Binary issues and feminist issues in LOTR

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Even the most perfunctory glance through existing criticism on the work of J.R.R. Tolkien can highlight the fierceness of the debate that still rages, especially over his perhaps most widely read book, *The Lord of the Rings*. On one side are the critics who, like the masses of adoring fans, consider Tolkien a genius and feel that *The Lord of the Rings* can (and should) be studied as a serious work of literature. They feel that the text has an enormous amount to offer any reader or critic. On the other side are those who consider Tolkien's work to be laughable, and completely devoid of any real literary value. The splitting of Tolkien criticism into two such opposed camps is fitting in the light of the subject matter of *The Lord of the Rings,* which is essentially concerned with the war fought between the opposed forces of Good and Evil.

Among the issues under debate is the question of the form of the work; whether it is a novel or a romance. The first part of this essay will thus examine this question, arguing that it should be read as a romance, much the same as those written in the early Grail tradition. From here, the focus will fall on binary opposition as it appears in *The Lord of the Rings*. Finally, I will examine certain feminist issues as they appear in the text.

Novel or romance?

Roger Sale has made an interesting remark on the range of influences at work in the text. He says:

> [I]n Tolkien's Middle-earth lie the riders of Rohan, Beowulf-like in their love of lore, their simple and great strength, and their belief that brave men die well in defense of their lord and their honour; Aragorn, half-elven figure of romance, the wandering ranger who becomes King Elessar of Gondor; gigantic Wordsworthian tree-like Ents who swoop down in revenge on the man who treated them wantonly; Sam Gamgee, the namesake of Pickwick's servant, staunch in his servility and love of domesticity; Sam's master, Frodo Baggins, the real hero in this book where all must be heroic, who acts like any modern alienated man but who also is Tolkien's affirmation of possibility in a world where all old and other heroic types are by themselves inadequate. It is, thus, epic and romance and novel by turns, held together by a central myth that manages to partake of all the myths of all the heroes of the past without ever ceasing to be a myth of Tolkien's own devising (1968: 248).

This certainly is quite a list of influences. To say that Tolkien has managed to squeeze into his text "all the myths of all the heroes of the past" while remaining essentially original in his writing, certainly seems to be over-zealous adulation. Sale does, however, make some important points. The text has epic and novelistic elements, but remains mostly influenced by the romantic tradition. He correctly sees the main characters as being, for the most part, character types. He also mentions the text's similarities with Beowulf, in particular the connection to the riders of Rohan. John Tinkler has taken an extensive look at the use of Old English in Rohan. He mentions the use of, among other things, Old English in the naming of people. He points out that in the text, many people in Rohan have names beginning with Eo-, and explains that "[a]n Old English word for horse is *eoh*; and eo- appears as a combining form in *eored*, 'cavalry'. Hence, Eo- in the names of men of Rohan alludes to their fondness for, association with, and dependence upon horses" (1968: 165). He further points out that "[t]he great golden hall of Theoden is called Meduseld, and Meduseld, "mead-house, a house where feasting takes place," appears in *Beowulf*" (167). Tinkler shows that Tolkien not only uses Old English to name his Rohan characters, but even uses Old English when depicting speech in their native language. When Theoden, the king of Rohan, recovers from his languor brought about by the malevolent advisor Wormtongue, his nephew Eomer cries out, "*Westu Theoden hal*!" (1995: 506). Tinkler says, "This part of Eomer's speech is italicized in the text, indicating that he is speaking the language of Rohan, which here, is simply Old English. Eomer has said, 'Be thou healthy, Theoden'" (1968: 169). So here, one can see a very strong link between Rohan, Old English, and the most famous tale written in Old English, *Beowulf.*

Derek S. Brewer unhesitatingly classifies *The Lord of the Rings* as a romance (1979: 249), and says that the archetypal romance theme is that of the Quest (255). Using as a point of reference the romance written after the Dark Ages (especially the work of Chretien de Troyes), he considers the theme of romance to be that of transition, "the literary equivalent of what the anthropologists call rites de passage". This idea of transition will be returned to later. He further states that "the natural subject matter of romance, especially at this period, is adventure and love" (251). Love is a recurring theme in *The Lord of the Rings*, such as Aragorn's love for the Lady Arwen, Sam's love for Rose Cotton, and perhaps most important of all (because it is central to the plot) Sam's love for Frodo. Brewer has likened this relationship to that between the biblical David and Jonathan, and adds that "those who have not lived in warrior societies ... may easily underestimate the deep attachment that may exist between comrades in arms" (251-2). Upon Boromir's death, Aragorn kneels beside the body and weeps openly. Legolas the Elf and even the usually stern Dwarf Gimli are said to bow their heads in grief (1995: 404). Before casting his body adrift on the river Anduin, Aragorn and Legolas compose a song of farewell (407-8). The three companions then pursue Merry and Pippin, who have been captured by the evil orcs, with Aragorn saying, "The thought of those merry young folk driven like cattle burns my heart" (414). This is just one episode which serves to highlight Brewer's point of the love which exists between comrades in arms.

Hugh T. Keenan comments on Tolkien's use of 'the Wasted-Land-and-the-Wounded-King theme' when Gandalf "comes to Theoden's court, rouses the old king from illness, drives out Wormtongue, and thus restores the leader to his people and the land to its former vigor" (1968: 72-3). The central quest, that of Frodo to the Cracks of Doom to destroy the Ruling Ring, can also be seen to have elements of the Grail Quest. Traditional Grail quests involve a decaying of the land, corresponding with an illness of the king. The only answer is to find the Holy Grail, return with it, use it to heal the king and subsequently heal the land. *The Lord of the Rings* has an interesting variation to the traditional theme. The Grail object is an evil artefact that has to be destroyed before the land can be healed. Aragorn, the king who needs to be returned to his rightful throne, is also a questor. He journeys with Frodo and the rest of the fellowship for the first part of the quest. He does not immediately enter Gondor as the king, but first undergoes many battles and tasks. Perhaps the most interesting inversion is that, instead of assuming the role of Fisher King who needs to be healed, Aragorn is shown to be a natural healer. After Frodo is wounded by one of the wraiths, the Nazgûl,

Aragorn acts almost as a shaman. He sings over the remains of the knife that was used to stab Frodo and uses the plant 'athelas' to heal him (1995:193). Aragorn shows even greater natural healing abilities by being able to heal Faramir, the Lady Eowyn and Merry from a supernatural ailment brought about by close encounters with the Nazgûl (848-850). By doing so, he fulfils a prophecy of which Ioreth, an old woman who works in the Houses of Healing, reminds everyone in attendance: "The hands of the king are the hands of a healer" (945).

Thomas J. Gasque quotes Tolkien, who was giving a lecture defending the use of monsters in traditional northern mythology. Gasque comments on Tolkien's "own use of the northern imagination" in *The Lord of the Rings*, and considers the lecture to be "slanted toward a defense of his own work as well as of the genre" (1968: 151). Tolkien said that it is "the strength of the northern mythological imagination that ... put the monsters in the centre, gave them victory but no honour, and found a potent but terrible solution in naked will and courage" (151). It is not difficult to see how this can be applied to *The Lord of the Rings*. Monsters, or creatures of the imagination, play a central role in the text. All through the text, the forces of evil are represented by orcs, who do seem on many occasions to be victorious. They succeed in killing Boromir and sundering the fellowship of the ring. Much later, they succeed in capturing Frodo, the text's central quest hero. Beyond this, merely by force of numbers do they seem to hold the promise of victory over the forces of good. At the siege of Gondor, the scene is described as such:

> The numbers that had already passed over the River could not be guessed in the darkness, but when morning, or its dim shadow, stole over the plain, it was seen that even fear by night had scarcely over-counted them. The plain was dark with their marching companies, and as far as eyes could strain in the mirk there sprouted, like a foul fungus-growth, all about the beleaguered city great camps of tents, black or sombre red (1995: 803-4).

The central evil character, Sauron, is never seen but is always present. His presence is felt most tangibly through his captains, the Nazgûl. He very nearly gains victory over Gondor through the despair and fear alone, which his Nazgûl are able to inflict upon the men of the city. True to Tolkien's quote, though, these evil creatures have no honour, and in the end even have the victory taken from them. The orcs are constantly in-fighting. Sam is able to rescue Frodo because two groups of orcs, lead by their respective leaders Shagrat and Gorbag, kill each other in an argument over Frodo's spoils. On his way to rescue Frodo, Sam comments, "[I]t looks as if Shagrat, Gorbag and company have done nearly all my job for me" (884).

The section of the text that concerns Frodo and Sam's journey through the land of Mordor to destroy the Ring, is precisely that of a "potent but terrible solution in naked will and courage". The destruction of the Ring is a truly potent solution. When it finally falls into the Cracks of Doom, the results, seen through Sam's eyes, are positively cataclysmic:

> There was a roar and a great confusion of noise. Fires leapt up and licked the roof. The throbbing grew to a great tumult, and the Mountain shook ... A brief vision he had of swirling cloud, and in the midst of it towers and battlements, tall as hills, founded upon a mighty mountain-throne above immeasurable pits; great courts and dungeons, eyeless prisons sheer as cliffs, and gaping gates of steel and adamant: and then all passed. Towers fell and mountains slid; walls crumbled and melted, crashing down; vast spires of smoke and spouting steams went billowing up, up, until they toppled like an overwhelming wave, and its wild crest curled and came foaming down upon the land (1995: 925-6).

But this victory has not been easy to accomplish. From the beginning of the quest, it has been made known to Frodo that this is to be a terrible ordeal and a great risk. At the council of Elrond, where the decision is made to destroy the Ring by casting it into the fires of the Cracks of Doom, the journey is described as "a hard road, a road unforeseen. There lies our hope, if hope it be. To walk into peril – to Mordor" (260). Later, Elrond says of the quest and the Ring, "...it is a heavy burden. So heavy that none could lay it on another" (264). At the last stages of their quest, especially, Sam and Frodo manage to pull themselves along solely with "naked will and courage". At one point in the text, Sam seems to undergo a transformation, as he faces the prospect of not surviving after completion of the quest:

> But even as hope died in Sam, or seemed to die, it was turned to a new strength. Sam's plain hobbit-face grew stern, almost grim, as the will hardened in him, and he felt through all his limbs a thrill, as if he was turning into some creature of stone and steel that neither despair nor weariness nor endless barren miles could subdue" (913).

At many points in the text, Frodo is seen as struggling under the great burden of the Ring that he has agreed to carry, and still striving on regardless. Nearing the end of the quest, Sam says to Frodo, "There's nothing on the roads, and we'd best be getting away while there's a chance. Can you manage it?" Exhausted, malnourished and tormented by the magical weight of the Ring, Frodo answers, "I can manage it ... I must" (913).

The Lord of the Rings has many points at which one can trace connections to traditional mythology. But beyond this, the text is richly laden with imagery and style that would further suggest its classification not as a novel, but as a romance. The fight against Sauron is romantically epic in the face of the great adversity faced by the heroes. The very background of the action recalls Arthurian romance, with knights in armour, wielding magical weaponry and composing rousing and moving poetry at poignant moments. The siege of Gondor recalls the great Trojan siege, which was itself an extremely popular subject of romantic poetry, a wonderful example being Chaucer's Troilus and Criseyde. So Tolkien's work can confidently be called a romance written in the Quest tradition.

Binary opposition

Anne C. Petty raises the point that "[t]he key to mythic structure ... in the words of Claude Levi-Strauss, is 'binary opposition'" (1979: 78). Petty goes on to give a short explanation of the term binary opposition, using as an illustration the symbol for the yinyang. She highlights the important fact that "both opposing elements are necessary for wholeness, making them paradoxically complementary as well". *The Lord of the Rings* is rife with examples of binary opposition, and an understanding of some of these can add a new and important dimension to his work, which has been thought by some to be childish and of little literary value. Three very important and interrelated sequences of binary opposition are life versus death; the natural versus the unnatural; and good versus evil (at times in a very biblical sense). The following part of this essay will examine this notion.

Hugh T. Keenan has commented on *The Lord of the Rings'* "underlying and pervasive presentation of the basic struggle of Life against Death" (1968: 62). This is a very important observation, and it is certainly not difficult to find examples of such presentation in the text.

Brewer has highlighted the importance of the theme of transition in romance, specifically the passage into adulthood and death, suggesting "that whatever else *The Lord of the Rings* is ultimately 'about', it is certainly 'about' death (1979: 252). I would like to stretch this observation a little further, and suggest that it can be understood to be 'about' the confrontation of death

by the living. Death is a constant reality. Wars rage and all are in danger of being slain. The hobbits have an encounter with a Wight soon after parting company with Tom Bombadil. Tom can be seen as a symbol of the life element, in as much as he can be seen as a symbol of the earth itself. At the Council of Elrond, Tom is equated with the earth in the words of Galdor. In a discussion on the possibility of entrusting Tom with guarding the Ring, it is said of him, "Power to defy our Enemy is not in him, unless some power is in the earth itself" (259). Thus, Tom is the perfect character to rescue the hobbits from the Wight, a symbol of death.

Aragorn also must face death, when he rides through the Paths of the Dead, to enlist the help of the Oath-Breakers, a ghostly army of dead soldiers who cannot rest until they have fulfilled their oath to fight on the side of the King (758). Aragorn musters them and calls them to his aid.

The main heroes, and more importantly the focalisers, of the text are the hobbits. They are physically the size of human children, and can certainly be said to act in childlike ways. At Frodo's new home at Crickhollow, Pippin (the youngest and certainly the least mature of the hobbits) is shown playfully splashing his bath water all over the bathroom floor (1995: 99). They are constantly questioning the wise, such as during one exchange between Merry and Gandalf after the confrontation with Saruman. Gandalf laughs at all the questioning, and says, "A most unquenchable hobbit! All Wizards should have a hobbit or two in their care – to teach them the meaning of the word, and to correct them" (574). Later, Pippin is shown muttering like a spoiled child about not being allowed to have a closer look at the Palantir, the magical crystal ball thrown out of Saruman's window by his minion, Wormtongue. He says, "That – glass ball now. He seemed mighty pleased with it. He knows or guesses something about it. But does he tell us what? No, not a word. Yet I picked it up, and I saved it from rolling into a pool. Here, I'll take that, my lad – that's all" (576). Yet, like all children, the hobbits must grow up. As Brewer puts it:

> It is very significant that the Hobbits, who are at the centre of consciousness of *The Lord of the Rings* are Halflings, half as high as men ... Imaginatively they represent the emergence of the individual from childhood into realms of responsibility and danger. The cosy domesticity of the Shire ... is absolutely vital as representing the comfortable childish home from which everyone must be forced out (1979: 261).

The four leave the comfort of the Shire to embark upon a dangerous quest. They all pass through dangerous trials, and manage to return relatively unharmed. The effect that the quest has on each of the hobbits is symbolic of the transition to adulthood. This is most obviously apparent in Pippin and Merry. During their stay with the Ents, they partake of their Ent-drink. This has a permanent change on them, making them grow much bigger than any other hobbits ever before (with the possible exception of the legendary Bandobras 'Bullroarer' Took). They show the physical signs of the growth of the hobbits.

Of all the hobbits, Sam is the only one who marries. From the beginning of the quest, his devotion is always solely to Frodo. However, at the end of the quest, he marries Rose Cotton and has children with her (the only hint of sex in the entire text). He is also elected mayor of the Shire for many years. He thus moves from a position of servility to one of leadership. Sam is representative of the child growing up and entering the world of adult responsibilities.

Of the hobbits, Frodo is the unfortunate one who comes to represent the transition not only from childhood to adulthood, but from adulthood into death. Frodo experiences constant pain from his wounds. He says to Sam, "I am wounded ... wounded; it will never really heal" (1002). Frodo decides to journey with Bilbo and the elves to the mystical land to the west over the sea, which can be equated to the Arthurian Avalon. This is symbolic of Frodo's death, and admittance into heaven as a reward for his toils in the destruction of the Ring.

Frodo's 'death', however, occurs long before he is finally allowed to enter the western heaven. This death occurs in the demise of Gollum, who is Frodo's binary opposite. Part of the binary opposition is the recognition of the self in the other. Both Frodo and Gollum are obsessed with the Ring; Frodo is obsessed with destroying it, Gollum with the recovery of it. Frodo grows steadily weaker the closer he gets to Morder, itself an image of death, desolation and possibly even a symbol of hell itself. Conversely, Gollum becomes stronger and more in control as they enter the dead land of Morder. He is able to assume a kind of leadership in his role as guide. On one occasion, Frodo is glimpsed as almost another Gollum. After being rescued by Sam from the clutches of the orcs, Sam prepares to give Frodo the Ring back:

> Then quickly and strangely his tone changed. 'Give it to me!' he cried, standing up, holding out a trembling hand. 'Give it me at once! You can't have it!'
>
> 'All right, Mr. Frodo,' said Sam, rather startled. 'Here it is! ... You'll find the Ring very dangerous now, and very hard to bear. If it's too hard a job, I could share it with you, maybe?'
>
> No, no!' cried Frodo, snatching the Ring and chain from Sam's hands. 'No you won't, you thief!' He panted, staring at Sam with eyes wide with fear and enmity (890-1).

Brewer says of the relationship between Gollum and Frodo, "He is especially Frodo's alter ego, Frodo's own doubt, fear, suspicion, greediness, selfishness, cowardice ... Gollum is always being suppressed and rejected, but always there" (1979: 262). It is because Gollum and Frodo are so essentially linked that, after Gollum has died, Frodo lives on in a state of being only half alive, and it is only a matter of time before he gives up his mortal life in the Shire and sails away to the west over the sea. A part of him has died, and the rest cannot live on as it has for much longer. So Frodo, then, represents the transition from life to death.

After his death at the hands of the Balrog, Gandalf returns to life more powerful than ever before, and becomes something of a symbol of life. He is in direct opposition to the Nazgûl, who conversely stand as symbols of death. They have a piercing cry, which causes men to become petrified with fear. At the fiercest moments of fighting in the defence of Gondor, it is Gandalf who always runs to the aid of the soldiers when their hearts are about to give in, giving them new hope and courage.

Another theme of binary opposition is that of the natural (and literally, nature) as opposed to the unnatural. This is closely related to the opposition of life against death, with nature representing life.

Part of the evil envisioned under the rule of Sauron is the destruction of nature. It is this destruction on the part of evil that prompts the Ents to take up arms against this evil. Under Saruman's authority, orcs have been felling trees in the forest of Fangorn (462). In a conversation with Merry and Pippin, the Ent Treebeard notes a great difference between Gandalf and Saruman. He says of Gandalf, "Yes, I do know him: the only wizard that really cares about trees" (455). Saruman, on the other hand, is described as having "a mind of metal and wheels" (462). The orcs, at the siege of Gondor, make use of machines of war, while the men defending the city use old-fashioned weaponry and valour. One has a vision of the earth if it ever was to fall under the rule of Sauron in the descriptions of Mordor. Surveying it for the first time, this is the hobbits' first impression:

> The hobbits stood now on the brink of a tall cliff, bare and bleak, its feet wrapped in mist; and behind them rose the broken highlands crowned with drifting cloud. A chill wind blew from the East . Night was gathering over the shapeless

The White Rider *Lorenzo Daniele*

lands before them; the sickly green of them was fading to a sullen brown (589).

In contrast, the land of Lothlorien is alive and vibrant. Frodo is struck with wonder at his first sight of it:

> It seemed to him that he had stepped through a high window that looked on a vanished world. A light was upon it for which his language had no name. All that he saw was shapely, but the shapes seemed at once clear cut, as if they had been first conceived and drawn at the uncovering of his eyes, and ancient as if they had endured for ever. He saw no colour but those he knew, gold and white and blue and green, but they were fresh and poignant, as if he had at that moment first perceived them and made for them names new and wonderful (341).

The landscape itself becomes a symbol of life, just as the landscape of Morder is a symbol of decay. The importance of nature is, however, not just that it sustains and symbolises life, but it has a deeper, more religious meaning to it. The Lord of the Rings has a conspicuous lack of any sort of religion or deity. However, as William Dowie says:

> The religiosity of Tolkien's trilogy is neither conceptalised nor dogmatised within the story. Yet the sense of the sacred is present in blood and symbol and theme. It is the unvocalised religion of man in touch with nature and the cosmos (1979: 266-7).

Nature stands as a religious image itself, which is why Tolkien spends so much time on descriptions of the land, and on the importance of preserving nature. Dowie quotes Mircea Eliade, who says, "For religious man, nature is never only 'natural'; it is always fraught with a religious value. This is easy to understand, for the cosmos is a divine creation; coming from the hands of the gods, the world is impregnated with sacredness" (267). For this reason, all the heroic characters are shown to have a love of nature. Frodo is struck speechless at his first sight of Lothlorien. Sam is heartbroken at the destruction of the natural beauty of the Shire. Aragorn is also known as Strider, a Ranger who knows the land well, with knowledge of herbs and medicinal plants. His standard is a white tree, representing the white tree that his ancestor, Isildur, brought from over the seas. It has always stood in the courtyard of the king, but with the passing of years and the growing of evil it withered. Aragorn's discovery of the new sapling after his victory over Sauron and the reclaiming of his throne, is symbolic of the new life that now can grow in peace. These special trees are highly personified. Looking at the new sapling, Gandalf says, "Verily this is a sapling of the line of Nimloth the fair; and that was the seedling of Galathilion, and that a fruit of Telperion of many names, Eldest of Trees" (950). The old tree that is replaced is treated almost as a dead human: "Then the withered tree was uprooted, but with reverence; and they did not burn it, but laid it to rest in the silence of Rath Dinen [the tomb]" (950-1). As a further symbol of the renewal of life, the discovery of the new sapling heralds the arrival of Aragorn's betrothed, the Lady Arwen (951). They are married as the tree is in full blossom. Even the dwarf, Gimli, who prefers caves to trees, agrees to accompany Legolas the Elf on a journey to Fangorn.

While there is no overt religion in *The Lord of the Rings,* there is a lot of religious symbolism, which goes beyond the symbols of nature as sacred in itself. While not an allegory as such (or, at least, Tolkien himself would deny that it is so), the text has allegorical implications. It forms the basis of another binary opposition, that of Good versus Evil in the truly Biblical sense. Edmund Fuller says, "In Tolkien's Third Age an Ultimate Power is implicit" (1968: 29). Both the forces of Good and Evil are driven by higher powers. Gandalf says of Sauron, "Other evils there are that may come; for Sauron is himself but a servant or emissary" (1995: 50). Even the 'Dark Lord', who has many minions working for him, is not the ultimate force of evil. Two other unmistakably evil characters, the Balrog and Shelob, are practically unaware of Sauron and are not his minions just because they are also evil.

The forces of Good are also guided by higher, unseen powers that remain essentially nameless in the actual story. As Dowie points out:

> In the appendix there is a reference to the 'One' ..., explanation of the Valar as 'the Guardians of the World' ... and of the word 'vala' as meaning 'angelic powers' ... However, next to nothing is made of these figures in the story itself. There are also many songs and invocations to Elbereth as a special intercessor for Elves and their friends. However, her power is not out of continuity with the many other powers in and about Middle-Earth, such as that of wizards and spells (1979: 266 footnote).

Yet the power is constantly present. There are two points in the text where characters are shown to recognise that they have been called upon to perform a certain task in the destruction of the Ring. Right at the beginning of the story when Gandalf explains to Frodo the nature of the quest that awaits him, Frodo complains, "I am not made for perilous quests. I wish I had never seen the Ring! Why did it come to me? Why was I chosen?" Gandalf answers, "You may be sure that it was not for any merit that others do not possess; not for power or wisdom at any rate. But you have been chosen, and you must therefore use such strength and heart and wits as you have" (1995: 60).

At the Council of Elrond, Elrond himself makes the following observation while discussing what is to be done with the Ring:

> That is the purpose for which you are called hither. Called, I say, though I have not called you to me, strangers from distant lands. You have come and are here met, in this very nick of time, by chance as it may seem. Yet it is not so. Believe rather that it is so ordered that we, who sit here, and none others, must now find council for the peril of the world (236).

Elrond uses words such as 'called' and 'ordered', showing that another power is at work ordering the actions of others. Later, at the same council, Frodo volunteers to bear the Ring to the Cracks of Doom: "At last with an effort he spoke, and wondered to hear his own words, as if some other will was using his small voice. 'I will take the Ring," he said, "though I do not know the way" (264). Here, again, is an example of a greater power using others to fulfil its purposes. This may seem very deterministic, making Frodo's heroism seem a great deal diminished, but as Dowie points out, "Frodo, Sam and the whole company overcome mountainous difficulties and finally reflect that splendour of courage through hardship. But up until the end, the possibility of turning back, giving up and keeping the Ring remains open. Freedom of will is a constantly affirmed theme" (1979: 276).

With Frodo's decision to remain Ring-bearer, the symbolism is more overtly Christian. Dowie has commented on the fact that the suffering of Frodo (and, less directly, Sam) under the weight of the Ring is like the metaphorical suffering of the human being under his "cross" (275). Frodo bears the Ring with very few complaints, and Sam suffers as he acts as companion to Frodo. On one occasion when he does complain, he says to Sam, "I can't manage it Sam ... It is such a weight to carry, such a weight" (1995: 916). Yet, almost immediately, he carries on planning the best way to reach Mount Doom, wherein they will find the Cracks of Doom. This is reminiscent of Christ's prayer to have the ordeal of the cross taken away, but still presenting himself as a sacrifice, anyway. Fuller mentions the role of Christ-figures in The Lord of

the Rings, saying:

> [I]t is possible to say that both Gandalf and Frodo, each in his way, appear not as Christ equivalents, but as partial anticipations of the Christ. With Frodo ... it lies in his vain wish that the cup might be taken away from him, and since it may not, he goes his long, dolorous way as Ring-bearer – a type of the Cross-bearer to come. More mystically with Gandalf, indicative of the operation of an unexpressed power behind the events, the wizard undergoes a harrowing prefiguring of the death, descent into Hell, and rising again from the dead (1968: 35).

Gandalf has two other roles which serve to highlight the strong Christian symbolism in the text. Fuller quotes from an interview with Tolkien, in which Tolkien has said, "Gandalf is an angel", and goes on to explain that, "Gandalf the Grey does indeed die in the mortal flesh in the encounter with the Balrog in the mines of Moria. Gandalf the White, who returns, is the angel in the incorruptible body of resurrection" (35). Gandalf, the angel figure, stands in direct opposition to the Balrog, which can certainly then be seen as a demon. This episode serves not only to prove that Gandalf is an angelic figure of great goodness and power, but also serves to show that Goodness is more powerful that Evil. Although both Gandalf and the Balrog perish in the battle on the mountaintop, it is Gandalf who casts the Balrog from the heights (another Biblical image, reminiscent of God casting Satan from the heavens). More importantly, only Gandalf is brought back to life, and as a more powerful entity. The forces of evil have no such power to resurrect the Balrog.

Gandalf's other role, before his transfiguration, is that of a pilgrim and wanderer. The elves of Lothlorien refer to Gandalf as 'Pilgrim Grey' (1995: 350) and the men of Gondor call him 'the Grey Wanderer' (809). Dowie quotes Mircea Eliade, who says pilgrims "proclaim by their 'walking', by their constant movement, their desire to leave the world" and that they "devote themselves wholly to 'walking' toward the supreme truth, which, in highly evolved religions, is synonymous with the Hidden God" (1979: 270). Christians often refer to themselves as pilgrims in the world, and say that they are "in the world, not of it". Gandalf, then, serves as a reminder that the physical world does not encapsulate the entirety of existence; there is a force and existence beyond the mortal realm. Sam has a thought that echoes this notion, while still in the land of Mordor "where the shadows lie" (1995:49) (a symbol of the "valley of the shadow of death", it can be argued):

> Far above the Ephel Duath in the West the night-sky was still dim and pale. There, peeping among the cloud-wrack above a dark tor high up in the mountains, Sam saw a white star twinkle for a while. The beauty of it smote his heart, as he looked up out of the forsaken land, and hope returned to him. For like a shaft, clear and cold, the thought pierced him that in the end the Shadow was only a small and passing thing: there was light and high beauty forever beyond its reach (901).

The East is constantly equated with evil. As has already been shown, the land of Mordor can be equated with the valley of the shadow of death. It is the seat of Sauron's power. The men who side with Sauron are called Easterlings, and are easily corrupted by evil. In contrast, the West is seen as the seat of goodness. The heaven-like haven the Elves sail away to lies over the sea to the West. When Saruman is killed, the scene is described as such:

> To the dismay of those that stood by, about the body of Saruman a grey mist gathered, and rising slowly to a great height like smoke from a fire, as a pale shrouded figure it loomed over the Hill. For a moment it wavered, looking to the West; but out of the West came a cold wind, and it bent away, and with a sigh dissolved into nothing (996-7).

The grey mist can be seen as Saruman's soul. For a moment it wavers, looking wistfully toward the Western 'heaven'; however, for his crimes (sin) he is denied access, and a wind, notably from the West, blows him away into nothingness.

Feminist issues

Tolkien in *The Lord of the Rings* shows nature to be sacred in itself. He also uses a lot of tradition Christian imagery in the text. In the character, these elements come together. Petty (1979: 49) comments on the fellowship of the Ring's meeting with the Elf Galadriel, saying that this is the Mythic "meeting with the goddess". She goes on to quote Joseph Campbell, "who has this to say about the goddess of the quest myth: 'she is the incarnation of the promise of perfection'". She is the powerful protector of the timeless land of Lorien, which itself is so vibrant, it seems to be alive. However, she is more than just a mythological goddess figure and protector of nature. Dowie quotes from a letter, written by Tolkien in response to a friend's letter:

> In a letter to his friend, Robert Murray, S.J., who had read the unpublished manuscript and commented how "without a word about religion, the book is all about grace," Tolkien answered,
>
> I think I know exactly what you mean by the order of grace; and of course by your references to Our Lady [Mary], upon which all my own small perception of beauty both in majesty and simplicity is founded. *The Lord of the Rings* is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision (1979: 284).

Galadriel, the most beautiful, gracious and powerful female any of the members of the fellowship have ever met, can be seen as a Mary-figure. She is able to see into the hearts of the travellers and probes their deepest desires (1995: 348). The Elves living in Lorien refer to her as "The Lady" (361), a title that recalls Mary's title as used by Tolkien, 'Our Lady'. She provides Frodo with a phial of liquid that glows brightly in the dark (367). This is symbolic of Mary's task of bringing light to mortals, in her position as mediator between them and God. Similarly, she gives to Sam a box containing soil. Again, this is a Biblical image, reminiscent of the parable of the good and bad seeds. When Sam uses the soil, it causes the trees in the Shire to re-grow very quickly, and contains a seed of the mallorn tree, which grows only in Lothlorien. This is symbolic of the gospel 'taking root' in people's hearts.

Petty states that Galadriel and Shelob are "binary opposites in Tolkien's conception" (1979: 81). She also points out that "Shelob is actually a reverse meeting with the goddess, in evil terms with disastrous results, directly opposed to the episode with Galadriel" (53). Galadriel can be seen as a symbol of goodness; the angel, opposed to Shelob as symbol of the devil. *In The Lord of the Rings*, these are the only female types that are used. Gilbert and Gubar (1980: 29) have commented on the phenomenon of the female devil-figure in male texts: "Emblems of filthy materiality, committed only to their own private ends, these women are accidents of nature, deformities meant to repel, but in their very freakishness they possess unhealthy energies, powerful and dangerous arts". They also note how this symbol is "incarnate [of] ... male scorn of female creativity". Shelob's monstrous deformity is shown in the following description: "Bloated and grown fat with endless brooding on her feasts, weaving webs of shadow; for all living things were her food, and her vomit darkness" (1995: 707). Her eyes also betray her monstrousness: "Monstrous and abominable eyes they were, bestial and yet filled with purpose and with hideous delight" (704). Her power is so

great that the words uttered by Frodo, a calling upon great holy figures of Elven history, which previously had the power to defeat one of the Nazgûl, have no effect on her (704).

The characterisation of Shelob highlights the point made by Gilbert and Gubar that the female devil-figure is symbolic of the male scorn of female creativity. Gilbert and Gubar (1995: 4) comment on "the patriarchal notion that the writer 'fathers' his text just as God fathered the world" (This could be a possible reason for the remarkably absent sexual element in the text). Shelob is described as slaying her mates and her own offspring. In light of the notion of male scorn of female creativity, Shelob's slaying of her offspring can be seen as the failure of female creativity, with women destroying literature just as Shelob destroys her brood. It is also a further way of highlighting her freakishness, as the killing of her own brood is something that should be unthinkable to any female.

The figure of Shelob, however, is more than just a binary opposite to Galadriel, or a manifestation of Tolkien's possible bias against female creativity. She also stands as a symbol of the frightening power of the female. In a patriarchal world, she stands opposed to the norm of being dominated by males. Even Galadriel, who is a powerful figure and who holds sway over lesser beings of both sexes, has a husband and lord, Celeborn. Shelob, quite literally, inhabits the place of female power in the symbolism of the text, not even paying heed to Sauron, the foremost figure of evil in the text.. Gilbert and Gubar have written an essay that takes a new look at Plato's famous *Parable of the Cave*. According to this parable, in which life is comparable to prisoners locked up in a dark cave, caves are symbols of entrapment and fear for males. As Gilbert and Gubar point out, "In this prison the slave is immured, the virgin sacrificed, the priestess abandoned" (93). However, "Plato does not seem to have thought much about this point, a cave is – as Freud pointed out – a female place, a womb-shaped enclosure ... the womb-shaped cave is ... the place of female power" (93 / 95). Shelob dwells in a cave that the hobbits can barely stand to enter. Even the mines of Moria, male-created, are not as oppressive, "Not since the lightless passages of Moria had Frodo or Sam known such darkness, and if possible here it was deeper and denser. There, there were airs moving, and echoes, and a sense of space. Here the air was still, stagnant , heavy, and sound fell dead" (1995: 701). The mines of Moria, although also essentially caves and therefore symbolic of femaleness, have been mined by the Dwarves. Therefore, even though also filled with terror and danger, they are easier to bear, because mines are caves that have been conquered and used by males.

Gilbert and Gubar comment on the male "dread" of the female, and on the desire of men to figuratively kill the female (14). Shelob's lair is a place of unimaginable terror for Sam and Frodo. Passing by the entrance to her inner chamber, the effect is powerful: "Here was some opening in the rock far wider than any they had yet passed; and out of it came a reek so foul, and a sense of lurking malice so intense, that Frodo reeled. And at that moment Sam too lurched and fell forwards" (1995:703). Shelob attacks and wounds Frodo, champion of the Age and its accompanying patriarchal order. Sam in his turn wounds Shelob with an appropriately phallic symbol: the Elven sword, Sting (719).

The image of the cave as place of female power can also be explored where it concerns the Dwarves, who are natural miners. They delve deep into the earth, claiming dominion over that which is supposed to be the realm of the female. However, they do not go unpunished. Delving too deep, they awake the Balrog, who drives the Dwarves out of their magnificent underground kingdom. The male miners have encroached too far into the realm of female power, and have been subsequently punished for it.

So it can be seen that in *The Lord of the Rings*, nature is an entity sacred in itself, but that Middle-Earth is not completely free of religious imagery. Galadriel is representative of the meeting point of nature's sacredness and religion. True to the nature of the text, she has her binary opposite in the figure of Shelob. Tolkien uses binary images liberally. Tolkien seems to have no hesitation in affirming that there very definitely is such a thing as evil, and its opposite, good. Dowie points out that,

> [t]he men of the West can go to battle with such fierce intensity against the orcs and the winged Nazgûl because while they are set in their course of power and destruction, they are wholly evil ... War in Faerie [the realm of magic inhabited by the characters in a quest romance], unlike war in reality, possesses no ambiguous shades of grey ... Neither values nor morality are relative in Middle-Earth (276).

Aragorn's words to Eomer, in response to his question, "How shall a man judge what to do in such times", are quoted. He answers, "As he ever has judged ... Good and ill have not changed since yesteryear; nor are they one thing among Elves and Dwarves and another among Men" (1995: 427-8). This seems to be the crux of Tolkien's own moral thought: that evil and good are essentially unchanging, and people's morals should consequently remain unchanged.

The Lord of the Rings, a modern quest romance, has more literary worth than some literary critics would give it credit for. Tolkien has used binary oppositions to highlight many issues that are of extreme importance to him, most notably issues of morality and the striving of good against evil. As a product of his time and culture, he betrays some attitudes that, by today's standards can be seen as questionable. However, this has done little to curb the popularity of the book. This popularity, which in previous years hampered serious literary criticism, will hopefully in the years to come cause critics to look at *The Lord of the Rings* as serious and worthwhile literary work.

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