

Casting away treasures: Tolkien's use of *Pearl* in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*

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The importance of lost beauty to Tolkien's worldview is hardly a controversial point. In his letters, he frankly discusses his personal losses before and during the First World War, and his much-quoted statement that "By 1918 all but one of my close friends were dead" follows an acknowledgment that "of course" his personal experience has affected his fiction¹. Accordingly, many critics have examined the elegiac element in *The Lord of the Rings*², especially in the departure from Lothlórien, when Gimli laments seeing "the last of that which was fairest".

However, Tolkien's repeated tendency to imagine transient beauty as a lost jewel has not been properly connected with his study of the Middle English *Pearl*³. To be sure, his highly regarded translation of *Pearl*⁴ ensured that the poem would be considered essential background for his fiction: every thoughtful consideration of Tolkien's Middle English sources takes account of it, and Stefan Ekman's statement that "*Pearl* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* exercised enormous influence on Tolkien"⁵ is hardly to be disputed. The nature of this influence has, to some degree, been explained by Tolkien scholars, including Ekman, whose comparison between the *Pearl* landscape and Tolkien's Arda builds on Tom Shippey's observation that the topography of Lothlórien recalls that of *Pearl*⁶. Further, Amy Amendt-Raduege has found echoes of medieval dream visions, including *Pearl*, in Tolkien's own dream visions⁷.

Given this level of recognition, surprisingly little has been said of the most important image Tolkien takes from the *Pearl*: the basic metaphor of the jewel and the jeweller⁸. Tolkien's legendarium is full of "joyles juleres" who, like the dreamer in *Pearl*, become authors of their own misery over a lost jewel. The influence of *Pearl* on the possessive jewellers of *The Silmarillion* is so pervasive as to require separate treatment. However, I hope to take a first step in establishing the importance of *Pearl* in Tolkien's fiction by showing that, in *The Hobbit*⁹ and *The Lord of the Rings*, he uses the lost jewel in the same way as the *Pearl* poet to make the same point about love and loss: the more precious a treasure is, the more we must resist laying claim to it.

As in many of Tolkien's plots, the conflict in *Pearl* is set

in motion by the loss of a jewel. In the opening stanza, the speaker laments that

I leste hyr in on erbere;
Thurgh gresse to grounde hit fro me yot.

Despite the fact that he is recounting these events after he has supposedly had the consoling dream-vision, he cannot help exclaiming "Allas!" for the loss of "my precious perle". His most obvious analogue in Tolkien's fiction is the hapless Gollum, forever crawling after "my precious". The dreamer's lament, "Allas! I leste hyr . . . that privy perle wythouten spot" is echoed, less artfully, by Gollum's cry, "Curse us and crush us, my precious is lost!" The key to both characters' misery is the word 'my': they feel entitled to possess the beloved object forever, although their claim to ownership is vague at best. If, as internal evidence suggests, the pearl symbolizes the dreamer's little daughter, who died early—"Thou lyfed not two yer in oure thede"—then she is a person, and we are not granted permanent possession of people. The Pearl Maiden (presumably the fair lady into whom the little daughter would have grown) reminds her mourning father that what

thou lestes was bot a rose
That flowred and fayled as kynde hyt gef (269–270).

Nature, which makes the rose flower, also makes it die. Yet, the dreamer convinces himself that he can keep this gift of nature, that he can dwell forever "with hyt in schyr wodschawes". For this reason, the Pearl Maiden says he is "no kynde jueler", implying both ungentleness and unnaturalness: he denies the laws of nature by trying to keep forever what he thinks of as "my precious perle" and "my lyttel queene". As for Gollum's precious, we learn in *The Lord of the Rings* that he killed his friend Déagol for it and yet convinces himself that it really is his "birthday present". His desire for it (and the chance by which Déagol found it) makes him feel entitled to it, prefiguring Boromir's "It might have been mine. It should be mine". Having no consoling vision, Gollum never learns to see the Ring in any other way.

The less pathetic but equally joyless Thorin Oakenshield is irrational in the same way as the *Pearl* dreamer. The dreamer, even when made to understand why his earthly loss was necessary and given hope of a heavenly reunion, is still willing to die to cross that river and “assert . . . ownership of the pearl maiden”¹⁰. When he plunges into the flood, she has given him the entire lecture on which his serenity at the end is supposed to be based, including the information that, to get to where she is, “Thy corse in clot mot calder keve”. But at the time, with her in front of him and the water between them, “My manes mynde to madding malte”, and he (like Gollum) wants only to see and touch his precious. Thorin also is ready to die — and doom his comrades, too — to assert ownership of his treasure. This obsession is not ordinary greed: it is a long-nursed grievance over his patrimony. As the treasure is the product of his own people’s mining and craftsmanship, stolen by the dragon, his claim to it seems more rational than Gollum’s claim to his “birthday present”. But his desire for possession, like that of the dreamer in *Pearl*, makes him less rational as it makes him more joyless. It is ironic that Thorin should contemptuously describe dragons as “guard[ing] their plunder as long as they live” but “never enjoy[ing] a brass ring of it”.

When he makes his Gollum-like claim to his own lost jewel, the Arkenstone — “I will be avenged on anyone who finds it and withholds it” — he stands little chance of enjoying it, not only because Bilbo has stolen his precious, but because he and his dozen comrades are surrounded by an army. Bard has asked only one-twelfth of the treasure for his people’s loss and trouble, and Roac’s logic is incontrovertible: even if the reinforcements come in time and the dwarves win the treasure, winter is coming and they can’t eat gold. But Thorin has become so “grim”, so joyless, that no one dares argue with him. Only at his death does he realize that “If more of us valued food and cheer and song above hoarded gold, it would be a merrier world”.

Tolkien’s most unkind — and most joyless — jeweller¹¹ is probably Sauron, who is literally a jeweller in that he forged the Ring, which he then lost (when Isildur cut it from his finger), and the plot of the entire trilogy is driven by his attempt to get it back. Like the dreamer in *Pearl*, Sauron is “no kynde jueler”, not only in the sense of ungentleness, but also (and more importantly) in the sense of unnaturalness. In fact, unnaturalness, hostility to nature, may be his defining characteristic. Originally, let us remember, he was a maia serving Morgoth, who (being unable to create life), devoted his efforts to marring and wrecking it. Sauron is now carrying on his work. Everyone who reads *The Lord of the Rings* notices that, as one gets closer to the mechanical hell that is Mordor, the landscape becomes less natural: trees, grass and, above all, that life-giving water, are replaced with barren rocks and ashes and slag-heaps (657).

What Sauron will do if he gets back his lost jewel is equally obvious: he will destroy all nature and substitute a mechanical order with him in command. Such an order would have one advantage over nature, at least for the one at the top: it would be durable. “The desolation that lay before Mordor,” we are told, will be a “lasting monument to the dark labour of its slaves” and will “endure when all their purposes [are] made void”. However, if one prefers the gifts of nature, as most of us do, one has to accept that they are cyclical and impermanent.

For Tolkien, as for the dreamer in *Pearl*, the need to “yern no more then was me gyven” is as important as it is difficult. Faramir, who “would not take this thing if it lay by the highway”, recognizes that the temptation to seize it must have been “too sore a trial” for Boromir. Galadriel is sorely tempted by Frodo’s offer of the ring, as she could tell herself she was “given” it. Besides, as she tells Frodo, if the ring is destroyed, then “Lothlórien will fade, and the tides of Time will sweep it away”. But if he does not, then Sauron wins, and his kind of permanence would destroy everything that made Lothlórien worth preserving. To clutch what she has would be to lose it.

The importance of “passing the test”, of refusing to claim ownership of a treasure is consistent in Tolkien’s fiction and is not confined to the Ring. Celeborn accepts the necessity of losing his “treasure” — Galadriel — and he applies the metaphor in a way that connects him explicitly with the dreamer in *Pearl*. Knowing he will lose her, he hopes that Aragorn’s “doom [will] be other than mine, and your treasure remain with you to the end!” Of course, she will not: when a man marries an elf, they both become mortal. So, living “happily ever after” ironically means accepting death. When Eowyn is betrothed to Faramir, Aragorn uses a similar metaphor: “No niggard are you, Eomer . . . to give thus to Gondor the fairest thing in your realm!” The importance of not clutching earthly treasures too tightly is probably stated best by Aragorn, who approves of Pippin’s dropping the elven brooch: “One who cannot cast away a treasure at need is in fetters.”

Given, then, that some treasures have real value and deserve to be cherished, how does one go about loving them without claiming ownership? This question goes to the heart of the Pearl Maiden’s lesson, and Tolkien’s answer is supplied, surprisingly enough, by Gimli, whose shock at the idea that dwarves would mine the caverns at Helm’s Deep is instructive. He says:

No, you do not understand . . . No dwarf could be unmoved by such loveliness. None of Durin’s race would mine those caves for stones or ore, not if diamonds and gold could be got there. Do you cut down groves of blossoming trees in the springtime for firewood? We would tend these glades of flowering stone, not quarry them. With cautious skill, tap by tap — a small chip

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of rock and no more, perhaps, in a whole anxious day — so we could work, and as the years went by, we should open up new ways, and display far chambers that are still dark, glimpsed only as a void beyond fissures in the rock.

Gems and precious metals, after all, are as much a part of the natural world as trees, and Gimli's appreciation of their beauty separates him from Sauron and Saruman, who also have some interest in mining and craftsmanship. What distinguishes a gentle jeweller like Gimli is his ability to appreciate treasures and see them as beautiful in themselves, not as a means to other ends, such as power, pleasure, wealth or fame.

Of course, one may also value people or use them, and for this reason, the image of treasure applies similarly to human relationships in *Pearl* and *The Lord of the Rings*. In *Pearl*, the dreamer finds cause for joy only when he brings himself to rejoice that his darling girl is a queen in heaven. As she tells him early in the poem:

Now thurgh kynde of the kyste that hyt con close
To a perle of prys hit is put in pref.

His simple gem has been chosen by the prince, cleaned, smoothed, and put in a worthy setting, so that its quality shines clearly. Similarly, when Gimli asks for a strand of Galadriel's hair, "which surpasses the gold of the earth as the stars surpass the gems of the mine", he tells her he will "treasure it" and set it "in imperishable crystal to be an heirloom of my house, and a pledge of good will between the Mountain and the Wood until the end of days". Such a gift is gloriously useless, compared with a bow or a knife or a belt or a rope. Gimli's ability to love a treasure without using it is probably Galadriel's reason for predicting that "your hands shall flow with gold, and yet over you gold shall have no dominion". He seems to suffer most at leaving Lothlórien — he is the only one of the company who "wept openly", lamenting that, "I have looked the last upon that which was fairest" — yet he makes no attempt to cling to it, to remain there¹². He loves Galadriel but has no thought of laying claim to her and can therefore still rejoice in her gift to him. This is exactly what the dreamer in *Pearl* must learn to do, and by the end, he does. His statement that "wel is me in thys doel-doungeoun / That thou art to that Prynces paye" is not just virtue or generosity. Rejoicing in the happiness of his beloved is the only way he can receive the consolation he seeks.


Of course, it is easy to say that death is a natural part of life, and one must simply accept it. Tolkien, who had endured the bitterest of personal losses, understood very well the difficulty of accepting such consolation. One problem is that the drive for ownership is not always as straightforward as it is for Gollum and Sauron. For most of us, who are neither heroes nor villains, it has a way of looking like something else. For the dreamer in *Pearl*, it looks like love: his precious pearl has been lost, hurt, sullied, and he mourns to think that the dirty earth has "marred" it. In fact,

Tolkien links the "creative (or as I should say, sub-creative) desire" with a "passionate love of the real primary world" and consequent wish to preserve it (*Letters* 145). This creative desire, he continues, "may become possessive, clinging to the things made as 'its own', the sub-creator wishes to be the Lord and God of his private Creation. He will rebel against the laws of the Creator — especially against mortality" (*Letters* 145). This is precisely the situation of the jeweller in *Pearl*: he wants so badly to grasp 'his' little pearl that he disregards the will of God, not only refusing to "love ay God, in wele and wo", but attempting to cross the river, having once been told that he may not. As Jennifer Garrison observes, he wants to "rescue her from death" (ref. 10, 310), which, in human terms, is a loving wish. For Thorin, the drive to possess looks like honour, and not just his own honour, but the honour of his people, who have been reduced to blacksmithing and coalmining since they were robbed of their treasure. For that matter, when Boromir cries, "It should be mine!" he wants to protect Gondor. And none of these considerations is, in itself, bad. Another problem is that the desire to cling to what we love is often stronger than our reason.

The cure for this 'madness', for both Tolkien and the *Pearl*-poet, is the same as the cure for any other addiction¹³: one must do without the object long enough to get through the withdrawal agonies and recognize that what joy may have come from love or honour or whatever the treasure represents did not come from possession: dragons do not enjoy a brass ring of their treasure. This need for separation and withdrawal may also be Tolkien's solution to an old problem in *Pearl* criticism¹⁴: why is the dreamer suddenly consoled at the end, when all the Pearl Maiden's speeches were insufficient to prevent him from plunging into the river?

At the end of *Pearl*, with the jewel no longer before his eyes, the dreamer can pronounce himself well and happy that his dear one has found favour with God: "So wel is me in thys doel-doungoun / That thou art to that Prynces paye". Here, he parts company with Gollum, who is too strongly addicted to his precious for its absence to ease his cravings. Bilbo, however, after seeing the ring again and being almost driven to madness by his own cravings, tells Frodo, "I understand now" and urges him to "Put it away", where the sight of it can no longer tempt him. Boromir's experience is the same: when the ring is no longer before him, the "madness" that he says drove him to try to seize it passes. Even Frodo, when he sees Sam with the ring in the Tower of Cirith Ungol, has a "hideous vision" in which Sam turns into an orc, and he snatches the ring, crying "No you won't, you thief". But as soon as the ring disappears in his clenched fist and is no longer before his eyes, the madness departs. The same thing happens when the ring is destroyed: Sam looks into Frodo's eyes and "there was peace now, neither strain of will, nor madness, nor any fear". This last is especially telling, as he thinks he and Sam are about to die, but his serenity equals that of the awakened dreamer in *Pearl*. With his new understanding

but without his jewel, he is no longer a “joyles julere”: the drive to claim the ring for his own is gone, and he is “glad” that Sam is with him. This, too, is the state in which the awakened dreamer finds himself: he “yern[s] no more then was me gyven” and finds in God a “frende ful fyin”, whom he is content to serve.

Thus, the loss is the cure, as the Pearl Maiden repeatedly tries to tell the dreamer. To accept the possibility of loss is to be cured of the drive for ownership and thus to be made capable of real joy. The dragon hoarding his treasure, Thorin Oakenshield committing himself to a war he cannot win, Gollum crawling after his “precious”, and Sauron in his dark tower seeking his ring, are “joyless juelers” whose need for ownership destroys them. Much more joyful are Faramir, Galadriel, Celeborn, Pippin and Gimli, who appreciate their treasures but do not imagine that they have a right to them. Tolkien’s seeming ambivalence towards human craft becomes clearer when viewed in the light of *Pearl*. The dwarves’ treasure and the rings of power are beautiful in themselves, but they lead to misery when clutched too tightly. Even the fairest things, like Lothlórien, must be allowed to pass away. 

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1. Foreword. *The Lord of the Rings* 2nd edn (HarperCollins, 1965).
2. For example, see Smith, L. ‘I have looked the last on that which is fairest’: Elegy in Beowulf and Tolkien’s Lothlorien. *Mallorn* No. 44, 43–46 (2006); Deyo, S. M. Wyrd and Will: Fate, Fatalism and Free Will in the Northern Elegy and J. R. R. Tolkien. *Mythlore* 14(3), 59–62 (1988); Walker, S. The

War of the Rings Treelogy: An Elegy for Lost Innocence and Wonder. *Mythlore* 5(1), 3–5 (1978).

3. Dunn C. W. & Byrnes, E. T. (eds) *Pearl*, in *Middle English Literature* (Routledge, 1990).
4. Tolkien, J. R. R. (trans.) *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl, and Sir Orfeo* (Ballantine Books, 1992).
5. Eckman, S. Echoes of Pearl in Arda’s Landscape. *Tolkien Studies* 6, 59 (2009).
6. Shippey, T. J. R. R. *Tolkien: Author of the Century 196–200* (Houghton-Mifflin, 2000).
7. Amendt-Raduege, A. Dream Visions in J. R. R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*. *Tolkien Studies* 3, 49–50 (2006).
8. Shippey briefly but directly connects the narrator in *Pearl* with Tolkien’s jewellers in *The Road to Middle Earth* (Houghton-Mifflin, 2003). There, he notes the kinship between craftsmen such as Fëanor and Tolkien himself, who “must have thought” that the *Pearl*-poet was right “to call himself a jeweller” (242). This reference to a jeweller’s ‘sub-creation’ is justified by Tolkien’s letter to Milton Waldman, in which he asserts that gem-making symbolizes “the sub-creative function of the elves” — Carpenter, H. (ed.) *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien* 148, (Houghton Mifflin, 2000). However, Shippey makes this observation in passing and does not explore the full implications of the metaphor.
9. Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Hobbit* (Houghton Mifflin, 1996).
10. Garrison, J. Liturgy and Loss: *Pearl* and the Ritual Reform of the Aristocratic Subject. *The Chaucer Review* 44(3), 294–322 (2010).
11. That is, as Fëanor, whose case, as mentioned earlier, should be examined in a future paper.
12. This fact is especially noteworthy in light of Shippey’s observation that the rivers in Lothlorien seem influenced by the river in *Pearl* (see ref. 4).
13. For a discussion of the Ring’s addictive powers and drug-like operation, see Shippey, T. *The Road to Middle Earth* 139 (Houghton-Mifflin, 2003).
14. Many critics have expressed dissatisfaction with an ending they consider too neat and too easy. For example, see Aers, D. The Self Mourning: Reflections on *Pearl*. *Speculum* 68, 54–73 (1993). One solution is suggested by Garrison (see ref. 13). I would argue that Tolkien suggests another.

A woman of valour: Éowyn in *War and Peace*

CATHERINE MADSEN

And I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you a heart of flesh. — Ezekiel 36:26

It is easy to read Éowyn’s change of heart from shield-maiden to healer with mild incredulity, even with some irritation. There is something formulaic and even facile in the presentation — not as forced as Jane Studdock’s conversion in Lewis’s *That Hideous Strength*, where one is not sure she will like having children any better than she liked having dreams, but still too sudden and thoroughgoing. A conventional feminist reading would call it Tolkien’s convenient way to dispose of a woman who, by taking up arms, has trespassed (however fortunately for the free peoples of Middle-earth) on a male preserve.

This would be a superficial reading, considering Tolkien’s sympathetic treatment of Éowyn’s frustration and also Aragorn’s and Faramir’s respect for her valour. Yet the question remains whether Éowyn is treated quite

adequately at the climactic moment of ‘The Steward and the King’ (*The Lord of the Rings* VI 5). Possibly Tolkien did not entirely know how the subtleties of such an emotional reorientation operate in a living woman’s life; possibly he was reproducing a schema long established in literature by other male writers who had themselves observed the shift only from the outside. Telescoping the complex process of sexual awakening and vocational redirection into a few lines of rather formal dialogue, the form cannot hold the experience.

Tolkien has a reputation of doing badly with female characters, although some of the unhappy women of *The Silmarillion* material reveal a greater psychological acuity in this realm than he is generally given credit for. Éowyn herself is thoroughly convincing as long as she is unhappy. Joy is notoriously more difficult to convey in writing than sorrow and discontent, and as Éowyn’s joy is only a minor detail in the great eucatastrophe of Sauron’s overthrow it