, Tom remains aloof to the concerns of men and their allies. Gandalf explains this phenomenon at the council of Elrond: if they were to press him to take the Ring “... he would not understand the need. And if he were given the Ring, he would soon forget it, or most likely throw it away. Such things have no hold on his mind. He would be a most unsafe guardian ...” (F; 346). Although powerful, ancient, and enigmatic, Tom is ignorant. His ignorance, though, is also his innocence. Think of a forest of trees, which some people want to chop down for houses while another faction proposes making it a reserve. The trees in our world have no Ent-agency to make decisions for them. Like Tom, Goldberry, and Middle-earth, they are just there, aesthetic as can be and ruthlessly at our mercy. They are a testament to nature’s inherent humour and resilience and set the bar towards which all the good characters of LOTR aspire. Their rituals of humour are symbolic of man’s “voluntary effort[s] to recapture a lost rapport with nature”; understanding ritual, in Frye’s definition: “a ritual being a temporal sequence of acts in which the conscious meaning or significance is latent; it can be seen by an observer, but is largely concealed from the participators themselves.”

The Shire is a country of great antiquity and replete with pastoral rituals and those “human forms of nature that we call farming and architecture”. These practices bring order to world of wilderness. The more efficient we become with these processes, the more distance accrues between our civilization and our place in the natural world. “The pull of ritual”, Frye says, “is toward pure cyclical narrative, which, if there could be such a thing, would be automatic and unconscious in repetition.” Tom’s micro-narratives, the verbalized stream of his thought, seem to be flowing in this direction. He often mouths sounds beyond conscious thought, for their rhythm and place in nature alone. Perhaps the best allusion to the divine pull of nature can be found later in Pippin’s colloquial description of Treebeard’s eyes:

90 Ibid., 19.
92 Ibid., 23.
94 Ibid., 105.
One felt as if there was an enormous well behind them, filled up with memory and long, slow, steady thinking; but their surface was sparkling with the present; like sun shimmering on the outer leaves of a vast tree, or on the ripples of a very deep lake. I don’t know, but it felt as if something that grew in the ground—asleep, you might say, or just feeling itself as something between root-tip and leaf-tip between deep earth and sky had suddenly waked up . . . (TT; 603)

Tom and his sense of humour may lift the hobbits’ spirits but they still do not fully understand him. The alien feel to the Old Forest reaches a comic culmination when Merry is assailed by Old Man Willow and Tom comes to his aid: “There was a tearing creak and the other crack split open, and out of it Pippin sprang, as if he had been kicked” (F; 158). Unfamiliarity haunts the hobbits through their trek and even follows them into Bombadil’s house, which for all purposes is a safe haven. On the “threshold . . . a golden light was all about them” (F; 160). They wait there between the chapters “The Old Forest” and “In the House of Tom Bomadil”, and that chapter begins when “[t]he four hobbits stepped over the wide stone threshold, and stood still, blinking” (F; 161). They take “a few timid steps further into the room” when commanded by Goldberry (F; 161). The repetition of the word “threshold”, the divide between chapters and the hobbits’ ensuing timidity and curiosity all demonstrate the hobbits’ disconnect from pure nature as embodied by Tom Bomadil and Goldberry. It takes coaxing by the enigmatic duo for the Hobbits to be at ease enjoying song and laughter, yet recognising something grander than even their own rituals of humour. The hobbits enjoy melody which, while low mimetically, still has meaning and/or relates a story. Tom bends language to fit his spiritual communion with the world.

If ritual “is not only a recurrent act, but an act expressive of a dialectic of desire and repugnance”\(^\text{95}\), the hobbits’ humorous rituals stem from their desire to feel the complacency of the Shire versus their repugnance at the thought of being prey of Wargs, Orcs, Nazgul, Gollum, and so on. The hobbits’ experience in the Old Forest is so stress inducing because they are re-entering a world which their society has replaced with cultivated crops and neat rows of hobbit holes. Man-made landscapes have traditionally been thought to represent “living in harmony with nature,”\(^\text{96}\) and the Shire’s Hobbit-made landscape can be seen in a similar light. The Hobbits’ landscape is also a historical one, a preservation of what Tolkien remembered of life before machines and industry. Herrington reiterates David Hume’s long-ago contention in his *Treatise in Human Nature* that people see historical landscapes that are

\(^{95}\) Ibid., 106.

preserved in our world as a relic of “when society had innocence and a simplicity that we have since lost”. More than a quarter of a millennium later, this observation is as relevant as ever. We can find historical landscapes in every protected plot of land that is kept as it was in the past. The Shire fits this description, especially when contrasted with Isengard’s evil industry. Thus, the hobbits tend to often confront the anxiety-ridden wilderness through the frame of their memories of their home. Since the questing Hobbits can only traverse nature, not tame it, the hobbits carry the shire with them. By practicing rituals of the Shire along the way, the hobbits keep themselves from having to reinterpret nature’s complexities or from registering the physical threat differing environments may pose.

**Carrying the Shire: Nostalgia (Memory, Mimicry, and Storytelling)**

Early in *LOTR*, when Gandalf thrusts the weight of Ring-knowledge upon Frodo, the young hobbit tells the wizard: “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” (F; 86). This idea of the Shire is based on pre-World War I England, where “for many Britons the era was a time of material comfort and tranquillity stretching into futurity.” So it is that Frodo speaks not only for himself, but for Sam, Merry and Pippin as well. All of the hobbits carry the Shire with them through their collective and individual encounters with terror. Yet, the uprooting of the Shire begins straightaway, as Gandalf soon nominates Sam to accompany Frodo on his quest. According to Garth, Sam’s qualities encompass the Shire’s most positive attributes; he is competent, diligent, loyal, humble, and altruistic. Sam is a “reflection of the English soldier, of the privates and batmen [Tolkien] knew in [World War I]”, men that Tolkien acknowledged as “far superior to himself”, and the members of the Fellowship (and the hobbits, in particular) are endowed with what may be seen as what I call *trench humour*. Trench humour is especially dry and ironic, and often outright sarcastic. It often stems from a longing for home, such as Frodo’s moment at Weathertop (F; 246), and often results from the collision of past and present realities. This means that there is a constant presentation of things as belonging to a different plain of reality as they appear. For example,

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97 Ibid., 37.
99 Ibid., 310.
a soldier heading to the front trenches might say and act as if they are going hunting or fishing. Thus, even acting normal, in the face of terror can suddenly become humorous.

One of the best modern examples of this process is a scene in the movie *Apocalypse Now*, where Robert Duvall is more concerned with surfing than his responsibilities to the men under his command. The same strand of humour can be traced back to the trenches of the war Tolkien knew, particularly to the Battle of the Somme, “perhaps the most egregious ironic action of the whole war”.

The practising of trench humour might involve waking up each morning, staring over No Man’s Land, taking a deep breath of gore-ridden air and declaring: “It’s a nice day for war”. A humorous stance can be seen as generated by the irony of the whole: “In the Great War eight million people were destroyed because two persons, the Archduke Ferdinand and his Consort, had been shot”. The Great War has in many ways been defined by the phrase “Lions led by Donkeys”, a reference to the heroic infantry man sent to his death by orders of incompetent men of power.

Resultantly, many see the humour from World War I as inherently sardonic, and there is an element of truth to this claim. Tolkien’s work, does not accept this straightforward view. Beyond ridiculing their leaders and each other soldiers were simply rejecting the present reality of things, such as: their location, situation, and prospects. Is war horrific? Yes, but where we find absolute horror there is also absolute courage. Bringing simple truths of the past lives they enjoyed back home, allowed them the courage to walk into machine gun fire. Simply put, there is humour that is constructive, and humour that is destructive.

Amongst the hobbits and their friends we may find the positive in their shared banter, and conversely we may see destructive humour in Saruman, Orcs, and other of Sauron’s servants.

One way soldiers deal with their stressful existence is to practice rituals of nostalgic value, such as comical songs that tie their past lives to their present anxieties. Where the grand and enigmatic songs and riddles of *LOTR* are to be read philologically, the simple songs are tied to what Tolkien saw in the trenches of the Great War, whose songs and

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101 The Battle of the Somme was fought largely due to political pressure from England’s French allies and held little strategic value.
102 For more reading on trench humour, please refer to *Nice Day For a War* (2011) by Chris Slane and Matt Elliott.
104 Ibid., 1.
105 To be discussed further in the next chapter.
Many Hobbit songs, with their catchy iambic rhythms, would have fit well enough in English trenches and even more so among the Germans (both of which held portions of Tolkien’s sympathy), such as this song about drinking beer:

\[
\begin{align*}
Ho! Ho! Ho! To the bottle I go \\
To heal my heart and drown my woe. \\
Rain may fall and wind may blow, \\
And many miles be still to go, \\
But under a tall tree I will lie, \\
And let the clouds go sailing by. 
\end{align*}
\]

When the hobbits sing this song they are still within the confines of the Shire. However, their singing is interrupted by a “long-drawn out wail . . . like the cry of some evil and lonely creature” (F; 118). In an instant the hobbits switch from gallant soldiers marching with purpose and song to being frightened and out of their element, “trying to speak lightly, but quavering . . .” (F; 118). The Drinking Song is representative of what the hobbits are leaving behind, and their future singing will bring their past to the present when they need it most. The more desperate the situation, the more these songs shine through, such as when Sam fails at first to find Frodo at Cirith Ungol. Sam thinks about “old childish tunes out of the Shire, and snatches of Mr. Bilbo’s rhymes that came into his mind like fleeting glimpses of the country of his home. And then suddenly new strength rose in him . . .” (R; 1188). Singing brings visions of the Shire back to the forefront of the hobbits’ minds, veiling all the looming darkness and desperation, and when Sam begins to sing and Frodo sings along, revealing his position, he provides Sam with new hope (R; 1189).

The same therapeutic power of such mnemonic devices is seen early in *LOTR*, when the travellers come across the stone troll statues left of Bilbo’s adventure: “Frodo felt his spirits reviving: the reminder of Bilbo’s first successful adventure was heartening” (F; 269). “Spirits”, a word noted in my introduction, recurs, and requires some investigation. The Oxford English dictionary has a dualistic definition of this usage, which is split into “high spirits and low spirits”. High spirits, being closest to what Frodo feels, means to have a

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“lively and cheerful behaviour or mood”. 109 But this definition is simply not sufficient. \textit{LOTR}, a work largely concerned with antiquity, consistently attempts to “open a door on Other Time, and if we pass through, though only for a moment, we stand outside our own time, outside Time itself, maybe.” 110 Nostalgia idealises and mystifies the past, thus summoning our ancestral “spirits” and primordial desires. Perhaps the collective, mnemonic imagery of Bilbo’s adventure works for Frodo in this way also. His nostalgia allows for a temporary “mental death” in the present, for him to step outside of his own time. He is for a moment lost in the memory. His revival is a rebirth of the mind, ready to interpret the world anew. The ensuing shared acknowledgment, memory of and amusement shared between the hobbits re-invents their reality. Bilbo has had a successful adventure, and so shall they. Merry then asks for a song, another useful device in the remembrance and reconstruction of the Shire.

There is an interesting moment when Pippin tells Denethor of the songs they sing, “We seldom sing of anything more terrible than wind or rain. And most of my songs are about things that make us laugh; or about food and drink, of course” (R; 1055). Denethor, the suicidal symbol of despair, asks Merry if he would share a single “of the comic [riddle songs] that he knew best” (R; 1055)? Merry doesn’t feel comfortable sharing them, citing that they were too “rustic for such an occasion” (R; 1055). The Hobbit abstains from sharing “echoes from a land untroubled . . . [that could make Denethor] feel that [his] vigil was not fruitless” (R; 1055). Perhaps Merry’s hesitance was because Denethor was already too far gone, or because the steward was too imposing and official. In my interpretation, Merry’s unwillingness stems from a subconscious knowledge that the songs wouldn’t work their magic on Denethor because he couldn’t experience the same nostalgia that Hobbits do when they sang. He could not recall memories of the Shire, and so could not re-create it with Merry, and so robs Merry’s singing of its main purpose. A song alone, isolated from the experience that births them, is an unfulfilled vessel.

The songs, mimicry and other nostalgic apparitions of humour in \textit{LOTR} are all rituals that (briefly) evoke and satisfy the hobbits’ desire to be home. The hobbits’ search for ritual, as we find in Pippin’s acclimatisation to the frontline environment of Gondor:

'Nine o’clock we’d call it in the Shire,’ said Pippin aloud to himself. ‘Just in time for a nice breakfast by the open window in spring sunshine. And how I should like breakfast! Do these people ever have it, or is it over? And when do they have dinner, and where?’ (R; 994-995)

The chapter “Minis Tirith” follows Pippin as he looks not only to compensate for his distant homeland but also to substitute for the lost company of his best friend. He is lonely, and has “had no one to talk or jest with”, but Pippin finds remedy for both his ailments in Beregond, with whom he “ate and drank, and . . . talked now of Gondor and its ways and customs, now of the Shire and the strange countries that Pippin had seen” (R; 998, 1004). The nostalgic reciprocation of story telling results in a fond relationship with Beregond, and the sharing of banter with Beregond’s son Bergil gives Pippin “the best company . . . since he parted from Merry” (R; 1006). Merry too feels the pull of nostalgia, and through him we see the adverse, escapist tendencies of nostalgia. Merry, “now that he was borne down by the insupportable weight of Middle-earth. . . longed to shut out the immensity in a quiet room by a fire” (R; 1036). Merry’s development, his move from escapist suppression to embracing responsibility, mimics Bilbo’s maturation in THOB. Bilbo consistently has thoughts of abandoning his quest and returning home. But when he wakes in the darkness in “Riddles in the Dark”, “[h]e thought of himself frying bacon and eggs in his own kitchen at home – for he could feel inside that it was high time for some meal or other; but that only made him miserabler” (H; 74). The failure of nostalgia to provide comfort in this instance is due in part to the horrifying environment in which Bilbo finds himself. The ability to envision memories is an important tool of morale, whether in the pitch-black trenches of the Great War or on the side of Mt Doom, and when it fails the reader senses genuine despair, as when Frodo tells Sam: “No taste of food, no feel of water, no sound of wind, no memory of tree or grass or flower, no image of the moon or star are left to me. I am naked in the dark, Sam, and there is no veil between me and the wheel of fire. I begin to see it even with my waking eyes, and all else fades” (R; 1226).

Another prevailing manifestation of nostalgia in LOTR is mimicry, specifically of Sam’s father, “the Gaffer”. Hamfast Gamgee, a character based on a real life rustic Tolkien knew112, is an authority on all things roots (F; 29). Sam’s memory of his father keeps him rooted in the Shire, even as he traverses the darkest corners of Middle-earth. He keeps his father’s memory alive through mimicry, such as in Lothlórien (“It’s the Job that’s never

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started as takes longest to finish”), or when held captive by Faramir: “When ever you open your big mouth you put your foot in it” and, “where there’s life there’s hope” (F; 470, TT; 889, 916). Sam’s mimicry may also reflect soldiers’ mimicry of their superiors, at the same time amusing each other while also reinforcing protocol. Nostalgia and self-discipline thus go hand and hand, as they do in Sam. For an example, Sergeant Howard Rowlands, a member of a Rifle Brigade, wrote a letter about how he mimicked a Corporal: “Old Lucas used to say, ‘About his serluting, what I says is yer don’t take it serious enough’. Sam’s father accompanies him as a moral compass, but like many archetypal wise old men, the Gaffer’s psychological presence periodically leaves Sam to his own devices. One such departure takes place in the chapter “The Choices of Master Samwise”, where there are no old sayings or words of wisdom for him to channel, and Sam makes the decision to take the Ring from a seemingly lifeless Frodo and carry on the quest by himself, marking a step into further maturity and the beginning of the transition of Sam into arguably LOTR’s “greatest of heroes . . . [who is] the one ring-bearer who voluntarily, willingly surrendered the ring after having worn it repeatedly” (TT; 957).

Hobbits carry the Shire, its agrarian society and all, with them throughout the narrative, as Sam physically carries Frodo upon his back on Mt Doom. Sam wonders why “he found the burden light”, but reclaiming Frodo as Sam remembered him, he too draws strength from the past: “There was the dear master of the sweet days in the Shire” (R; 1239). When the quest is over and Frodo no longer carries his burden, even in the face of imminent corporeal destruction, Sam celebrates the successful completion of their part in Middle-earth’s history. They have helped create a new order out of the old and spend their final moments (as far as they know) revelling in their accomplishments, uncaring about their impending doom. Sam feels “only joy, great joy” (R; 1239). Freud says that “[t]he Grandeur”, of such humorous resilience, “lies in the triumph of narcissism, the victorious assertion of the ego’s invulnerability”. This implies a kind of self-satisfaction. But I think that Tolkien’s text makes clear his joy stems from who Sam had been fighting for, and whom he would be dying alongside. The Shire is safe, and Sam is happy to die for those he cared about. This personalising of the battlefield, somewhat lost amongst the mechanisation of

113 Macdonald, Somme: 22.
modern warfare, is thus recovered by Tolkien’s great testament to friendship in *LOTR*, and is shown to persist right up to the moment of death.

**Fantasy, Objects and Objectifying**

In his essay *Humour*, Freud consistently leans on the term *cathexis*, which is the concentration of mental energy on one particular person, idea, or object, often to an unhealthy degree. There are many cases involving cathexis and the Ring (which often causes “torment to [the] mind” (R; 1223) in *LOTR*, but perhaps none is as exemplary as Bilbo’s relinquishing of the Ring. Bilbo is overwrought with paranoia, his voice “sharp with suspicion and annoyance” and there is a moment of tension and threat before he concedes to Gandalf’s demand (F; 44). The tension is then revisited in Rivendell, when the Ring lies in Frodo’s outstretched hands between him and Bilbo, and “a shadow seemed to have fallen between them, and through it he found himself seeing a little wrinkled creature with a hungry face and bony groping hands. He felt a desire to strike him” (F; 302). Thus ongoing tensions around the Ring serve as reminders to never put too much emotional energy into an ideal or object, as can be seen in Boromir’s case. He would use the Ring as a weapon against Sauron, against which Elrond cautions, “The very desire of it corrupts the heart” (F; 349). Conversely, Tolkien exhibits many healthy projections of cathexis into objects throughout his work; the process even seems a necessary source of humour as a “state of mind”. The next portion of this chapter will explore the differing cathectic reliances of the Fellowship, their emotional investments, and the objectification of their enemies (the removal of cathexis).

There are many grand, magically imbued objects in Middle-earth, including the Ring, the swords Glamdring and Orcrist, the Elven dagger Sting, and the gifts of Galadriel, to name a few (F; 15, 364, 488-491). This thesis, however, is chiefly concerned with lesser items, ones with little worth outside the owner’s grasp: Gimli’s axe and Sam’s cooking gear in particular. Sam is among the most resilient of Tolkien’s characters, and his resilience is partly shown to stem from his ability to channel his emotional energy into numerous objects. He is a simple man who takes heart in everything he can, so while his happiness at seeing Elves, Ponies, Oliphaunts and Swans may seem almost dog-like in its exuberance, this capability is his virtue. One constant object accompanying Sam is his pack, carried from the Shire to Mt Doom, that he rarely gets to use: “I’ve lugged my cooking-gear all the way from

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118 Ibid.
the last camp, and what use has it been? Naught to make a fire with, for a start; and naught to
cook, not even grass!” (TT; 789). His cooking gear does serve him well however in that it has the agency to generate good humour in the present, as well as generating beneficent memories for the future. A case in point is when Gollum brings him a raw rabbit and Sam creates a rabbit stew. They enjoy the meal in the present, intimately “sharing the old fork and spoon . . . [and] allowed themselves half a piece of the Elvish waybread each. It seemed a feast” (TT; 857). The importance of this bonding exchange is illustrated by the chapter title, “Of Herbs and Stewed Rabbit”. The event is so memorable that Sam draws on it in the future, on the ground of Mt. Doom: “Do you remember that bit of rabbit, Mr. Frodo?” (R; 1227). At this point, Frodo laments his inability to see such memories, and this vacancy raises a warning for the critical reader. The undressing of Frodo’s memories coincides with his loss of cause, and consequently foreshadows the failure of his quest.

As the hobbits prepare for the last push to Mt. Doom’s summit, the shedding of their items is a symbol of spiritual significance. The last leg of their journey is completely in sacred fashion, as in the parable of Job, where God, accepting a challenge from Satan, strips Job of all his possessions to prove his faith. Job, in spite of losing all of his wealth and family, declares his faith through an act of undressing: “Naked I came out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return: Lord has given, and Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of Lord.” Like Job, the righteous in LOTR also suffer loss. When Sam is forced to discard his gear into a fissure, the “clatter of his precious pans as they fell down into the dark was like a death-knell to his heart” (R; 1227). Sam soon trades one burden for another, as he carries Frodo to the point of exhaustion, until they both “crawl like small grey insects” (R; 1232). On the primary level, Sam’s attachment to his gear is somewhat ridiculous, especially at what appears to be a one-way, divine journey. There is serious weight behind his loss, though, if we consider the emotion and memory with which Sam has imbued his items. Luckily for Sam, his sacrifice, like Job’s will ultimately be rewarded, with a new family, farm, and restoration of the Shire.

Gimli does not have the resilience of Merry, Sam, or any member of the Fellowship. Gimli is the most war-worn, unhinged member of the fellowship. He displaces a great deal of his emotional agency into his axe, and his psychical accent is often betrayed by his axe, which acts nervous on his behalf. Before the Battle of Helm’s Deep, he disowns his anxiety:

“...my axe is restless in my hand. Give me a row of orc-necks and room to swing and all weariness will fall from me” (TT; 694). Gimli puts his axe to constant work even when not in battle. After he kills two orcs, he laughs his release of tension, declaring “Till now I have hewn naught but wood since I left Moria” (TT; 695). Much of the trek through the Paths of the Dead is experienced through Gimli, as he is “pursued by a groping horror that seemed just about to seize him.” (R; 1031). Apart from finding a moment of comfort in Legolas’s “bright eyes” (who “felt no horror”), Gimli crumbles in the darkness (R; 1032, 1144). He tells Merry later, “I was put to shame” (R; 1144). The darkness of the underworld actually unveils his neurosis which had to that point (and hereafter) been suppressed beneath a stout exterior, in large part due to the cathexis with which he has imbued his axe.

People tend to fantasise to make ourselves feel better, but this can also have adverse affects. A fantasy is related to nostalgia and is used similarly. The difference between fantasy and nostalgia, though, is that while nostalgia looks back on what was, fantasy envisions what could have been or what could be in the present or future. We tend to take paradoxical views of situations, at once envisioning the greatest and the worst of outcomes. The soldier, brave and philosophical at once, thinks of heroism while considering his corporeal destruction and possibilities of the after life. Does anything happen after the destruction of the body? Eventually, we have to repress the bad if we are to act courageously, to embrace the fantasy of success for as long as is our quests’ need. Galadriel is a symbol of this mythologising tendency, she is to be embraced or feared, and she is often presented in both lights, as seen in Gimli and Éomer’s chivalric conflict over her.

Gimli’s worship of Galadriel is “excessive” and comically so. When he breaks out in a dance upon hearing news from Galadriel, he is ridiculous and hilarious at the same time. In LOTR the traditional narrative voice is rooted in romanticism, and in an age full of sexual freedom, follows “the moderate path between prudishness and prurience”. Gimli is enthralled by Galadriel romantically, and through the rituals of courtly love, he prolongs his infatuation with her. It begins with flattery and a humble request when Galadriel asks what gift Gimli would desire: “It is enough for me to have seen the Lady of the Galadhrim, and to have heard her gentle words...” (F; 490). His infatuation is fanned to a flame when she

grants his desire, cutting a lock of her hair for him to “treasure . . . in memory of your words to me at our first meeting” (F; 490). Upon leaving Galadriel’s realm, Gimli sadly declares “I have looked upon that which was fairest . . . Henceforth I will call nothing fair, unless it be her gift” (F; 493). This chivalric claim will comically be put to the test by Éomer, and Gimli then threatens violence in her honour, “Then Éomer son of Eomund, Third Marshal of Riddermark, let Gimli the Dwarf Gloin’s son warn you against foolish words. You speak evil of that which is fair beyond the reach of your thought, and only little wit can excuse you” (TT; 562). Éomer’s mythological view of Galadriel as a witch is a testament to the mind’s ability to conceptualise and rationalise the unseen. These exchanges recur later with diminishing levels of threat, until their chivalric gestures are little more than jests between friends.

By the reckoning of Middle-earth’s mythology, our present day is in the middle of the fourth age, and we inhabit a fallen world of lost magic. Tolkien told his son in a 1941 letter (while writing *LOTR*) that the “displacement of the sex instinct is one of the chief symptoms of the fall”.¹²¹ This notion is relevant to the chapter “The Mirror of Galadriel” and Gimli’s ensuing affections for Galadriel. There are two mirrors in this chapter. The first is the one Galadriel shows Sam and Frodo, through which they witness the destruction of the shire, the return of Gandalf, Sauron’s Eye, and other visions (F; 471-475). The second mirror is Galadriel herself. She is capable of “divining thoughts” (F; 475) and each member of the Fellowship, through guessing at what she saw, vicariously perceives himself as she turns from one of them to the other. Galadriel is a woman whose presence, once embraced, serves to hearten the members of the Fellowship. Merry and Gimli in particular are struck by her. However, the contrasts between Merry and Gimli’s interest in Galadriel are stark, both temporally and ethically. For Merry, the younger and more immature, the fantasy of Galadriel is sexual and short termed. There is a sexual undertone to Galadriel’s penetrating stare as she looks “searchingly at each of them in turn” (F, 464). Gimli acts clumsy, Sam blushes, and the Fellowship as a whole is held captive, and needs to be “released from her eyes” (F; 463-465). Sam tells about why he blushed, and he tells of her “looking inside” him and asking what he would do if she offered wish fulfilment to his desires, asking him “what I would do if she gave me the chance of flying back home to the Shire to a nice little hole with – with a bit of garden of my own” (F; 465). Now we know that Sam’s full image of temptation would be a home shared with Rosie Cotton (see for example R; 1221, 1228, 1319). So we can deduce that he excluded this part from his answer, specifically in the break “with –

¹²¹ Albert Mohler, “From Father to Son: J.R.R. Tolkien on Sex.”
with”. The avoidance of mentioning Rosie shows the sacred, personal value Sam places on her image. Merry immediately hints further at sexual desire, Sam’s depiction was “Almost exactly what I felt; only, well, I don’t think I’ll say anymore” (R; 465). He ends this sentence “lamely”, suggesting the embarrassment and shame of a sexual fantasy. We never hear any more of what Merry felt when faced with Galadriel, but what else would Merry be so ashamed of that he wouldn’t share even with his best friend?

Merry, a youthful character in need of direction for much of the novel, like his friend Pippin, is what Northrop Frye calls a Buffoon\textsuperscript{122} character. Such a character is placed within a narrative for one purpose, and their purpose is to be merry, “Merry alone seemed cheerful . . . [Merry] spoke cheerfully and if he felt any great anxiety, he did not show it” (F; 148). He is chiefly concerned with food and drink. These represent basic, primal urges of the body, and from this we may further deduce the primal nature of his fantasy. For bachelors such as Merry, gratuitous sexual fantasy, although empty of true emotion, remains a common source of mental sustenance. But while these primal aspects of these hobbits remain (indeed, their humour becomes a quality to be cherished), they eventually begin to fantasize about becoming and consequently develop into adults. It is after this psycho-sexual encounter (and the ensuing robbery of their innocence experienced during captivity by the Uruk-Hai orcs) that Merry and Pippin slowly awaken to their “Baggage” status, and their fantasies switch from primal desires and impulses to images of becoming soldiers (see for example TT; 579, 583 R; 1012-1013, 1086-1087). Merry in time disowns his feelings of inadequacy: “I am not a tree-root Sir . . . nor a bag, but a bruised hobbit” (R; 1087).

Perhaps Sam is the middle man, his vision of a full life with Rosie Cotton being healthier than that of Merry or Gimli. Through Sam we see a “monogamous marriage [which] provides [a] true context for sexuality without shame.”\textsuperscript{123} Regardless, the idealization of a woman’s image is better than the objectification of it, and through Tolkien’s work we can see how soldierly men kept (sometimes inflated) images of their sweethearts in their heads to humour them or while enduring the horrors of war.

So far this section has investigated the maintenance of good humour through the investment of emotional significance into objects, people, and ideals. At this point I would like to inverse the process of objectification, removing empathy from an object. This ability

\textsuperscript{122} Frye, Anatomy of Criticism : Four Essays: 172.
\textsuperscript{123} Mohler, “From Father to Son: J.R.R. Tolkien on Sex.”
allows for humans to commence acts that our ethical conscience would revolt against. This is “the essence of humour”, as Freud tells us, that “spares oneself the affects to which the situation would naturally give rise and dismisses the possibility of such expressions of emotion with a jest”.\textsuperscript{124} A prime example of this phenomenon is the creation of games and competition. For example, I recently bore witness to some children fishing for eels in a local lake. They were having a fun game of it, so that when they caught the eel, they acted hysterical and began to kick the animal until a more mature child threw it back. Gimli and Legolas’s game of numbers works in the same way. By making a game of how many orcs they can kill they remain detached from the violence they inflict. While there remain numerous theories on how Orcs came to life, one of the more credible claims is that Melkor corrupted elves to make a mockery of their own image.\textsuperscript{125} Frodo tells Sam of the limits of evil in Middle-earth: “The Shadow that bred them can only mock, it cannot make: no real new things of its own. I don’t think it gave life to the Orcs, it only ruined them and twisted them” (R; 1195). Taking for granted the vile nature of Orcs, the reader is not meant to sympathize with them, but Gimli and specifically Legolas should. Throughout their humorous counting game, Gimli and Legolas show no remorse for the life they take and no regret for their own ability to so easily claim it. As a whole, the army at Helm’s Deep sees the orc army as little more than a horde of “marching ants” (TT; 694). The game is in fact how Gimli summarizes the entire battle to Merry: “There was a battle here three nights ago . . . and here Legolas and I played a game that I only won by a single orc” (R; 1015). His mind, locked completely into the game, fails to put forward the traumatic details of the fight.

\textbf{Fellowship and Intimacy}

The source of humour that is most sacred in \textit{LOTR} it is the concept of “fellowship”. \textit{THOB} weighs the urge to become a part of a community against the sacrifice of the ethical Self. At first, Bilbo is eager to gain acceptance by the dwarves. Once respect and admission is granted, Smaug reverses the judgment process. The dragon uses a wordy game of wits to fill Bilbo’s mind with “nasty suspicions”, to pass judgment on those he would so mindlessly seek to join (H; 215). Bilbo learns not to grant his loyalty so lightly and to responsibly reconsider the cause behind the Company’s quest. \textit{LOTR}, however, pushes past this process; we know that the fellowship’s cause is just. The destruction of the One Ring and the evil it

\textsuperscript{124} Freud, "Humour," 162.
supports is a far less dubious venture than the greed and revenge driven treasure quest of \textit{THOB}. Furthermore, Frodo gives a great deal of thought before accepting his role in the event. So what \textit{LOTR} leaves us with is an ideal situation (with a fairly clear line between good and evil) to explore the ideal of fellowship at an almost pure level. Each has a responsibility to care for the other’s morale, and, thus, to generate humour. A theatrical layer is then a large part of the group’s dynamic. Much of the good humour in the story is farcical, each character playing a role to mesmerize another. While a bit extreme, this interaction between Pippin and Merry best brings this discussion to life:

‘Lean on me, Merry lad!’ said Pippin. ‘Come now! Foot by foot. It’s not far.’
‘Are you going to bury me?’ said Merry.
‘No, indeed!’ said Pippin, trying to sound cheerful, though his heart was wrung with fear and pity. ‘No, we are going to the Houses of Healing.’ (R; 1124).

The disjunction between feeling and face exposes a fragile web of assumed personas, and it is this fragility that creates much of the tension following the protagonists through Middle-earth. It is important to note the physical embodiment of Pippin’s moral support; he literally lends Merry a shoulder to lean on. The intimacy of touch given to the wounded soldier is rare, but occurs when Boromir falls:

‘Farewell Aragorn! Go to Minas Tirith and save my people! I have failed.’
‘No!’ said Aragorn, taking his hand and kissing his brow. You have conquered. Few have gained such a victory. Be at peace! Minas Tirith shall not fall!’
Boromir smiled.

In \textit{LOTR}, words alone cannot catch the “[s]ensous frontline existence”\textsuperscript{126} of a soldier’s touch. Assurances are sealed with a touch with an appropriate sense of intimacy. In another form of postwar reminiscence, the loss of Boromir, the dying in another’s arms, is sealed by a kiss, \textit{LOTR}’s most intimate touch.

Touch in \textit{LOTR} is also shared by Pippin and Bergil accompanying one another through the gates of Gondor: “Hand in hand they went back into the City, the last to pass the Gate before it was shut . . .” (R; 1009). The imagery surrounding this action is particularly

powerful: “Shadow came down on the City. . . [ending] a fair day in wrath!” (R; 1009). These linked hands are an aesthetic symbol of what we glimpsed in Merry and Pippin’s interaction: of the intimate touch before the final confrontation with death’s sublime seen in the wrathful Shadow. The capitalization and Biblical image of the Gate (or the “Great Gate” R; 982), which shuts behind them conjures feelings of sanctuary and solace.

There is no object in LOTR which draws more cathexis than intimate, even romantic friendship. After destruction of the ring, Frodo and Sam are waiting for the impending destruction of Mt Doom. Their objects have either outlived their usefulness or are lost: Sting no longer needs to slay orcs, Galadriel’s phial served its purpose in Shelob’s lair, with Sauron defeated there is nothing that their Elvish cloaks need to hide them from. No beautiful landscapes grace their view, and their memories fade in favour of the present triumph. Frodo turns to Sam and says “I am glad you are here with me. Here at the end of all things, Sam” (R; 1240). There is no illusion of fantasy or feeling of futurity -- they believe only the afterlife awaits them. For the hobbits, there are no sources of humour left save each other. Of course, the stage is set for perhaps the greatest of Tolkien’s eucatastrophes, and in a sudden joyous turn of events the hobbits are saved by Gandalf and the Eagles.
Chapter 2: Riddles

In this chapter, I will define the riddle and theorize different roles that the riddle plays in Tolkien’s work. Where Tolkien, who toiled for some time in service of the Oxford English Dictionary, often employs the word “riddle” in its traditional usages, he also seems to have used various ideas of the riddle methodologically in his sub-creation of Middle-earth. A bridge needs to be erected between “riddle” as a defined term and “riddle” as a concept. While the traditional use of the term includes the riddle as a device of humour, critical analysis of the riddle-concept provides valuable insight into many facets of THOB and LOTR. These facets include the riddle as characterization, symbol, theme, narrative element, and as a component part of the plot. Gollum and Beorn will both be shown to be riddles characterized, pulled from ancient sources and given new life in Middle-earth. The riddle serves symbolically both to the characters of LOTR and to the reader, as a sign of “happier times” (F; 401), it may also foreshadow of bleaker times to come. The riddle can be seen as a theme of LOTR, an avenue towards the sublime. LOTR’s plot, too, often revolves around the solving of riddles. Since long before Tolkien put pen to paper, quest narratives have been inherently comparable to the riddle’s unravelment. Craig Williamson, marking the similarities between the quest hero and the riddle solver, notes that they both experience:

1. Departure from the dead world of reified categories
2a. Confrontation with the metaphoric world of unknown monsters and shifting shapes.
2b. Recognition of the Other and its relationship to the Self.
3. Return to the old world with rejuvenate eyes.  

This riddle-plot, however, operates differently in both books. Both Hobbit heroes return to the Shire with changed perspectives: Bilbo leaves the safe confines of Bag End, confronts monsters, discover his place in relation to the society he keeps, and returns to the Shire with rejuvenated eyes. As such, THOB flows simply “There and Back Again” (the name Bilbo gives to the narrative found in THOB). LOTR (while based on the same formula) goes there, back again, and on again. While Frodo, like Bilbo before him, returns for a time to the Shire, his eyes are wearied, not rejuvenated. There is no “happy ending” for Frodo, but a measure of peace is found in the Grey Havens. Mary Bowman addresses the lack of a proper end to

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Tolkien’s narratives in her paper *The Story Was Already Written: Narrative Theory in The Lord of the Rings* (2006), citing Tolkien’s comments from *Tree and Leaf* that “there is no true end to any fairy-tale”.\(^{128}\) “Happily ever after” is an artificial device\(^{129}\). Each tale is only a fragment of a whole “seamless web of story”, dating back into unrecorded history.\(^{130}\) In *LOTR*, Bilbo is revealed taking liberties with his version of events, and Frodo is resistant to remaining in the Shire. Both of these developments demonstrate that “closure is . . . elusive and never absolute”.\(^{131}\)

The riddle is also analogous to Tolkien’s story, sharing the indefinite nature of Tolkien’s narrative. The riddle often has no clear answer. Riddles may be solved to the best of our ability, and we may at that point feel the euphoria of a task completed, but definitive answers are beyond our grasp. A riddle is interpretative at best, and may even change in meaning as the years wear on. Bowman’s argument supports this connection between Tolkien’s ongoing narrative and the obscure riddle devices found throughout his books. In the following discussion, special attention will be paid to some possible source materials, “the bones” as Tolkien the theorist would call them, particularly in Old English, in which Tolkien was professionally interested. However, as Tolkien warns the bones themselves are not as important as the “soup”, the end result. I am, therefore, also interested in the riddle as a link and embodiment of the shared spirit between the time Tolkien studied philologically and Middle-earth.

There are many textbook definitions of “riddle” which provide a basis for discussion of Tolkien’s Middle-earth, though these require further elaboration for the purposes of this thesis. Below are definitions paraphrased from the Oxford English Dictionary\(^ {132}\), along with concurring examples from the books:

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\(^{128}\) Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*: 68.

\(^{129}\) Ibid., 68.


\(^{131}\) Ibid., 275.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Examples from text</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. A question or statement so framed as to exercise one’s ingenuity in answering it or discovering its meaning.</td>
<td>In <em>The Hobbit</em>’s chapter “Riddles in the Dark” Gollum poses such riddles to Bilbo.</td>
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<td>2. A puzzling question, problem, or matter.</td>
<td>In <em>The Two Towers</em> Aragorn, Gimli, and Legolas give chase to orcs who had abducted the hobbits Meriadoc and Pippin. They are consistently faced with the aftermath of the hobbits’ ordeal. As these scenes are surveyed, they are often referred to as riddles.</td>
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<td>3. A puzzling thing or person.</td>
<td>Gollum is both a puzzling thing and person, being half hobbit and half monster. Debates over his worth, life, loyalty, and motivations persist throughout <em>Lord of the Rings</em> – from Gandalf’s early chat with Frodo to Frodo’s arguments with Sam near the quest’s conclusion.</td>
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| 4. Any enigmatic or dark saying or speech.                               | Characters of *Lord of the Rings* are sometimes presented with obscure sayings, such as the riddle which appears to Boromir in a dream:  
*Seek for the Sword that was broken:*  
*In Imladris it dwells;*  
*There shall be counsels taken*  
*Stronger than Morgul-spells.*  
*There shall be shown a token*  
*That Doom is near at hand,*  
*For Isildur’s Bane shall waken,*  
*And the Halfling forth shall stand.* (F, 320) |
| 5. To speak or express in riddles; to be enigmatic.                      | Gandalf often speaks in such riddles. Aragorn himself states this in the chapter “The White Rider” after Gandalf speaks vaguely to himself concerning Boromir’s fate: “Gladriel told me that he was in peril. But he escaped in the end. I am glad.” (TT, 647). From what Boromir has escaped Gandalf never mentions specifically, but since Boromir physically didn’t escape anything (he dies), it is safe to say that Gandalf’s words refer to a form of spiritual salvation. |

This table presents us with a foundation of general ideas which provide a useful starting point for this chapter. When looking at this table one thing that should be apparent is
that Tolkien’s interest in words, their definitions, etymology, flexibility (and concurrently, their ability to deceive) permeates his work. The term “riddle”, like “spirit”\textsuperscript{133} is apparently a complex word in which Tolkien invested his interest, and they are not unrelated. Both of these words, if we pay them enough attention, hint strongly at an ancient, spiritual world that has long been concealed from us. He believed in words as the carriers of a certain magic, much like the Anglo-Saxons of old, who inscribed objects such as their weaponry on magic runes and riddles. Indeed, the word “riddle” acts magically, as a riddle\textsuperscript{134} itself, one of Tolkien’s spells. The greater part of this chapter focuses on the riddle’s ever-morphing face and the role it plays the text. Firstly, however, I will explain recurring concepts and characteristics which inform this chapter.

The riddle must first be understood as a penumbral creature; for it is metaphoric by nature. Metaphoric, because, as Williamson tells us, a “riddlic creature takes on the guise of another”.\textsuperscript{135} Williamson’s *A Feast of Creatures* is a translation of, and introduction to, the *Exeter Book*, an ancient book of Anglo-Saxon riddles which Tolkien used as a source for both his creative and academic work. Williamson refers to riddles as “creatures” because of their tendency to resist labels. In the ninth riddle, for example, a cup of wine becomes a seductress with “sinuous power” who wears a silver dress while making fools of men. Throughout the Exeter riddles, the lines between man, beast and the supernatural remains blurred. The order of things becomes suspended, and the reader’s own rationalization of the world suddenly becomes suspect. This effect may seem ironic when we consider that “the word ‘riddle’ derives from the Old English *raedan*, to advise, to counsel, to guide, to explain.”\textsuperscript{136} But, if we turn to the age old philosophical paradigm that wisdom stems not from what we know but rather from what we don’t know, the etymological root of the term makes much more sense. Through dismantling our fundamental views of the world, the riddle opens a way to the advancement of knowledge. As Kevin Crossley-Holland says, “in a wide sense a riddle does teach; it presents the old in new ways”.\textsuperscript{137} The riddle, through metaphor, teaches us to question our preconceived notions. Metaphor also serves as the string by which every riddlic creation is tethered. For every riddle is a shade of another, a problem to be solved and a question to be guessed. Conversely, every metaphor belongs to

\textsuperscript{133} See page 38.
\textsuperscript{134} As in the second definition of Table 1.
\textsuperscript{135} Williamson, *A Feast of Creatures : Anglo-Saxon Riddle-Songs*: 3.
\textsuperscript{137} Ibid., 8.
the “riddle family”, as Crossley-Holland calls it, which also includes, among cultural phenomena: “simile, the detective story, the faked voice on the telephone, the crossword puzzle, the question in the cracker”. All of these actions “hinge on recognition [and] . . . represent things as other than they are”. The “descriptions of objects in terms intended to suggest something entirely different” is a hallmark of what Archer Taylor calls the “true riddle.”

Where Metaphor is perhaps the riddle’s most dominant characteristic, a prime use of the riddle in Tolkien’s literature is mimesis. As a medium of mimesis, the riddle presents the reader with the familiarity of our world so that we may interpret Middle-earth. Tolkien’s intended audience was certainly familiar with riddle tradition. The riddles are an important element in Tolkien’s sub-creation, where an author “makes a Secondary World which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is ‘true’: it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside. The moment disbelief arises, the spell is broken; the magic, or rather art, has failed.” C.W. Sullivan quotes this same section of Tolkien’s Tree and Leaf when arguing that fantasists often turn to “elements of folklore to make the Secondary World a more homey place for the reader.” The riddle is one such element. The riddle, through being both familiar and enigmatic, makes us feel comfortable in a literary world foreign to us. While being faced with a new world may be at first confusing, the reader recognizes the familiar obscurity of the riddle and so settles down to unravel the story. In other words, when the reader recognizes the riddle-elements in the text, we remember that we are already used to not knowing what is exactly happening in our own world. The riddle’s presence in the sub-created world mimics our reality-monitoring, the process in which we constantly re-evaluated and interpret our surrounding environments. Once in tune with this process, the acceptance of the sub-created world is made easier.

**Riddles, Quests, and the Cosmic**

The obscurity of the riddle can be used to hint at a metaphysical presence. Frodo and Gandalf piece together a riddle (as in the second definition of Table 1) in the chapter “The Shadow of the Past”. Once Gandalf reveals to Frodo that the Ring has a level of agency, that it left Gollum, Frodo counters this assertion, asking why it then came to Bilbo instead of an

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138 Ibid., 7.
140 Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*: 37.
Orc or another evil creature. Gandalf tells him that there “was something else at work, beyond any design of [Sauron]. I can put it no plainer than by saying that Bilbo was meant to find the Ring, and not by its maker. In which case you also were meant to have it”, (F; 73). Thus we are confronted with a riddle with no clear answer. Frodo is not sure that he understands Gandalf, and he will spend the rest of the story fulfilling a prophetic answer to this exchange—what was meant to happen now? This device works wonders for the narrative, and it derives from “the archaic and historical origins of the riddle”, which were chiefly oracular and prophetic. The riddles of LOTR share this revelatory nature, “and may only be understood in the hindsight of a prophecy fulfilled”. Many characters, as we will soon see, have riddles attached to them that they are destined to fulfil.

Riddles may therefore be seen as tools of religion and faith. Williamson explains the advent of the riddle in the medieval Anglo-Saxon world:

Both a religious doctrine and a literary tradition were brought to England by Christian missionaries who carried with the gift of script, the Word of God. But as was true of many other Christian traditions, the literary riddle was transformed by the Anglo-Saxons into something uniquely their own.

The riddles of Tolkien’s work provide a philological link to these ancient texts of the past. They are scattered throughout THOB and LOTR as scholarly homage to great works such as Beowulf, The Exeter Book, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, and the Norse Sagas. To read The Lord of the Rings is to subconsciously experience elements of storytelling that have existed long before the codex.

To solve a riddle in the world of these texts was to take a step towards being heroic. Tolkien’s use of the “cosmic riddle . . . requires us to redefine our traditional notions of heroic action.” Jane Chance outlines the template for Tolkien’s redefinition of heroism:

Tolkien’s Lord of the Rings delineates a clash of values during the passage from the Third Age of Middle-earth dominated by the elves to the Fourth Age dominated by

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141 As in the fourth definition of Table 1.  
144 Williamson uses “The Dream of the Rood” as an example for the cosmic riddle and argues that its metaphor between Christ and the Rood serves to “redefine our traditional notions of heroic action”. A Feast of Creatures: 42.
man. Such values mask very medieval notions of Germanic heroism and Christianity evidenced earlier by Tolkien in his *Beowulf* article.\(^{145}\)

Crossley-Howard tells us that while “some riddles in the *Exeter Book* reflect aspects of the Germanic Heroic world, others describe objects, such as the Bible and Chalice, associated with the new Christian faith that swept through England during the seventh century.”\(^{146}\) The first steps were being taken towards medieval Christian knighthood. *Beowulf*, with its mix of pagan and Christian storytelling, would be written within the next few hundred years. Knighthood, with its chivalry and the emblematic image of King Arthur, would peak at about the same time time *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* was written. This transitionary phase, which took centuries, was of particular interest to Tolkien. Consequentially, his works often marry the attainment of heroism to the attainment of salvation. This is to say, that the way his characters conduct themselves morally is at least as important as their physical feats. The esteem of self-ingratiating deeds and conquests began to fade before the alluring promise of a new life after death. Tolkien notes that *Beowulf* captures “a fusion that has occurred at a given point of contact between old and new, a product of thought and deep emotion.”\(^{147}\) In the Norse world, both men and Gods are doomed to defeat at Ragnorak, the final battle in their afterlife. Christian ideology presented an alternative option, ultimate victory, and this fundamental point lead to sweeping changes in belief during the period of Tolkien specialised in. The real battle became, Tolkien tells us, “between the soul and its adversaries”.\(^{148}\) But in the medieval world of *Beowulf*, as in Tolkien’s Middle-earth, the “shift is not complete”, and the lack of spiritual definition produces works which are complex, poetic and obscure.\(^{149}\) Tolkien’s work captures this feeling of divine change, of something at work outside of the comprehension of Middle-earth’s inhabitants, except that in his work magic is destroyed instead of gained. But it isn’t that simple, because while magic is in fact lost with the destruction of the Ring, it is being traded for something else – the same thing that protects Bilbo and Frodo and resurrects Gandalf, the thing that speaks though riddles; something greater than what existed, an unnamed divinity which Tolkien, as a Roman Catholic, saw as the Hebrew/Christian God.

\(^{148}\) Ibid., 23.  
\(^{149}\) Ibid., 23.
Scrutinised under the light of divinity the riddle serves as a ‘metaplot’, which is essential to the basic structure of LOTR. Tom Shippey identifies this metaplot as “the ancient and pre-novelistic device of entrelacement.”\textsuperscript{150} The “Interlace” technique includes the incorporation of several threads of story, each centred on different characters, to form the whole.\textsuperscript{151} At the heart of this interweaving pattern, with its departures and meetings, lies the riddle. Each character is mythicised through their riddle-value, something that commands the respect of Middle-earth’s denizens and the reader alike. The characters directly involved in the plot often take heart at being part of the cosmic, mythic riddle. Frodo, for example, is “proud” as he explains his part to Faramir (TT; 867). Boromir, one of the most traditionally heroic characters in the books, is another who believes he has a place in history to fill. It is his riddle\textsuperscript{152} received through a dream, that is at the forefront of the ‘metaplot’ concept. Later on, Frodo provides some answers to Boromir’s enigmatic prophecy to his brother Faramir: “Aragorn whom I named is the bearer of the Sword that was Broken . . . and we are the Halflings that the rhyme spoke of” (TT, 8 60).

Aragorn is perhaps the most enigmatically shrouded of the heroes:

\begin{quote}
\begin{verse}
All that is gold does not glitter,  
Not all those who wander are lost;  
The old that is strong does not wither,  
Deep roots are not reached by the frost.  
From the ashes a fire shall be woken,  
A light from the shadows shall spring;  
Renewed shall be blade that was broken,  
The crownless again shall be king.  
\end{verse}
\end{quote}

This riddle includes the characterisation and destiny of Aragorn. We meet him as a travel-worn ranger. By the time the above riddle is presented (encased in Gandalf’s letter), Aragorn has already fulfilled some of the lines. He has already told the hobbits that he is “older than he looks, and that he has “wandered . . . for many years”, for two clear examples (F; 216). Tolkien employs an interesting device by reversing the expectation of the riddle-solver. The evidence is uncovered as the hobbits spend a good deal of time attempting to solve Aragorn as a riddle\textsuperscript{153} himself. His character is put on trial, and he gradually reveals details about himself. The riddle-text that Gandalf includes in his note serves the function of an answer to the hobbits and as such also provides Aragorn’s true name. The riddle serves prophetic

\textsuperscript{150} Shippey, \textit{The Road To Middle-Earth}: 143.
\textsuperscript{151} Ibid., 144.
\textsuperscript{152} As in the fourth definition of Table 1.
\textsuperscript{153} As in the third definition of Table 1.
purpose also, and we know that Aragorn will become a King. Other clues to his greatness, however, are all presented to us in the chapter “Strider”. His virtue is in his humility and self-deprecation, his willingness to share a smile at his own expense, and his knowledge of the Ring and decision to protect it instead of claiming it as his own (F; 223, 224). We meet him as a ragged traveller, and by the time we leave Middle-earth, he is the King of Gondor. Along the way to his rise, however, he must solve his own riddles of faith and fate.

Near the beginning of The Two Towers, Gimli, Legolas, and Aragorn convene following an ambush by the orcs loyal to Saruman. They slowly begin to unravel a virtually impossible quest. Boromir is dead and the hobbits vanished, and it’s up to the remnants of the fellowship to figure out what happened and what to do. The narrative of LOTR at this point becomes a pattern of riddle-answer, as the riddles are presented in the company’s chapters, and as the answers are shown in the chapters concerning hobbits. The hunting party scavenges for clues and slowly starts piecing the puzzle together, thus beginning a parable of faith. For our purposes, the Parable is a short story that uses familiar events to illustrate a religious or ethical point. Through a series of riddles, Legolas, Gimli, and Aragorn learn to embrace their place in a divine design despite facing insurmountable odds. The religious import of their method of travel, by foot, is an important detail not to be overlooked. According to Mark 6:7 and Mathew 9:35; Jesus often travelled between towns. In Mark 6:7-6:10, Jesus sends his disciples on mission, and forbids them to bring anything but a staff, sandals, and the clothes on their back. Jesus likely led a life consistent with his teachings, one main theme of which is that people should shun possessions in favour of a more simple existence. For a Christian author like Tolkien, the decision to leave Aragorn, Legolas, and Gimli on foot embedded his story with divine reason. Even without Biblical undertones, the slower crossing of the land on foot exhibits a closer connection to nature, just as Hobbits’ elongated feet symbolise their connection to the earth. Throughout the riddle-solving ordeal, Gimli often plays the foil to Aragorn’s Christ-like figure, such as when they first begin discussing riddles:

‘Well, we have no time to ponder riddles,’ said Gimli. ‘Let us bear Boromir away!’
‘But after that we must guess the riddles, if we are to choose our course rightly,’ answered Aragorn.
‘Maybe there is no right choice,’ said Gimli. (TT, 541)

This interaction marks the departure point for Tolkien’s parable. Gimli already shows a crisis of faith while Aragorn proposes direction. From this point forward, their hopes trend
from solving each riddle themselves to trusting in a higher plan. Along the way they learn eternal truths of self sacrifice, faith and hope, nature’s beauty and perseverance. Aragorn embodies Tolkien’s Christian belief “that in the end all things would end happily, that in a sense they already had – a belief he shared with Dante, and a matter of faith beyond argument.” He remains aware that he, Legolas, Gimli and the others are threads in the fabric of fate, each having to fulfill their part of their own volition, and so it is at the first junction, where Aragorn, at Gimli’s behest, presents us with the first answer: “Frodo has gone by boat, and his servant has gone with him” (TT; 545). Once the riddle is deciphered they exercise their free will within LOTR’s divine design (‘Our choice then,’ said Gimli) to determine the next step, and Aragorn answers: “I will follow the orcs . . . My heart speaks clearly at last: the fate of the Bearer is in my hands no longer” (TT; 545).

It is fitting that Gandalf, who has the most insight into the cosmic plan, is presented as the three travellers’ final riddle. He has died and changed, and Tolkien “explains his reincarnation in terms of Gandalf’s angelic nature.” He is first presented to the heroes as an obscure vision “just on the edge of the firelight . . . an old bent man, leaning on a staff, and wrapped in a great cloak; his wide-brimmed hat was pulled down over his eyes . . .” (TT, 576). Despite Gimli’s fear that the old man may be Saruman, Aragorn overcomes his anxiety and offers a spot, warily, by the fire, “Come and be warm, if you are cold!” Gandalf disappears, only to reappear the next day wraithlike, “passing from tree to tree” (TT, 642). They confront him and Legolas is the one that solves the riddle. He names Gandalf, thus revealing a familiar object. Aragorn is so surprised that he asks, “What veil was over my sight?” To answer this I turn to a writer Tolkien was very much influenced by, George MacDonald, who said that “Man is but a thought of God.” We do not think ourselves, but rather we are “being thought”. Tolkien’s debt to this thought can be found in the first sentence of the Silmarillion, his long account of the mythology upon which both THOB and LOTR are based; Eru, the godlike creator of all Middle-earth’s existence, “made first the Ainur, the Holy Ones, that were the offspring of his thought . . .”: Furthermore, Aragorn’s surprise recognition of Gandalf parallels Macdonald’s own example of this phenomenon: “He

154 Shippey, The Road To Middle-Earth: 157.
157 Tolkien and Tolkien, The Silmarillion: 15.
knew [the thought] not till he found it there, therefore he could not even have sent for it. He did not create it, else how could it be the surprise that it was when it arose?"\textsuperscript{158}

Through the use of dark riddlic speech, Tolkien forces the reader to vicariously experience Aragorn’s revelation. The veil over his eyes is the same as the one over ours, he is a creation of the sub-creator, and the sub-creator is a creation (so Tolkien thought) of God. God, to Macdonald and Tolkien, creates the artist to create his art. He also creates the forms we convey our art through, such as the riddle which persists as “an ancient literary form”\textsuperscript{159}. The veil that obscures the sight of both Aragorn and the reader is the gap that Macdonald explains:

that between creator and poet lies the one unpassable gulf which distinguishes—far be it from us to say divides—all that is God’s from all that is man’s; a gulf teeming with infinite revelations, but a gulf over which no man can pass to find out God, although God needs not to pass over it to find man\textsuperscript{160}

Gandalf, the chosen architect of Sauron’s demise, passes over such a gulf during his death and rebirth, returning to the company as Gandalf the White. The similarity between this Gulf and the enigma of the riddle is why Tolkien leans so heavily on the riddle when dealing with parabolic themes and narrative. The riddle is often used as a spiritual rite, a manufactured epiphany, and like any ritual helps the participants “take heart” and keep good humour. Riddles are fun, after all, they amuse, entertain, and serve as a pastime, often played between adults and children. Much of Tolkien’s riddling stays true to this view of the riddle, yet in his writing there is a cosmic level to the riddle as well. The comic and the cosmic is drawn together through the riddle-journey of Aragorn, Gimli, and Legolas, and this is why Gandalf’s first command, once revealed, is to simply “Be Merry!” (TT, 645). Gandalf, like the riddle, can be threatening and yet light-hearted. Similar ideas of veiled malice and the unveiling of friendship are exhibited for younger readers when Bilbo and company visit Beorn in \textit{THOB}.

**Beorn and Gollum as Riddle Creatures**

“But there is somebody that I know of, who lives not far away... a very great person... [but] you must be very careful not to annoy him...” (H; 116)

\textsuperscript{158} Macdonald, \textit{A Dish of Orts}. 7.
\textsuperscript{159} Cook, \textit{Enigmas and Riddles in Literature}: xii.
\textsuperscript{160} Macdonald, \textit{A Dish of Orts}. 6.
A riddle is revealed, “his name is Beorn. . . He is a skin-changer. He changes his skin: sometimes he is a huge black bear, sometimes he is a great strong black-haired man with huge arms and a great beard” (H; 116). In Tolkien’s Middle-earth to discover what something is means tracing the roots and history of the object. And like a true Exeter Riddle, Beorn’s identity remains a subject of debate. Gandalf offers differing answers, two different histories of Beorn’s existence. These differing tales of Beorn’s past reveal two possible answers to the riddle: one states that he is a man who can change into a bear, and the other that he is a bear that changes into a man. The duality of Beorn’s identity is reflected by the linguistic duality of his name. In Old English, “Beorn” has been used as an “Old English heroic word for ‘man’, which meant originally ‘bear’”. His name has even been used to describe a prince. All three of these definitions inform Beorn’s role in THOB, but together they create a confusing riddle, and it is this mystery that incites our intrigue.

The ambiguity of Beorn’s character, the subtle balance of his benevolence and threat, serves to engage and tease the child reader through the narrative. A good deal of narrative interest is generated through his enigmatic duality, the nature of which can be seen as both riddlic and contradictive. “This doubleness,” Marjorie Burns states, has to do with the “blending of the civilized English with the far more wilful Norse.” She elaborates on the dichotomy of Beorn’s character and lists some pairs of his opposing traits:

[Beorn] is . . . a being of two extremes: both ruthless and kind, bear and man, homebody and wanderer, berserker and pacifist in one. . . [Tolkien] creates a world where contraries not only exist in highly conspicuous forms but are sometimes brought together in a single entity. The skin-changer Beorn, for instance, is not only a contradiction in kind – a man who is sometimes a bear; he is also a homebody who ranges far and wide, a berserker who avoids weaponry, a loner who is not quite alone (if you think of his animals), and a misanthrope who makes an excellent host.

Beorn’s ferocity is fearsome but “actually in context . . . is attractive. It goes with his rudeness and jollity, all projections of that inner self-confidence which as Tolkien knew lay at the core of the ‘theory of courage’.” Listening to Gandalf’s story, Beorn experiences a

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162 Shippey, The Road To Middle-Earth: 62.
164 Marjorie Burns, Perilous Realms : Celtic and Norse in Tolkien’s Middle-earth (Toronto ; London: University of Toronto Press, 2005). 34.
165 Ibid., 4.
166 Shippey, The Road To Middle-Earth: 62.
paradox of interest in their story and exasperation at the dwarves' untimely interruptions. What ensues is a competition between his anger and interest, growing together in opposing directions, and creating a tension that permeates the rest of Beorn’s part in the story.

In the world of Old English riddles, it would be easy enough to create a riddle whose answer might be either a man or a bear. For that matter, one could create a riddle which incorporated both entities, and led to a single answer: the heroic berserker. As a berserker, surely Beorn’s characteristics can be used to not only describe a man that looks like a Viking, but a large Black bear as well. One has to only turn to Beowulf for inspiration to find a heroic man who “...cracks ribs with urain power...[whose name meant] bees’ wolf=honev-eater=bear...” Beorn is what Williamson would call “a riddle incarnate,” and offers an example of the human-animal transfiguration that is possible in the literary world of the old English riddle. Here is one example of this “penumbral creature” from the Exeter book:

I saw six creatures scratch the ground,
Their four lively sisters strutting round;
The house of each, pale skin on shell,
A fine, filament robe hung on a wall,
Well-seen. Though each had been stripped
Of a gossamer skin, none was nude
Or raw with pain; but quickened, covered,
And brought to grass and grain by God--
They pecked, strutted, and stripped sod.

This riddle is generally viewed as a metaphoric description of ten chickens, but on second look it can be portraying 10 fingers as well. This riddle demonstrates its own agency, revealing itself differently to a farmer who feeds chickens than it would to a gardener who pulls up weeds. Similarly, Beorn appears a man to the company and (as evidenced by the scuffling, snuffling and growling at night in lieu of his human voice) as a bear to the bears who aided him in his hunt to verify Gandalf’s story. This paradox of identity is never fully resolved, and it is a long time until the reader is allowed to feel any sort of safety near the skin-changer.

For his first appearance, Beorn’s presence is certainly accompanied by a great deal of threat. Upon reaching the outskirts of his domain, Gandalf turns to the company and tells them that the majority of them “had better wait here” (my italics) (H; 117). As Gandalf and

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167 Of whom, Gandalf clarifies later in “Many Meetings”, Beorn is not “over[ly] fond of” (F; 298).
168 Shippey, The Road To Middle-Earth: 62.
169 Williamson, A Feast of Creatures : Anglo-Saxon Riddle-Songs: 42.
170 Ibid., 71.
Bilbo step through the gate, it becomes clear that Beorn’s Hall is no simple hermit-dwelling, but a secured fortress. Horses, acting as sentries, trot away “to tell him of the arrival of strangers” (H; 118). The first caricature of Beorn is imposing as well: “Standing near was a huge man with a thick black beard and hair, and great bare arms and legs with knotted muscles”\(^\text{171}\). He leans “on a large axe” which he relinquishes only when he determines that Gandalf and Bilbo “don’t look dangerous” (H; 118). What if they did look dangerous? By the time Beorn is labelled a “friend”, any reader should be well aware that Bilbo and the others risk a gruesome fate, one similar to the goblin whose “head was stuck outside the gate” (H; 131) or the Warg whose skin was nailed to a nearby tree. These grotesque images are hovering in the background when the narrator (with a slightest tinge of threat) tells us that Beorn “was their friend and Gandalf thought it wise to tell him their whole story . . .” (H; 131).

On the flip side, some things about Beorn seem very familiar; he appears as a man, has a house, knows proper custom, and how to treat weary travellers. But we are often reminded that Beorn chooses to maintain images that may be seen as pretentious. Beorn is “under no enchantment but his own. He lives in an oak-wood and has a great wooden house; and as a man he keeps cattle and horses which are nearly as marvellous as himself” (H; 116). As a shape-shifter he could weather the elements in his bear form. He doesn’t need a house or anything else on his property. The only property he wants has long been stripped from him, as Gandalf tells us: “I heard him growl in the tongue of bears: ‘The day will come when they will perish and I shall go back!’” (H; 117). This scene exemplifies the hard work Tolkien spends on imbuing the reader with notions of displaced nobility; including a mead hall in the middle of a forest, a man with servants who are not human, and the ursine power that disrupts Bilbo’s sleep at night, scratching at the door. Remember the third Old English usage of “Beorn” in lieu of “prince”? Under this light, Beorn appeals to the reader as dethroned benevolent royalty.

So what do we make of Beorn-as-riddle? There is no definitive answer to a character who remains “an enigma to the end”.\(^\text{172}\) However, I believe the most important and most telling of the Beorn sequences is the company’s cautious approach to him. Gandalf has to carefully inch the whole party of 14 comrades into Beorn’s Hall right under his nose. Consequences could be disastrous, and it is this tension that is the most important thing to

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\(^\text{171}\) The underlying pun between bear and bare is likely intentional.

\(^\text{172}\) Burns, Perilous Realms: Celtic and Norse in Tolkien’s Middle-earth: 39.
keep in mind when treating Beorn. He is “the tension between forest and garden, home and
wayside, comradeship and solitude, risk and security, freedom and obligation”.\textsuperscript{173} The urge
to reconnect to nature conflicts with our fear of the risk that actually entails. In Beorn we
find conflicting feelings stemming from our displacement from nature. Between the modern
estrangement from our place in the natural cycle and the times of being preyed upon, we find
the romanticized time Beorn represents.

Gollum is a riddle creature much like Beorn, but unlike Beorn his shape-shifting takes
place through the other’s perception. He has no magical agency apart from two notable
exceptions: his exceptional strength and his longevity, and both of these powers came from
the Ring. He can not physically transform himself like Beorn can. His appearance is in fact a
deformation, a persistent distortion of his physical mass by the power of the Ring. An
inversion of Beorn, Gollum remains strong yet appears atrophic. Both of their existences are
in a way purgatorial, but Beorn has a better chance at regaining what he has lost. And unlike
Beorn, who is directly tied to the tangible Bear, Gollum’s design seems tied to enigmatic
monsters, such as Grendel from \textit{Beowulf} and the mythological Sphinx. The Grecian Sphinx,
which has a more definable bloodlust coupled with a love for riddles than its Egyptian
predecessor, is particularly relevant. Gollum inherits from Grendel an appetite for humanoid
flesh, his home, his solitary existence, the linkages between him and dark shadows. Gollum’s
mischief conjures Loki from the Norse myths Tolkien esteemed so highly. While these traits
may have been borrowed by Tolkien philologically, the essence of Gollum’s intrigue
emanates from his absence of definability.

What kind of image of Gollum does the reader develop? We know that he is a hobbit
in origin\textsuperscript{174}, and as such, a shadow character to the Hobbit heroes of \textit{THOB} and \textit{LOTR} (Bilbo
and Frodo, specifically). He is humanoid in bone structure and he even has pockets. The
resemblances stop there. \textit{THOB}’s narrator tells us of his distinct identity: “He was a Gollum
– as dark as darkness, except for two big round pale eyes in his thin face” (H; 77). We are
reminded a few times that he has “nasty flappy feet” (F; 799). When Aragorn captures him,
he is “covered with green slime” (F; 330).\textsuperscript{175} Sam categorizes him as “the miserable \textit{slinker}”
(F; 789, my italics), a word that he feels fits Gollum’s wretched nature. When Gollum is seen

\textsuperscript{173} Marjorie Burns, "J. R. R. Tolkien: The British and the Norse in Tension," \textit{Pacific Coast Philology} 25, no. 1/2
(1990): 49.


\textsuperscript{175} The green slime and log references almost conjure images of an inanimate object, much in the same way
the Exeter riddles share traits between such objects and the organic.
as “a log”, Frodo tells Sam that he “could put a name on the creature, at a guess. A nasty name. Gollum, maybe?” (F; 498, 499). He is a “small . . . black crawling shape” (F; 879, 801). Yet while being a “dark shape” he somehow possesses a “long whitish hand . . .” (F; 500). In every character not familiar with him, the word “creature” almost always accompanies their descriptions of him. Tolkien’s reliance on the word likely stems from his observations of Beowulf, in which he takes a close look at the etymology of Grendel’s title. “Creature”, Tolkien tells us, “is probably the nearest we can now get” as a translation to the word (“cwealmcuma”). “Creature” is also the best word for Gollum, Tolkien’s cannibalistic and monstrous shadow-hobbit.

Gollum, like the sphinx, is often described using the traits of animals. The description of the sphinx is “intrinsically riddle-like”; often incorporating the head and breast of a man or woman, the body of a lion, and the wings of an eagle. Gollum is an even more obscure creature; his character is of a dark, morphing nature. Both of these “hybrid creatures” are “personified figures of enigma”. And perceptions of Gollum consistently change; Tolkien often presents new cryptic imagery so that Gollum continues to defy clear definition. We are shown Gollum as a spider that adheres to walls, as a squirrel with his deftness at climbing trees (he habitually hides behind tree trunks), as a hissing snake in coiled postures, as a frog with a fondness for the lakeside and water, as a kingfisher who dives into water from above to hunt the fish below, as a clever fox and as a loyal dog to Frodo (TT; 800, 882, 966, 895, 899). At the sacred pool of Henneth Annun, Faramir and Anborn engage in perhaps the longest singular attempt at making sense of Gollum while actually beholding him. They run a list of possible identities (all animals) to no avail. In the end, creature is the only word that may be truly affixed to Gollum, and Faramir does this after all other attempts to identify him fail. He petitions Frodo for the answer: “You know, then, what this thing is? . . . I marvel at the creature: so secret and so sly as he is, to come sporting in the pool before our very window. Does he think that men sleep without watch all night? Why does he so?” (TT, 895-896). Frodo, to whom Gollum is bound, provides the answer: “There are two answers, I think . . . For one thing, he knows little of Men, and sly though he is, your refuge is so hidden that perhaps he does not know that Men are concealed here. For another, I think he is allured here by a mastering desire, stronger than his caution” (TT, 896). The cosmic collides with the common when Faramir misunderstands Frodo’s answer “Can he, does he then know of

176 Tolkien, Beowulf: the Monsters and the Critics: 37.
177 Cook, Enigmas and Riddles in Literature: 12.
178 Ibid., 18.
your burden? . . . He bore it? . . . This matter winds itself ever in new riddles. Then he is pursuing it? ”, Frodo acknowledges that maybe the desire for the Ring has brought him to this pass, but reveals Gollum’s current hunger extended only so far as to search for fish. Faramir laughs at the “less perilous hunger”, they use Frodo to capture Gollum, and so the saga continues (TT, 896). The riddle’s apparent swing from the cosmic to the familiar (from ring to fish) generates humour out of anxiety - a common construction in both THOB and LOTR.

As previously mentioned, Beorn’s character is of a similarly dualistic nature; his cosmic and intimidating aura is juxtaposed with his pastoral Englishness. He is “all in different ways in between” good and evil, and the same can be said of Gollum (see his famous self-debate over Frodo). When the obscurity of Beorn is peeled away, he stands as a suspicious and fierce, yet friendly creature. Gollum shares this suspicious nature, which leads the protagonists to be wary of (and indeed share a good deal of dialogue concerning) his intentions. However, Gollum’s character is much more intricately woven, even to the point of entanglement. He does have a duality; shown through his conversations with himself “in a more direct, schizophrenic sense . . . Slinker talking to Stinker”180 This disjunction can be equated to Tolkien’s view of Grendel in Beowulf, who “is conceived as having a spirit, other than his body, that will be punished”.181 The Gollum-half has possession of the body, as evidenced by the body’s decomposition, with Sméagol being the tortured soul. As a whole, Gollum is the riddle’s darkness, the answer we fear – an assemblage of our worst traits. He is both a shadow and a cannibal – the rotten part of our being always threatening to devour the rest. Tolkien made this creature to induce our mental gag reflex, and like Sam we are appalled. Except, like Grendel (and even Sam), Gollum’s traits are all our own and require reconciliation, as recognised by Frodo.182

Gollum is essential. “Monsters”, Tolkien states, are “fundamentally allied to the underlying ideas” of the medieval art that inspire his work. The creation of Middle-earth’s riddle creatures serve a similar function to one that Tolkien the scholar observes in Beowulf:

It is just because the main foes in Beowulf are inhuman that the story is larger and more significant that this imaginary poem of a great king’s fall. It glimpses the

179 Ibid., 68.
181 Tolkien, Beowulf: the Monsters and the Critics: 37.
182 Ibid., 50.
In a world of opposites, the dark creatures of *LOTR* serve as an opposition to the unseen forces hinted at in the work’s prophetic and oracular riddles. By counterbalancing these powers, Tolkien illuminates the “cosmic” importance of the story. Creatures like the Balrog hint at “antiquity with a greater and yet darker antiquity behind.” Gollum’s “riddles tend to be modeled on sources in ancient myth and legend”. One might argue that the *riddling* monsters of Tolkien’s world (Smaug and Gollum) are more integral to the “underlying ideas” of the story than his heroes. Greed (as symbolized by Smaug) is the engine that powers *THOB*. In *LOTR*, Frodo’s view of Gollum (his *personal* shadow character) moves from repulsion to pity and onward to the acceptance. These monsters counter the lofty riddle speaker of the righteous, the wise Gandalf, while validating the eternal truths he stands for. Both monster and prophet exist mutually as answers to death’s cryptic sublime, often explored by the hero in the *catabasis*, or descent into the underworld. Often the hero’s descent is a journey to a “literal” underworld, like Bilbo’s, or like “Christ’s descent into hell”. In other examples the Hero may traverse hellish or dystopian landscapes above ground, like Sam and Frodo, or as Odysseus experiences in *The Odyssey*. And so it is that when we find Bilbo and Gollum swapping “Riddles in the Dark” we can see that they are not alone, that the sphinx’s claws and Grendel’s hands clutch at what Tolkien calls the “outer edges” of the page.

Bilbo’s catabasis is defined by his exchange with Gollum of a series of *neck-riddles* along the shore of an underground lake. I borrow the term “neck-riddle”, like Eleanor Cook in her helpful book, *Enigmas and Riddles in Literature*, from Archer Taylor. Cook describes the neck-riddle to us:

> Taylor invented the term “neck-riddle” which he calls a “well-established and enigmatic genre” in his collection, *English Riddles from Oral Tradition* (p. 1). A neck-riddle, following Taylor, is a riddle set by someone whose life is at stake and who will die if the riddle is solved. Hence clever neck-riddles are based on secret, personal knowledge, unavailable to the powers that be. Taylor’s term may be usefully expanded to include any riddle where one’s life depends on answering it, whether it is

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183 Ibid., 35.
184 Ibid., 33.
set by oneself or another. . . The mood is menacing, the occasion is a trial by wits, the attitude of the riddler is legalistic or murderous.188

Much can be (and has been) said about Bilbo’s experience in the underworld, but I will focus on Tolkien’s own contentions, specifically his theory that monsters are often more closely aligned with a book’s underlying messages than the hero. Through this lens I will examine Bilbo through Gollum; his (and later Frodo’s) fallen self. Mathew Fike points out that the “descent-into-hell motif suggests a primarily literary underground, but there is also a psychological dimension to the underworld…”189 Tolkien coaxes this marriage between literary and psychological dimensions to the forefront of his text. Frodo also experiences a majority of his hell in an introverted state of despair, into which we are hardly allowed to peer. Frodo experiences a literal descent in Moria, and a figurative descent in Shelob’s lair. His mental descent resulting from the downward pull of the Ring varies, remains continually present. Bilbo’s mind experiences little wear, his fear and anxiety, although valid in their own way, merely peer over the edge into the abyss of Frodo’s. Frodo’s ailment demonstrates that “One does not have to journey underground or suffer physical torture to descend into hell, for hell is also a negative state of the mind’s own making.”190 Bilbo’s catabasis, made more accessible for children and yet continually appealing to adults, is a more straightforward union of the real and imagined, the seen and unseen, the literal and the psychological.

The underworld’s dank environment also acts as a canvas to the mnemonic imagery of the riddles. For years Gollum has been lurking about the dark lake. In Gandalf’s words: “He was a loathsome little creature: he paddled a small boat with his large flat feet, peering with pale luminous eyes and catching blind fish with his long fingers, and eating them raw” (F, 15). His life is a construct of his riddles’ answers: he lives under a “mountain”, hissing “wind” between his teeth, in the “dark”, chewing raw “fish”, for a very, very long “time”. Bilbo brings with him, through his riddles, agrestic ideals that Gollum has all but lost. The whiteness of his “teeth” riddle is a stark contrast to the dark, and the garden-image of “sun on the daisies” solarises the cave. “Fish on a little table, man at a table sitting on a stool, the cat has the bones” brings domesticity. And of course, “Egg(s)”, representing the fertility and procreation of ordinary life which Gollum will never again experience. Bilbo’s riddles conjured in Gollum “memories of ages and ages and ages before, when he lived with his grandmother in a hole in a bank by a river. . . they reminded him of days when he had been

188 Cook, Enigmas and Riddles in Literature: 119.
189 Fike, Spenser’s Underworld in the 1590 Faerie Queene: 3.
190 Ibid., 5.
less lonely sneaky and nasty, and that put him out of temper” (H; 80). The “Egg” riddle stumps Gollum, but suddenly he remembers “sitting under the river bank teaching his grandmother . . . to suck – ‘Eggses!’ (H; 81). At this point of THOB it is easy to gloss over this seemingly minor connection between memory and riddles, but Gandalf recalls this in LOTR:

“There was a great deal in the background of their minds and memories that was very similar. They understood one another remarkably well . . . Think of the riddles they both knew, for one thing . . . [In Gollum there] was a little corner of his mind that was still his own, and light came through it, as through a chink in the dark: light out of the past. It was actually pleasant, I think, to hear a kindly voice again, bringing up memories of wind, and trees, and sun on the grass, and such forgotten things. (F, 72).

Through Gollum we can see what Tolkien meant when he wrote that “the long-ago had a special poetical attraction.” Gollum and his riddles are nostalgic in nature. But while Gandalf hints that nostalgia may have the power to cure Gollum’s trauma, it remains a precarious desire. He tells us: “But, of course [the memories] would only make the evil part of him angrier in the end . . .” (F, 72). Indeed, the darker side to the riddle’s mnemonic function creeps out later, as Gollum, Frodo, and Sam approach the Dead Marshes. Gollum prepares to recite a longer version of his fish riddle, except that this time the memories conjured are filled with malice:

“The cold hard lands
they bites our hands,
they gnaws our feet.
The rocks and stones
are like old bones
all bare of meat.
But stream and pool
is wet and cool:
so nice for feet!
And now we wish—

‘Ha! Ha! What does we wish?’ he said, looking sidelong at the hobbits. ‘We’ll tell you,’ he croaked. ‘He guessed it long ago, Baggins guessed it.’ A glint came into his eyes, and Sam catching the gleam in the darkness thought it far from pleasant.” (TT, 810)

In this sequence, the riddle brings an above-ground Gollum back to his subterranean dwelling. The “glint” in his eye is the darkness of the cave, the obscurity of the riddles. He feels cheated by Bilbo, but the discerning reader is meant to understand that the game was

191 Tolkien, Beowulf: the Monsters and the Critics: 22.
rigged from the start. Bilbo is granted a special providence, one which wouldn’t allow him to come to harm. In THOB it appears to be merely a hero’s good luck, in LOTR, a reflective Gandalf (as mentioned earlier) calls it “something else at work” (F, 73). When Bilbo finds the fish riddle difficult, a fish jumps out of the water, when he calls for more time it just so happens to be the answer, and finally the controversial “What have I got in my pocket?” wins Bilbo the contest. Bilbo’s special providence, disguised by mere luck, hints at the riddle’s relationship to the divine:

In the end Bilbo won the game, more by luck (as it seemed) than by wits; for he was stumped at last for a riddle to ask, and cried out, as his hand came upon the ring he had picked up and forgotten: What have I got in my pocket? (F, 15)

The question could be seen as a riddle in its second definition (a puzzling question, problem, etc), but the rules of the riddle game included only the first meaning, in which the riddle is meant to exercise ingenuity and wit. This last question is not a “true riddle” where the “question contains sufficient evidence for the answer, even if the evidence is given in an obscure way.”\(^{192}\) It does, however, have the personal quality of the aforementioned neck-riddle. Bilbo, of course, knows that Gollum has no way of knowing what he has in his pocket. Still, while the last conundrum posed by Bilbo is not a riddle as understood by the riddle game, by attempting an answer Gollum accepts its admission into, and promptly loses, the riddle game. He uses the riddle as a weapon, and defeats himself as the wicked things of Tolkien’s world often do. Where Gollum uses the riddle as a weapon, for Bilbo it is a shield – one that is provided for him in the dark, and one that he learns to use (the hard way) in his confrontation with Smaug. Gollum merely belongs to “a series of fallen creatures on a rising scale of terror” leading to Bilbo’s encounter with a clever dragon.\(^{193}\) In between Gollum and Smaug creep the spiders of Mirkwood.

Gandalf has left the company to themselves to stand on their own. Once the group is ambushed by spiders, it is up to Bilbo to fill Gandalf’s shoes. Using both of the objects he has extracted from the underworld, the Ring and the riddle, Bilbo imitates Gandalf’s method of dealing with the trolls of “roast mutton”. Gandalf, Tolkien’s “Odinic wanderer”\(^{194}\) (after the Norse god known for such clever ruses), tricks the trolls through a riddlic game of wits and fools them into exposing themselves to the sun and consequently turn into stone. Bilbo

\(^{192}\) Cook, Enigmas and Riddles in Literature: 120.

\(^{193}\) Lobdell, A Tolkien Compass: 7.

uses rhyming riddles to infuriate the spiders and draw them away from the dwarves but also “to let the dwarves hear his voice” (H; 159), paradoxically offering hope and escape through the melody of his riddle-rhymes. Bilbo makes “the spiders so angry that they lost their wits” (H; 159), allowing the dwarves an opportunity to escape. Only after his mental manipulation falters does he turn to sting to aid the escape, an important life lesson.

By the time Bilbo meets Smaug, he is a local hero, and his status has gone to his head. He uses riddle speech to protect himself from Smaug’s manipulations, but Smaug is one of Tolkien’s most cunning creations. The Riddle often brings characters together in LOTR, and binds them as the Ring’s riddle binds those who bear it. Smaug is an inversion of this usage, and uses the riddle to sew dissension. Despite Bilbo’s efforts to keep the truth veiled, the dragon has sewn seeds of doubt in regards to his Dwarf-friends’ greed. Not only is Bilbo newly suspicious of his escorts, but Smaug also deduces that Bilbo had other help, and sets out to attack the lake-folk. In a way he too, like Gollum, vanquishes himself; for at his own decision, he catches Bard’s fatal arrow in the chest. So it is that Bilbo loses the game of riddles to Smaug and yet learns humility, and nears the end of his maturation process.

In conclusion we have explored the apparitions of the riddle in Tolkien’s work, both literary and figuratively. The riddle is a vital concept to bear in mind when reading these works, whether critically or for leisure. The (Old English) riddle seems to have informed Tolkien’s creative process. Much of my discussion has involved the Riddle’s metaphoric nature and mimetic usage. Gollum and Beorn have been presented as riddle-creatures, or personified enigmas. Tolkien’s heroes share the experience of the riddle solver. The riddle, representing ingenuity and wit can be both sword and shield in a game of life or death; the ability to use the riddle as a measuring stick of maturity. The interlacing narrative of LOTR heavily incorporates the riddle; each character has their part to play in the final outcome. The riddle is used both nostalgically (through Gollum we even see the riddle as a mnemonic device) and to foreshadow events to come. The “question-answer” form of the plot coaxes the reader along to share in Tolkien’s journeys. The riddle signifies many things, but faith remains the most prevalent of themes. The riddle tends to draw characters together in fellowship. It brings them together cosmetically through “high style” prophecy, and strengthens their camaraderie through “low style” common humour riddles. Smaug shows that the vague speech of the riddle can also be divisive. Tolkien makes use of the riddle’s intrinsic multiplicity, the good and the bad, and (like Beorn) everything in between. The void hints at an incomprehensible spirit-world larger than the characters, or us; the obscurity plays
at the limits of language. It is in this magical realm of words that we will continue in the next chapter.
Chapter 3: Jokes and Laughter

Before entering a discussion about the roles jokes and laughter play in Middle-earth, I must first establish the prevalent power of words. Words can have magical value; oaths, for example, seem destined to be fulfilled, and Moria opens only to the spoken word “friend” in elvish. This “magic” correlates with the power of speech in the “real world”, especially in Tolkien’s time of eloquent orators and influential totalitarian party leaders. In Tolkien’s era, advances in technology spread the voices of Hitler, Stalin, and Mussolini across continents. This trend continues through our time, as the internet continues to provide an open conduit from the individual to the masses. Language can build culture, or destroy it, and while these capabilities are first presented in THOB, they are documented more clearly in LOTR.

The chapter will also revisit and expand on Tolkien’s use of recognisable linguistic and/or philological “patterns” to enhance the process of his sub-creation through mimesis of our real world. The languages of Middle-earth form the foundation of LOTR. Folkloric sayings such as mottoes and proverbs fill Middle-earth’s oral canon, suggesting the basis for an evolving culture. By focusing on language, as Elizabeth Kirk puts it:

Tolkien has created an entire world in its spatial and chronological dimensions, peopling it with languages which have, in a necessarily stylized and simplified version, all the basic features of language, from writing systems and sound changes through diction and syntax to style . . . . [Tolkien applies] language to action, to values, and to civilization.

Words thus define the existing order while paving the way for the new, so of further concern is the vulnerability of an oral-historical order to the spoken word. I intend to discuss manipulation and sincerity, and how Sauron and Saruman demonstrate age old devices that seem engrafted into our own historical cycles, such as fear mongering, falsified stories, and other “dark” practices. Grima Wormtongue, Saruman, Denethor, the Mouth of Sauron, and Sauron himself serve as examples of deceptive and exploitative empire building in opposition to Gandalf’s, Aragorn’s, Elrond’s, and Théoden’s virtuous unifications. A close look is needed at the great deal of attention paid in LOTR to Saruman’s voice, his sincerity and rhetorical manipulation. Gandalf will represent authenticity and serve as a foil to Saruman’s undertakings.

196 Ibid., 10.
At this point too I will discuss how the ironic informs both Saruman’s oratory characterisation, and his story. It will be demonstrated that Saruman meets irony’s need for “‘alazony’, which is Greek for braggartism but in works on irony is shorthand for any form of self-assurance or naivety”. The root word alazon, after which Frye names a character type, “means imposter, someone who pretends or tries to be something more than he is.” Alazons are blocking characters, which are often humorous imposters, and stand in the way of the Eiron’s goals. Tolkien’s ironic treatment of these imposters further reflects an English trait grown in the trenches of World War I, where many courageous men died fighting for questionable motives. As a result, a new paradigm, that the military is seen as an ironic structure, became part of the “English” character with which Tolkien infused his work. The higher the rank, the more likely you are to find incompetence, or ignorance, in the face of reality.

Saruman’s self-aggrandisement becomes ridiculous, and the chapter “The Voice of Saruman” reveals itself as dramatic irony at its finest. His evil designs will be seen as tendentious jokes, specifically the corruption of the Shire. The ironic treatment of Saruman is elucidated by the authenticity of Gandalf as an eiron character. Where the alazon deprecates others in search of increasing his own power, the eiron character contrastingly deprecates himself. Although Gandalf is powerful and dangerous, he undermines his own power whenever possible. The contests between alazons and eirons form “the basis for comic action”. The audience, of course, is “sympathetic to the eiron side”. The treatment of Saruman is often comic; like Smaug, he has been bestowed a name with hidden humorous value. However, the real amusement in Saruman’s handling is his increasingly obvious fate—to the reader, and his own progressively absurd ignorance of it.

After establishing the dynamic between power and manipulation of the spoken word at the highest levels of Middle-earth’s political sphere, my discussion moves away from grand dealings to common familiarities between Middle-earth and our world. The two worlds collide most recognisably through the hobbits and their habits. Descending from high

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199 Ibid., 172.
200 Ibid., 50.
201 Ibid., 172.
202 Ibid., 172.
to low mimetic, from world-impacting politics to the everyday, I will discuss how jokes are used by LOTR’s common characters. We may not all be a grand wizard like Saruman or Gandalf, but each person holds a fragment of the ability to bend others’ perceptions of reality, whether through spontaneous wit or prepared humour. Jokes can thus be seen as a form of common magic, as distinctive sets of words that serve everyday manipulation. The two vanishings (of Bilbo and Frodo) in the beginning of LOTR will serve as prime examples. The first is a physical alteration of reality, where Gandalf makes Bilbo’s disappearance look like a prank in bad taste. The second shows how a joke alone can soften trauma, when Barliman jokes about Frodo’s weight when he disappears.

Once the reality-bending qualities of the joke are fully established, then the discussion of laughter as a struggle of truths and power may begin. For the heroes of LOTR, laughter often accompanies a revelation of truth. The ever-mocking villains often laugh in an attempt to make falsities appear true. Laughter has the power to dispel rhetorical manipulation. Gandalf’s laughter in particular is related to inside knowledge of LOTR’s divine design. Through laughter, Gandalf demonstrates the ability to break the verbal “spells” of Middle-earth’s wicked. Whoever controls the appearance of truth in Middle-earth has power over everything else.

Making History: Oaths Mottoes and Proverbs

Jane Chance has championed the contention that LOTR, specifically The Two Towers, “dramatizes the power of language to change, control, dominate—and release.” Other powers of the spoken or written word in Tolkien’s Middle-earth have been duly noted: “Swearing an oath binds the characters to fulfil it, even after their deaths or against their will.” Aragorn travels the Paths of the Dead to recruit an army of “oathbreakers”, ghosts who once swore, and abandoned, an oath to aid Isildur (Aragorn’s ancestor) and who have been consequently cursed until their oath can be fulfilled to an heir of the same bloodline (R; 1023, 1033-4). The rhyme inscribed on the Ring correlates with the power of the Ring itself (F; 66). Language, too, has a magical element, most clearly seen after Gandalf recites Sauron’s black speech without translation into the common tongue: “A shadow seemed to pass over the high sun, and the porch for a moment grew dark. All trembled, and the Elves

stopped their ears” (F; 331). Names too have a sacred aura about them. Sauron’s name is seldom heard, as if speaking his true name grants him power, and he is even referred to as “The Nameless One” by the men of Gondor (TT; 886). The sounds of one’s language contribute to identity, “illustrat[ing] their speakers’ inherent moral fiber”. As noted, Words can be used to open portals such as at Moria (F; 401). Conversely, speech acts can be used to help bar passageways, as when Frodo forbids the Black Riders to cross the river or when Gandalf forbids the Balrog to cross the Bridge of Khazad-Dum (F; 279-281, 430-431).

The foundation to this magical element to language is shared in our world, where the spoken word can be seen as the closest thing to a magical ability a person can wield. The right words can be used to manipulate and/or control people into perpetrating both positive and negative acts. A speech can incite peaceful reform or violent revolt. The bridge between the magical identity of speech in Middle-earth and its disenchanted counterpart in our world is maintained through the fall of Saruman. Even after the shattering of his staff and after losing his wizardly power, Saruman obtains power over the Shire using no sorcery save the persuasiveness of his tongue.

One of the greatest pleasures of reading Tolkien’s work is the feeling of witnessing a cultural evolution. The old order fades as the new emerges at the genesis of the third age. The hobbits in particular dutifully annotate lessons learned during their travels. Bilbo makes many notable contributions himself to Middle-earth’s oral canon, sayings likely to be “passed into a proverb” (H; 216). Some humorous examples include: “Never laugh at live dragons, Bilbo you fool!”, and “Victory after all, I suppose! Well, it seems a very gloomy business.” (H; 216, 269). It takes an antihero such as Bilbo to deliver these antiheroic sayings to such comic effect. The pre-World War I heroic model of the past would not only laugh at a live dragon, but attempt to kill it. Victory on the battlefield would be glorious, not gloomy. Bilbo’s antithetical attitude towards courage and glory relates directly to our own world, where there is little room for the heroism of old. The surpassing of man’s technological capabilities past conventional warfare strategy meant that hand to hand combat became nearly extinct, a new form of heroism needed to be learned. The warrior was no longer in control of the battlefield. To charge valiantly often meant to get torn asunder by machine gun fire. Bilbo records the insights of one such brave warrior, Thorin, as he utters his dying words: “If more of us valued food and cheer above hoarded gold it would be a much merrier
world” (H; 271). The sharing of such sayings, proverbs and mottoes may be seen as simply repetitive, but to the critical reader they amount to Tolkien’s demonstration of forming culture. Appreciation is owed to Tolkien’s meticulous deployment of language to give a sense of Middle-earth’s past and its passing history.

Along with the experience of *LOTR* as a historical piece, full of “reality and cultural depth”, comes a certain awareness of the fragility of such a testament. How easy would it have been for the history to have turned out differently? The text serves as not only a device of enculturation full of virtuous proverbs and mottoes, but also as a warning against those who would exploit our yearning for oral identity. The line between being thankful for “what was” and being relieved for “what wasn’t” is frail. Evil could easily win, draw up lies about Gandalf and company, and cast our beloved characters into maligned oblivion. Only by the unwitting fulfillment of Gollum’s earlier oath (that he would never let Sauron have The Ring TT; 807) are our protagonists saved. Gollum and The Ring (and so Sauron’s dominion) disappear into the infernal pits of Mt. Doom, all immolated at the same instant. Given the chance, the wicked would have continued to twist the ingredients of Middle-earth’s cultures to their liking. A chief example of such an exploitation of custom is what Adolf Hitler did with the same mythology that Tolkien cherished. In Tolkien’s own words in a 1941 letter to his son Michael: “I have a burning private grudge . . . against that ruddy little ignoramus Adolf Hitler . . . [f]or ruining, perverting, misapplying, and making for ever accursed, that noble spirit, a supreme contribution to Europe, which I have ever loved, and tried to present in its true light.” Tolkien provides his readership with a wealth of proverbs, mottoes, and folklore that cross between the real world and Middle-earth. The cultural and political vulnerability created by the lingual exploitations of the wicked leaves the reader with a familiar feel of contested politics.

Hitler may or may not have been used as a source of characterization for Sauron, Saruman, and the like. He does certainly join them under the categorical label of tyrant. He is closest in nature to Saruman, due to their mutual affinity for passionate oration. I turn to Nietzsche’s insight into great deceivers: they exhibit “a remarkable process . . . to which they owe their power. In the very act of deception with all its preparations—the dreadful voice, the gestures—they are overcome by their belief in themselves, and it is this belief which then

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speaks so persuasively, so miracle-like to the audience.”\textsuperscript{211} George Victor identifies such charismatic leaders as “masters of an illusory type of intense sincerity.”\textsuperscript{212} It is in the intense sincerity of Saruman’s rhetorical manipulations that we find a crucial link between Middle-earth and our world, and between our time, times past, and the future.

**Manipulation and Sincerity**

“Sincerity”, Lionel Trilling tells us, is a word that “has lost most of its former high dignity.”\textsuperscript{213} When we speak it, “we are likely to do so with either discomfort or irony”.\textsuperscript{214} *LOTR* is a work which captures the lost nobility of sincerity and enables the rise of authenticity, a quality evidenced by action. “Sincerity”, a positive concept by design, often attempts to make something appear truer than it is. Saruman too was once pure, he too has fallen, and he speaks with sincerity even while deceiving and manipulating on personal and political levels. He is introduced as “Saruman the White . . . great among the Wise” (F; 63). But power corrupts him, and he is revealed by Gandalf to be treacherous (F; 335-342). His ensuing actions classify him as a tyrant. Betty Glad draws on observations made by Plato and Aristotle in order to define the tyrant. Citing Stalin, Hitler, and Saddam Hussein as examples, she claims the tyrant “(1) rules without law, (2) looks to his own advantage rather than that of his subjects, and (3) uses extreme and cruel tactics—against his own people as well as others.”\textsuperscript{215} During the First World War, the radio was a relatively new invention. Propaganda was still mostly limited to the cinemas and comics, but Tolkien witnessed the rise of television and soon images of Adolf Hitler (with his hands clutched close to his vest, his eyes closed, and his mouth open) began seducing the common people of Germany and other countries.

Saruman is one of three active tyrants in *LOTR*, a step below Sauron, and a step above Lotho Sackville-Baggins. As with most modern tyrants all are masters of words and fear. By the end of *LOTR* all of these characters are dead or (in Sauron’s case) irreparably crippled and disempowered. Like many notorious tyrants in this world they all undermine

\textsuperscript{211} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{212} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{214} Ibid., 6.
their own power. Saruman is (like most wicked characters of *LOTR*) doomed to be ensnared by his own treachery; evil often defeats evil, while the good persevere.

Sincerity is first treated in *THOB* with heavy suspicion, particularly when dealing with the dwarves. The well-mannered formalities of their culture clash with their self-serving ways. Dwarfish greeting includes following ones name with “at your service” (H; 14, etc.). Dwarves’ actions, however, place others at their service. As we’ve already seen the dwarves exploit Bilbo’s hospitality. In fact, one might argue that Thorin’s greed (for the Arkenstone, his kingship, and the rest of Smaug’s treasure) is the main drive behind the story. The comic effect comes from the incongruity of the dwarves’ words and actions. Perhaps the most telling example I can provide is a letter left for Bilbo the morning after the dwarves have had their way with Bag End, with my italic on the word “sincerest”, and Tolkien’s italics on the rest:

Thorin and Company to Burglar Bilbo greeting! For your hospitality our sincerest thanks, and for your offer of professional assistance our grateful acceptance. Terms: cash on delivery, up to and not exceeding one fourteenth of total profits (if any); all travelling expenses guaranteed in any event; funeral expenses to be defrayed by us or our representatives, if occasion arises and the matter is not otherwise arranged for.

Thinking it unnecessary to disturb your esteemed repose, we have proceeded in advance to make requisite preparations, and shall await your respected person at the Green DragonInn, Bywater, at 11 a.m. sharp. Trusting that you will be punctual,

We have the honour to remain
Yours deeply
Thorin & Co.

In spite of its courtesies, this note is full of assumptions and quite demanding. Words of flattery and assurance, such as “professional”, “esteemed”, and “grateful” weigh down what amounts to a binding contract for Bilbo’s services. The readiness with the letter refers to Bilbo’s death makes one think of an enlistment notice, where the thing you are invited to sell might just be your very life. In *THOB*, we are provided with a playful and accessible version of sincerity’s relationship to manipulation. The dwarves’ sincerity is amusing, as it represents a recognisable truth in modern society that business dealings, whether personal or national, are always sugar coated in tasty rhetoric, and because of the language and pretence of manners, the consumer often doesn’t understand what they are getting into. When

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216 Ibid., 1.
Tolkien’s readership looks over this note, we roll our eyes and sigh, since some things never change, even in a sub-created fantasy world entirely set apart from our own. In _LOTR_, however, Tolkien adds a more serious level of consequence to this theme.

The tyrant’s speech is often his most important tool. Sauron has “few servants but many slaves of fear . . . [and] uses others as his weapons” (R; 1070, 1177). The shadow of his threat spreads by word of mouth. Saruman uses a different twist on fear mongering. Where Sauron builds up fear of his own image, Saruman instils fear of others. After the Battle of Helm’s Deep, for example, we find the men of Dunland “amazed; for Saruman had told them that the men of Rohan were cruel and burned their captives alive” (TT; 711). Saruman exploits Middle-earth’s rich tradition of story telling, and a “large portion of his power and his evil ability [is] to tell false stories that are taken for truth”. Saruman has made his army more afraid of the enemy than of him, where Sauron suffers nothing to be feared more than Sauron. Saruman and his voice shift many shapes, but he often portrays himself as being on the side of righteousness, where Sauron offers no such pretext. He owns the colour black, whereas Saruman’s robe becomes multicoloured. Sauron is the Lord of Darkness: Saruman is a lord of mockery, and a master of “sincerity”.

As sincerity is often the face of manipulation, so it is the deceiver’s sincerity that must be disproved. Because “[t]he word cannot be applied to someone without regard to his cultural circumstances” cultural insight is required to discredit somebody’s sincerity. Enter Gandalf, the ethical authority of Middle-earth, self-described as “Saruman as he should have been” (TT; 645). Gandalf’s and Saruman’s images are often woven together; as Gimli notes, they appear “Like, and yet unlike” (TT; 754).

Both wizards are strong orators, both are very powerful. Like Saruman, Gandalf carries with him a great deal of threat. Gandalf admits as much when Gimli mistakes him for a “dangerous” Saruman: “‘Dangerous!’ cried Gandalf. ‘And so am I, very dangerous: more dangerous than anything you will ever meet, unless you are brought alive before the seat of the Dark Lord’” (TT; 651). They both, in ethically different ways, attempt to defeat Sauron. Saruman seeks the Ring for himself, Gandalf seeks to destroy it. Perhaps a heavily understated difference between these two characters is their sense of humour. Saruman is cynical and sardonic; he exhibits the laughter of ridicule, of superiority:

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219 Trilling, _Sincerity and Authenticity_: 2.
You made me laugh, you hobbit-lordlings, riding along with all those great people, so secure and so pleased with your little selves. You thought you had done very well out of it all, and could now just amble back and have a nice quiet time in the country. Saruman’s home could be all wrecked, and he could be turned out, but no one could touch yours. . . (R; 1332, 1333)

This amusement of Saruman embodies everything he is. The third person reference exposes his narcissism, feelings of entitlement, and snobbishness. His enjoyment lies in the unveiling of his sardonic design; the exposition of why the ironic situation is funny to him because he is all that matters. Saruman has spent an abundant amount of time engineering a tendentious joke, hostile by nature and aimed to satisfy his aggressive instincts. His physical threat made impotent, he has resorted to treating the Shire cynically, exploiting and making a joke of its creeds and institutions. The level of detail and effort he has apparently put into this venture is comparable to the construction of his ironic demise by the author Tolkien himself.

But a central contrast between Saruman and Gandalf remains their sense of humour. Freud and others have written many pages on the aggressive nature of jokes, and Gandalf is no stranger to threats. He is quick to anger, fitting the “age old” proverb concerning wizards (see above). In one most apparent example, he threatens to knock the door of Moria with Pippin’s head. In another instance, he recalls to Frodo an encounter with Mr. Butterbur at the Prancing Pony. He learns of Butterbur’s failure to deliver his letter to Frodo, then speaks a comical and yet gruesome threat: “If this delay was his fault, I will melt all the butter in him. I will roast the old fool over a slow fire” (F, 343). Frodo, who once again plays the surprised foil, cries in alarm: “What did you do to him? . . . He was really very kind to us and did all that he could.” Gandalf laughs at Frodo’s naïve-yet-truthful cry of alarm. He tells us “So overjoyed was I of the news that I got out of him, when he stopped quaking, that I embraced the old fellow.” Gandalf distinguishes himself from Saruman, but never lets us forget that he could easily become Saruman. Gandalf shows how humour often results from the dissipation of threat. If he were Saruman, his threats would cease being something to laugh about.

Saruman’s own prominent place in Middle-earth’s divine design (and narrative) is bookmarked by two scenes of laughter. The first laughter, at the expense of Gandalf, takes place at the height of Saruman’s power. The second is Gandalf’s laughter as he breaks that power.

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221 Ibid.
In many ways, Saruman is the most tangible villain we experience in *LOTR*. Sauron looms, we are consistently made aware of his presence, but he remains wraithlike, metaphysical. The Mouth of Sauron is an extension of this presence, as his label defines him. Wormtongue lurks behind greater people, whether it is Théoden (whom he controls) or Saruman, who controls him. He cannot exist without another to leech off, and so he falls in a hail of arrows when he kills Saruman. Other villains lack individuality. We may come face to face with an array of orcs, but their parts are minor and short lived, a trait apparently matching their lives. Also, Orcs tend to act as figurative fire-crackers, they carry around a great deal of threat, but once ignited they explode, in turn, as individuals, and collapse inwards as a group. This process of “orcish implosion” is detailed twice: when Saruman and Sauron’s orcs fight over Merry and Pippin, and when Frodo’s jailers all kill each other in Cirith Ungol. The consistent nature of Middle-earth’s common wicked creatures can be traced through *THOB* as well. The Trolls act in similar fashion to *LOTR*’s Orcs, something Gandalf exploits during the early chapter “Roast Mutton”. Gandalf, through mimicking each troll in turn, causes them to bicker and quarrel until the sun comes up thus turning them into stone (H; 48). Denethor’s part is small, and his madness, like Gollum’s, excuses him from the accusation of pure villainy. *Buffoons*, who “polarize the comic mood”,²²² like Bill Ferny, Lotho Sackville-Baggins and the like are often portrayed, and/or explained away, as insignificant. They loom as examples of the pettiness, greed, and ambition often pervading political spheres of small-town communities. But Saruman is the most real, the one whom we are given evidence about, and who is placed in front of us to be evaluated. The reader, of course, judges him unfavourably, and this assessment goes hand in hand with our detection of the irony of his fate. By identifying the ironic in the portions of *LOTR* that deal with Saruman, we recognize not only that the way he acts is wrong, but also that people like him exist in our world.

D.C. Muecke points out that irony serves a “corrective function”²²³, and Tolkien makes use of irony in this way. Sam, whose “goodness” is increasingly valued as the narrative wears on, goes from underappreciated gardener to hero. Saruman is a man of authority whose “goodness” is revered and vaunted by Gandalf, but he will be found out as

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an imposter. The corrective function is that the reader appreciates Sam’s class while questioning the motives of the leaders in which it too often places its trust. Tolkien may have been a fan of the benevolent monarchy, but throughout *LOTR* there are many instances of justified disobedience to authority. A democracy might have been little more than “mob rule” to Tolkien, but, as the fall of Saruman shows, a trusted monarch who becomes a tyrant is even more unforgivable. Tolkien deploys dramatic irony to correct the reader’s awareness of how we sometimes fail to judge a person behind the mask of their employment, gender, or way of life. We find Sam as a simple gardener; we leave him with respect inspired by his courage and humility.

To borrow Salvatore Attardo’s definition of Dramatic Irony: “it is telling of an ironical event . . . where the audience knows something that the character of a play, novel, etc., ignores. (e.g., the case of Oedipus).” The tale of Éowyn is a textbook case. As a woman she forbidden to fight and yet she is the hero who, together with Merry, defeats the Lord of the Nazgul and so breaks the siege of Gondor. On the battlefield, the Nazgul Lord stands over what he believes is a male soldier called Dernhelm. The Ringwraith haughtily scoffs, “Thou fool. No living man may hinder me!” (R; 1101). The Ringwraith revels behind this prophetic providence while the reader is aware of Merry lurking behind him, and are furthermore suspicious that there is something to Dernhelm that the Ringwraith doesn’t grasp. Dernhelm is in fact only Éowyn’s assumed disguise, and is not what he seems, as Tolkien has given many hints of the knight’s femininity (see R; 1052-1053, 1086, 1100). In Saruman’s case he is not aware of Gandalf’s sacrifice, rebirth and transition (TT; 431). Gandalf’s willingness to die for his friends and for their freedom proves his authenticity to his friends and the reader alike. While the enactment of Gandalf’s rebirth is often considered one of *LOTR*’s flaws (Tolkien himself admits as much in a November, 1954 draft of a letter to Robert Murray), one redeeming result is his unquestioned authenticity. Tolkien had to draw this authenticity from somewhere so that it could replace Saruman’s fallen sincerity.

Using dramatic irony, Tolkien pits Saruman’s words against Gandalf’s action. Saruman becomes one of *LOTR*’s largest and longest jokes. Tolkien places him high in order to lengthen his fall. The critical chapter in his story, “The Voice of Saruman”, plays out his downfall as a narrative joke. He builds himself up through grand rhetoric only to be

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revealed as a fool. By the time the fellowship departs Isengard, Saruman and Grima Wormtongue are reduced to comic insignificance.

A simple narrative joke follows a general pattern. It begins like any other story, by introducing the context. Tension is built through absurdity, whether placing the character/s in an absurd situation or by having one of them emit absurd dialogue. The tension of the joke is eventually dispersed by a punch line. Many of these narrative jokes, such as the one we are about to analyse, consist of what Victor Raskin identifies as “two opposed scripts”.  

I will at this point draw on Raskin’s linguistic hypothesis that:

A text can be characterized as a single-joke-carrying text if both of the [following] conditions . . . are satisfied.

(i) The text is compatible, fully or in part, with two different scripts
(ii) The two scripts with which the text is compatible are opposite in a special sense . . .

I will now analyse the narrative joke by identifying the context of the joke, the tension arising between the two scripts of Saruman and Gandalf, and the concluding punch line. We begin with a look at the context of the situation. Tolkien meticulously adds detail to his writing in order to create an air of precariousness. The chapter greets us with bleak imagery:

They passed through the ruined tunnel and stood upon a heap of stones, gazing at the dark rock of Orthanc, and its many windows, a menace still in the desolation that lay all about it . . . Here and there gloomy pools remained, covered with scum and wreckage . . . a wilderness of slime and tumbled rock . . . [and so on] (TT; 751)

We are also greeted with our first warning:

‘Walk warily!’ said Merry. ‘There are loose slabs that may tilt up and throw you down into a pit, if you don’t take care.’ (TT; 751)

The topography of Isengard is thus presented as fallen, decadent and hazardous; the very ground beneath our feet is unstable. Once the material construct of the chapter is in place, Gandalf presents us with the chapter’s action:

. . . ‘I must pay Saruman a farewell visit. Dangerous, and probably useless; but it must be done. Those of you who wish may come with me – but beware!

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228 Ibid., 99.
And do not jest! This is not the time for it . . . Beware of his voice! (TT; 752, Italics mine)

The direness Gandalf relates is in the land, the air and in our ears. Since rising tension is an important ingredient to the joke, it is suitable that Saruman is approached with such an extreme level of deference and respect. But Saruman’s respect is earned through fear and so is destined to fail. The pleasure of the joke is in watching him be undone. We also get a sense that this chapter, taking place after the Battle of Helm’s Deep and the attack of the Ents on Isengard, is embroiled in a hazy fog of war. The traumatic experiences are over, and the history of these actions is beginning to be processed. The characters (and the readers with them) seek the reestablishment of order—in the form of seeking answers. Why did Saruman do what he did and what does he have to say for himself? What ensues are two differing scripts of what happened. The version voiced by Saruman is at times convincing to the common soldiers, as they cheer when Théoden seemingly accepts the Wizard’s call for peace (TT; 757). But Saruman’s version, a mockery of LOTR’s entire narrative to this point in the text, is countered by the reality of what the reader has experienced in Middle-earth. The ironic treatment of Saruman and his embarrassing downfall provides a corrective function in that it gives a sense of consolation and closure to a readership who, like those in Middle-earth that circle Orthanc, needed a sense of closure, even retribution.229

It is fitting that Gandalf should be the one passing final judgment on Saruman. He is inherently bound to Saruman, prevailing as Saruman fails, sacrificing while Saruman hoards; the list could go on. Most importantly, he ascends into divinity as Saruman falls from grace. Gandalf’s humiliation of Saruman plays on what Vladimir Propp calls “The Comic of Similarity”. Laughter, Propp says, is often “caused by the sudden revelation of some hidden flaw.”230 Propp uses the differing of twins as one example, but more important is his observation of professional clowns:

Talented clowns are quite familiar with this device: they often act in pairs, they are similar enough and different enough, but they argue endlessly with each other, wrangling and even fighting over trifles.231

Gandalf is the straight man to Saruman’s lunacy, his ethical conduct is unquestionably the one we sympathize with. The action of the chapter is the removal of Saruman from the high

229 And in fact, continues to be so for any person sceptical of politicians or political action or policy, and so on.
231 Ibid., 38.
spiritual plateau Gandalf now inherits. Gandalf breaks Saruman’s staff and thus severs the prime similarity between them. Once disassociated from Gandalf, Saruman is paired with Grima Wormtongue. They are bound by their failed ambition, their fall from higher nobility, and their petty squabbles.

There is a simple yet sharp lesson attached to the narrative joke of Saruman’s fall. If you laugh at the lunacy of would-be tyrants and write them off as harmless then you may be in for a surprise. This aspect of LOTR attacks complacency. If containment of such megalomaniacs is left to others then you can expect a knock on your own door soon. This was a lesson sorely learned by Tolkien’s generation, but one that is equally applicable today and will remain so in the foreseeable future. A perfect example of such complacency is seen through the hobbits. The hobbits have seen Saruman mostly as an immediate threat to their friends and themselves, not as a future threat to the Shire. Feeling “unimportant and unsafe”, Merry and Pippin stand on the sidelines while Gandalf and the aristocrats confront Saruman (TT; 753). They place their trust unwaveringly in Gandalf’s faith in the Treebeards’ valiant offer “Saruman shall not set foot beyond the rock, without my leave.” (765). While LOTR portrays Saruman and people like him as ridiculous, we are never left to believe that they should be taken lightly. If there is any doubt that LOTR is not severely concerned with political and lingual manipulation, it disappears in the chapter “Scouring of the Shire”. Saruman’s obtaining power over and domination of the Shire can easily be seen as the most bitterly ironic action of the story. The Shire, which has throughout the narrative been represented as a sanctuary, is in fact under endangered by a lack of moral rigour and failure to keep vigilance against enemies. Hobbit inaction and complacency have enabled dominance and oppression to enter their society.

**The Bend of Reality**

Making the transition from higher dealings of political manipulations, strife and intrigue, I now turn to look at how jokes work among the “common” people. This section will discuss the joke’s ability to change perceptions in the every day, specifically how a joke prevents or softens traumatic suffering. The joke does not change actual reality, but it can alter the way we experience it. My discussion begins by focusing on two early vanishings in LOTR, when Bilbo uses the Ring to escape his party, and Frodo has an accident in the Prancing Pony. In both situations the disappearances caused by the Ring threatens to cause trauma to those who witness them. That these two disappearances happen so close together
serves a purpose. Mainly, we see that the next best thing after the censorship and prevention of harm is the mitigation of the trauma through the use of wit.

Relating this discussion to our world, the advent of modern warfare and explosive projectiles has brought the phenomenon of disappearance to the battlefield.\textsuperscript{232} In the war Tolkien experienced, most of the casualties were results of shelling. There would be a cloud of smoke and debris, much like Gandalf’s, except evidence would often be all that was left of a living body that once inhabited the destroyed space. A piece of a pocket watch, smoking boots, and other grim reminders might be scattered about torn earth where the explosion took place. Since artillery strikes were constant, life carried on knowing that at any moment you or one of your friends might disappear. The aftershock of the vanishings, particularly Frodo’s is traumatic, a sort of precursor to shellshock. There is a moment where everything freezes and must settle into place. The hesitation that takes place during this time is what Tzvetan Todorov describes as the \textit{fantastic}. The fantastic event causes the people experiencing it in a place of uncertainty, leaving him/her to “two possible solutions: either he is the victim of an illusion of the senses, of a product of the imagination – and laws of the world then remain what the are; or else the event has indeed taken place, [and] reality is controlled by laws unknown to us.”\textsuperscript{233} Let us look at how Tolkien describes two instances to us. First, there is Bilbo’s:

\begin{quote}
He stepped down and vanished. There was a blinding flash of light, and the guests all blinked. When they opened their eyes Bilbo was nowhere to be seen. One hundred and forty-four flabbergasted hobbits sat back speechless. (F; 40)
\end{quote}

Gandalf’s masking of the event creates a \textit{fantastic-uncanny} atmosphere, in which experiencing the supernatural can be explained using the existing known “rules” of the world.\textsuperscript{234} Gandalf realizes that the complacent Shire-hobbits wouldn’t be able to comprehend such a disturbance in their reality’s fabric. He decides to cover Bilbo’s tendentious act by concocting a simple magic trick. He emits a puff of smoke around Bilbo, shielding the Shire folk’s eyes from what happened. By his doing so we are left with a much more subdued reaction than the alternative. The hobbits were still surprised, but their reaction “generally agreed that the joke was in bad taste, and more food and drink were

\begin{footnotes}
\item[232] Look up example
\item[234] Ibid., 41.
\end{footnotes}
needed to cure the guests of shock and annoyance” (F; 40). In fact, Bilbo’s malevolent act of humour is not unrelated to the Ring’s ongoing corruption of his soul, as evidenced by Bilbo’s suspicion and Gollum-like behaviour towards Gandalf (F; 44). The key here is that the situation, because of Gandalf’s material covering of the prank, is remedied. Whereas the trauma experienced seeing someone truly disappear is incurable, as is demonstrated in Frodo’s vanishing:

He simply vanished, as if he had gone slap through the floor without leaving a hole!
The local hobbits stared in amazement, and then sprang to their feet and shouted for Barliman. All the company drew away from Pippin and Sam . . . [regarded] as companions of a travelling magician of unknown powers and purpose. (F; 210)

The air in the Prancing Pony might be engulfed in a good amount of pipe smoke, but Frodo has no blinding flash to mask his disappearance. The act is met with suspicion and hostility. With no rational excuse at hand, the situation edges on the fantastic-marvelous, where the supernatural is unexplained and must be accepted.\textsuperscript{235} Even the reader, along with Frodo, faces the fantastic when he questions whether the Ring “had somehow . . . slipped on” or whether it had played a trick on him, trying to “reveal itself in response to some wish or command that was felt in the room” (F; 210). Magic may be an accepted part of the fantasy world we now know, but the question of the Ring’s agency, its ability to make things happen, looms large throughout the work because it generates such uncertainties.

With Frodo’s disappearance and tensions running high, Butterbur intercedes: “There was too much of that Mr. Underhill to go vanishing into thin air; or into thick air, as is more likely in this room” (F; 211). Joking about Frodo’s size and the thickness of the pipe smoke in the air eases the anxiety just enough for Frodo to make his reappearance:

He came forward into the firelight; but most of the company backed away, even more perturbed than before. They were not in the least satisfied by his explanation . . . [m]ost of the Hobbits and the Men of Bree went off then and there in a huff, having no fancy for further entertainment that evening. One or two gave Frodo a black look and departed muttering among themselves. (F; 211-212)

Frodo’s error is bringing magic into a place not magical. He has placed something sublime in front of their faces, something loftier than their everyday existence. However, by mixing his

\textsuperscript{235} Ibid., 42.
wit with a little bit of truth (the pipe smoke in the air and Frodo’s size), Butterbur reduces the situation from fantastic-marvelous to merely being uncanny. In Tolkien’s philologically charged work, a term like “uncanny” is featured for our perusal, and the text often signifies a specific word’s importance. Of particular interest is the separation of the word “uncanny” in the middle of Butterbur’s explanation to Frodo: “We’re a bit suspicious of anything out of the way – uncanny, if you understand me; and we don’t take it all of a sudden” (F; 212). In the Oxford Dictionary of English, “uncanny” is defined as “strange or mysterious, especially in an unsettling way”.

Freud, of course, took more liberty with the term. *A Dictionary of Critical Theory* provides a condensed version of Freud’s definition, one commonly used in literary theory today: “Freud argued that the uncanny is the feeling we get when an experience that occurred by chance suddenly feels fateful and inescapable.”

There is a feeling of repetition in uncanny, of déjà vu, witnessing something familiar yet strange. The uncanny experience is something Tolkien would have become familiar with during the Great War.

The best way to deal with the uncanny is through wit. We don’t have the magic of Gandalf, we can’t change the material world. We can, however, tell a joke to make the situation more manageable. This is a ritual that we are familiar with and Tolkien uses it to great effect in convincing the reader to relate to, and invest our emotions in, his characters. If we suffer, we expect our friends to suffer with us. Joint suffering, for better or worse, creates a unique experience that only those present can understand. After being abducted and tortured by laughing orcs, Merry greets his best friend Pippin:

‘Hullo Pippin!’ he said. ‘So you’ve come on this little expedition, too? Where do we get bed and breakfast?’ (TT; 584)

The greeting is a simple one, but it is laden with many comic effects, such as: understatement, irony, smugness, superiority, and incongruity. Because Merry and Pippin share cultural and personal relationships, we understand that there is a wealth of subtext beneath the surface. The orcs may shut them up, but the two hobbits enjoy intuitive laughter. Glenn Wilson talks about humour as a means of accessing personality:

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Humor is a form of self-expression. The jokes we tell and laugh loudest at give clues as to our central preoccupations, needs, and frustrations. Similarly, mutual understanding of the jokes we share with one another indicates certain levels of intimacy. I once suffered a traumatic eye injury, and only my closest friends joke about it, often referring to me as “One Eye Willy”, after the pirate-skeleton in the movie Goonies. If someone who I did not know personally made a comic reference to my condition, I doubt that I’d “get” the humour. The hobbits emit this sense of the sharing the unsaid through their jokes, especially their insults. They have a penchant for calling each other an ass, for one example (TT; 792, R; 1139). Frodo also calls Sam a nuisance (F; 529). Where Merry and Pippin’s insults are obviously between equals, Frodo’s insults to Sam come seemingly from a master-servant perspective of a higher class and status. Frodo does live higher up on the hill, after all, and Sam is his gardener. However, their relationship changes, or is perhaps clarified, as they travel further from the Shire. Sam becomes Frodo’s custodian, looking after his health, his meals, and offering him advice. As Frodo becomes more reliant on Sam, his insults in a way even the field between them. Never do we doubt that the hobbits are genuine friends. Understanding when the humorous insult is and isn’t The more explicitly they insult each other the closer they grow. Again LOTR shows us that Humour is the glue to any great fellowship.

Laughter, Truth and Divinity

Laughter is, obviously, often evoked by humour. When analysing LOTR, however, we must accept laughter as capable of being a separate entity. Sam, for example, “laughs for heart’s ease not for jest” (TT; 751). When laughter (in its low-mimetic form) does accompany humorous cause in a social context (Orc or Hobbit alike) it is what Pete Gunter describes as Nietzsche’s laughter of the multitudes. We find this laughter at the social level, and this is the laughter that Freud, Bergson, and other comic theorists often focus on. Causes for such laughter include incongruity, release, and superiority. Incongruity, “something comic theorists generally consider essential to laughter”, is the bringing together of things that do not fit. Laughter at the incongruous in LOTR often results from

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239 Pete A. Gunter, "Nietzschean Laughter," *The Sewanee Review* 76, no. 3 (1968): 500-500 gunter
consensus reality-shattering discoveries that mythic stories and creatures are actually true. When Éomer first meets Aragorn, Legolas, and Gimli, he says: “[t]hese are indeed strange days . . . [d]reams and legends spring to life out of the grass” (TT; 564). Then, in the same conversation, Aragorn asks the Riders of Rohan about their hobbit friends:

‘Halflings!’ laughed the Rider that stood beside Éomer.
‘Halflings! But they are only a little people in old songs and children’s tales out of the North. Do we walk in legends or on the green earth in the daylight?’ (TT; 565).

Similarly, when Gandalf refers to Pippin as a “man” in Gondor, the men present laugh at the impossibility of such a claim (R; 979).

The release theory of laughter holds that laughter is an explosion of repressed psychical energy. When an increasingly apprehensive Frodo listens to Sam’s song about the oliphaunts, he laughs “in the midst of all his cares . . . the laughter released him from hesitation” (TT; 846). Furthermore, Frodo’s laughter “produces a reduction in tension, momentarily relaxing the otherwise relentless dissatisfaction that extends . . . beyond the immediate and, in a sense, finite demands of biological need.”241 Frodo’s laugh not only releases his tension, it places him alongside his temporal reality. For a brief moment he is beyond reality and outside of time. His physical suffering, his starvation and fatigue, and the mental drain of the Ring do not exist on this plain. Gimli, anxious and war-worn, says of the wait during the sail from Pelargir to Harlond: “[h]eavy would my heart have been, for all our victory at the havens, if Legolas had not laughed suddenly” (TT; 846). The laugh of Legolas negates Gimli’s negative energy.

Laughter of superiority may be neglected and considered outdated in contemporary comic theory, but to a philological writer such as Tolkien it was a useful tool and a pivotal contrast with which to prove the quality of Gandalf’s divine laughter. I showed before that in a book of dualisms, paradoxes, and pairings, evil is often construed as a mockery of the good. We find the laughter of superiority firmly embedded in the wicked characters of LOTR. Saruman, Grima Wormtongue, and the Mouth of Sauron all laugh in an attempt to appear more powerful (whether politically, intellectually, or magically) than their counterparts (F; 339 TT; 669, R; 1163).

241Ibid., 4.
Where riddles are veiling creatures, laughter is quite the opposite. Laughter in Tolkien’s work usually accompanies a form of answer or truth. There is a point in the chapter “The Forbidden Pool” when Frodo and Faramir speak in riddle-fashion about Gollum’s relationship to the Ring (TT; 895-896). As Gollum dives and splashes about, these characters too find themselves submerged in a pool of pretence. They speak obliquely of Frodo’s “burden”, I assume to keep the truth from Faramir’s men nearby. Faramir questions whether the creature is drawn to the pool by the Ring:

‘This matter winds itself ever in new riddles. Then he is pursuing it?’
‘Maybe. It is precious to him. But I did not speak of that.’
‘What then does the creature seek?’
‘Fish,’ said Frodo. (TT; 896).

Faramir laughs softly at the riddle’s answer, and they emerge from a pool of pretence. In LOTR laughter often signifies release. The freed weight is often from the burden of truth. When Frodo witnesses Bilbo’s disappearance, we are told: “[h]e had enjoyed the joke, of course, even though he had been in the know. He had difficulty in keeping from laughter at the indignant surprise of the guests” (F; 40). Frodo’s suppressed laughter results from a burden of truth, his trouble in keeping a secret.

Laughter, in other words, releases us from pretence and feigned acts. In the light-hearted, beginning chapters of LOTR, this relationship is progressively explored. Farmer Maggot laughs when he reveals his remembrance of Frodo’s days stealing mushrooms from him (F; 122). Frodo laughs when he discovers the gift bag given to him by Maggot is laden with mushrooms (F; 127). The other hobbits laugh at Frodo’s surprised face when Merry reveals his knowledge of Frodo’s impending plan (F; 135). The purpose of Tolkien’s laughter is explained after the largest surprise of all, that Sam was the chief informant of the conspiracy to join Frodo in his adventures. Frodo pauses, “quite unable to decide whether he felt angry, amused, relieved, or merely foolish.” (F; 137). Later, at the Prancing Pony, Pippin’s laugh confirms the truth of Aragorn’s claim that “I believe my looks are against me” (F; 223). Pippin laments that the hobbits’ “last short cut through woods nearly ended in disaster”, and Aragorn laughs (F; 237). “Ah”, he responds, “but you had not got me with you then . . . (F; 237)”. 

The burden of truth does not have to be a personal ordeal. Laughter may be shared by many who have special access to a truth others do not. Aragorn, Gandalf, and Háma share
such a moment at the entrance to Théoden’s hall (TT; 666-668). Aragorn laughs at Gandalf’s excuse to keep his staff, knowing that the guard Háma would see through the pretence. Aragorn then extends the pretence to Háma: “Every man has something too dear to trust to another. But would you part an old man from his support? Come, will you not let us enter?” (TT, 667). Háma accepts the undertones of Aragorn’s laughter, and while he makes it clear he knows the “staff in the hand of a wizard may be more than a prop for age” the guard concludes that they are “friends and folk worthy of honour, who have no evil purpose”, and lets them pass through (TT, 668).

Laughter is a complex phenomenon that often happens in a moment of revelation, whether received or transmitted. While it likewise accompanies truth in Tolkien’s work frequently, the truth of its own nature is not easily defined. Vladimir Propp begins his treatise on the comic and laughter by citing a list Rostislav Yurenev provides of what laughter can be:

. . . joyful and sad, kind and irate, clever and silly, proud and warm-hearted, indulgent and fawning, contemptuous and scared, offensive and encouraging, impudent and shy, friendly and hostile, ironic and ingenious, sarcastic and naïve, tender and rough, significant and groundless, triumphant and justificatory, shameless and confused. The list can be extended: cheerful, mournful, nervous, hysterical, humiliating, physiological, bestial. There can even be melancholy laughter!242

Identifying the type of a person’s laughter and the concurring comic source can provide a truthful insight into said person’s state of mind. As we’ve seen before, the hobbits’ laughter often results from sharing truths of minds universally formed in the Shire. When one puts forward a preposterous suggestion involving food and drink in a time of anxiety, the others’ acknowledging laughter implies similar thoughts had been running through their heads. Sometimes this laughter can even be purely psychological in nature, as when Merry and Pippin share their inward laugh at the expense of the orcs and their own melancholic situation (see above).

The manipulative antagonists in LOTR often use laughter to make falsities appear true. Wormtongue laughs “grimly” when he is first introduced, and this action coincides with an attempt to cast doubt upon Gandalf’s intentions (TT; 669). Later, preceding the Battle of Cormallen, the Mouth of Sauron laughs superiorly before a word is even spoken. His laughter is a false claim to power. When put in his place by Gandalf, “the messenger was at a

242 Propp, Perron, and Debbèche, On the Comic and Laughter: 11.
loss; yet swiftly he laughed again” (R; 1166). Laughter in LOTR can be seen as a claim to the power of truth and authenticity, things inherent in Gandalf’s character. When he is Gandalf the Grey this is not apparent. His early “inaction with regard to the Ring”\textsuperscript{243} almost proves too costly. He is tricked and subjugated by Saruman, and he is also wrong about the men of Rohan (whom he hears may be paying tribute to Sauron). Before his rebirth, Gandalf “is torn by the choices he must make. . .”\textsuperscript{244} The ascendance of Gandalf the White, however, is marked by his inner knowledge of a design by a force unseen (the same force that provides Bilbo and Frodo with their special providence and protection). His choices are steadier, his laughter divine. Gandalf’s divine laughter finds its roots in antiquity. Literary history is full of such laughing wise old men and Gods. Other than perhaps the Old Testament itself, we find examples of such a laugh in John Milton’s Paradise Lost.

Differences in the ideological views of the Protestant Milton and the Roman-Catholic Tolkien are naturally glaring. However, Tom Shippey argues that “. . . the general opinion that Tolkien knew nothing of literary history, was unswervingly hostile to Shakespeare and Milton and the entire Post-medieval canon, has been shown to be false. . .”\textsuperscript{245} Shippey, Jane Chance, Patrick Grant and many other Tolkien authorities have, to some extent, utilized Milton’s work as a tool to investigate Tolkien’s. Shippey thinks Milton served as an “unlikely figure . . . [who] contributed to Tolkien’s mix of myth and poetry”.\textsuperscript{246} Charles Huttar compares Paradise Lost’s Mammon and his industrial ways to Saruman’s.\textsuperscript{247} Chance contrasts the relationship between Sauron and Shelob to Satan and Sin.\textsuperscript{248} She also states that“Tolkien has also been described as a mythologist equal in stature to the Puritan poet John Milton. . .”.\textsuperscript{249} And Grant argues that both Paradise Lost and LOTR exude “Christian principles” through the use of “embodied themes”; all the while casting off the dogmatic theology of traditional Christian epic.\textsuperscript{250} Debbie Sly contends that both authors “exhibit tensions between religious imperatives and artistic aesthetics.”\textsuperscript{251} William N. Rogers II and Michael R. Underwood have also examined a variety of possible connections between the

\textsuperscript{244} Ibid., 92.
\textsuperscript{245} Shippey, J. R. R. Tolkien : Author of the Century: 310.
\textsuperscript{246} Ibid., 200.
\textsuperscript{247} Lobdell, A Tolkien Compass: 134-35.
\textsuperscript{248} Zimbardo and Isaacs, Understanding The Lord of the Rings : the Best of Tolkien Criticism: 215.
\textsuperscript{249} Chance, The Lord of the Rings : The Mythology of Power: 19.
\textsuperscript{250} Zimbardo and Isaacs, Understanding The Lord of the Rings : the Best of Tolkien Criticism: 164.
two authors. At the core, Milton’s *Paradise Lost* and Tolkien’s *LOTR* are both rooted in the tradition of the epic. They both share the problem “of formulating a vision in which Christian assertion, history, and imagination can [coincide].” Shippey hazards a guess at Tolkien’s personal view of Milton: “I do not expect that Tolkien had much love for Milton, with his determinedly Protestant Epic *Paradise Lost* and his revolutionary political views, but he accepted him like Shakespeare as a poet capable of true poetry . . .”

A Milton scholar, Susanne Rupp, makes many points about *Paradise Lost* that I find applicable to Gandalf’s divine laughter. In *Paradise Lost*, she says, God “laughs most of all”, and it is possible to make a list of her claims regarding God’s laughter which are also relevant to Gandalf. God’s *divine laughter*: “is not simply an expression of his amusement but a representation of his absolute power”, it “is always placed in mediated speech”, and “can be distinguished according to the objects of his laughter: He either laughs at his celestial enemies or at the ambitions of fallen men”, and his laughter is an “adequate expression [of] . . . power and superiority”.

Gandalf is no God, although we may see him, as Tolkien did, as a kind of angel. He has power, but nothing approaching God’s level of creation and destruction. He is aware of an unseen force in Middle-earth, its *true* godlike power and he represents that power. Tolkien’s universe incorporates “both spiritual and physical planes: both seen and unseen dimensions . . . challenging readers to look beyond temporal values of the moment to see the eternal values where the spiritual and physical planes come together: at eternity.” Gandalf, like a demigod, is a medium between these two realms. If God’s laughter, which we see in the Old Testament and in Milton’s work, “is a representation of his absolute power”, then Gandalf’s laugh is that of inner wisdom informed by God’s will. Milton’s God either “laughs at his celestial enemies or at the ambitions of fallen men”. We are not introduced to the unseen forces at work for the good and are likewise not exposed to the unseen forces behind

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252 Ibid., 6.
253 Zimbardo and Isacs, *Understanding The Lord of the Rings: the Best of Tolkien Criticism*: 178.
257 Letter 156 of Humphrey Carpenter’s compilation of Tolkien’s letters reads: “[Gandalf] is not, of course, a human being (Man or Hobbit) . . . I would venture to say that he was an incarnate ‘angel’”.
258 Dickerson, *Following Gandalf: Epic Battles and Moral Victory in the Lord of the Rings*: 17.
the evil drive of Melkor, Sauron, and their like. As a demi-god, Gandalf’s laugh is restricted—as far as we know—to the ambitions of fallen man alone: Grima Wormtongue, Saruman, and the Mouth of Sauron provide examples of his amusement. Gandalf is a tool of Middle-earth’s unseen force, and this force (like God) finds “its adequate expression in divine laughter.”

Gandalf’s laughter signifies a spiritual conduit flowing through him from higher truth, fate, and divinity. Satan’s forces, like Sauron’s, imitate divine laughter. It is often their false superiority and mockery that provokes Gandalf’s laughter. This cause is best explained by Immanuel Kant, who “attributes laughter to a collision of incompatible conceptual frameworks. Kant contended that comic laughter resulted when interference from a competing matrix momentarily interrupted the forward momentum of thought/discourse and thereby subverted futurity.”

The competing matrix of good and evil in LOTR is clear. The momentum of thought and subverted futurity would be the incessant plotting of Middle-earth’s wicked, such as Saruman, Grima Wormtongue, the Mouth of Sauron, and so on. Gandalf’s laughter has a tendency to accompany the foiling of their plans. They remain, even in the face of Gandalf’s authenticity, obstinate to the end. Saruman (like Satan) would rather rule in the prison of Orthanc than serve Gandalf’s divine purpose.

Laughter is a form of transcendence. Laughter rises above melancholy. The bleaker the reality, the higher is laughter’s spiritual significance. Mark Weeks refers to laughter as a “transcendental signifier”. Pippin tastes this mysticism after suffering an ironic fate on the battlefield. Slaying a troll only to be crushed by the corpse, the young hobbit’s last thought “laughed a little within him ere it fled, almost gay it seemed to be casting off at last all doubt and care and fear. . .” (R; 1169). Gunter talks about this relation of the ordeal to laughter:

This “spiritualizing”, while achieved through endless struggle and at great cost, has resulted in whatever greatness has appeared in history, and may yet lead to the creation of the Overman . . . a supremely powerful individual capable of affirming all life and all existence.

Gandalf earns this high laughter through all his trials and tribulations on behalf of Middle-earth and its people. He even pays the greatest cost, his life. He is then reborn in divine form.

Gandalf at this point would be read as equivalent to the Nietzschean “Overman”, an entity with a strong will by whose ideals and plans the foundation for Middle-earth’s future is

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260 Ibid., 49.
261 Ibid., 53.
263 Ibid., 1.
264 Gunter, "Nietzschean Laughter," 500.
moulded. Gandalf can be seen as possessing man’s *Apollonian* instinct, “man’s desire for form, measure, and harmony.”\(^{265}\) This primitive impulse exists dualistically with our Dionysian side, which “expresses the irrational, potentially destructive component of human nature”.\(^{266}\) Nietzsche’s view of laughter is one of inherent duality, laughter may be “Healthy” or “Decadent”.\(^{267}\) Where laughter of the multitudes is *Socratic* (or trivial), Apollonian-Dionysian is profound.\(^{268}\) Nietzsche’s view of laughter shares some resemblances with Freud’s. For one, “[t]hey both agree that laughter is an expression and release of basic psychic energies”.\(^{269}\) However, Nietzsche alone recognizes the sources of laughter as a product of battling drives.\(^{270}\) He saw life as an eternal power struggle of the dualistic Dionysian and Apollonian instincts. *LOTR* captures this struggle by pitting the Apollonian Gandalf against the Dionysian Saruman. Like Nietzsche’s “insights into the nature of laughter,” the two wizards’ dynamic “cannot be understood apart from their relations to the will to power”.\(^{271}\)

The higher and wiser one gets, however, the more one’s laughter is destined to clash with that of the multitudes. Gandalf is often considered something of a meddlesome wizard, but he certainly encounters an influx of naysayers from his rebirth onwards. Even Aragorn chides Gandalf for being too introverted, too enigmatic, and failing to speak clearly. Gandalf is often lost in thought, so much so that he sometimes fails to acknowledge others (see TT; 651). When the wizard isn’t predisposed in thought that is often shielded from the reader, he exudes “joyful wisdom,” an expression of the most profound truth.\(^{272}\) The reader, however, has few clues as to what truth this is and to what extent Gandalf’s familiarity with it extends. We are given the sense that the truth is somehow connected to morality and that if a certain ethical harmony may be reached. In Nietzsche’s words (as edited by Gunter):

> . . . nothing under the sun is more rewarding to take seriously [than morality]; and part of the reward might be that someday we will be allowed to take it *lightly*. For light-heartedness, or to use my own phrase, a ‘joyful wisdom’ is the reward of a long, painstaking inward seriousness, which to be sure is not within every man’s compass.\(^{273}\)

\(^{265}\) Ibid., 493.  
\(^{266}\) Ibid.  
\(^{267}\) Ibid., 494.  
\(^{268}\) Ibid., 495.  
\(^{269}\) Ibid., 498.  
\(^{270}\) Ibid., 498.  
\(^{271}\) Ibid., 499.  
\(^{272}\) Ibid., 501.  
\(^{273}\) Ibid., 501.
After Saruman’s embarrassment at Isengard, the final test of will takes place between Gandalf and Sauron. A flaw in Sauron’s ideology ultimately tips the scale in Gandalf’s favour. He may have the larger army and more magical power than Gandalf, but he cannot grasp the moral truth. Gandalf asserts his power in the creation of a new order, but he does not want the new order to be his. His work is for the sake of others. He wants to create where Sauron wants to dominate. Once he obtains the power to accomplish his will, he relinquishes it in the same way and for the same reasons LOTR’s quest destroys the Ring.

The Ring is, as Patrick Curry puts it, symbolic of “the wilful exercise of power applied instrumentally to the realization of a single overarching goal.” Furthermore, “the effects of such an enterprise, regardless of the intentions of those who carry it out, are necessarily evil.” As such, Gandalf mitigates his own power at every turn and his followers join him voluntarily. “All seizures of power,” Shippey states, “no matter how ‘strong or well-meaning’ the seizers, will go the same way.” Gandalf’s assertions about the Ring, the fact that it cannot be used without causing eventual decadence, remain unquestioned. This is because, as Shippey states it is all “far too plausible, and too recognizable. It would not have been so before the many bitter experiences of the twentieth century . . . [of which the] major disillusionment . . . has been over political good intentions, which have led only to gulags and killing fields.”

Gandalf and Sauron are both represented in the battlefield by concurring multitudes (their hordes and armies). Gandalf has willing servants, Sauron has slaves of fear (R; 1177). Gandalf represents a harmony and coexistence between races and nature; Sauron desires to “turn everywhere into one empire, ruled by one logic in accordance with one Will”. The clash of Wills between these two powerful figures washes over the masses, destined to share in the fate of their Overman. Thus, when the Dark Lord’s power is broken, so too is the laughter of his followers:

... the hosts of Mordor trembled, doubt clutched their hearts, their laughter failed, their hands shook and their limbs were loosed. The Power that drove them on and filled them with hate and fury was wavering, its will was removed from them; and now looking

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274 Curry, Defending Middle-earth: Tolkien, Myth and Modernity: 146.
275 Ibid., 146.
277 Ibid., 115.
278 Ibid., 117.
279 Curry, Defending Middle-earth: Tolkien, Myth and Modernity: 146.
in the eyes of their enemies they saw a deadly light and were afraid. (R; 1241-1242 Italics mine)

*LOTR* shares Nietzsche’s philosophical paradigm that “history repeats itself in endless cycles”. Nietzsche’s fictional Zarathustra rids “himself of his dread of the eternal recurrence [and therefore] achieves the capacity to affirm all time and all being [while] loathing and horror vanish in exultant laughter.” Gandalf too battles a historical cycle, except that he rids society of it, not just himself. Great evils such as Melkor and Sauron keep emerging in the world. After Gandalf’s intervention puts an end to this mythic tyranny, only lowly tyrants like Lotho Baggins and an emasculated Saruman are left. These people can be easily disposed of by the common person without any form of divine intervention (as we see in “The Scouring of the Shire”). When Sam wakes up after his ordeal at Mt. Doom, Gandalf is there waiting for him:

‘A great Shadow has departed,’ said Gandalf, and then he laughed, and the sound was like music, or like water in a parched land . . . (R; 1246).

Gandalf’s laughter is a spell upon itself; it breaks the influence of Saruman’s magical voice, causing the “fantasy [to] vanish . . . like a puff of smoke” (TT; 759). The aesthetic detail of his laughter’s description also hints at a connection to some form of divinity, whether other-worldly, or a pure form of natural order or something else entirely, is left to the reader. As Gandalf achieves his part in the defeat of Saruman, he seems to ascend to his final place in the hierarchy of the spiritual divine. We are told that he now “laughs more than he talks”, something that brings to mind another character left long ago in the narrative’s past: Tom Bombadil. Tom has been somewhere above Gandalf in the order of things this entire time as a type of ageless nature spirit. Tom’s own divinity came hand in hand with his cheer. Gandalf, like Tom, now experiences little worry. Leaving the hobbits to return to the Shire by themselves, Gandalf tells them he’s off “to have a long talk with Bombadil: such a talk as I have not had in all my time . . .” (R; 1304). Of all the important councils and meetings Gandalf has attended, it is significant that his talk with Tom would be of a kind he had never experienced before. By visiting Tom at length, he achieves communion with the primordial essence of Middle-earth and the highest level of his divine laughter.

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280 Gunter, "Nietzschean Laughter," 503.
281 Ibid., 503.
Conclusion

Humour, its sources and its manifestations, aids in creating a believable ideological framework in building a convincing secondary world. For Middle-earth’s inhabitants, it plays a compensatory role in lieu of a sense of place and a secure feeling of belonging in a well-ordered land. Riddles, jokes, and laughter create communal atmosphere and a feeling of belonging, even when in a physical environment which is alien and dangerous. This process of world-building through communally shared humour mans that Tolkien’s own process of sub-creation is echoed by his characters’ use of humour within his fictions.

Tolkien wrote his mythology, including THOB and LOTR, during a time of drastic change. Industrialisation had severely altered the personal experience on the battlefield. The archetypal hero no longer held a lofty position free of suspicion and derision. New qualities of leadership were valued, such as self-deprecation and a sense of humour. As the desolation of World War I caused Western civilization to re-examine society at all its levels, and the modernists came to look through a lens of disillusionment and scepticism at words such as “heroism”, “chivalry”, and “courage”, Tolkien took a different view.

LOTR provides a lesson in resilience, and I have covered many ways the Fellowship consoles themselves and each other. Merry fantasises, Gimli projects his emotional energy into his axe, Sam and Frodo find solace in each other. Touch is an important device of their shared spirit, such as when Aragorn holds and kisses Boromir. The foremost key to the hobbits’ resilience, however, is their memories and nostalgia, penchant for stories, jokes, and songs that remind them of the Shire. Through the ritualistic performing of these things they carry the Shire with them on their quests.

Whether literary or “real”, humour functions in a similar way to the fantasy Tolkien theorises. It demonstrates recovery and presents things in a new light. It offers consolation and escape from undesirable realities. Humour even exhibits its own form of eucatastrophe, such as when someone plays a joke on a friend, makes them think something terrible has happened, only to reveal a joyful truth. As our sense of humour is a large part of our “sub-created” reality building process, its implementation into the fantasy narrative helps create the consistency of reality Tolkien argued as being crucial to fantasy’s makeup. I’ve argued that the humour in Tolkien’s work is taken from acknowledged truths regarding English
characteristics, and that laughter in LOTR is often connected to truth. As “truth” is akin to “reason” I can conclude that humour also coincides with Tolkien’s refutation of the claim that fantasy assaults reason, contending that “[t]he better and the clearer is the reason, the better the fantasy will make”. Humour demonstrates its own ability to sub-create, to reject and recreate the present moment, and to deny eternal defeat. Humour and its constructs, riddles in particular, also create recognisable doors between our reality and that of Middle-earth. While I believe my thesis has established a clear relationship between Tolkien’s sub-creation and humour, the dynamics of their association warrants further exploration.

This thesis, like LOTR, grew in its telling, and I have had to leave out many aspects of my thought that I believe are still worth pursuing. Identifying and exploring the physical and personal characteristics of Middle-earth’s inhabitants is a promising area for further research. I suspect that Grima’s serpentine demeanour, the Hobbit’s elongated feet and rotund middles, Gandalf’s short (and sometimes violent) temper, Saruman and Smaug’s haughtiness, carry meanings not yet accessed. The Hobbit’s smallness could be contrasted to the “diminutive” fairy, based on Tolkien’s contentions in Tree and Leaf. Perhaps most intriguing would be an in depth looks at Gollum. I may have scratched the surface in the “Riddles” chapter, but Gollum’s story is a tragic one that deserves a full investigation, perhaps using Mikhail Bakhtin’s discussion of the grotesque in Rabelais and His World (1984) as a framework for such a venture. Inside the reader’s experience of Gollum there is a mixture of terror and amusement, and (as Gandalf and Frodo show us) of pity and hate. The dualism concerning the amusement and disgust caused by Gollum is well worth some writing. I have in this thesis showed a link between base humour and nature, but The Ents, too, deserve an eco-critical investigation as humorous creations, perhaps building off of Matthew Dickerson and Jonathan Evans’s Ents, Elves, and Eriador (2006).

Further philological enquiry can be made into the words Tolkien uses and creates to invoke humorous effect. Every word has an etymology, and so every word’s definition has room to evolve. Behind every denotation there is a connotation (“What a lot of things you use Good morning for!” H; 16). Also, as my discussion on riddles has shown, behind everything concrete there is an abstraction. Gollum’s usage of the word “precious”, for example, carries a great deal of weight behind it and thus slightly changes their idea of the nature of the Ring for readers. What lies at the heart of Tolkien’s writing is his penchant for recovering and

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282 Tolkien, Tree and Leaf: 54.
revising words so that they may have a place in the contemporary world. Words that became disowned in Tolkien’s primary world found a new home in Middle-earth and have since been restored, often through wordplay, to Tolkien’s readership. Some particular words that have informed the discussion of this thesis include “riddle”, “spirit”, “uncanny”, and “sincerity”.

The riddle has been revealed as being a structural piece in Middle-earth’s sub-creation. The riddle permeates the narrative, theme and plot, is used to create suspense and foreshadowing, and is even embodied by some of Middle-earth’s characterisations. Oaths, mottoes and proverbs are used to create a sense of history, and jokes and laughter play a large part in how that history is and will be portrayed, as they represent a competition between ethical paradigms. We are shown, through the contrast of what causes Orcs’ and Hobbits’ cheer, that our protagonists’ righteous laughter is pitted against the malevolence of Middle-earth’s wicked characters.

Tolkien’s writing demonstrates knowledge of mythology’s power to recalibrate collective, ethical conscience. Where the seminal Beowulf helped the transition from paganism to Catholicism, Tolkien wrote work that compiled the positive and negatives of an age where hands increasingly interacted with machines instead of soil. His writing was equal parts a cautionary tale and testament to the human spirit. Man has been moving away from nature’s design for some time. We are, in a sense, still in the process of of shedding more of our magic. The sardonic laughter of the trenches is only one symptom of a fallen society. Sarcasm and cynicism, like the evil characters in Middle-earth that wield them, mock the purer forms of “good humour”. Hobbit humour in THOB and LOTR is very much a response to the trivialising nature of their darker counterparts. To be over-cynical is to breed complacency, refuse to take anything at all seriously, to surrender hope, and worst of all enable the Sarumans of our world have free reign. There is a cosmic force at work in Middle-earth, and it is represented by Gandalf’s laughter. Much of the humour derived from the fall of the wicked, such as Saruman, is in their futile resistance to an inescapable cosmic plan.

The Hobbits’ sense of humour, representing some of the best traits Middle-earth has to offer, comes hand in hand with a sense of moral responsibility. Merry clarifies this hobbit-trait to Aragorn from his bed in the Houses of Healing: “But it is the way of my people to use of light words at such times and say less than they mean. We fear to say too much. It robs us of the right words when a jest is out of place” (R; 1139). Merry demonstrates the ethical
awareness amongst Middle-earth’s peaceable denizens. Firstly, there is an unspoken code to offer one another humorous comfort in a time of shared distress. However, the time and place needs to be recognised by the joker and the receiver as being in good taste, for humour can easily do more damage than good.

Tolkien uses humour in the recovery of the every day, and uses comic devices to turn things considered trite during routine existence into objects of consequence. For what better form of retrospect is there than the examination of what causes us to smile? Humour enables the reader to enter Tolkien’s secondary world with a level of recognisability and humility. Riddles mimic the experience, learning, and formation of reality. Laughter signifies divinity and truth. All together, the comic effects of Middle-earth enhance readers’ literary belief in Tolkien’s perilous realm. By instilling into his work a keen English\textsuperscript{283} sense of humour, based on what his readership saw as funny because of its recognisable truth, Tolkien shows us why the Hobbit accompanies us through every difficult task to which we are set.\textsuperscript{284}

\footnote{And which has since been, as noted, adopted by many other cultures into their own identity.}
Bibliography


