Tolkien's Jungian Views on Language

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In *J.RR. Tolkien: Author of the Century* (2000), Tom A. Shippey states that "Tolkien was the holder of several highly personal if not heretical views about language" (xiv). This paper proposes that the source of these "heretical" ideas was Tolkien's adopting Carl Gustav Jung's concept of the collective unconscious. Verlyn Flieger in her article, "Do the Atlantis Story and abandon Eriol-Saga," writes that Tolkien's use of ancestrally based memories in *The Lost Road* and *The Notion Club Papers* must be based on "Jungian psychology and the theory of the collective unconscious" (Flieger 53). An understanding of Tolkien's use of Jung's concept of the collective unconscious will clarify some of his seemingly mysterious statements on language.

When working on his lecture "On Fairy-stories," Tolkien wrote a memo to himself, "Jung Psych of the unconscious" February 25, 1939 (TOFS 129). This cryptic memo is ambiguous. It could refer either to Jung's book, *Psychology of the Unconscious (Wandlungen und Symbole der Libido* 1912), or to the Jungian concept of the psychology of the unconscious. While the theory of the personal unconscious is usually associated with Sigmund Freud, Jung's (1875-1961) distinctive contribution to the theory of the unconscious was in his formulation of a collective unconscious. The specific reference here must be determined because Jung's views on the unconscious evolved over time.

Sources

Jung's 1912 book, *Psychology of the Unconscious*, would seem to be the most obvious and likely candidate for Tolkien's memo. However, it cannot be what is referred to in Tolkien's note because the concept of the collective unconscious is not presented in that work. Jung first proposed the theory of the collective unconscious in 1916, initially labeling it as the "suprapersonal unconscious." This was later published in his 1918 article "The Role of the Unconscious" (*"Über den Unbewusste"*) (Noll, *The Jung Cult, Origins of a Charismatic Movement* 97). Further, Jung's book, *Psychology of the Unconscious*, was not likely to have been attractive to Tolkien because Jung's assumptions about the historical development of consciousness in that book was derived from Frederic M. Müller's ideas. This is not surprising since Müller (1823-1900) dominated European thought on the subject of comparative mythology for almost fifty years (Noll 116, 343). Müller's views were accorded great importance partly before the publication and acceptance of Charles Darwin's theories, the study of comparative philology was considered the best guide to the study of the origins of the human race (Noll 83).[1]

Then where would Tolkien have learned about the Jungian view of the collective unconscious? The likeliest alternative would be Jung's article "Mind and the Earth" which was published in English in 1928. It was enthusiastically praised by C.S. Lewis in his paper "Psycho-analysis and Literary Criticism." While this paper was very critical of Freudian psychoanalysis, Lewis was "enchanted" by Jung's concept of the collective unconscious, adding a caveat that "if it turns out to be bad science it is excellent poetry" (297).[2] Given C.S. Lewis's intense pleasure and approval of Jung's concept, it was likely he discussed its ideas in the Inklings writing group prior to his lecture and his publishing.[3] This paper will only assume that Tolkien was familiar with "Mind and the Earth," which gives a succinct summary of Jung's views on the personal unconscious, the collective unconscious, myths and fairy tales, archetypes, and the effect of soil and climate on "a racial group" (135).

In "Mind and Earth," the collective unconscious is defined by contrasting it to "a superficial, relative, or personal, unconscious" as Freud had advocated (106). "The collective unconscious, being an inheritance of the possibilities of ideas, is not individual but generally human, generally animal even, and represents the real foundations of the individual soul" (110). The collective unconscious as a "timeless and universal mind […] seems to consist of something of the nature of mythological themes or images. For this reason the myths of peoples are the real exponents of the collective unconscious" (111). Archetypes are "mythical motives in general," and "the unconscious, as the totality of all archetypes, is the deposit of all human experience back to its most remote beginnings" (115, 116). Archetypes "are merely the forms that the instincts have assumed […] the very source of the creative impulse" (117). They are the "fundamental elements" and "the roots of the mind [...] through which the mind is linked to nature" (118). Here would be the working definition of the collective unconscious that Tolkien would have used.

Jung's paper would have caught Tolkien's attention not only because of Lewis' effusive endorsement, but also because of Jung's comments about Catholicism. Jung asserts that, as compared to the Jew or the Protestant who have merely an intellectual apprehension, the Catholic believer experiences "a considerable portion of his collective unconscious in tangible reality […] These are always present and available for him. In the sacred precincts of every altar for him there dwells a god" (116). Given Tolkien's mystical experiences as a Catholic, including the mote and the Eucharist, this view may have intrigued him (*Letters* 99, 340).

The essay, "Mind and the Earth," was written by Jung for a book that his friend, Keyserling, edited in 1927 (Noll 95, 97). Count Hermann Keyserling (1880-1947) was famous for writing on how geography shapes the souls of the inhabitants of various lands (Noll 93). He expounded

the mid-nineteenth century concept of Bodenbeschaffenheit: the "formative forces of the soil." The focus of this theory was only on the regional manifestations that gave a particular people or folk (volk) its character, potential, and unity. "Nature was defined as a landscape: those features of the environment peculiar and familiar to the member of one Volk and alien to all others" (Noll, 305). This concept was very much a part of the collection of völkisch ideas that were popular in central Europe at the turn of the twentieth century. The völkisch movement, with the prominent backing of the renowned German scientist, Ernst Haeckel (1834-1919), embraced the quasi-Larmarckian notions of Darwinian pangenesis, a theory that the effects of experience could be inherited. These views gave a scientific justification to such environmental influences (Noll 96).[4] Völkisch groups rejected Christianity in favor of a mystical Volk connection and direct initiation into the mysteries of the ancient Aryan peoples, especially the Teutonic tribes. Their interests included nature worship; hiking; nudism; neopagan rituals, like dancing around bonfires and magical ceremonies invoking the Norse or Greek gods; the study of Aryan occult symbolism; idealization of ancient Teutonic warriors like Siegfried and fascination with medieval Grail legend and Parsifal; exaltation of the deed (die Tat) over mere words; and the purity of Aryan blood which entailed anti-Semitism (Noll 77-78). Certainly during the 1920s Jung openly endorsed völkisch mysticism and taught it to Americans and British who did not have the background to understand the Germanic cultural heritage of this philosophy or the political use of its anti-Semitic element to establish the superiority of the Aryan peoples (Noll 99).

Around 1936-37 shortly before his preparation for the"On Fairy-stories" lecture, Tolkien was working on *The Lost Road*, a story of fathers and sons traveling through time by means of "ancestrally transmitted memories of a past they could not have experienced in their own personae" (*Lost Road* 8-9; Flieger 45). Flieger states this concept from *The Lost Road*, which reappears in *The Notion Club Papers*, must be based on "Jungian psychology and the theory of the collective unconscious" (Flieger 53). However, there may be another source of influence on Tolkien's use of Jungian type ideas.

Psychical research was very popular and pervasive in England's culture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century culture as can be seen in the involvement of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (1859-1930), the celebrated author of Sherlock Holmes and someone who was regarded as a paragon of skeptical and rational inquiry, in the investigation of Cottingley fairies' photographs which he documented as valid and true in his book, *The Coming of the Fairies* (1922).[5] The Society for Psychical Research in England was founded in 1882, and its interests in dreams, parapsychology, and intuition generated new models of the unconscious mind.[6] The most respected of these models, which grew out of their investigations, was the "subliminal self" proposed by Frederick W.H. Myers of Cambridge (1843-1901) (Noll 32). Myers published throughout the 1880s and 1890s and was a close friend of the American psychologist and lecturer, William James (Noll 310, 196).[7] F.W.H. Myers borrowed the term "mythopoetic" from the philologist Müller to describe the apparent myth-making functions of the subliminal self. This "mythopoetic" or myth-making function was similar to Jung's later conception of a collective unconscious (Noll 343). In fact, Jung cited Myers in his 1902 doctoral dissertation (Noll 32). Working in the French clinical tradition that explored dissociated states, Jung in Basel along with Theodore Flournoy (1854-1920) in Geneva, studied the unconscious mind by analyzing automatic writing and observing spiritualist mediums in trance states (Noll 31). Jung's 1902 dissertation was based on the trance states he induced by means of hypnosis in his 15-year old cousin, Helene Preiswerk, who let 'spiritual' personalities speak through her (Noll 144).

Tolkien famously used the term "mythopoeia," associated with F.W.H. Myers' work, in his poem stemming from a conversation on September 19, 1931, which was instrumental in persuading C.S. Lewis to convert to Christianity (*C&G* 2.159; *TOFS* 113). Tolkien's familiarity with this sense of the word 'mythopoeia' indicates his contact with the widespread ideas coming out of the psychical research of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Finally, Tolkien seemed to have his own idiosyncratic view of the connection or influence of land and mythology. Clyde Kilby cites from an unpublished letter of C.S.Lewis from June, 1930. Lewis reports that Tolkien:

> expounded on home and how the atmosphere of it must have been different in the days when a family had fed on the produce of the same few miles of country for six generations, and that perhaps this was why they saw nymphs in the fountains and dryads in the wood - they were not mistaken for there was in a sense *real* (not metaphorical) connections between them and the countryside. What had been earth and air and later corn, and later still bread, really was *in* them. We of course who live on a standardized international diet […] are artificial beings and have no connection (save in sentiment) with any place on earth. We are synthetic men, uprooted. The strength of the hills is not ours (*Tolkien and The Silmarillion* 70. Italics in the original).

This view of how the produce of the land influences people clearly would apply to Tolkien's mother's family, the Suffields, who had lived for generations in Worcestershire. In these remarks Tolkien was clearly thinking of himself and his family. Tolkien's view seems to be a variant of the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation. That is, when bread and wine are blessed by a priest they are then carriers of the deity, and the parishioner is joined or becomes one with Christ through what he eats. With this view of the influence of the land, mediated by consumption of the local produce on the inhabitants' perceptions or experiences of spirits or demigods or possibly fairies, Tolkien would have found Jung's presentation and endorsement of Bodenbeschaffenheit in line with his thinking, though proposing a slightly different mechanism of influence.

Applying Jungian Type Views to Language

Tolkien revealed his familiarity with Jung when working on his lecture "On Fairy-stories" in late 1938 and 1939 (*TOFS* 128).[8] He wanted to salvage what "had value" from the 1936-1937 *The Lost Road* and use it in *The Notion Club Papers*, which he was writing around July, 1946 (*Letters* 118). Tolkien's working note of 1945-46 to "Do the Atlantis story and abandon Eriol-Saga, with Loudham, Jeremy, Guildford, and Ramer taking part" refocused the transmission of the past from the oral and written stories by the character, Eriol, to the idea of inherited memories of the past including languages and myths as seen in his members of The Notion Club (*Sauron Defeated* 281; Flieger 44, 46, 51). Flieger notes that now the story or mythology of England would be English "not simply because it was *about* England or because it happened *in* England, but because it was *ingrained in the memory* of countless generations of Englishmen, memory revived, re-experienced, and re-possessed by Loudham […] through the genetic re-collections of their ancestors." She notes this is based on "Jungian psychology and the theory of the collective unconscious, plus something […] close to reincarnation" (Flieger 53). Therefore, English history, myth, and mythology, is inborn and "possessed by the English whether they know it or not" (Flieger 53). Flieger notes the parapsychological "spin" in *The Notion Club Papers* with "reincarnation, out-of-body experiences in time and space, the psychic import of dreams, and most important of all, collective unconscious manifest in inherited memory" (Flieger 58).[9] In other words, Tolkien fused the psychical research that he would have known about the contemporary milieu with the compatible ideas of Jung whose views grew out of this same psychical research.

Flieger notes this language on inherited memory is consistent with Tolkien's remarks to W. H. Auden in a letter of June, 1955: "I am a West-midlander by blood (and took to early west-midland Middle English as a known tongue as soon as I set eyes on it)" as opposed to Tolkien's "linguistic conditioning" in Latin, Greek, Gothic, Spanish, and later exposure to Welsh and Finnish (*Letters 213*, Flieger 59). Tolkien adds, "I dare say such linguistic tastes, with due allowance for school-overlay, are as good or better a test of ancestry as blood-groups" (*Letters*, 214). Here is the nexus of inherited memories of language, the influence of the native setting of soil and climate, and the family groups that carried these influences found in Jung's' "Mind and Earth." This view appears in the background of his March, 1941, letter to Michael Tolkien: "I am a Suffield by tastes, talents, and upbringing, and any corner of that country [Worcestershire] (however fair or squalid) is in an indefinable way "home" to me as no other part of the world is" (Letters 54). Also, a January, 1945 letter to Christopher Tolkien sounds the Jungian refrain of linking native soil, race, and language: "it is things of racial and linguistic significance that attract me and stick in my memory." He hopes Christopher will delve in to "the origins of our peculiar people" as "you are a Mercian or Hwiccian" (*Letters* 108).

This Jungian view reappears in Tolkien's idiosyncratic idea of "inherent linguistic predilections" as presented in his lecture "On English and Welsh" given October 21, 1955, and discussed by Dimitra Fimi (*Tolkien, Race, and Cultural History: From Fairies to Hobbits* 80-81). Tolkien stated that each person has a "personal linguistic potential," "a native language. But this is not the language that we speak, our cradle-tongue, the first-learned. Linguistically we all wear ready-made clothes." There is a difference between "the first-learned language, the language of custom and an individual's native language, his inherent linguistic predictions" (*M&C* 190). While Tolkien can recall his various interests and pleasures in languages ranging from Latin, French, Greek, Spanish, Gothic, Finnish, to Welsh, he asserts that the pleasure in Welsh is not "peculiar" to himself, "but lies dormant" in many English, evidently because Welsh may have been the native speech as far east as Wiltshire in the late ninth century (*M&C* 194, 185). Further, "Welsh is of this soil, this island, the senior language of the men of Britain; and Welsh is beautiful" (*M&C* 189). That this is an inherited preference, associated with the local soil and climate of England, is made clear by the remark that "Modern Welsh is not, of course, identical with the predilections of such people," (*M&C* 194). That is, it is the older, medieval Welsh that fits the preference best. "It is the native language to which in unexplored desire we would still go home" (*M&C* 194).

Tom A. Shippey in *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century* writes that Tolkien held "several highly personal if not heretical views about language. He thought that people, and perhaps as a result of their confused linguistic history especially English people, could detect historical strata in language without knowing how they did it. They knew that names like Ugthorpe and Stainby were Northern without knowing they were Norse; they knew Winchcombe and Cumrew must be in the West without recognizing that the word cŵm is Welsh" (xiv). That is, the languages spoken in England, just like English history, myth, and mythology, are "possessed by the English whether they know it or not" (Flieger 53). These puzzling views would be consistent with and a function of Tolkien's Jungian views on inheritance and the collective unconscious with its links to geography and language. These views would be "heretical" in light of what we now know about the actual mechanisms of inheritance and the debunking of the theory of Bodenbeschaffenheit. In the same vein, Shippey says that Tolkien believed he had a special understanding of *Beowulf* as "it took someone with the same instincts to explain it. Sympathy furthermore depended on being a descendant, on living in the same country and beneath the same sky, on speaking the same language-being 'native' to that tongue and land" (*Road to Middle-earth*, revised 47).

If one believes in evolution in the twenty-first century, then one understands inheritance in Darwinian terms. Consequently, the modern reader is puzzled, if not confused, by the quasi-Lamarckian assumptions present in the theory of the Jungian collective unconscious that lead Tolkien to such seemingly odd conclusions about language. Once his familiarity with and use of Jungian ideas on the

inheritance of language and mythology, combined with the influence of the local geographical region on this process possibly by means of ingesting the produce of the land as opposed to Jung's Bodenschaffenheit, are known, a number of curious statements about language and the special understanding of the native speaker make sense. Further, these assumptions grew out of and were compatible with contemporary views of parapsychology, which was widespread in the popular culture. Tolkien's use of the Jungian concept of the collective unconscious seems even to have extended to his belief and/or hope that English readers would understand chunks of untranslated Elvish: "Aiya Eärendil Elenion Ancalima!" (*TT* IV ix 329). It did turn out to be bad science, but Tolkien saw it as excellent poetry.

Notes

1. Müller was not just a name on a volume which Tolkien was required to read. Müller held the first chair in Comparative Philology at Oxford 1868-1895, and Tolkien's teacher, Joseph Wright (1855-1930), was given a post by Müller in 1888. From 1891 to 1901 Wright was the Deputy Professor of Comparative Philology and then from 1901 to 1925 the Professor of Comparative Philology at Oxford. Müller, as the founder of the department and in a sense Tolkien's academic grandfather, would have established the tone and culture of the department at Oxford University. Müller's views were part of Tolkien's everyday academic world, and they had to be reckoned with. It is clear from Tolkien's notes that he found shortcomings in both Müller's theories and those of Andrew Lang concerning the origins of myth and fairy tale (*TOFS* 11, 21-22).
2. This paper was read to a literary society in Westfield College at an unknown time and was afterwards published in 1942 in *Essays and Studies* (Hooper, *Selected Literary Essays* by C.S. Lewis xix).
3. In *Tolkien Cult or Culture?* J.S. Ryan reports that Jungian philosophy and its implications for literature was "a topic known to have been much aired by the Inklings (89). Given this group's interest in myths and the place of the Christian story in relation to myth, this would not be surprising.
4. The Lamarckian theory of inheritance still enjoyed some scientific respectability until the mid-1920s due to weaknesses in the Darwinian theory of inheritance that Darwin himself was well aware of. Specifically, there was the problem that changes could certainly happen much faster than Darwin's theory and the known mechanisms of inheritance would allow. This is part of the reason he created the vague concept of 'pangenesis'. This puzzle was not solved until the late twentieth century with the discovery of the mechanism of epigenesis. However, Lamarckian evolution ceased to be a respectable theory after the scandal detailed in Arthur Koestler's *The Case of the Mid-Wife Toad*.
5. Decades later these photographs were revealed to be the work of children and a hoax.
6. Tolkien's aunt, Edith Mary 'May' Incledon, the sister of Mabel Tolkien, J.R.R.Tolkien's mother, had become an "enthusiastic member" of the International Club for Psychical Research after her husband had forbidden her to attend Roman Catholic services in 1900 (Priestman, *Life and Legend* 36). In her letter of mid-November, 1917, May, who was staying with Edith Tolkien after the birth of their first child, John, addresses the anxious new father, J.R.R. Tolkien, as "Dear old Pet and ancient Lamb." This very sweet greeting conveys an affectionate and warm relationship and is followed by empathic reassurances (Priestman 36). This easy relationship becomes especially evident when this letter is contrasted with the letter from her sister, Aunt (Emily) Jane Neave from October 1, 1937 in which Aunt Jane's imperious tone and trademark punctuation are in full display: "I hasten to all but *demand* instant enlightenment" (Priestman 50 Italics in the original; Bunting, "Tolkien in Love: Pictures from Winter 1912-1913," 7-9). Tolkien was in regular contact with his aunt and the Incledons He would have been familiar with her interests in psychical research as well as her forbidden Catholic sympathies. May died August 24, 1936 from "paralysis agitans" or what we would now call Parkinson's disease. Her death would have followed a period of deterioration during 1936-1937 when Tolkien was writing *The Lost Road*, the time travel story by means of parapsychological methods. Having a family member with active interests in this area would have opened Tolkien to cultural trends that he might not otherwise have investigated. Aunt May was a likely catalyst for this. Awareness of his aunt's deteriorating condition may have led Tolkien to think about her beliefs and made him receptive to any ideas of Jung whose work grew out of the same psychical research background.
7. William James praised Myers' work in "Frederic Myers' Service to Psychology"(1901).
   Beginning as early as 1969 in J.S. Ryan's *Tolkien – Cult or Culture?* the presence of Jungian archetypes in Tolkien's work has been an area of discussion. In particular, the Jungian process of individuation has been explored both by Timothy R. O'Neill in 1979 in relation to *The Lord of the Rings* and by Dorothy Matthews in 1975 in relation to Bilbo Baggins in *The Hobbit*. More recently, the interpretation of Tolkien's works using archetypes can be found in Grant's "Tolkien: Archetype and Word." However, none of these authors believes that Jung directly influenced Tolkien though he had some familiarity with Jung's theories. This article argues that Tolkien did adopt the concept of the Jungian collective unconscious in relation to his understanding of language.
8. In 1956 Tolkien speaks of only learning "recently" that his son Michael had seemingly inherited Tolkien's "Atlantis" dream (Letters 213). If Tolkien only learned this in the middle-1950s, this information could not have influenced the views put forward in *The Notion Club Papers*. Children of trauma survivors are known to dream their parents' dreams, and siblings of trauma victims can begin to have some of the same fears, behaviors, play, or dreams as their traumatized siblings (Terr 311, 25). We do not know the mechanism of this transmission.

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