The Tolkien Paradox: The Silmarillion and the Denouncement of War Using Heroic Style

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World War I devastated a generation of men and women with its technologies of mass destruction and its lack of progress relative to the death toll. Out of the ashes of the conflict rose many authors who felt compelled to give accounts of the War as they experienced it. Many rejected traditional values, and their writing reflected this with fragmentation and a wide range of experimentation. Despite his experiences as a World War I soldier, J.R.R. Tolkien did not wholly reject the values and traditions of the past. Tolkien maintained his belief in the qualities of valor, honor, and good faith when much of his generation did not. However, Tolkien's works are greatly influenced by the war, and are certainly not complimentary to the greater scope of conflict. While Tolkien concedes that some wars are necessary, most of the wars detailed in his novel *The Silmarillion* are viewed as largely pointless as they are fought for frivolous reasons and accomplish little. This portrayal of war as seemingly heroic yet ultimately useless was used by other epic writers long before Tolkien's time. Like Homer many centuries earlier, Tolkien uses high style to tell a story that appears to glorify war, yet upon closer examination details the problems underlying war. Tolkien continued to write in the style to which he became accustomed before he joined the war effort just as he held firm in his beliefs. In his great work, *The Silmarillion*, J.R.R. Tolkien uses traditional language to pursue a similar goal to that of many of his modernist contemporaries: to portray the costs and futility that he saw in war. By representing a modern war via archaic language, Tolkien is able to maintain the identity and style he developed during his education before World War I while displaying views influenced by the conflict.

Conflict is central to J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Silmarillion*. Published in 1977 and written over the course of Tolkien's life, *The Silmarillion* shows vestiges of inspiration from both World War I and World War II. Tolkien's *The Silmarillion* tells the story of the first age of Middle-

Earth in which the Valar, the powers of the world, Elves, and some Men struggle against the threat of Morgoth, the Dark Lord, who wishes to claim dominion over all the world. The Elves struggle to reclaim the stolen Silmarils, beautiful jewels created by Fëanor, an Elven prince and the most skilled of all the Elves who have ever lived. Through acts of heroism and folly, the Elves attempt to reclaim this lost treasure, ultimately failing as one Silmaril is set in the sky as a star, one is thrown into a fiery chasm, and the third is cast into the sea. All three Silmarils are removed from the grasp of the Elves. The Valar, meanwhile, struggle against their fallen comrade, Morgoth, and eventually assemble a great host of Maiar, servants of the Valar, and Elves to overthrow him in the War of Wrath. After the defeat of Morgoth, his lieutenant Sauron assumes the mantle of Dark Lord. Sauron compels the Men of Númenor to defy the Valar, leading to their destruction. The survivors of the downfall of Númenor join with the hosts of Elves to unseat Sauron. The remainder of the story summarizes the deeds told in *The Lord of the Rings* including the finding and destruction of the Ring of Power and the restoration of a king to the throne of Gondor. The entire story told in *The Silmarillion* is fraught with tales of individual battles, deaths of great Elves and Men, and characters who orchestrate their own destruction through pride, envy, or greed. These characters and their place in the greater scope of the wars provides an effective lens through which to examine Tolkien's opinions on war. Though Tolkien by no means denigrates heroism, loyalty, or valor, he paints a picture of war as a futile effort ending only in pain and destruction.

Pure Escapism: The Politics of Fantasy Literature

Though Tolkien's works are widely acknowledged as works of art, there are many who dismiss them as purely escapist literature and ignore the possibility of a potential political message. Many of these critics fail to see the inherently political nature of fantasy literature, and

as such, it is important to address this issue. Andrew Butler displays the various attitudes about the political nature of Tolkien's works in "The Rise of Fantasy: Swords and Planets," a chapter in his book *Solar Flares: Science Fiction in the 1970s*. He describes the dismissive attitude that many displayed toward Tolkien. About one such critic, Michael Moorcock, Butler says "For him, Tolkien… betrays a romantic (as opposed to romanticized) tradition, both of narrative and landscape, in his celebration of the bourgeois hobbits with their utopian way of life standing against the faceless, unexamined hordes of Mordor" (70). Butler also describes the seriousness with which Tolkien's books were regarded in the 1978 film adaptation directed by Ralph Bakshi. Bakshi's adaptation treats Tolkien's legendarium as an important work of adult fiction. Bakshi's "The Lord of the Rings" is largely dark showing the struggle of the characters against the evil of Mordor with only light comic relief provided by the hobbits. Bakshi was adamantly for the treatment of Tolkien's work as serious literature. This argument about the treatment of Tolkien's works has been repeated many times, and is central to a reading of his works as a political argument. The dismissal is largely based on impressions that fantasy literature as a genre is not rooted in reality. A close reading of fantasy literature shows that this is not the case. Fantasy literature as a genre and Tolkien's works in particular present issues central to reality even as they ground them in an alternate world.

Rosemary Jackson addresses the political nature of fantasy in her book *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion.* Jackson describes fantasy literature as a genre that describes a lack in the world by creating an alternate reality contrary to the dominant social order. Jackson calls these alternate realities "neither entirely 'real'…nor entirely 'unreal'… but located somewhere interdeterminately between the two" (19). Jackson is describing fantasy literature's ability to portray events, fears, and circumstances present or possible in reality through an alternative lens.

Tolkien creates an interdeterminate reality between the real and unreal by presenting the concepts of war, honor, loyalty, and valor through the fictional Middle-Earth with its thinly veiled similarities to the circumstances of the 20th century. By showing a fictional war, Tolkien is able to acquaint the reader with the realities of war as he experienced it, especially its futility and destructive nature.

The War of the Jewels depicts the kind of futility experienced by soldiers in World War I. Centuries of fighting yield no result in the War of the Jewels. Neither Morgoth's forces nor the Elves are able to destroy the other, and the kingdoms of each remain largely unassailable to the other for many years. It is only at the end of the War of the Jewels that Morgoth manages to destroy the Elven kingdoms of Nargothrond and Gondolin while Doriath is destroyed in a battle with Dwarves. The Elves are never able to destroy Morgoth's fortress of Angband, and they must wait for salvation by the Valar. In addition, the Silmarils, the very cause of all of the conflict, end up lost to all combatants. Neither contingency is able to achieve victory over the other, and all of the great kingdoms of the Elder Days are destroyed in the war. This mirrors the effects of battle on the Western Front in World War I. Despite endless effort, the battle lines moved very little during the entire war. Both sides were caught in an endless stalemate, much like the characters in Tolkien's *The Silmarillion*. Franco Manni addresses the parallels between World War I and the War of the Jewels in his essay "The Complexity of Tolkien's Attitude Toward the Second World War." Manni says,

> features and events of the actual war find a close correspondence in JRRT's depiction of some of the conflicts of the Wars of the Jewels. The first three Battles of Beleriand, during which Morgoth's onslaughts are defeated and repulsed by the Sindar (the First) and the Noldor (the Second and Third) can be seen to mirror Germany's 1914 offensives,

stopped by the Allies at the Marne, on the Yser and at Ypres. These led to the

stabilization of Western front and the beginning of the four-year-long, siege-like trench

stalemate, much as the Third Battle of Beleriand (Dagor Aglareb) led to the Siege of

Angband, 'which lasted wellnigh four-hundred years of the Sun' (2).

These similarities between real battles in World War I and fictional battles in *The Silmarillion*

show the applicability of Tolkien's work to the world. Though he creates a fictional alternate

reality, Tolkien shows remarkable similarities to the world in which his readers live.

In addition to the lack of progress in Tolkien's *The Silmarillion* that closely mirrors the

Western Front, the end result of the wars in *The Silmarillion* was another lengthy war. Though

Morgoth is expelled in the War of Wrath, his lieutenant Sauron is neither captured nor destroyed

and left to rise as a second Dark Lord. Sauron is free to spread his power and influence over

Middle-Earth just as Morgoth attempts before him. Sauron is trained in warfare and sorcery at

Morgoth's hand, and his actions and desires are nearly identical to his former master. Tolkien

saw a similar effect in his contemporary world. The effects of World War I, far from preventing

another devastating conflict, served as the powder keg to thrust the world into World War II.

This parallel is made apparent by the intentional choice to include details of the wars with

Sauron in *The Silmarillion*. The tale comes to a natural end after the War of Wrath and the

ejection of Morgoth, yet Tolkien continues the tale with the story of the downfall of Númenor,

the Last Alliance, and a brief description of the War of the Ring. By including these events at the

end of *The Silmarillion*, Tolkien renders them inseparable as were World Wars I and II. It must

be noted that Tolkien viewed the War of the Ring as a battle that needed to be fought for the

survival of Middle-earth, yet the real victory in the story is never dependent on battle. The War

serves only as a distraction to allow Frodo to achieve his quest undetected. The War of the Ring

cannot be avoided, yet it is not because of battle that the world is saved. Many regarded World War II as a just war as well, a war that needed to be fought to prevent total destruction. This is also an oversimplification of the political climate of the time. While World War II had some noble outcomes, it also caused unnecessary destruction and suffering. The war may have been necessary, but it cannot be described as just (Manni 3-4). Tolkien demonstrates clearly his perspective on World Wars I and II in *The Silmarillion*. Because of these parallels, the work cannot be dismissed as irrelevant to the political situation of the world.

The Making of Middle-Earth: Tolkien as a Soldier and Scholar

When examining *The Silmarillion* as a reflection of Tolkien's war experiences, it is important to acknowledge its beginnings. Tolkien began work on this epic tale while convalescing from trench fever, yet the roots of his work on Middle-Earth trace earlier to his adolescence. While in school, Tolkien discovered a love of languages, particularly Greek, Latin, Celtic, and Welsh. He read classical literature and wrote his own using similar forms. According to John Garth in his book *Tolkien and the Great War*, Tolkien was drawn to parody and imitation during his school days. Garth describes a poem Tolkien wrote titled "The Battle of the Eastern Fields" in which Tolkien mirrors Lord Macaulay's *Lays of Ancient Rome* to describe a rugby match. Garth asserts that "the down-to-earth reality of the rugby pitch gently mocks the heroic pretension of the literary mode" (20). This use of mock heroic is repeated in *The Silmarillion* as Tolkien uses high language to display war, yet subverts the glorification of war by showing the frivolous reasons for the conflict and by depicting the deaths of so many major characters.

Tolkien continued to write after he enlisted in the army, passing the time in the trenches by writing in his invented language, Elvish. When he was convalescing in the hospital, Tolkien began a mythology to provide background for his language. This mythology became *The*

Silmarillion. Tolkien acknowledged the influence of the Wars on his works. In the preface to *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien writes, "An author cannot of course remain wholly unaffected by his experience" (xxiv). Tolkien continues to explain some of the ways in which his experiences in World War I affected his life and his work. He says, "One has indeed personally to come under the shadow of war to feel fully its oppression; but as the years go by it seems now often forgotten that to be caught in youth by 1914 was no less hideous an experience than to be involved in 1939 and the following years. By 1918 all but one of my close friends were dead" (xxiv). Tolkien alludes to the horrors he experienced during World War I and explicitly states that these experiences affected him deeply. His writing was a coping method during the war, and the resulting stories naturally reflect these coping attempts.

Tolkien needed to cope from the trauma of losing his friends, and he did this by immortalizing his grief in his tales. One of the most important parallels between *The Silmarillion* and World War I is the death toll. Tolkien was deeply impacted by the deaths of his close friends, and he reflected these important deaths in his works. Most of the supposedly immortal Elves and all of the men die in the story. Some of these deaths are noble, such as Fingolfin, the third High King of the Noldoran[1] Elves, who challenged Morgoth and greatly injured him before being slain. Finrod Felagund is also praised for the manner of his death. He aided his friend Beren in the quest for a Silmaril and died protecting him from one of the werewolves of Sauron. Others are not given such honorable deaths. Thingol, king of Doriath, is killed in a petty battle with Dwarves over the Silmaril recovered by Beren, his son-in-law. Thingol's death is brought about by greed and anger, and is far less tragic to the reader than the deaths of Fingolfin, Finrod,

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[1] Noldor is one of many races of Elves. These races are distinguished by patrilineal descent and kingship, and each race has certain characteristics. The Noldoran race is the primary focus of *The Silmarillion*, though other races are addressed.

Beren, or Lúthien. Fingolfin and Thingol are not the only elven kings killed in *The Silmarillion*.

Finwë, the first High King of the Noldor, is killed in the initial theft of the Silmarils, and after

Fingolfin, every Noldoran king becomes a personal target for Morgoth, leading to the deaths of

Fingon, Finrod, and Turgon. Other important characters are killed in the War of the Jewels.

Beren and Lúthien, Thingol's daughter, die twice. Mandos, keeper of the Houses of the Dead,

takes pity on Lúthien and allows her to return to the world and take Beren with her, but they are

not guaranteed happiness or long life. Lúthien's second death is made truly tragic because

Tolkien takes time to explain that Lúthien, because of her love for Beren, tied her fate to that of

men, and does not go to Valinor after death like the rest of the Elves. Tolkien writes, "So it is

that Lúthien Tinúviel alone of the Elf-kindred has died indeed and left the world, and they have

lost her whom they most loved" (336). Lúthien's death is the most tragic of all the deaths

described in *The Silmarillion* because the reader cannot take any comfort in the knowledge of

where her spirit dwells, unlike the rest of the Elves, whose fate Tolkien states explicitly in the

tale. This detail would not be significant to the reader if Tolkien did not make the intentional

choice to describe her death and the tragedy at length. In addition to these deaths of significant

characters, many others are mentioned in the story. Fëanor kills many Elves in his return to

Middle-Earth, and every battle, even the ones where the Elves are victorious, is said to have a

large death toll. These countless, nameless deaths linger in the background of every major battle

fought in the course of the story, but it is the deaths of the significant characters which closely

mirrors Tolkien's pain at losing his friends. Deaths such as Fingolfin, Finrod, and Lúthien's

make the costs of the War of the Jewels seem too high, just as the cost of World War I was

heightened for Tolkien because of the loss of his close friends.

The Modernism Question

Given Tolkien's experiences as a veteran and his subject matter of war, Modernism seems to be an effective mode from which to write. In fact, some scholars argue that Tolkien fits into this movement, yet others place Tolkien in stark opposition to Modernism and its ideals. Modernism is classified by strong experimentation. Some of the more common traits of this movement include markedly unreliable narrators, fracturing of the narrative, and stream-of-consciousness writing. In her book, *Tolkien and the Modernists: Literary Responses to the Dark Days of the 20th Century*, Theresa Nicolay describes the literature of the Modernist movement. She writes, "Much of the literature of this period depicts the world as a wasteland and its inhabitants as marked by a sense of existential despair as well as feelings of alienation, dislocation, and loss. What had been lost, at least for many people, were the old beliefs that helped give order and meaning to the world" (11). These feelings of alienation which Nicolay describes stemmed largely from the devastating effects of the Enlightenment which the world witnessed in World War I. Universal truths which were held so dear through the Enlightenment had, to the Modernists, failed and caused the world to fracture. This feeling is best explained by W.B. Yeats' line, "The centre cannot hold." The destruction of the world because of "reason" caused many to disavow deeply held beliefs. The sense of devastation is reflected in the literature of the time.

Tolkien shared a similar background and timeline to many of the more prominent Modernists. Because of the similarities in events and time, it is natural to attempt to place Tolkien within this popular movement. One such critic who attempts to place Tolkien within Modernism is Patchen Mortimer in his article, "Tolkien and Modernism." Mortimer argues that *The Silmarillion* displays a modernist ideal of extreme appreciation of art similar to that of William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* in which Quentin Compton attempts to rewrite his

history. Several examples of this appreciation of art can be seen throughout the novel. In the very beginning of the tale, Tolkien shows the quality by having a song create the world. Ilúvatar, the God figure, leads his Ainur, angelic beings, in three different chorus' which conceive the world (Tolkien 3-5). Mortimer also cites the composition of Tolkien's mythology as proof of this appreciation of art. Tolkien created his mythical world to create a grounding place for his invented languages. Tolkien's art was his creation of Elvish, and he envisioned an entire world with unique mythologies in order to present his art to the world. Mortimer argues that this evidence of Tolkien's appreciation of "art for art's sake" is indicative of a connection to Modernism. Unfortunately, Mortimer's argument leaves a gaping hole. The idea of "art for art's sake" harkens back to Aestheticism before the rise of Modernism. Romantics, too, displayed a strong love of art. This extreme appreciation of art which Mortimer uses as evidence of Tolkien's ties to Modernism is by no means unique to that movement.

Mortimer also addresses Tolkien's references to mythology as a reason to describe the author as a Modernist. Mortimer discusses Tolkien's inspiration from Celtic and Welsh mythology and claims that this is similar to James Joyce's works which reference Greek mythology. Mortimer does concede that Tolkien is not merely attempting to retell the old myths as Joyce does, but creating an entirely new mythology using similar methods as the older mythologies. This argument, too, leaves some problems to be pondered. James Joyce was not sincere in his treatment of mythologies, while Tolkien does take a genuine approach to view the literature. Tolkien appeared to be using the mythological modes not to criticize their ideals, but to embrace them. In this way, Tolkien's use of mythology as inspiration is more similar to Traditionalism than Modernism. Though some can argue that Tolkien is a Modernist writer, the arguments for such a viewpoint do not hold up to scrutiny and are invalidated.

In *Tolkien and the Modernists*, Theresa Nicolay provides an explanation of why Tolkien is not modernist. Nicolay stresses that because Tolkien praises qualities such as loyalty, valor, and moral clarity, and because he seeks to achieve a unity of narrative that Modernist writers eschew, his writing is in fact in direct opposition to the Modernist movement. Nicolay writes, "Those of the story's characters who are admirable make choices based on values of kindness, charity, and concern for the welfare of all of Middle-earth" (17-18). In *The Silmarillion*, the Valar display these traits most fully. The overthrow of Morgoth is achieved, not by any race of Elves or Men, but by the Valar. Through two different battles spanning many ages of the world, the Valar successfully banish Morgoth from the world and destroy his fortress and many of his most terrible servants. These feats are praised in the tale because they are attempted for love and protection of the Children of Illuvatar. The first battle occurs shortly after the awakening of the Elves. The Valar decide that in order to protect the new Children, they must overthrow Morgoth and break his hold on Middle-Earth. They defeat Morgoth and imprison him, and the Elves have a time of peace to build their realms free of the constant threat of war. This battle is explicitly linked to the arrival of the Elves as Tolkien says, "Never did (Morgoth) forget that this war was made for the sake of the Elves, and that they were the cause of his downfall" (Tolkien 48). Tolkien leaves the reader in no doubt that this first successful defeat of Morgoth is fought for a noble reason, the protection of the Elves. Before their awakening, the Valar leave Middle-Earth to the dominion of Morgoth, and they choose to dwell elsewhere. They do not feel ownership over the lands, and do not go to war without cause. They are attempting to save and protect the Elves, rather than to claim kingship over the world. Protection, not greed or vanity, is the cause of this battle.

The second battle between the Valar and Morgoth is also fought to deliver the Children of Illuvatar from his tyranny. Morgoth has shown clearly his desire to end the races of Elves and Men, and the races have proven that they do not have the power to overthrow him. The Valar are hesitant to interfere, for in the last battle, much of Middle-Earth was damaged. They also regret very much the deeds of the Noldor and have been sundered from them for many centuries, making them hesitant to go to their aid. It is at the request of Eärendil, the Half-Elven, that the Valar finally go to war. Tolkien emphasizes the motives of the Valar when he writes, "Pardon (Eärendil) asked for the Noldor and pity for their great sorrows, and mercy upon Men and Elves and succor in their need. And his prayer was granted" (Tolkien 299). Tolkien shows here that the motives of the Valar were completely noble. Nothing but the pleas of aid and pardon could drive them to assault the fortress and armies of Morgoth. Unlike many of the attempts of the Noldor, the Valar did not fight for greed or revenge, but for pity and compassion. The total success of this battle shows Tolkien's great praise for a battle fought to protect and safeguard rather than for anger or gain. Tolkien shows with the actions of the Valar the value he places in charity and moral clarity. Though these battles do not end evil and have some negative outcomes, Tolkien does not allow for the possibility that the Valar are acting out of pride which makes the results of the war far more admirable. Other characters in *The Silmarillion* often display values of charity and moral clarity through a willingness to sacrifice themselves for others. Lúthien places herself at the mercy of Morgoth to save Beren from discovery and capture. Her plan is risky, yet she succeeds in saving her love and herself from the dungeons and the certain torment that would have awaited them. Finrod, too, sacrifices himself for Beren, thus his death is much more admirable. In this way, Tolkien shows the value of a hero, not through bravery or prowess, but through selflessness and deeply ingrained sense of right and wrong.

These absolutes which Tolkien values in the actions of his characters are, according to Theresa Nicolay, in complete opposition to Modernism which often embraces unreliable characters and moral ambiguity.

Theresa Nicolay addresses another trait of Tolkien's writing which makes him appear in direct opposition to Modernism. In his works, Tolkien sought to achieve a unity of narrative which other authors of his time consciously eschewed in favor of fragmentation. *The Silmarillion* displays a massive timeline, yet the progression of events is chronological. Tolkien does not follow stream-of-consciousness in the style of Virginia Woolf, nor does he deviate from the storyline in extended metaphors like William Faulkner. The story reads much like an epic poem in its progression of events. Not all critics agree that this unity of narrative should be used as evidence against Tolkien being Modernist, however. Douglas Charles Kane in his book *Arda Reconstructed: The Creation of the Published Silmarillion* points out that this cohesion was not Tolkien's doing at all, but the product of his son Christopher's efforts to collect Tolkien's many notes and ideas into one unified narrative. Kane argues that *The Silmarillion* certainly shows that Christopher Tolkien was not Modernist because of this unity of narrative, it does not necessarily prove that J.R.R. Tolkien did not have some Modernist leanings (25). Though Kane raises a valid point, it is evident from Tolkien's other works that he prized unity of narrative, and it is unlikely that he intended to do otherwise with *The Silmarillion*. The unity of narrative which Tolkien's works display is highly recognizant of a past age, making him an unlikely candidate to be classified as a Modernist. Tolkien's works more closely parallel classical styles, especially Homer's *The Iliad*.

Homeric Inspiration: Tolkien's Classical Parallels

Tolkien's *The Silmarillion* resembles Homer's *The Iliad* in many ways including language, subject matter, and some of the events portrayed. Both stories employ elevated language and make use of verse form. John Garth in his article "'The Road from Adaptation to Invention:' How Tolkien Came to the Brink of Middle-Earth in 1914" discusses Tolkien's use of language. He writes, "he enjoyed reading and writing in this consciously archaic version of English, largely free of the 'polysyllabic barbarities' that had been imported by the Norman invaders" (5). This "archaic version of English" places Tolkien in close proximity to his classical predecessors. The language is an intentional homage to older, more traditional literature, and it immediately shows similarities between Tolkien and classical writers such as Homer. The language is hardly the only similarity between *The Silmarillion* and *The Iliad*, however. Both are, in essence, tales of war, and both tales appear to be esteeming war because of the reverence for heroism. On closer examination, however, the tales are doing the opposite. Much like Tolkien's *The Silmarillion,* Homer's *The Iliad* seems to value the heroic deeds of the warriors, yet many of them are killed because of their reckless behavior. In addition, the common soldiers who are not praised for their heroism suffer greatly in the conflict.

In his article "Manhood and Heroism" included in *The Cambridge Companion to Homer*, Michael Clarke discusses a passage in *The Iliad* which greatly resembles one in *The Silmarillion*. Because of a personal grievance against Agamemnon, Achilles sends his people to battle in hopes that Agamemnon will be forced to acknowledge Achilles' skill when many of the men die (Homer 8-9). Achilles shows no concern for the countless soldiers who will die in his self-centered effort to prove his worth. Michael Clarke discusses this implacable, overzealous wrath writing, "the source of Achilles' implacable anger is precisely his unparalleled level of vitality which has made him unable to 'conquer his mighty spirit'" (82). Though some characters in

Homer's tales may glorify Achilles as a hero, to the reader he is portrayed as a foolish and selfish character. He shows no concern for the lives that will be lost as a result of his actions; they are merely pawns in his bid to prove a point. This makes the losses more tragic. They are not accrued for any worthy cause or heroic quest. Achilles is almost villainous for setting in motion the deaths of so many for such a frivolous end.

In *The Silmarillion*, the character Fëanor is shown in a very similar manner to Achilles. Fëanor also begins a lengthy, futile war because of his pride. Outraged by the theft of the Silmarils, Fëanor declares war on Morgoth, despite the Valar's insistence that he cannot defeat his foe. Fëanor replies to the Valar's advice saying, "if Fëanor cannot overthrow Morgoth, at least he delays not to assail him, and sits not idle in grief. And it may be that Eru has set in me a fire greater than thou knowest" (Tolkien 92). Fëanor's grief is tied to the Silmarils which Morgoth stole, but these precious jewels are hardly worth such fierce words and deeds. They have no real power beyond their beauty and the ability to burn the hand of anyone who is "unworthy." Fëanor's pride causes him to lead his people into a war that is explicitly described as unwinnable and is certain to destroy most of his people. Fëanor and Achilles show remarkable similarities as they allow their pride to overcome their sense and compassion for others.

Achilles and Fëanor show another similarity beyond starting futile and bloody wars that end the lives of many; both also orchestrate their own deaths. After the death of Patroclus, Achilles vows to kill Hector, even if it means dying himself. He achieves both ends, slipping further into madness and away from humanity with each kill. Though *The Iliad* does not tell the circumstances of Achilles' death, it is left in no doubt from the prophesies and dialogue of the deities and other characters, as well as Achilles' own words. He says, "Well I know that it is my fate to die here, far from my dear father and mother: but I will not yield before I have driven the

Trojans to the utmost limit of war" (Homer 408). The tragedy of Achilles' death comes when

one considers close he was to escaping this fate. Before Patroclus' death, Achilles chooses to

leave the battle and the warrior's lifestyle. Vengeance pushes him to pursue his death with vigor.

With this foolish pursuit, Achilles seals his fate to die in battle. Fëanor also foolishly causes his

own demise. Driven mad by desire for the Silmarils, Fëanor rushes into the dungeons of

Angband, the stronghold of Morgoth. Fëanor does not possess the skill to defeat Morgoth or

even break through the strong defenses of the fortress, but he attempts the feat regardless because

of his pride and greed. Tolkien writes, "Nothing did he know of Angband or the great strength of

defence that Morgoth had so swiftly prepared; but even had he known it would not have deterred

him, for he was fey, consumed by the flame of his own wrath" (Tolkien 121). Fëanor's

determined pursuit of Morgoth accomplishes nothing but his own death.

Achilles and Fëanor are not the only characters in *The Iliad* and *The Silmarillion* who

orchestrate their own deaths. Hector and Túrin Turambar also cause their own destruction

through pride and vanity. Hector is driven by a need for acclaim which forces him repeatedly

into the front lines of battle. He is easily lured into the trap which Athena sets because of this

desire for glory. His death at the hands of Achilles is certain because he so willingly embraces it.

Túrin, a noble man and great warrior, causes the destruction of the Elven kingdom Nargothrond

as well as the deaths of many of his friends, his sister, and himself. Túrin wins great renown as a

warrior, and his efforts hold back Morgoth's forces from his land for many years. Túrin grows

proud and urges the people of Nargothrond to abandon the secrecy that has kept them safe for so

long. Because of this, Morgoth discovers the location of the kingdom and sends forces to destroy

it. Túrin's belief in his own prowess leads him to disregard sense and the advice of the Valar. His

hubris destroys the great city. Both Homer and Tolkien show the dangers of pride and vanity in heroes and how war breeds these qualities to the ruin of the heroes.

Homer also shares Tolkien's display of the steep cost of war, particularly the death toll. Though Homer focuses primarily on the heroic characters, he also illustrates the reality of war for the foot soldiers. In his article, "Homer and the Poetry of War," F.E. Harrison discusses the inescapability of war. He describes how Homer makes little attempt to make the action of war appear more palatable. From the vivid descriptions of deaths and bestial natures of the "heroes" to the lack of reward, the war in *The Iliad* is not portrayed in a positive manner at all. The courage and glory which war brings are its only redeeming qualities, and they are not shared by the foot soldiers. On the rare occasions when the Achaean foot soldiers speak, it is only of suffering and a stark acceptance that most will never return home. The Trojans show an equal acceptance of the fall of their city and their futures as slaves once the outcome of the war is indisputable. Though only the heroes' deaths are highlighted and mourned, Homer demonstrates the death toll in the foot soldiers as well. In their works, both Tolkien and Homer illustrate the major reality of war: death.

The parallels between Tolkien's *The Silmarillion* and Homer's *The Iliad* are numerous. Using elevated language, both tales display problematic heroes and wars that appear to be glorified but on closer examination are really denigrated.

A More Appealing Age: Why Tolkien may have chosen Traditionalism over Modernism

Because of his time period and subject matter, Tolkien's rejection of Modernism seems an odd choice. Tolkien would most certainly have been aware of the movement, as it was quite prominent by the time of the publication of his novels. Yet, Tolkien is never known to have even addressed Modernism. This indicates that he did not see the movement as a viable solution to

address the world's problems. He continued to place his faith in values that he felt had been abandoned long before World War I or Modernism came into being. One is led to wonder why he held faith in traditional values when so many of his contemporaries did not. The answer lies in his educational and religious background. Tolkien's interest in mythology and his identity as a Christian prevented him from following a similar trajectory to his peers. Though the subject matter of Tolkien's writing changed slightly after his time in the trenches, the methodology did not. World War I gave Tolkien experiences from which to draw, but it did not change his personality or interests.

In 1900, Tolkien entered the King Edward's School, the most prestigious school in Birmingham, and, with a brief hiatus due to religious and financial issues, Tolkien spent the next ten years there. It was during this time that he first discovered a love of traditional British, Celtic, and Welsh literature as well as Classical Greek and Roman literature. Tolkien was particularly fascinated with Homer. Because of this fascination, it is not surprising that *The Silmarillion* seems so similar to *The Iliad.* At King Edward's, Tolkien also fostered the love of languages that would persist throughout his life. About his first experience with Greek, he said, "The fluidity of Greek, punctuated by hardness, and with its surface glitter captivated me. But part of the attraction was antiquity and alien remoteness (from me): it did not touch home," (qtd. Carpenter 27). Tolkien's fascination with languages that appear remote also manifested itself in his love of Latin and Welsh. Tolkien's love of antiquity was cemented at this tender age and not even a violent, earth-shattering war could diminish it.

It was not only languages that captured Tolkien's imagination during his pre-war days. Mythology also appealed to him. In her article "Mad Elves and Elusive Beauty: Some Celtic Strands of Tolkien's Mythology," Dimitra Fimi discusses the importance of mythology to

Tolkien. Tolkien studied the mythologies of the Greeks, Romans, Celts, and Welsh, yet he did

not feel a kinship to any. Fimi writes that Tolkien from an early age expressed a desire to create a

uniquely "British" mythology. She writes, "Tolkien felt the lack of a mythology as an important

deficiency for his own country and its national identity" (160). *The Silmarillion* is a product of

this dream to create a mythology, and though it does show similarities to the mythologies of

other cultures, it is not merely an adaptation, but a unique creation. This interest in mythology

was unchanged by World War I, even if Tolkien's views of war were influenced by the conflict.

One of the most important aspects of Tolkien's identity was his Catholicism. When

identifying himself, it was the first descriptor he used. This influenced his view of the world and

his later view of the causes of war. While Modernists saw traditional values as the cause of the

suffering in the twentieth century, Tolkien did not. In his article, "Tolkien's Catholic

Imagination: Mediation and Tradition," Thomas Smith explores Tolkien's opinion in this matter.

He writes, "While these early post-modern movements sought to undo western tradition that was

thought to be at the heart of the contemporary crisis, Tolkien sought to reaffirm at least the

Catholic elements of the western tradition, the abandonment of which he believed precipitated

the crisis" (81). In Tolkien's mind, the world had shifted away from the Catholic Church in the

advent of the Enlightenment. To him, the values which the Catholic Church teaches could have

prevented some of the needless death which he saw. *The Silmarillion* displays the traditional

Christian teachings which Tolkien held so dear by its cautions against greed and pride. These

two qualities, which are most often condemned in Christian doctrine, cause the War of the

Jewels and the deaths of many of the characters in the story. The Silmarils, though useless, still

inspire lust in everyone who possesses them and many who do not. This lust and greed causes

kinslayings and the divisions of people who were once great allies. Pride, too, causes much of

the destruction in *The Silmarillion*. Morgoth's pride in his abilities causes him to seek more prominence and eventually to fall from grace, much like Satan in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, another deeply Christian story. Fëanor, too, is a victim of pride, believing himself to be more skilled and powerful in battle than his is. His hubris is his downfall. Many characters in *The Silmarillion* display the dangers of traits which Tolkien, as a Catholic, would have believed to be highly destructive.

Tolkien goes farther in *The Silmarillion* than just cautioning against certain "anti-Christian" traits. He also illustrates the Christian notion of "Eucatastrophe." Tolkien coins this term and describes it in his essay "On Fairy Stories." Tolkien defines "eucatastrophe" as "a sudden joyous 'turn'… and a miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur" (22). Tolkien also defines the reverse of "eucatastrophe," "dyscatastrophe." This, he describes as "sorrow and failure" (22). Tolkien's "eucatastrophe" is a hopeful concept which states that no defeat will ever be universal or unending. *The Silmarillion* displays this "eucatastophe" prominently in two places. The first is the salvation of the peoples of Middle-earth from Morgoth in the War of Wrath. Though the effects of this war are far from perfect, the war did free the Elves, Dwarves, and Men from the threat of the Dark Lord at least for a time. It was an unlooked-for salvation when it seemed that Morgoth would destroy all the world. In this moment, hope is restored, even if it comes with after tones of sorrow. The second "eucatastrophe" is told in brief at the end of *The Silmarillion,* though it is recounted at length in other tales. This is the end of the second Dark Lord, Sauron, because of the destruction of his Ring. In this instance, it seems as though Frodo will die before his quest is completed, and as though the Company will all fall in a futile assault on Sauron's fortress when, miraculously, Frodo achieves his quest. Once again, this joyous turn comes with no illusions that evil is ended or that the world will be golden again, but

it provides hope when the story seems most hopeless. These instances of "eucatastrophe" display Tolkien's belief in redemption. "Eucatastrophe" is an idea bound to Tolkien's Christianity. The idea stems from the story of Jesus. To Tolkien, Jesus' birth, death, and resurrection is the ultimate "eucatastrophe." The story is one of salvation unlooked-for both for Jesus and for mankind. It is Tolkien's fervent belief in this one "eucatastrophe" that permits him to believe that others are possible. His continued belief in "eucatastrophe" speaks to Tolkien's continual optimism which survived World War I unscathed because of his devout Catholicism.

Though he shared some similarities with his contemporary Modernists, Tolkien's world-view and beliefs were very different. His writing style and interests were born during his education, and his beliefs were founded in his identity as a Christian. Because of these things, Tolkien did not find appeal in a form of narrative which eschewed traditionalism. Though Tolkien was influenced by his experiences with war, he was not wholly changed.

In Conclusion

Tolkien established his writing style from a young age, and he did not deviate from it or his core beliefs. World Wars I and II showed him the worst of humanity, yet he did not regard this as a cause to abandon all belief as did many of his Modernist contemporaries. Instead, Tolkien redoubled his faith in the traditional values which most of the world left behind. These values allowed him to create a story which depicts war as Tolkien experienced it, glorifying those traits which human possess that allow them to withstand evil yet vilifying war as a futile effort. Tolkien was not the first to do this. Many of the classical and traditional writers whom he studied showed similar views to his own. Through tales of war, Tolkien is able to display acts of valor and joyous events as well as caution against traits such as pride, greed, and vanity. His language and subject matter combine to weave a complex and seemingly contradictory tale, one

that on the surface praises war and traditional heroes, yet on further examination criticizes these things. Through its use of classical methods, J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Silmarillion* displays the problems of war and the importance of traditional values.

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