

The Harrowing of Hell Motif in Tolkien's Legendarium

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Hell oncneow Crist, ðaða heo forlet hyre hæftlingas ut, þurh ðæs Hælendes hergunge.

"Hell acknowledged Christ when it let its captives out, through the Saviour's harrowing."¹

Medieval European narratives of "The Harrowing of Hell" were designed to account for the time Christ spent in the tomb. The Nicene Creed states that Jesus was "[c]rucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered, and was buried, and the third day he rose again, according to the Scriptures..." This statement leads to a particular question: what was Jesus doing in the time between his death on the cross and his resurrection? One answer provided by the Harrowing of Hell narratives depicts Jesus descending to Hell, described as a subterranean fortress-prison², to liberate the captive souls of the (usually righteous) dead held captive therein by Satan and his minions. While not generally considered part of dogmatic orthodoxy, accounts of The Harrowing of Hell captured medieval Catholic interest. The basic structure of the motif was gradually embellished and enhanced, with multiple variants appearing over time. For the purposes of this paper, I suggest that the reader may identify the presence of a Harrowing of Hell motif if the narrative passage under consideration shows the following features: 1) a character or group of characters imprisoned in darkness 2) by an overwhelming-seeming evil entity 3) who nevertheless cannot withstand the appearance of a liberating figure or figures 4) associated with light 5) who then proceed(s) to liberate captives from their captivity.

J.R.R. Tolkien (1892 – 1973) draws upon the motif of The Harrowing of Hell for various episodes in his own narrative fiction. While he maintains the integrity of the basic structure of the Harrowing of Hell accounts, he nevertheless creatively adapts it for his own purposes. In doing so, he participates in a form of narrative tradition that stretches back for almost 1500 years and sustains its presence in contemporary literature.

The Harrowing of Hell in *The Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings*

*And the light that leapt out of Thee, Lucifer it blente, [blinded]
And blew all Thy blessed into the bliss of Paradise!*³

Tolkien, given his academic background as a medievalist and philologist and his profound identification with Catholicism, no doubt was well aware of the variety of medieval Harrowing of Hell accounts. Furthermore, he showed

extreme care and skill in crafting his legendarium. When we perceive Harrowing of Hell-type episodes in his legendarium, it is extremely likely to be due to the fact that he consciously chose to incorporate them with the goal that they be noticed as such. In the process, both Tolkien and the reader of Tolkien would thereby enter into participation with what he called "The Tree of Tales."⁴ "The Tree of Tales" is an image Tolkien creates to illustrate his theory of story, which is that most, if not all, stories ultimately are variations ("branches" and "leaves") growing from a common source ("trunk"). It is not my intention in this paper to show all possible Harrowing of Hell episodes in Tolkien's legendarium; rather, the goal is to showcase a few examples of this motif, and to use them as a springboard to explore ways in which Tolkien follows its basic structure while creatively reworking aspects of it to suit his purposes. The four examples to be examined are those of Lúthien's freeing Beren from Sauron's Tower, Tom Bombadil freeing the four Hobbits from the Barrow-wight's barrow, Gandalf freeing Théoden from Saruman's spell, and Samwise freeing Frodo from Shelob's lair⁵ and the tower of Cirith Ungol.⁶

Lúthien, Beren, and Sauron

"Of Beren and Lúthien" is in many ways the centerpiece of *The Silmarillion*. The tales in *The Silmarillion* before this chapter all lay a foundation for it, and most of the major characters later in the history are shown to be directly descended from the heroic couple and later stories branch out from the events of the pair's life. It should come as no surprise, then, that several themes that are important to Tolkien should be woven into this story. At the center of Beren and Lúthien's tale, right at the heart of this centrally significant story, is The Harrowing of Hell motif. Tolkien draws our attention to Lúthien's grace-full power in part by showing her liberating captives almost effortlessly. She does so in order to free Beren from his imprisonment in Sauron's⁷ guard tower on an island. She and her faithful hound Huan having overcome various obstacles along the way, Lúthien confronts Sauron at the gate of that tower:

Then Lúthien stood upon the bridge, and declared her power: and the spell was loosed that bound stone to stone, and the gates were thrown down, and the walls opened, and the pits laid bare; and many thralls and captives came forth in wonder and dismay, shielding their eyes against the pale moonlight, for they had lain long in the darkness of Sauron. But Beren came not. Therefore Huan and Lúthien sought him in the isle; and Lúthien found him mourning by Felagund. So deep was his anguish that he lay still, and did not hear her feet. Then thinking him already dead she

put her arms about him and fell into a dark forgetfulness.⁸ But Beren coming back to light out of the pit of despair lifted her up, and they looked again upon one another; and the day rising over dark hills shone upon them.⁹

In this passage we see a kind of double-movement. First, Lúthien, by means of her graceful/grace-full power, casts down the stones that imprison, at which point all of Sauron's captives, dazed even in the dim light of the moon by their unlooked-for freedom, come out, except for Beren. When Lúthien finds Beren, she sinks into grief, thinking him dead, at which point he begins his movement, the second part of the double-movement, freeing Lúthien from her grief as the sun rises.¹⁰

In her freeing the captives from Sauron's stone prison by the power of her grace, Lúthien is depicted in a way that encourages us to see in her actions a participation in the Harrowing of Hell motif, but with some interesting modifications in keeping with Tolkien's creative re-working of established themes and motifs. Unlike Christ, Lúthien is not completely successful, and gives way to despair for a brief moment. However, this permits Tolkien to show Beren in his Christ-like aspect, as the one who revives from death¹¹ and by so doing restores those whom he loves. Lúthien, then, is a Christ-figure in her role as liberator, a Marian figure in her role as comforter, as well as a symbol of the Ecclesia (Church) who is the recipient of Christ's love. She does not show herself to be any of these in their fullness, but to a great degree she participates in aspects of all of them.

Tom Bombadil, the Four Hobbits, and the Barrow-wight

Perhaps a less immediately obvious example of Tolkien's re-working of The Harrowing of Hell motif is that of Tom Bombadil's freeing the Four Hobbits from the Barrow-wight's barrow. The hobbits, despite Bombadil's warnings, are lured and captured by the Barrow-wight and imprisoned within his barrow. The Barrow-wight's dark song entrances them, making it difficult for them to move or take any action much beyond lying still, waiting as they gradually transform into barrow-wights themselves. Despite this, Frodo is eventually able to summon enough courage to sing a minor song of power that Tom Bombadil taught to him and thereby summons him to help. Within a few moments, Bombadil arrives and, as Tolkien describes it:

There was a loud rumbling sound, as of stones rolling and falling, and suddenly light streamed in, real light, the plain light of day. A low door-like opening appeared at the end of the chamber beyond Frodo's feet; and there was Tom's head (hat, feather, and all) framed against the light of the sun rising red behind him. The light fell upon the floor, and upon the faces of the three hobbits lying beside Frodo. They did not stir, but the sickly hue had left them. They looked now as if they were only very deeply asleep.

Tom stooped, removed his hat, and came into the dark chamber, singing:

*Get out, you old Wight! Vanish in the sunlight!
Shrivel like the cold mist, like the winds go wailing,
Out into the barren lands far beyond the mountains!
Come never here again! Leave your barrow empty!
Lost and forgotten be, darker than darkness,
Where gates stand for ever shut, till the world is mended.*

At these words there was a cry and part of the inner end of the chamber fell in with a crash. Then there was a long trailing shriek, fading away into an unguessable distance; and after that silence.

At this point Tom and Frodo carry the others out of the barrow and lay them onto the grass to recover, and then Tom returns to the barrow, apparently destroys whatever remains of the wight, and brings treasures out for all to share, singing:

*Wake now my merry lads! Wake and hear me calling!
Warm now be heart and limb! The cold stone is fallen;
Dark door is standing wide; dead hand is broken.
Night under Night is flown, and the Gate is open!*

To Frodo's great joy the hobbits stirred, stretched their arms, rubbed their eyes, and then suddenly sprang up. They looked about in amazement, first at Frodo, and then at Tom standing large as life on the barrow-top above them; and then at themselves in their thin white rags, crowned and belted with pale gold, and jingling with trinkets.¹²

The scene continues on for a bit, and the connections to the Harrowing of Hell are deepened as it goes on, but I have presented enough here to establish the connection between this scene and that motif.

Frodo is often described in secondary literature as a kind of Christ-figure, serving as a type¹³ for Christ-as-priest or for Christ-as-suffering-servant. However, Frodo has not fully come into those roles here. Instead, he is the one who, even though the most resistant to the Barrow-wight's spell, still needs aid from outside in order to regain his and his friends' freedom. That is, he is not the liberator, but one of the liberated. It is Tom Bombadil who serves as a type for Christ here, being the one who comes in a blaze of (sun) light, throws down the stone gates of the barrow, and easily overcomes the shadowy and derivative power of the Barrow-wight. In some ways, the scene is an even fuller presentation of the Harrowing of Hell motif than Luthien's described above; not only are the captives liberated, they are also clothed in gold, laden with treasures, and freed of their "old rags" as a result of Bombadil having removed the wight's curse from those items. The hobbits have in some way become newly refreshed versions of their former selves as a result of their contact with Bombadil's grace. Tolkien makes an explicit connection between Bombadil and The Harrowing of Hell-Christ in Bombadil's songs, especially the end of the second one, where he sings of the hobbits' liberation and celebrates the open Gate of the dark underground prison.

Frodo receives liberating grace from Bombadil here; perhaps he must first experience the reception of grace before he can develop into a sharer of grace, a role which later he much more clearly fulfills.

Gandalf and Théoden

The examples of The Harrowing of Hell motif drawn from the stories of Beren and Lúthien and Tom Bombadil and the Barrow-wight are clear and not easily missed (as is that of Aragorn and the Paths of the Dead). However, Tolkien crafted other episodes in his works which seem to draw upon this motif in subtler ways that require more sustained attention to recognize. One of these is the narrative sequence of Gandalf's freeing Théoden from his despairing and nearly catatonic state brought about by Wormtongue's, and by extension, Saruman's, and through Saruman's palantir, Sauron's intrigue against him.

When Gandalf and his companions arrive in Meduseld, they find Théoden to be hostile, cold, and unwelcoming. Under Wormtongue's influence, he sees Gandalf as a threatening presence, a bearer of ill news. Gandalf perceives that Théoden's mind is weighed down by care and grief over the recent death of his only heir and heroic son, Théodred, and therefore is highly susceptible to Wormtongue's insinuations of despair. The wizard takes immediate steps to help Théoden cast off those morose shackles. Gandalf addresses him by name as Théoden son of Thengel, reminding him of his place within a longer kingly lineage. Then, he sings a song about the beauty and grace of Galadriel, she who is closely associated with light in the legendarium,¹⁴ drawing upon her grace-full power to aid him in the shadows of Meduseld and in those of Théoden's psyche. After rebuking Wormtongue, Gandalf raises his staff, at which point thunder rolls and the hall falls into darkness, except for the shining figure of Gandalf himself. At this point, Gandalf addresses Théoden, saying:

'Now Théoden, son of Thengel, will you hearken to me?' said Gandalf. 'Do you ask for help?' He lifted his staff and pointed to the high window. There the darkness seemed to clear, and through the opening could be seen, high and far, a patch of shining sky. 'Not all is dark. Take courage, Lord of the Mark; for better help you will not find. No counsel have I to give to those that despair. Yet counsel I could give, and words I could speak to you. Will you hear them? They are not for all ears. I bid you come out before your doors and look abroad. Too long have you sat in shadows and trusted to twisted tales and crooked promptings.'

Slowly Théoden left his chair. A faint light grew in the hall again. The woman hastened to the king's side, taking his arm, and with faltering steps the old man came down from the dais and paced softly through the hall. Wormtongue remained lying on the floor. They came to the doors and Gandalf knocked.

'Open!' he cried. 'The Lord of the Mark comes forth!' The doors rolled back and a keen air came whistling in. A wind was blowing on the hill.¹⁵

It is true that Théoden is not literally dead nor is he being held captive in a literal and physical sense. Still, he *is* a captive, even if it is primarily to his own despair and dark imaginings reinforced by Wormtongue's crafty counsel. He sits in darkness, both that of shut-off Meduseld and that of his mind. When Gandalf comes, he does so as a bolt of lightning that shatters the dark while overturning Wormtongue, and recalls Théoden to remember who he is and to assume his proper glory. He is a Lord of the Mark; Meduseld should be open to the winds of the world, and he should be out in that world of wind and light. Remembering who and what he is with the aid of Gandalf's liberating grace, Théoden is freed and made new. This pattern is that of The Harrowing of Hell motif.

Sam, Frodo, Shelob, and the Tower of Cirith Ungol

This sequence is lengthy, spanning two chapters split between two books. As a result, quoting the entire narrative to highlight the ways in which it fits the Harrowing of Hell motif is impractical. In addition, the motif is shown all of a piece; the elements of it are spread throughout the chapters with many non-motif insertions and interruptions, making it more of a challenge to recognize its presence than in the examples involving the Barrow-wight or Lúthien and Beren. For the purposes of this paper a summary will have to suffice.

Frodo is led into a "shortcut," by Gollum who, under the ruse of seeming to be helpful, actually takes Frodo to the lair of Shelob, a large spider who is a descendent of Ungoliant, who helped Melkor to kill the Two Trees of Valinor in the First Age of the world. Shelob traps Frodo in her webs and stings him, her venom paralyzing and apparently killing him. Sam, who has been separated from Frodo due primarily to Frodo's decreasing ability to think clearly and Gollum's machinations, decides to follow Frodo nonetheless, and when he does so he discovers that Frodo has been captured by Shelob. Sam then engages in a heroic effort to fight off Shelob and recover Frodo's body. Upon doing so, Sam thinks Frodo to be dead and reluctantly takes Frodo's weapon and the Ring to try to continue the quest. Shortly after Sam does this, the orcs find Frodo's body and take it to the tower of Cirith Ungol, and Sam realizes that Frodo is still alive. At this point Sam raids the tower, finds Frodo by singing¹⁶, and carries him out.

This easily may appear to be a typical story of adventure and rescue, and in many ways it is. The trials that Sam must overcome in particular fit that model. However, two things in particular move it from being such a story to one that manifests the Harrowing of Hell motif. The first is the presence of light, especially in the form of the phial of Galadriel. This phial is filled with water from her fountain and pool, which themselves hold the light of Eärendil's star, a Silmaril which holds the light of the Two Trees of Valinor, that radiate the light of Varda, the Star-Kindler of the Valar, whom the elves call Elbereth. Sam uses this phial both to ward off Shelob¹⁷ and later to break through the gate of the Two Watchers at Cirith Ungol:

They [the Watchers] were like great figures seated upon thrones. Each had three joined bodies, and three heads facing outward, and inward, and across the gateway.¹⁸ The heads had vulture-faces, and on their great knees were laid clawlike hands. They seemed to be carved out of huge blocks of stone, immovable, and yet they were aware: some dreadful spirit of evil vigilance abode in them. They knew an enemy. Visible or invisible none could pass unheeded. They would forbid his entry, or his escape.

Hardening his will Sam thrust forward once again, and halted with a jerk, staggering as if from a blow upon his breast and head. Then greatly daring, because he could think of nothing else to do, answering a sudden thought that came into him, he drew slowly out the phial of Galadriel and held it up. Its white light quickened swiftly, and the shadows under the dark arch fled. The monstrous Watchers sat there cold and still, revealed in all their hideous shape. For a moment Sam caught a glitter in the black stones of their eyes, the very malice of which made him quail; but slowly he felt their will waver and crumble into fear.¹⁹

Sam's repeated use of the grace-filled light of the Phial of Galadriel moves the narrative to more closely fit a Harrowing of Hell pattern.

The second feature is Frodo's near-resurrection. It is true that he is not fully dead²⁰ but he appears that way to Sam, and probably *is* near death. Either way, he is beyond hope. When Sam draws near to Frodo, singing about the Sun high above dark towers and bearing the Phial of Galadriel, Frodo begins to revive. He is first liberated from the bonds of death, and later freed from the imprisoning tower of Cirith Ungol. It may be odd to think of Sam as a force whom evil cannot resist; Sam certainly does not see himself in this way. Still, as the narrative develops, that is what he is. Neither monstrous spider, nor orc-warriors, nor supernaturally evil guardians, nor cold stone blocks and iron bars can stop Sam from breaking into the dark places with his light and liberating his friend. Sam is the light-bearing liberator at the center of the Harrowing of Hell motif.

Notes

- 1 Ælfric's homily for Easter, ca. 990 C.E. Found at <http://aclerkofoxford.blogspot.com/2015/04/open-ws-t-eorrr-harrowing-of-hell.html> March 2017.
- 2 Most likely this image of Hell-as-prison-with-gates within Christian narrative tradition derives originally from Matthew 16:18: "And I say to thee: That thou art Peter; and upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." (Douay-Rheims Bible)
- 3 Langland, *Piers Plowman* lines 495-496.
- 4 Tolkien, *On Fairy Stories* 18-19.
- 5 I thank Dr. Patrick Malloy of Hawkeye Community College for pointing this example out to me in a conversation we had in April 2017.
- 6 Aragorn and the Paths of the Dead would be the most obvious example, but that has already been covered elsewhere.
- 7 At this point, Sauron is a lieutenant of Melkor/Morgoth's. Sauron's tower is therefore guarding access to deeper regions of Morgoth's domain.
- 8 This image is strikingly similar to that of a Pietà.
- 9 *The Silmarillion*, 175.
- 10 This clearly is Easter/Paschal imagery.
- 11 Beren revives from apparent death several times and actual death once, repeatedly being depicted as a type for Christ.
- 12 *The Lord of the Rings*, 156-159.
- 13 That is, a typological "type" in which the character may be understood as a refraction or lesser "double" for another character who fulfills the paradigm of the type. Thus, in one direction Moses, Isaac, Elijah and Elisha are all types for Christ in the Bible, from a Christian perspective, and St. Francis of Assisi also serves as a type for Christ in Christian tradition. Types are not limited by time-frame.
- 14 Tolkien repeatedly and with great variety associates Galadriel with light, the most obvious examples being her luminous hair, the phial of light she bestows upon Sam, and Tolkien's descriptions of Lórien, her land, as being one over which no shadows lay.
- 15 *The Lord of the Rings*, 536-537.
- 16 This echoes Beren and Lúthien's tale, in which at one point they locate each other by singing.
- 17 Shelob, like her forbear Ungoliant, is associated with darkness and unlight and serves as a foil for Galadriel, the luminous one.
- 18 These images bear a striking similarity to the Greek deity Hecate, who is associated with the underworld, terror, and magic and bore in one of her forms three faces; my thanks to Haydee Comparán-Steed for alerting me to this point.
- 19 *The Lord of the Rings*, 937.
- 20 Which a great sage has pointed out means he is slightly alive.

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