

Bridges and Renunciation of Power in *The Lord of the Rings*

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Abstract

This article will analyze metaphorical depictions of bridges in *The Silmarillion*, *The Hobbit*, and *The Lord of the Rings* to uncover surreptitious themes and determine genre-specific strengths and weaknesses in J. R. R. Tolkien's writing. Paying special attention to the Bridge of Angband episode in the tale of Beren and Lúthien in *The Silmarillion*, cultural distinctions expressed through details of bridge depiction in *The Hobbit*, and Gandalf's battle with the Balrog at Durin's Bridge in *The Lord of the Rings*, patterns of bridge representation in each work will be identified. After reviewing every bridge reference in all three works, it will be asserted that bridge depiction in Tolkien's fantasy is generally used as a means of imagistically communicating changes in power relations between characters and cultures. A comparison of superficially similar bridge depictions in multiple works demonstrates considerable development in the author's anti-Utilitarian ethical theory between the writing of the *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. By combining his aesthetic preference for stories featuring *eucatastrophe* with a morally serious quest narrative written in an increasingly sophisticated prose style, *The Lord of the Rings* succeeded in fusing elements of the fairy-tale, the epic, and the novel into a surprisingly influential new literary genre: the fantasy novel.

Keywords: bridge, *eucatastrophe*, fairy-tale, J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit*,

The Silmarillion

I. Introduction

Although *The Hobbit* (1937) and *The Silmarillion* (1977) have both garnered a certain amount of popular and critical attention, J. R. R. Tolkien's most highly regarded work is probably *The Lord of the Rings* (1954). Having said this, its literary reputation has paled in comparison to its ongoing popularity. While certain critics including W. H. Auden (*Letters*, 229) were quick to endorse it with unbridled enthusiasm, *The Lord of the Rings* has also been summarily dismissed by many others (cf. Carpenter, 222-223) and even after many years has failed to gain any broad-based critical support. As Tolkien himself felt that well-meaning attempts to help skeptics appreciate literary works they disliked from the outset were a waste of time (*Letters*, 229), this article will not endeavor to win over those who find Tolkien's oeuvre as a whole distasteful. Rather, an attempt will be made to use bridge depiction as a fixed point of analysis from which some of Tolkien's genre-specific strengths and weaknesses may be determined. An effort will also be made to analyze the roles that bridge depiction plays in the plots of each of his representative fantasy works so as to detect and confirm areas of thematic consistency that may be present.

II. Genre-related questions pertaining to the fantasy works of Tolkien

To adequately assess the relative strengths and weaknesses of a specific work, it is often useful to be able to compare it with other works within a broader literary tradition. Unfortunately for previous generations of scholars, Tolkien's works were different enough from the various precursor works of fantasy that came before them that his stories were considered unprecedented and relatively *sui generis* at the time of their publication. Now, however, more than 60 years after the release of *The Lord of the Rings*, there may finally be enough similar works

extant to allow for meaningful comparison: the fantasy genre kick-started by Tolkien has spawned the publication of countless imitations and influenced a number of bestselling cultural phenomena with multimedia dimensions including C. S. Lewis's Narnia tales, Frank Herbert's *Dune* books, J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* book series, and George R. R. Martin's yet to be completed *Game of Thrones* saga.

That said, one problem with the above-mentioned offshoot creations is that many of them seem significantly less "serious" than Tolkien's works; considering the often spotty literary quality of the vast majority of fantasy titles in this multi-generational literary movement, a high-minded critic might be tempted to write off the whole lot, Tolkien included. This article will offer some tentative reasons for avoiding such a course of action. While it is probably accurate to say that many Tolkien-inspired works do seem lacking in literary merit (as traditionally defined), *The Lord of the Rings* especially has a certain gravitas about it that many of the successor works, even the more carefully contrived and successful ones, have failed to match. Having said this, when compared to *The Lord of the Rings*, even the related works written by Tolkien himself may be found wanting.

Using thoroughgoing metaphorical analysis of bridge depiction passages as a starting point, this paper will attempt to explain what sets *The Lord of the Rings* apart from Tolkien's other works. It will be asserted that, owing to its carefully thought through, consistently expressed moral viewpoint and its relatively novelistic style of writing, *The Lord of the Rings* rises above mere fantasy and achieves a rare creative balance; it is an entertaining epic fantasy story that is simultaneously a full-fledged long-form novel of "ideas."

At this point, the reader may wonder how an examination of the depiction of "bridges" in a fictional work can hope to accomplish such objectives. In fact, in

the author's prior research into Japanese and English language literature, bridges have proven to be extremely allusive entities: sensitive authors from Charles Dickens (Strack, 2008) to Ernest Hemingway (Strack, 2000) to Mishima Yukio (Strack, 1998) have all used bridges to imagistically express ideas of theoretical import in unobtrusive ways. One premise of this paper is that Tolkien's literature, like that of many skilled novelists before him, camouflages its metaphorical insinuation in scenery, setting, and seemingly innocuous narrator asides.

In fact, various comments made by the author hint that he used his stage props in just such ways. For example, Tolkien has suggested that when a "Locked Door" is depicted, it can only but symbolize an "eternal Temptation" (*Monsters*, 129). On the other hand, he has gone on record about his preference for dramatic and mythologically replete bridges as opposed to mundane ones: "The bridge to platform 4 is to me less interesting than Bifröst guarded by Heimdall and Gjallarhorn" (*Monsters*, 149). Having verified the likelihood that Tolkien would be inclined to utilize such artifice, depiction of bridges in his stories will be examined to determine whether they are in fact symbolically freighted or not. If such were determined to be the case, it would not be surprising to discover that the major themes explored in his works come into sharp focus through the analysis of scenes that include bridges in particular.

III. Bridges depicted in *The Silmarillion*

One obvious question one must answer before attempting a sweeping evaluation of Tolkien's fantasy works is where to begin. While it would certainly be possible to follow the age-old orthodoxy of addressing an author's published works in the order of their publication, there are a number of problems with such a strategy in the case of Tolkien. For one thing, despite the fact that *The*

Silmarillion was published last, much of it was actually written first and, for all intents and purposes, events depicted within it occur earlier in Tolkien's fictional timeline than those of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. For this reason, the analysis that follows will proceed according to the well-acknowledged order of each work's creation.

The Silmarillion is Tolkien's attempt to flesh out mythological, ethnic, linguistic, and legendary/historical background details of Middle-earth (the fictional setting shared by Tolkien's most famous long-form works). While its writing was initiated for its own sake, over time and as other corollary works appeared, it came to be regarded less as a free-standing work of fictional lexicography than as important background information for properly understanding the events depicted in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. While many of the episodes explained in *The Silmarillion* seem to have been developed many years before *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, due to the fact that *The Silmarillion* was heavily edited¹ after the release of these other works, the final published form of *The Silmarillion* both informs and is derived from the preceding works.

The first chapters deal with the creation of the world by Ilúvatar. After this apparently omnipotent deity created a group of celestial beings called the Valar, and tasked them with harmonizing so as to make a "Great Music" together (*The Silmarillion*, 15), time and physical being were established as a physical reflection of the music they made. Although created "good," one particularly powerful Valar named Melkor (a Satan-like character) attempts to create a new "melody" of his own that clashes with the theme originally proposed by Ilúvatar.

¹ Editing was done both by Tolkien himself and his son, Christopher.

Although Tolkien seems reluctant to label this act of subversion ‘sin,’ there are obvious parallels in the story with Judeo-Christian traditions as to how evil entered the world.

The various collected stories go on to describe how first the elves, then the dwarves, and then finally humans were created to populate the new world created by Ilúvatar, and how the Valar kept constant vigilance against, and did occasional battle with, Melkor so as to safeguard Ilúvatar’s many good creations. Nevertheless, Melkor (also called Morgoth) and his servant Sauron are described as aggressively sabotaging the creations of Ilúvatar and the Valar. Such destruction was not limited to instances of physical destruction but also included the intentional damaging of relationships; it is Morgoth and Sauron that tempt elves, humans, and dwarves to distrust the Valar (and by extension Ilúvatar) and each other, progressively leading them away from the ostensibly healthy paths originally intended for them.

While passages mentioning bridges are not exceedingly numerous in *The Silmarillion* (the word “bridge” is mentioned a total 23 times in the body of the work²), the presence of these bridges often serves to illuminate and amplify an underlying theme being expressed more obliquely in the overall narrative arc encompassing it. Beginning with the less prominent bridges mentioned, the story’s bridges include a ‘bridge of slain Orcs’ (‘Orcs’ being the goblin-like minions of Sauron), a perpetual but intangible bridge between Middle-earth and the realm of the Valar, a bridge over the Great River at Osgiliath, the stone bridge of Iant Iaur at Esgalduin (Menegroth), the bridge of Angband, and Thingol’s bridge at Nargothrond. Each of these will be explained in turn.

² Because they do not contribute directly to the narrative proper, maps, genealogies, glossaries, and other back matter in *The Silmarillion* have been excluded from the range of analysis.

The reference to a bridge of slain Orcs occurs in the account of a battle between a band of Orcs and Turgon the elf and his followers in the region of Hithlum. The passage reads, “Then all the hosts of Angband swarmed against them, and they bridged the stream with their dead, and encircled the remnant of Hithlum as a gathering tide about a rock” (*Silmarillion*, 234). While this passage represents but a specific incident that occurs at a particular juncture during the ebb and flow of an ongoing battle, it seems relatively representative of Sauron’s valuation of his Orc-hordes; worthless to him individually, their sole reason for existence is to sacrifice themselves for the sake of his practical objectives. The fact that Sauron’s ‘bridge’ to victory in this particular battle is literally composed of his dead followers is all too fitting.

Near the end of the book, in a section that relates the flourishing and ultimate demise of the Atlantis-like island of Númenór, a somewhat figurative bridge is mentioned. After the Númenóreans have succumbed to Sauron’s temptation to strive for technological ascendancy (330) and then finally sailed into the West in a vain attempt to defeat the Valar militarily, Ilúvatar causes Númenór to be swallowed up by the ocean and further causes the ocean paths to the Western realm of the Valar to become hidden from common view. About this sudden dislocation the narrator explains, “And they taught that, while the new world fell away, the old road and the path of the memory of the West still went on, as it were a mighty bridge invisible that passed through the air of breath and of flight...” (339).

It should be of little surprise to find that Tolkien, an author with no desire to demystify the fantastic or in any way cut off everyday existence from the magical realm of fairies, designed this invisible bridge of “breath” and “flight” so that Ilúvatar and the Valar would always have ready access to Middle-earth even if its

human inhabitants remain (under normal circumstances) completely unaware of the connection. This parallel positioning of mundane existence alongside more fantastic realms echoes many fantasy stories that preceded Tolkien's own works, in particular echoing the sometimes practical and sometimes ephemeral "bridge" that links the human and elfin worlds in the short story "The Elves" (originally published as "Die Elfen" in German, 1811, 1812; Thomas Carlyle translation, 1827) by Ludwig Tieck (1773-1853).

The fact that the Númenóreans built the bridge of Osgiliath over the Great River (350) ties the decaying Kingdom of Gondor in *The Lord of the Rings* to the splendor of its ancient Númenórean heritage. It is symptomatic of the dysfunction of Third Age Gondorian society that Boromir, son of Theoden, Steward of Gondor, is forced to cast the last bridge in Osgiliath down for the sake of Minas Tirith's protection. That said, most of the bridges mentioned in *The Silmarillion* are destined to be cast down sooner rather than later, an indication of the increasing influence of Sauron on civilizational stability as the mythological past of Middle-earth gradually blends into its more historical-seeming 'present.'

One bridge that is mentioned on multiple occasions is the stone bridge of Iant Iaur on the River Esgalduin at Menegroth. When the dwarves built the hidden halls at Menegroth for Thingol, they built nearby a "bridge of stone over the river, by which alone" (109) the gates of the great hall of the elven king could be entered. Although this bridge was created as a defensive mechanism, it ultimately proved an insufficient one. For although the domain of Morgoth is described as being "one-hundred and fifty leagues distant from the bridge of Menegroth" (*Silmarillion*, 113), the narrator characterizes this as "far and yet all too near," thus signaling troubles to come.

Despite this apparent foreshadowing, it was not the hordes of Sauron but a

host of dwarves that eventually conquered the halls of Thingol at Menegroth; as the narrator puts it, “There it was that the host of Naugrim crossing over Aros passed unhindered into the woods of Doriath; and none withstood them. (...) But the Dwarves held on their way, and passed over the great bridge, and entered into Menegroth...” (283). In this way, Thingol’s heirs are seen to be betrayed by the very ones that helped him build his secret halls in the first place and so the enmity between elves and dwarves in Middle-earth was firmly established.

One of the foremost legends in *The Silmarillion* involves key events relating to the tale of Beren and Lúthien that occur at the bridge leading to Sauron’s fortress, Angband. After the human, Beren, had been captured by Sauron in battle and came to be imprisoned in Sauron’s fortress, his elvish wife Lúthien brought the renowned dog Huan with her in a seemingly futile attempt to rescue him or die trying. The narrator explains:

In that hour Lúthien came, and standing upon the bridge that led to Sauron’s isle she sang a song that no walls of stone could hinder. Beren heard, and he thought that he dreamed; for the stars shone above him, and in the trees the nightingales were singing. And in answer he sang a song of challenge that he had made in praise of the Seven Stars, the Sickle of the Valar that Varda hung above the North as a sign for the fall of Morgoth. Then all strength left him. (*Silmarillion*, 209)

Sauron, thus informed that Lúthien was present at the bridge, sent a number of great wolves to the bridge to capture her but each in turn was slain by Huan (209). Losing patience, the shape-shifting Sauron took on the form of the greatest werewolf ever and approached the bridge. In horror, Huan gave way and Sauron attacked Lúthien but not before she could cast a fleeting spell of drowsiness upon him. Sensing an opening, Huan attacked and seized Sauron (still in werewolf

form) by the throat. Unable to resist and upon the verge of death, Sauron yielded his fortress isle to Lúthien and thereupon turned into a vampire and fled, dripping blood from his throat, like a dark cloud across the moon. After this, Lúthien went on to find and rescue Beren (209-211). In this way, one of the most famous legendary battles of Middle-earth was fought at a bridge at the very threshold of Angband, the gates of which are said to be fashioned in the form of an arch (215).

The depiction of the arched gate here echoes and amplifies the presence of the (presumably arch-shaped) bridge, both of which by their form prefigure events that ‘turn back upon themselves.’ To the extent that bridges and arches have been emphasized in this episode’s depiction, their images in combination serve to “frame” the dramatic reversals of fortunes taking place nearby; not coincidentally, Sauron’s defeat and subsequent flight from his corporeal form is understood to be a great ‘turning point’ in the history of Middle-earth. As the embodied but spiritually immortal Sauron physically dies in this battle, his powers have suddenly and unexpectedly waned and Middle-earth has become a safer place for it. It should be stressed that this unexpected ‘turning’ happened not due to the power of kings nor any kind of cunning stratagem on Lúthien’s part; ignoring the hopelessness of her cause, her love expressed itself in song which Beren responded to with his own song that praised a certain constellation and in so doing called upon unseen powers to honor their ancient pledge never to allow Middle-earth to be dominated by evil. In this way, the willingness of Lúthien to sacrifice herself for Beren’s sake at the Bridge of Angband unexpectedly results in a terrible set-back for Sauron and a temporary reprieve for Middle-earth as a whole.

The most commonly mentioned bridge in *The Silmarillion* is Thingol’s bridge at Nargothrond (referred to a total of 9 times). Following a decision made

by the council of Túrin, the elves of Nargothrond “built a mighty bridge over the Narog from the Doors of Felagund, for the swifter passage of their arms” (*Silmarillion*, 254) and thereafter succeeded in driving the hordes of Angband out of nearby lands. After the passage of four-hundred and ninety-five years, however, rumors reached Nargothrond of “a great mustering of Orcs and evil creatures” (255). In no uncertain terms, prophetic words advised them to “shut the doors” of the great fortress, cease going abroad and to cast the stones of “pride” (the bridge) into the river so that the gradually approaching evil might not find the gate. According to the narrator, one of the king’s counselors “was troubled by the dark words of the messengers, but Túrin would by no means hearken to these counsels, and least of all would he suffer the great bridge to be cast down...” (255).

In the end, the spurned warnings turned out to have been correct. After the overconfident Túrin had lost the battle of Tumhalad, he and his compatriots were forced to retreat to Nargothrond in haste only to find that “the host of the Orcs and Glaurung the Dragon were there before him” (256) and, having come upon the bridge guards suddenly, had cut off his line of retreat. “In that day the bridge over Narog proved an evil; for it was great and mightily made and could not be swiftly destroyed, and the enemy came readily over the deep river...” (256). After a recounting of various valiant yet ultimately doomed attempts to reclaim the bridge (257), Glaurung the Dragon is seen to break down the mighty bridge, casting it into the Narog and thus denying the Orcs their plunder; “...being thus secure, he gathered all the hoard and riches of Felagund and heaped them, and lay upon them in the innermost hall, and rested a while” (258). Although breaking down a bridge so as to hoard a great treasure is emblematic of dragonish conduct, one might note that Thingol, who had hoarded his own treasure

behind “stones of pride” (a bridge) and kept his kingdom secret for hundreds of years, displayed certain dragonish qualities himself; in fact, the Anglo-Saxon tradition occasionally explains dragons as the resultant state of men who exhibit “exceptional greed or savagery” (Risden, 193).

The ways in which secret bridges are surreptitiously created and then surprisingly subverted and overthrown in *The Silmarillion* echoes some of the relational problems between the Valar in their role as Sub-creators of the world Ilúvatar had first established. Of particular note is the episode that recounts how a member of the Valar named Aulë first created the dwarves:

Now when Aulë laboured in the making of the Dwarves he kept this work hidden from the other Valar; but at last he opened his mind to Yavanna and told her all that had come to pass. Then Yavanna said to him: “Eru is merciful. Now I see that thy heart rejoiceth, as indeed it may; for thou hast received not only forgiveness but bounty. Yet because thou hiddest this thought from me until its achievement, thy children will have little love for the things of my love.” (51)

This passage recognizes that surreptitious creative acts are sometimes kept hidden precisely because there is something subtly subversive in their creation. While Eru (Ilúvatar) no doubt hoped for harmonious coordinated creative activity among the Valar, he was apparently willing to admit surreptitious individual effort provided that pardon was sought and such efforts were in the end brought into harmony with his own creation.

The above passage also shows, however, that the Valar themselves were not above harboring a small amount of spite. While a surface harmony was restored among the Valar themselves, the seemingly small effects stemming from secret acts of creation such as Aulë’s harbored the potential to undermine more public

acts of creativity in the long term; in this sense, Aulë's decision represents not a consciously rebellious attempt to subvert the efforts of others (as was the case with the openly rebellious 'song' of Morgoth/Melkor) but rather a willfulness to have it one's own way by not allowing others the opportunity for critique or criticism. This disharmony, while initially mild, naturally blossomed into full-grown antagonism between the elves and the dwarves when compounded over the passage of time.

In a very important sense, when Middle-earth rulers (whether elves, dwarves, or humans) create hidden halls or fashion secret fortresses for themselves underground, they are adumbrating Aulë's initial secretive act of creation. Attempts to cut oneself off from the problems around and live life in self-satisfied isolation inevitably carry implications not only for oneself but for those with whom one has denied the possibility of relationship, as well.

On the other hand, while the building of bridges ought to reflect confidence in relationships and societal strength, the bridges depicted in *The Silmarillion* are almost all bridges expressing distrust: over time, confidence placed in personal relationships, strategic alliances, great physical distance, military might, or hoarded gold, all eventually prove baseless. While certain properly conceived and constructed bridges do for a time withstand the forces of gravity and the ceaseless onslaught of history and the elements, it is the destiny of every terrestrial bridge to fall at some point. Tolkien appears to realize this; almost every bridge mentioned in *The Silmarillion* is depicted either as "falling" or being at risk of so doing. In fact, anticipating certain partial conclusions relating to bridges in the other works to be examined hereafter, it might be asserted that 'the bridge betrayed' is a theme consistently present in Tolkien's works of fantasy. As expressed through the various pessimistic depictions of bridges in

The Silmarillion, Tolkien's Middle-earth was off to a decidedly inauspicious start.

IV. Bridges Depicted in *The Hobbit*

The Hobbit, which Tolkien commenced writing sometime between the summers of 1926 and 1930 (Zaleski & Zaleski, 203) and which first appeared as a comic children's fairy tale (only twelve pages in typescript), was eventually published in its current form in September of 1937 (Zaleski & Zaleski, 208). According to Tolkien, the story was actually based on *The Silmarillion*, as yet an unpublished assortment of mythological and poetic vignettes, "to which frequent allusion was made" (*Letters*, 31). That said, none of the specific bridges mentioned in the final form of *The Silmarillion* are referred to in *The Hobbit*.

The first bridge to appear in the story is the one over which Thorin's company crosses as they journey away from the Shire. Described as an "ancient stone bridge" (*The Hobbit*, 31) across a river swollen with rain, it allowed them to continue their journey in bad weather despite the fact that it was "nearly night." Judging from the presumed location of the travelers when they encountered the bridge and also from its appearance, it seems likely that this was the "Last Bridge" located beyond Bree on the East-West Road.

Taken at its most basic, one might say with some confidence that the presence of a bridge at this juncture in the plot emphasizes the fact that Bilbo has embarked on a journey into unknown lands. Tellingly, the bridge is not located at the border of the Shire as one might have expected. In fact, it is found after the travelers have already passed beyond the "hobbit-lands" and even the lands where people spoke in strange tongues and finally entered the uninhabited "Lone-lands." From a practical point of view, this location is somewhat puzzling.

Apparently a well-maintained bit of stable infrastructure, without a population to support it, one wonders who it is that is maintaining the bridge? In any case, the very fact that their night crossing occurs over a turbulent river emphasizes the fact that they have only at that point truly entered the realms of adventure promised to Bilbo at the story's outset.

The second bridge they encounter is the "narrow bridge of stone" that leads to Rivendell (48) which they pass over at the invitation of the elves that welcome them. Forced to reduce their speed as they crossed so that no dwarves would 'dip their beard in the foam,' the very narrowness of the bridge seems to accentuate the desirability of the hospitality offered on the other side by Elrond at his "Last Homely House."³ This special "refuge" (157) that the narrator explains to be a realm where the elves attempt to maintain the beauties of an age already past, is a place not for "action" but for "reflection." Hunter asserts that "Rivendell effectively stops time and allows time-bound creatures to think in a properly historical way" (Hunter, 132). Tolkien notes, "Elrond symbolizes throughout the ancient wisdom, and his House represents Lore—the preservation⁴ in reverent memory of all tradition concerning the good, wise, and beautiful" (153). In *The Hobbit* it serves to physically but more importantly psychologically refresh the travelers for the journey ahead. They also gain knowledge concerning the hidden gate of Erebor from the only person in Middle-earth capable of recognizing and then reading the ancient Moon-runes secretly inscribed on Thorin's map. For all

³ Rivendell is depicted as a perfect house for food, sleep, storytelling, singing or even just sitting and thinking: "Merely to be there was a cure for weariness, fear, and sadness." (Vol. 1, 297)

⁴ Of course, preservation is not always considered to be a good thing; when Tolkien considers the "second fall" (the 'error' of the Elves), he is referring to their willful resistance to their own diminishment and fading. Similarly, their efforts at preserving the bliss and perfect memory of 'The West' (including their own prestige relating to its establishment) he terms an "antiquarian" type of "embalming" (*Letters*, 151).

of the above reasons, the access afforded to Bilbo and the others over the “narrow bridge” of Rivendell should be seen not as an incidental side-trip but as a crucial condition of their journey’s ultimate success.

The location of the third bridge mentioned in the story is an oblique reference to a river crossing. When they stay in the shape-shifter Beorn’s home, he forewarns them of a black, strong stream in Mirkwood that they’ll find obstructing their progress. Although Beorn doesn’t go into detail about the nature of the river’s enchantment he does warn them not to drink its water or bathe in it (125). When they finally encounter the stream, the travelers note that there “had been a bridge of wood across” but that “it had rotted and fallen leaving only the broken posts near the bank” (134). Apparently a wooden footbridge of some sort, the fact that it has long ago given way points not only to its waning utility at that particular location but also to the fact that whoever built it is either gone or has decided that its maintenance is no longer warranted. The frequent reference to defunct bridges in the story is iconic of civilizations and societies in a state of decline. Lacking this bridge, they grapple a boat tied to the opposite shore, pull it towards themselves and then take turns using it to cross. The boat, representing a temporary, small-scale method of transport, clearly lacks the universal bidirectional access that a bridge typically affords.

After all of the dwarves are taken prisoner by the wood-elves of Mirkwood, they are led across the fourth bridge mentioned to the mouth of a huge foreboding cave (160) which serves as an entrance to the elven king’s city. Although it is deep in the woods and apparently well-guarded, the stealthy Bilbo is nevertheless able to follow his companions across unnoticed. Unlike the bridge at Rivendell, it does not lead to warm elven hospitality but rather is depicted as a bridge of coercion that they will not be allowed to traverse again. Abandoning the idea

of escaping back across this well-guarded bridge, Bilbo decides to sneak the dwarves out of their prison in barrels headed down the river towards Lake-town.

The fifth bridge relates to the city of Lake-town, across the lake from the Lonely Mountain and the ruins of the dragon-destroyed city of Dale. Initially the town is described as itself being “built on bridges far into the water” (165), a statement that conflates the “great bridge made of wood” with the wooden piers upon which the town as a whole rests. Nevertheless, when Tolkien characterizes the entire town as being built on bridges, he subtly hints at the role it will play in propelling the dwarves towards their ultimate destination, the Lonely Mountain lying across the lake. Having been given food, tools, weapons, and horses by the town’s generous inhabitants, the group’s situation improves markedly and their goal seems suddenly within reach.

Despite this initial description of Lake-town itself as being on a bridge, it is later described as being mounted on piles (179) and connected to the shore by a “great bridge made of wood” (179). Bilbo and the dwarves are able to enter the city over this great bridge undetected because, unlike the elves of Rivendell or Mirkwood, the bridge’s human guards “were not keeping very careful watch” (182). This lax security notwithstanding, its position on the lake has apparently been planned so as to keep the dragon from mounting a full force land-based attack on the city (165). This is evidenced by their attempts to “cut the bridges” (229) when the dragon finally does attack. While this strategy ultimately proves ineffective in saving the town itself from destruction, it does necessitate the flying dragon to carry out its fire-breathing attack from the air, thus exposing a flaw in the scaly plating of its underbelly to the skilled archer, Bard.

The sixth and final bridge to make an appearance in the story is the broken down “old bridge” to Erebor, the Lonely Mountain; unfortunately, all that

remains of this 'bridge' are boulders fallen into the river below. Still referred to as the "old bridge" despite the fact that it is no longer intact, its location serves as a reference point for understanding the efforts of the dwarves to reinforce the mountain stronghold's defenses after the dragon has been slain (241).

On Bilbo's triumphal return trip to the Shire, the travelers once again are "led across the water" to the house of Elrond at Rivendell (273). While on the previous occasion they had listened to old stories and learned necessary facts to prepare them for the journey ahead, now they are portrayed as actively telling the "tale of their adventures." At this point they also learn more of what Gandalf had been doing after he left the group to their own devices (although the full import of the "great council of white wizards" was likely lost on them). Still, it is necessary to note that, once again, the warm hospitality and availability of big picture perspective afforded by Elrond's Last Homely House is not freely available except to the chosen few who are allowed to cross over into fellowship.

The final bridge they cross is the bridge near the "mill by the river" located relatively close to the door of Bilbo's house (277). With the subtitle of the *The Hobbit* being "There and Back Again," it is only fitting to have Bilbo's ultimate return home punctuated by the crossing of a bridge. While it would have been natural for Tolkien to provide even greater symmetry to the story by having Bilbo cross the same bridge on his journey home as he had on his journey out, this final bridge mentioned, being located exceedingly close to home, communicates a sense of 'journey's end' that a repeated reference to the initially mentioned "Last Bridge" would not have expressed.

In retrospect, the bridges in *The Hobbit* are remarkably varied in terms of materials, function, and state of repair. Sometimes made of stone, sometimes of wood, some are freely available for transportation purposes while others are

closely guarded. They are often well-maintained and intact but just as likely to have succumbed to gravity after long disuse. Despite all of these differences, the bridges referred to are all linked by one common characteristic: each serves as an iconic marker for the technological sophistication and ongoing viability of the culture that devised them, maintained them, destroyed them, or allowed them to fall into disuse. While bridges in *The Silmarillion* were often depicted as expressions of pride and overconfidence that lay exposed to vaguely anticipated attacks or sudden acts of betrayal, bridges in *The Hobbit* express a much more pragmatic moral: bridges, like other hard-won civilizational gains, must be guarded and properly maintained or they will fall victim either to the ravages of time or to antagonistic forces of a much more personal nature.

Arches, as well, are put to iconic purpose in the story. The entrance to the path through Mirkwood is marked by a “sort of arch” (132) and the barrels that the dwarves float to Lake-town in only leave the domain of the Mirkwood elves by going under “an arch” (172) to get out into the open stream. The dwarves also construct a small arch to allow the “issuing of the stream” (241) from Erebor as part of a project to widen the pool of the river to create a kind of wide defensive moat where none had been before. In this way, arches are seen to be indicative of exits or entrances, regardless of whether they are artificially fashioned or natural (as seems to be the case with the arching of tree branches overhead at the entrance to the Mirkwood path). Tolkien’s tendency to highlight noteworthy events (and especially entrances to and exits from certain significant episodes in the story) will take on an even more pronounced role in *The Lord of the Rings*.

V. Bridges depicted in *The Lord of the Rings*⁵

Volume 1: The Fellowship of the Ring recounts the beginning of Frodo's quest to bear the magical Ring he had received from Bilbo to Mt. Doom to destroy it rather than have it fall into the hands of Sauron. Warned by Gandalf, Frodo leaves the Shire and makes a dangerous journey to Rivendell, where it is decided that he and a group of companions will attempt to destroy the ring by throwing it into the active volcano where it was first forged. Events recounted in Volume 1 include Gandalf's battle with an ancient monster called a Balrog at the bridge in the mines of Moria, the group's subsequent narrow escape, Boromir's temporary betrayal and heroic death, and the setting out of Frodo and Sam on their own.

The "Prologue" to this volume begins with an account of the history of the Shire in which the narrator mentions that when Hobbits first entered the region, they were allowed to settle on the condition that they maintain certain bridges in the area including the "Bridge of Stonebows" (a.k.a. The Great Bridge; *The Lord of the Rings*, Vol. 1, 24). The Shire stretches west to Brandywine Bridge,⁶ a

⁵ While *The Lord of the Rings* is commonly thought to be a trilogy because of the fact that it was released incrementally in three separate volumes, there are a number of reasons for which it might be asserted that it is actually a single stand-alone work. For one thing, the decision to divide the story into three volumes was made by Rayner Unwin (of the publisher George Allen & Unwin) for economic and not artistic reasons (Carpenter, 218); in fact, Tolkien had originally vehemently objected to the work being published in any other form than a single volume (Carpenter, 213). Secondly, there is another equally natural way to understand the work's segmentation: it is divided into 6 books, Book I through Book VI, these clearly labeled as such by way of relatively obtrusive headings at the beginning of each book. Third, Tolkien's relatively well-documented process of writing (Carpenter, 187-216) clearly shows that the work evolved as an organic whole in which the beginning and end of the story were painstakingly harmonized through multiple rewritings. Consequently, while citations concerning *The Lord of the Rings* will refer to specific volumes within the trilogy for scholarly convenience, the work itself will be considered here not as a trilogy but as a single unified work.

⁶ The map on page 40 shows the Brandywine Bridge located over the Baranduin (Brandywine) River along the "East Road" as it extends to Bree. In fact this is the "East-West Road," a kind of trunk road linking the Grey Havens in the west with the Blue Mountains in the east (72).

bridge on the Brandywine River, which forms the Shire's eastern border (25).

When Gandalf arrives to visit Bilbo in Hobbiton at the beginning of the story he is depicted as traveling with a cart along the road "through Bywater from the direction of the Brandywine Bridge" (48). After throwing Bilbo a spectacular goodbye party complete with fireworks, Bilbo "disappears" from the crowd by putting on his Ring, is urged by Gandalf to give his ring to Frodo, and then leaves Hobbiton for parts unknown.

Years later, after receiving warnings from Gandalf that the Shire had come into danger due to the presence of the Ring there, Gandalf urges Frodo to bring the powerful item to Rivendell for consultation concerning it. After setting out for Rivendell with Sam Gamgee and a few other Hobbits, the first bridge the companions cross is the "plank bridge" at the edge of Hobbiton (106), likely the same bridge Bilbo had crossed on his way home at the end of *The Hobbit*. The small scale of this bridge inaugurates the journey somewhat but stresses the fact that they have yet to truly get beyond familiar surroundings.

Realizing that they are being pursued by mysterious "Black Riders" (actually Ringwraiths, deadly servants of Sauron), they become concerned about whether they will be able to safely "get across the river" (125). Having abandoned the main road to the Brandywine Bridge (because it would "certainly be watched," 153), they are actually referring to the ferry crossing of the Brandywine termed the Buckleberry Ferry (127). Narrowly escaping the Ringwraiths as the Ferry embarks, they feel somewhat reassured that the river crossing nearest to the ferry would be the Brandywine Bridge some twenty miles away to the north (143).

After exiting the Shire, the Hobbits begin to make their way into the Old Forest where they eventually encounter Tom Bombadil. Whenever Tolkien's travelers enter a particularly interesting structure or natural setting, especially a

woods, the author carefully signals these ‘entrances’ by noting how the characters pass under real or seeming “arches,” a type of artifice that Tolkien had already made frequent use of in *The Hobbit*. The first reference to such an arch in *The Lord of the Rings* occurs here in Tom Bombadil’s Old Forest (162), but there is also a welcoming arch in front of the Prancing Pony in Bree (209), the trees are said to be “arched” above them as they travel down a road entering into Lothlórien (438), there is a “great arch like a wall of rock” at the gate before Saruman’s tower of Orthanc (338), and Wellinghall of the Ents includes impressive tree-branch arches (Vol. 2, 92-93, 97), as well (leaving momentarily aside the many stone arches the group encounters in the mines of Moria to be discussed later).

After being joined by Strider at the Prancing Pony, the next bridge they cross is the “Last Bridge” over the River Hoarwell (a.k.a. the Mitheithel; 268). Crossing in safety, they find a beryl jewel (an elfstone) lying on the bridge. In fact, this gem had been placed there by the powerful Rivendell elf Glorfindel after he had driven three Ringwraiths away from the bridge (280); due to the fact that the bridge represents a natural bottleneck on the road for travelers, his placing of the jewel on the bridge implicitly acknowledges the heavy flow of traffic bridges must accommodate when they are the sole means of crossing a divide in a given area. Moving on, the group worries about whether they will safely be able to cross the Ford of Rivendell (a.k.a. the Ford of Bruinen; 283, 296). As it turns out, their fears prove well-founded but Glorfindel summons a flash flood to repulse the Ringwraiths as they attempt to follow Frodo across the Ford (285-286).

Having recounted this narrow escape, the narrator depicts Frodo in Rivendell confined to bed as he gradually recovers from a wound he had received from the knife of a Ringwraith. Because Rivendell is only approachable by way of a single

bridge (as described in *The Hobbit*), the knowledgeable reader may infer that he has been physically carried over the narrow bridge by whoever rescued him after the Ringwraiths were swept away by the sudden flood surge at the ford. And in fact, after the members of the Fellowship of the Ring have been decided upon, their quest begins by crossing “the bridge and [winding] slowly up the long steep paths that led out of the cloven vale of Rivendell” (368).

During the Council of Elrond held there, Boromir, son of the Steward of Gondor, mentions how he had until recently been in charge of defending the last bridge at Osgiliath from the increasingly aggressive probing of Orc forces until it became too dangerous to do so, at which point the bridge was “cast down” (322). After swimming the river to escape, the west side of the River Anduin remained under Gondor’s control. The (already destroyed) bridge at Osgiliath is mentioned once more later when the Fellowship is trying to decide which bank of the Anduin to travel along (475).

Before entering the mines of Moria, the members of the Fellowship must first solve a riddle carved into an “arch” shape on the side of the mountain (397) so as to ascertain the password to enter. At Rivendell, the dwarf Glóin had remarked about the wonderful beauty of the “aches carved like trees” found in the dwarf-inhabited Kingdom under the Mountain (302). It seems likely that some of the arches referred to as they make their way through Moria would be of the same variety (cf. 404-415).

To finally exit the mines, the group must traverse a fifty-foot “bridge of stone without kerb or rail” (427). As the group is pursued by a fiery demon-monster called a Balrog, Gandalf urges the others to hurry across the bridge and on to safety while he stays behind to deny its crossing (428-429). After the Balrog ignores the wizard’s warning and makes an attempt to cross the bridge in pursuit,

Gandalf “smote” the bridge with his staff (429), destroying it. Unfortunately, the falling Balrog uses its whip to ensnare him and drags Gandalf down into the abyss. With no chance to attempt a rescue, the group exits the mines through “an arch of blazing light” (430) out onto the mountainside bordering Dimrill Dale.

When the fellowship enters Lothlórien, they do so by crossing the River Nimrodel. In fact, they had been watched and their party was only permitted to wade across because they were accompanied by Legolas, an elf of Mirkwood (444). Later, when they are being escorted to the city of Caras Galadon, they cross the River Celebrant using a peculiar elven mode of transport: a rope bridge. While the elves themselves can walk over a single rope strung across the river tighrope-style, non-elves require the stringing of two additional ropes at a higher level which then serve as handrails (449). Of the company, Pippin crosses this rope bridge most easily while Sam does so only with great difficulty. This rope bridge is very revealing of the nature of Lórien society in general: because this reclusive elven society has no desire for stable contact with the outside world, the bridges they use are naturally the most temporary and difficult to cross bridges imaginable. Furthermore, although the rivers that separate them from outsiders lack bridges entirely, the river boundaries themselves are guarded with constant vigilance.

Regarding Lórien, Tolkien’s narrator uses a metaphorical ‘bridge’ to express its character: “[I]t seemed to [Frodo] that he had stepped over a bridge of time into a corner of the Elder Days, and was now walking in a world that was no more. In Rivendell there was a memory of ancient things; in Lórien the ancient things still lived on in the waking world” (453). Finally arriving at Caras Galadon, they crossed a “white bridge” which led to the gates of the city proper (457), the very same bridge they leave over when it comes time for them to be on

their way (480). This “white bridge” is the last bridge mentioned in Volume 1.

The importance of Gandalf sacrificing himself at the Bridge of Khazad-dûm (a.k.a. Durin’s Bridge) in Moria cannot be overstated. Not only is this bridge the second most frequently mentioned bridge⁷ in the *The Lord of the Rings* but the references to it are almost always freighted with import. For example, when members of the Fellowship have an interview with Galadriel, the events at Durin’s Bridge are what she most wants to hear about and a subject of great general interest (460-461); Frodo goes on to write a poem recounting the episode which specifically mentions the bridge (465-466); and when Gandalf suddenly reappears in Volume 2, the bridge is mentioned three times more as he explains to the others what had happened to him.

Moreover, the fact that Gandalf’s sacrifice occurs at a bridge (and not in open territory or in a tunnel or on a mountain) points to the bridge being used as an artificial focusing device by the narrator to attract reader attention and heighten the dramatic importance of the events taking place there. For although Gandalf’s actions are dramatic enough on their own, the fact that they are viewed by all present and transpire on the raised ‘stage’ of an arched bridge ensures that the significance of his demise is not one that can be lightly ignored. The subsequent repetition of observations concerning the bridge episode throughout the story further confirm this intuition.

Bridges in *Volume 1: The Fellowship of the Ring* are primarily of two types. The first relatively ‘defensive’ type serves not only to allow access but also to funnel traffic past watchful guards so as to protect entrances to and exits from a variety of cities and inner halls. The second type are found over rivers on the

⁷ 19 times in all; the most frequently referenced bridge is the Brandywine Bridge, mentioned a total of 22 times.

open road. To the extent that the narrative arc of *The Fellowship of the Ring* is primarily that of an overland journey during the course of which the protagonists are required to cross many rivers, the presence or lack of bridges during the various scenes represents a key way in which the author alternately impedes or propels the characters on their quest. Sections of rivers with no bridge must be forded with difficulty but after crossing also provide a modicum of safety; bridges ease travel when their crossing is permitted but such permission (at least in this story) can never be taken for granted. As such the story arc effectively removes bridges from the predictable realm of everyday life they normally occupy and portrays them as strategically crucial and danger-fraught entities characteristic of a war zone. This being the case, it should not be surprising that the most evocative bridge depiction is achieved during the scene in which the Fellowship loses its most important member while trying to cross the story's longest and most dangerous bridge.

Volume 2: The Two Towers begins with Frodo and Sam separating off from the group and traveling by boat down the River Anduin. Meanwhile, Strider (Aragorn), Legolas, and Gimli set out in pursuit of the Orcs that have killed Boromir and apparently captured Merry and Pippin. The first bridge reference to appear in Volume 2 occurs in a conversation among a few of the Orcs that have captured Merry and Pippin; they note the difficulty of crossing the river due to the fact that enemy forces control the opposite shore and a particular bridge some distance away (61).

The next mention of a bridge occurs when Aragorn, Legolas, and Gimli encounter Gandalf who is making his first appearance after returning from the dead. In response to Gandalf's request, "Tell me of yourselves," Aragorn responds that it would be difficult to recount everything that has occurred "since

we parted on the bridge” (125-126; in a later passage, Faramir also enquires about the “fight on the bridge,” 362). In fact, because of the various disconnects that occurred when Gandalf fell into the abyss, for the rest of the story the event serves as a before and after reference point of supreme import: soon after his fall, the mutual trust that had bound the Fellowship together begins to unravel and previously suppressed temptations concerning the Ring reveal themselves in Boromir’s impulsive attempt to take it by force; Frodo leaves the group to follow his own paths; and when Gandalf returns from “death” (134-135) he does so with enhanced powers and wizardly status. No longer “Gandalf the Grey” but “the White Rider” (133), his newfound authority equips him to better captain the forces arrayed against Sauron.

Next comes a rather surprising bridge reference: Merry remarks that one group of Orcs had gone towards the Fords while another went in the direction of a bridge that “had been built down there.” At first one might wonder whether the disputatious Orcs would actually be able to accomplish a group project as complex as bridge-building but, due to the fact that at least some of the roads (and likely bridges) in Mordor had been constructed using Orc labor, perhaps the idea is not so far-fetched after all.

At one point, the narrator mentions the far off bridges over the Anduin (314) near Osgiliath.⁸ Two pages later Gollum mentions these same bridges (316) along with the strategic observation that, because Sauron’s forces hold these bridges, he will presume himself safe from attack and will not be carefully watching the environs closer to Mordor (316).

A surprising “white bridge” (397) plays a prominent role in the chapter

⁸ As the largest and last bridge there has already been “cast down” it is unclear which bridges are being referred to here.

entitled “The Stairs of Cirith Ungol.” As an approach to Minas Morgul, the bridge is apparently white because it was built by the Númenóreans long before the city was taken over by Sauron’s forces. As it is an entrance to the city of the captain of the Ringwraiths, Frodo is tempted to cross it at great peril but Gollum warns him of the danger and Frodo manages to resist the Ring’s pull. Passing through a “gap in the stone-wall beside the road” (398), they begin climbing a narrow path that will lead them to the pass of Cirith Ungol. After traveling up this path they find themselves overlooking the bridge across a narrow valley (400). When the Wraith-king and his army emerge from the city gates and are about to cross the bridge, the Hobbits and Gollum must quickly hide themselves as best they can to avoid discovery. Even still, the Black Rider “halted suddenly, right before the entrance of the bridge” (400) and, seeming troubled, looked around as if sensing “some other power within his valley.” In the end, however, he and his forces pass on.

It seems evident that Tolkien here uses the Wraith-king’s hesitation in crossing the bridge as a framing artifice to indicate that this decision to carry on with Sauron’s battle plans despite his uneasy feelings before setting out will be a significant turning point in the story; this aspect would have lost focus if the Wraith-king had merely felt troubled somewhere along the road. Even though the decision to cross the bridge out of Minas Morgul with his troops is an easily reversible one in theory, the presence of the bridge in the scene causes the crossing to seem all the more momentous. It is as if the movement over the bridge has set in motion an irreversible course of events. As such, Tolkien’s historical viewpoint seems to adhere to a “great person/critical juncture” view of history. In such a view of history, the individual choices of the few make great differences in the fates of the many.

Keeping this “critical juncture” view of historical outcomes in mind, reflection on Gandalf’s decision to sacrifice himself on the bridge in Volume 1 seems all the more illogical. Only a few pages before he had made the observation that his “time [was] coming” (Vol. 1, 291), apparently a conscious observation that he would play a crucial role in the fight against Mordor. This premonition notwithstanding, by choosing to expend himself for the sake of those with lesser power and leadership potential, he seems to be abandoning the great responsibilities he had been psychologically preparing himself to take up and leaving the leadership of all future battles up to others less wise and dependable than himself. Made with a full knowledge of the strength of Mordor, such a decision would, on the surface, appear the height of folly. If wise leaders can have outsized influences on outcomes thanks to the very quality of their decision-making, then common sense would dictate that he should save himself at the expense of the less capable. Considered from this angle, his clash with the Balrog reflects not cold calculation but rather simpleminded faith that some outside force will not only recognize the value of his sacrifice but actually reward him for it. As this issue represents part of a recurring theme, it will be examined in more detail in the next section.

Thus, the bridges mentioned in Volume 2 fall primarily into three categories: the bridges over the Anduin which were at first defended but have since come under the control of Sauron, giving him a false sense of security; Durin’s Bridge in Moria, referred to solely in retrospect due to its particular significance as a critical turning point in Volume 1; and the white bridge of Minas Morgul at which Frodo narrowly escapes detection by the Wraith-king as he exits the city with his army. Such being the case, the only two types of bridge reference that actually refer to events transpiring in the second volume itself are important not

symbolically but rather strategically. In one case, the holding of bridges leads to overconfidence in those controlling them and in the other, a vague, disquieting feeling at a bridge by one of Sauron's leaders is ignored and a great opportunity to recapture the Ring is lost.

In this sense, bridges depicted in Volume 2 metonymically point to larger trends and tendencies evident in the story. The actions and attitudes of Sauron's followers at bridges, while not immediately disastrous in and of themselves, are indicative of underlying problems that will only reveal themselves in the fullness of time. As such, these bridge scenes serve to foreshadow the eventual collapse of Sauron's carefully orchestrated plans.

Volume 3: The Return of the King begins with Gandalf's speedy trip carrying the gravely injured Pippin to Gondor. Along the way, Tolkien describes some of the capital city, Minas Tirith's fortifications, including its outlying walls, bridges, and its "walled causeway" (23). In fact, when the Citadel guard Beregond notes how Minas Tirith had reestablished its presence on the river during the "youth of Denethor," he notes that the bridge of Osgiliath had been rebuilt during a time when the people of Gondor were optimistic that the bridge could be held against the assaults of Mordor (41). Later, however, the dark riders came and the bridge had to be "cast down" once again.

After Aragorn walked the "Paths of the Dead" and secured the service of the formerly traitorous "Dead" men of the mountain, his Shadow Host moved toward its rallying point, the Stone of Erech, by crossing "a bridge over the growing torrent" (73) into the vicinity of the lowland town below the mountain. By crossing the bridge here, the "Dead" enter the forbidden realm of the living and symbolically transgress the supernatural boundaries that have long held them in check. Additionally, the "torrent" mentioned would seem to stand in for

the rapidly burgeoning forces Aragorn finds himself in control of.

As the capital city of Gondor is assaulted by a vast army of Orcs, the allies of Mordor can be amply reinforced from behind because the Anduin had been “bridged” to allow “more force and gear of war” to pour across (119). In fact, these “bridges” turn out not to be quickly constructed permanent spans but rather “boat-bridges” (196) that are being used in coordination with ferries. In the end, however, after the Shadow Host manages to defeat Sauron’s forces at sea and Aragorn ferries a rapidly assembled army of the living upstream to relieve Minas Tirith’s siege, Sauron’s boat-bridges at Osgiliath, placed there for use by his own armies, end up facilitating Gondorian transport in the opposite direction.

Taking the initiative and traveling the short distance down the road to Minas Morgul, Aragorn and Gandalf discover the Wraith-king’s city to be deserted. So as to eliminate the possibility of their being attacked from behind by reinforcements exiting Mordor across the “evil bridge” (198) of Minas Morgul, they “broke” it and also set fire to the surrounding fields. Thus was a “white bridge” originally built by Númenóreans in more peaceful times brought down by the Númenórean heir to Gondor’s throne. In taking this action, casting down a bridge in Mordor itself, Aragorn surpasses the best that Theoden the Steward of Gondor had been able to accomplish even in his prime.

After Frodo and Sam escape from the Tower of Cirith Ungol, at Ephel Dúath they encounter a bridge they must run quickly across so as to escape detection (236-237). With a “desperate spurt,” they mostly cross the bridge only to hear the peals of an alarm bell. So as to avoid discovery in their exposed position on the bridge, they jump over the parapet; fortunately the drop is not far. Hiding in the shadow of the bridge, they wait until “the sound of hoof and foot” have passed over them (237) and then continue their journey, making every effort to stay off

the valley road which extended out from the western bridge-end (241). As they travel they make reference to their position in terms of the distance they have traveled from that bridge (250).

After many miles, they come upon another bridge, this one an artificial bottleneck in otherwise flat territory due to the fact that it had been positioned over a deep artificial trench (251). Because Frodo and Sam are traveling disguised as Orcs, when they are discovered lying near the edge of the road in exhaustion, they are urged to fall in with the marching army of Orcs. After crossing the bridge (256) and passing through a guarded gate, they come to a crossroads at which many moving troops are converging before heading off to battle. Taking advantage of the darkness that envelopes them, Sam drops down, tripping up the Orcs following them and then pulling Frodo after him off the road in the ensuing confusion.

The next bridge in the story is not seen by any protagonist but merely alluded to by the narrator: the “vast bridge of iron” (269) linking the road from Sauron’s fortress, Barad-dûr, to Sammath Naur, the “Chambers of Fire” of Mt. Doom where the One Ring was originally cast. In mentioning it as an “iron bridge,” Tolkien’s narrator echoes the author’s deep misgivings about the modern use of machine-oriented technology.⁹ Although bridges in the story are often portrayed as objects that can be put to evil use, this iron bridge at the center of Mordor seems inherently dark and evil. In fact, no depictions of anyone crossing over it are included in the text.

⁹ Tolkien was skeptical of many types of machines but especially of automobiles. Apparently none too skillful at driving (Carpenter, 165), he felt cars to be positively detrimental to peaceful Oxford life (Carpenter, 219-220).

After the Ring is destroyed¹⁰ and Frodo and Sam are rescued by the eagles, the story's denouement depicts numerous farewell journeys and partings. Initially, Frodo, Gandalf, and the other Hobbits stop at Rivendell to see Bilbo and when they do they are understood once again to cross the narrow bridge (326) leading to Elrond's door. After a short stay, they move on with all intention of reaching the Shire as soon as possible. As they approach home, however, they are warned by Gandalf to arrive at a time before the gate on the Brandywine Bridge will be locked for the night (341). In that there had been no gates on the Brandywine Bridge when they had left the Shire, this comment disturbs the Hobbit travelers somewhat.

Arriving at the bridge, they find that great spiked gates (342) had indeed been constructed at either end of the bridge and that some poorly built bridge-houses (cf. 348) had also been placed at either end.¹¹ As Frodo and his companions move towards Bag End, the Brandywine Bridge serves as the point from which the progress of their travel thereafter will be measured (345).

While crossing the plank bridge by the mill in Hobbiton, their position atop the bridge apparently offers them a clear view of the terrible changes that have occurred at Bagshot Row, which now seems to have been turned into a gravel quarry (366). In this depiction, the very act of standing on the bridge accentuates the shock felt by the Hobbits at seeing the horrific results of Saruman's scheming.

In the very next scene the bridge is no longer a place of clairvoyance, though. After a confrontation between Merry and Sandyman, the escort that followed

¹⁰ As Frodo nears the cracks of doom, Gollum manages to bite the Ring off Frodo's finger but loses his balance and falls into the volcano thus destroying the Ring and unintentionally saving Middle-earth.

¹¹ The Bridge Inn had apparently been pulled down to make room for one of the houses (Vol. 3, 344).

behind the Hobbits came marching across it, causing Sandyman to blow his horn and sound the alarm (367). To his regret, no help comes because a great many of Saruman's henchmen have already been dealt with.

In fact, this Hobbiton bridge scene represents the last bridge mentioned in the story. Although there are many partings in the last few chapters, none of these are made over bridges (which seem to symbolize two-way connection). Instead, the final voyage into the West for Frodo, Bilbo, Gandalf, and many of the elves is accomplished by way of a "white ship" (383) from the Grey Havens. This is only fitting as the crossing of a body of water by boat indicates a one-way journey from which there is no guarantee that those crossing will ever return.

All in all, the bridges depicted in Volume 3 of *The Lord of the Rings* seem to be rather treacherous bridges. They are captured and recaptured, first being used by one army and then another; they are used by spies to gain access to enemy territory; they are heavily guarded and yet still they manage to allow enemies into one's domain. The decision by Aragorn and Gandalf to destroy the ancient bridge at Minas Morgul lest it be used to their disadvantage seems to be not an ill-considered act of spite but a carefully calibrated example of prudent leadership in the face of unknown enemy movements. Nevertheless, the fact that both the Brandywine Bridge and the plank bridge in Hobbiton survive the scouring of the Shire intact seems indicative of the relative mildness of the power struggles therein; bridges that stand for long periods of time do so as a testament to the relative political stability of the locales they occupy.

VI. On the metaphorical implications of bridge depiction in *The Lord of the Rings*

Looking back on the previous three sections of analysis, depicted bridges are

seen to play crucial roles in all of Tolkien's major works of fantasy. The exact numbers of specifiable bridges mentioned in each work or volume are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Direct References to Specific Bridges in Tolkien's Major Fantasy Works

Bridge name	The Silmarillion	The Hobbit	The Fellowship of the Ring	The Two Towers	The Return of the King	Total references
Brandywine Bridge (a.k.a. Bridge of Stonebows, the Gret Bridge)		1	15		6	22
Durin's Bridge (a.k.a. the Bridge of Khazad-dûm)			16	3		19
Last Bridge (a.k.a. the Bridge of Mithreithel)			11			11
White bridge of Minas Morgul (Mordor)				10	1	11
Wooden bridge at Lake-town		10				10
Bridge of Nargothrond	9					9
Bridge of Ephel Dúath (Mordor)					8	8
Bridge of Osgiliath (Gondor)	1		4	1	2	8
Bridge of Esgalduin (a.k.a. Iant Iaur, Bridge of Menegroth)	6					6
Bridge of Angband	4					4
Plank bridge (Hobbiton, The Shire)		1	1		2	4
Bridge to Elrond's House (Rivendell)		2	1		1	4
Bridge at Elevenking's Gate (Mirkwood)		3				3
White bridge of Lothlórien			2			2
Old Bridge near Gate to Lonely Mountain		2				2
Bridge near Isengard				1		1
Iron Bridge to Sammath Naur (Mordor)					1	1
Bridge of Nimrodel			1			1
Mountain Bridge to Morthrond Vale (Gondor)					1	1
Total Specific References	20	19	51	15	22	127

References to bridges (including unspecified bridges of various types) total as follows: *The Silmarillion* – 23 references, *The Hobbit* – 20 references, and *The Lord of the Rings* (3 volumes) – 104 references. In terms of frequency of

reference, *The Lord of the Rings (Volume 1: The Fellowship of the Ring)* has by far the most bridges per page of text at 1 bridge every 8.78 pages followed by *Volume 3: The Return of the King* (1 bridge every 14.81 pages), *The Hobbit* (1 bridge every 15.5 pages), *The Silmarillion* (1 bridge every 15.96 pages), and *Volume 3: The Two Towers* (1 bridge every 24.83 pages).

The bridge most referred to throughout Tolkien's major works is the Brandywine Bridge in the Shire (being referred to 1 time in *The Hobbit*, 15 times in *Volume 1: The Fellowship of the Ring*, and 6 times in *Volume 3: The Return of the King*). The second most frequently mentioned bridge is Durin's Bridge (a.k.a. the Bridge at *Khazad-dûm*) with 19 references split between volumes 1 and 2 of *The Lord of the Rings*. In contrast to these highly memorable bridges, there are other bridges that have largely escaped notice despite their relative frequency of mention, these being the Last Bridge (11 times), the White Bridge of Minas Morgul (11 times), the wooden bridge at Lake-town (10 times), the Bridge of Nargothrond (9 times), the Bridge of Ephel Dúath (8 times), and the Bridge(s) of Osgiliath (8 times).

Having said this, the two most memorable episodes relating to bridges are probably Lúthien's desperate attempt to save Beren at the Bridge of Angband (*The Silmarillion*) and Gandalf's battle with the Balrog at the Bridge of *Khazad-dûm* (Vol. 1). As both of these bridge scenes involve characters displaying a willingness to sacrifice themselves for the good of others and also because both occasions result in surprising turnabouts in the course of Middle-earth events, these two 'bridge stories' are probably the best examples of Tolkien's use of bridges for purposes of abstract evocation, framing of noteworthy events, and the harmonization of metaphorical nuance with depicted actions.

These two most compelling examples aside, the instances in which bridges

appear in his major fantasy works all seem to have metaphorical implications to a greater or lesser extent. Because Tolkien's works are crucially concerned with the ways in which changes in power relations are manifested in the physical environment of Middle-earth, bridges help readers concretely visualize pride, overconfidence, trust, and betrayal, frame heroic deeds, and amplify the ways in which unwise actions and unhealthy attitudes are, inevitably, paid for.

Given the ways in which bridges in Tolkien's fantasy works have been used metaphorically, it would not be at all surprising to find that some or all of these bridge depictions are metaphorically linked to the author's consistently resonant overarching themes in one way or another. A few themes the author has admitted to incorporating include "Fall," the tragedy of "Mortality" and the consequent weight of sacrifice, and the evils of domination, especially by way of "Machine" (*Letters*, 145). In retrospect, the episodes at both the Bridge of Angband and Durin's Bridge may be understood to tie into 'mortality and the weight of sacrifice' while the iron bridge in Mordor and the destruction near the plank bridge in the Shire are certainly related to 'domination by way of the Machine.'

An additional distinctive ongoing theme prominent in both *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* is the characterization of both Bilbo and Frodo as humble individuals with outsized roles to play in much larger societal events. In fact, such a character development arc is detectable in some of Tolkien's lesser known stories, as well. For example, in an episode towards the end of Tolkien's fanciful tale, *Farmer Giles of Ham* (1949), Giles, having surprisingly vanquished a dragon, taken it prisoner, and brought back part of its treasure, cheerfully stands on a bridge at the edge of town and advises the King, who has come to claim part of the loot, to return home. When the King, enraged at his impudence, attacks

him, the bested dragon emerges from his hiding place underneath the bridge and scares off the King's knights and men-at-arms in an instant.¹²

This story, published in 1949 but originally offered for publication as a possible sequel to *The Hobbit* in the 1930s (Carpenter, 168), consistently emphasizes the down-to-earth cleverness of Farmer Giles in dealing with powerful yet overconfident enemies and rivals. He bests the King just as he bested the dragon: by proving himself more subtle in hiding his limited strengths and using them to maximum effect only at the opportune time. In this, Giles shows similarities to both Frodo and Gandalf. Like Frodo he is outwardly humble and unassuming; like Gandalf, he marshals his meager forces to maximum advantage in ways that achieve outsized results. Nevertheless, at least from a strategic point of view, Giles and the dragon's victory at the "Battle of the Bridge of Ham" superficially resembles the Balrog's unsuccessful surprise attack at Durin's Bridge. This enigmatic similarity, in which the failing strategy used by the villain of one story is used successfully by the hero in another, calls Tolkien's moral consistency into question somewhat.

One key contrast between these stories is that Farmer Giles has a certain amount of ambition and desire to maintain whatever newly won status comes his way while Frodo and Gandalf both show their inner virtue by shunning outward symbols of power or success. This difference is all the more apparent when

¹² The single bridge in *Farmer Giles of Ham* is depicted primarily in terms of military importance. From an offensive point of view it is featured as Giles leaves the town and also becomes the site for triumphal processions upon his return from both trips. Finally, it is the site of the battle between the King's knights and himself and the dragon. Zaleski and Zaleski note that Tolkien invented the story "on the spot in the 1920's, to entertain his children as the family huddled under a bridge during a passing storm" (Zaleski & Zaleski, 370). Seen from this perspective, the fact that only a single bridge is depicted in the story seems anything but incidental; its crucial role was largely determined by the fact that one particular bridge served to inspire the story.

considering the basic plot arcs of each story: while Farmer Giles heroic deeds lead inexorably to his Kingship, Frodo's succession of heroic deeds only lead him inexorably towards his own likely death. In fact, Frodo's symbolic journey into the heart of Mordor may actually be understood as a form of "catabasis" (cf. Obertino), a 'descent into hell' narrative structure that typically serves as a great test meant to prove the itinerant hero's worth.

Newman notes both similarities and discrepancies between Frodo's errand to Mt. Doom in *The Lord of the Rings* and many classical quest stories, the primary difference being that the evil characters striving to reclaim the Ring (Sauron and Gollum) both afford more prototypical examples of a quest than Frodo's effort to destroy it; in fact, his goal of retiring to his previous sedentary existence makes the whole journey seem more of an 'anti-quest' (238-240). If the typical quest involves a single-minded yearning for power, prestige, or riches, then Frodo certainly breaks the mold and overlays an utterly alien value system onto the traditional quest template. Zaleski and Zaleski are correct in observing Bilbo of *The Hobbit* to be "a new kind of hero altogether, exalted because first humbled, yet never exalted too far above his fellows" (206); consequently, Frodo's depiction in *The Lord of the Rings* raises the stakes and in so doing takes this novel hero-type to an entirely new level.

If the conscious choice to allow oneself to diminish (at the appropriate time) is one of the hallmarks of Tolkienesque "catabasis," the exaltation of self and the clinging to past prerogatives or status is viewed not only as lacking in nobility but even as being accursed. Although Gollum certainly fits this pattern, another prime example is the pathetic case of Denethor, the Steward of Gondor, who prefers to have "naught" than to diminish in any way with respect to life, love, or honor (Vol. 3, 138).

Tolkien, while keeping overt religious references below the surface, nevertheless took the Magnificat theme ('exaltation of the humble'; cf. Zaleski & Zaleski, 412-414) he had hinted at through Bilbo's character in *The Hobbit* and fully developed it through the carefully calibrated depictions of multiple characters in *The Lord of the Rings*. The numerous 'diminishing' figures portrayed as being deserving of honor mentioned include Aragorn (who makes no claims to his rightful throne until he has proved himself worthy of the crown), Arwen (who foregoes immortality for love), and Galadriel (who refuses the Ring when it is offered to her and instead chooses to "diminish" and go into the West). Of course the greatest example is Frodo; the parallel between Frodo climbing Mount Doom while carrying the ever-increasing burden of the Ring is too similar to Jesus carrying the cross to Golgotha to be considered coincidental.

As mentioned before, out of the 88 total bridges referenced directly in *The Lord of the Rings*, 19 of these refer to the dramatic events that occur on Durin's Bridge (a.k.a. the bridge of *Khazad-dûm*) in the mines of Moria. At this bridge, Gandalf incites a direct confrontation with the Balrog so as to allow the others opportunity to escape. As his quickly determined course of action seems not to reflect self-seeking bravado or naive overconfidence, his decision must be understood in a different way: as a natural upwelling of courage in humble awareness of values that transcend personal self-interest. Giving up hopes for personal success, he entrusts the company's future to its other members but also to the unseen power that has guided their steps till that point. In allowing himself to be thus 'diminished,' he places his faith in a power greater than his own, one that can ultimately 'tip the scales' and balance out any setbacks that might occur due to the scheming of enemies or the weakness of allies.

It is this implicit trust in the good will of the unseen arbiter that sets Gandalf

apart as a leader. According to Tolkien:

Gandalf alone fully passes the tests, on a moral plane anyway (he makes mistakes in judgment). For in his condition it was for him a *sacrifice* to perish on the Bridge in defence of his companions, less perhaps than for a mortal Man or Hobbit, since he had far greater inner power than they; but also more, since it was a humbling and abnegation of himself in conformity to ‘the Rules’: for all he could know at that moment he was the *only* person who could direct the resistance of Sauron successfully, and all *his* mission was vain. He was handing over to the Authority that ordained the Rules, and giving up personal hope of success. (*Letters*, 202)

In response to a critic’s opinion that Gandalf had not really died, Tolkien responds: “Gandalf really ‘died’, and was changed: for that seems to me the only real cheating, to represent anything that can be called ‘death’ as making no difference. ‘I am G. the *White*, who has returned from death’. Probably he should rather have said to Wormtongue: ‘I have not passed through death (*not* ‘fire and flood’) to bandy crooked words with a serving-man’” (*Letters*, 201).

Newman notes that Sauron’s visual appearance as a fiery single eye harks back to the classical cyclops of *The Odyssey* (244). Certainly so, but the image of the fiery eye also metaphorically communicates Sauron’s fundamental motivation: having created the Ring to serve his power-hungry purposes, he focuses his efforts on finding it so as to regain its utility. The single-mindedness of his obsession, however, ultimately keeps him unaware of the strong values that bind Frodo and his comrades together: duty, loyalty, honor, faith, hope, and love. While he could sense the ring’s negative energy whenever it was purposefully used, the Ring went unnoticed at his very doorstep precisely because its blunt-force utility was disdained in favor of circuitous trails, arduous means of transport

and, most importantly, non-utilitarian habits of collective conduct: patience, cooperation, power-sharing, and self-sacrifice. As Glover puts it, the Council of Elrond had a clear view of Sauron's motives and likely actions while Sauron, despite his supernaturally extended range of his vision, "could not conceive of motives strong enough to withstand the desire for power" (42).

Can we view such a dynamic as an expression of Tolkien's own 'anti-Utilitarian' philosophy of life? Yes, but it might be argued that this deep philosophical rejection of the dictum 'the ends justify the means' is not equally available in all of his fantasy works. In retrospect, both *The Hobbit* and *Farmer Giles of Ham* are relatively more neutral concerning this issue. It could be asserted that, although Giles and Bilbo do happen to be morally less reprehensible than the thieves they steal their treasures from, they both allow the 'ends' to justify their 'means' to some extent. In fact, Bilbo only agrees to join the dwarf adventure-seekers after receiving a convincing answer to his eminently practical question, "What am I going to get out of it?" (*The Hobbit*, 22). By way of contrast, members of the Fellowship are tested morally and encounter success to the extent that they risk their own well-being for the greater good. In fact, many of their victories, although certainly made possible in part through clever strategies and self-discipline, are nevertheless crucially facilitated at the last possible moment from the outside in seeming response to episodes of self-sacrifice or renunciation of power displayed *on prior occasions*.

In some ways, Tolkien's decidedly optimistic views on the ways in which self-sacrifice can lead to good ends seem almost to be a direct response to caricatures of empty-headed 'blind optimism' (the idea that tragic events are not really tragic because "all things work together for good"; cf. *Holy Bible*, Romans 8:28) of the type so caustically skewered in Voltaire's *Candide* (1759). To the

extent that any chain of events in Middle-earth in the age of Sauron turns out for the better, such an outcome never occurs in response to shallow hopes or vague good intentions. Divine help becomes available only in response to the willingness to undergo suffering accompanied by a deep-seated assurance that dynamic hidden processes can carry the day. This belief that an unseen benevolent outside power will not finally permit hope to be completely overwhelmed might succinctly be termed ‘tragic eucatastrophic faith.’

With respect to his idea of “Eucatastrophe” (c.f. *Letters*, 100), Tolkien notes that fairy-stories are almost always required to have a happy ending: “Almost I would venture to assert that all complete fairy-stories must have it. At least I would say that Tragedy is the true form of Drama, its highest function; but the opposite is true of Fairy-story. Since we do not appear to possess a word that expresses this opposite—I will call it *Eucatastrophe*. The *eucatastrophic* tale is the true form of Fairy-tale, and its highest function” (*Monsters*, 153). Tolkien notes this to be a “sudden happy turn in a story which pierces you with a joy that brings tears” and leads to a sudden “glimpse of Truth” (*Letters*, 100), a situation in which the normal tragic chain of cause and effect is broken, the twin ordinances of inevitable decay and ultimate death are temporarily repealed, and the joy of life snaps back into its proper place. It is for this deep philosophical reason that crucial events in *The Lord of the Rings* inevitably come as a surprise and simultaneously offer the reader a glimpse behind the curtain: as Newman notes (243), when Strider the steersman commands those in his boat to “Fear not!”, this ‘epiphany’ is based less on whatever confidence he has in his own navigation abilities than in his awareness that a power greater than himself is guiding their boat.

In the end, the greatest occasion of eucatastrophe in Tolkien’s fantasy, the

example most fully fleshed out, occurs at the end of *The Lord of the Rings* at Mt. Doom. Unable to complete the task of destroying the Ring by himself,¹³ Frodo is unexpectedly saved by Gollum, a character without redeeming qualities and someone that Frodo had regretted sparing on numerous occasions. A quote attributed to Mithrandir (Gandalf) in *The Silmarillion* expresses mercy as a moral extension of humility: “Many are the strange chances of the world,” said Mithrandir, “and help oft shall come from the hands of the weak when the Wise falter” (*Silmarillion*, 363). By passively accepting and ultimately acting on Gandalf’s intermittent encouragement to have pity on Gollum (cf. Nelson, 59), unmerited grace grudgingly offered to Gollum boomerangs back to Frodo’s own ultimate benefit. At the point when Frodo finally does fail and finds himself unable to give up the Ring, it is Gollum that unwittingly destroys it, thus saving Frodo’s life and releasing Middle-earth from Sauron’s domination, as well (*Letters*, 234).

Regarding the issue of whether he drew any inspiration from the *Nibelungen* tradition, Tolkien remarked: “Both rings were round, and there the resemblance ceases” (*Letters*, 306). Zaleski and Zaleski observe, “Though Tolkien indignantly rejected the comparison, there is more than a passing resemblance to the ring of power in Wagner’s *Ring of the Nibelung*, cursed by its maker, the dwarf Alberich, to destroy its possessor, “des Ringes Herr als des Ringes Knecht” (the lord of the ring as the ring’s slave)” (417). Given Tolkien’s expertise in the field of old

¹³ While Frodo ultimately “failed” (*Letters*, 252) in his quest, he still deserved “all honour” because “few others, possibly no others of his time, would have got so far” (*Letters*, 253). This reference to Frodo being deserving of “all honor” because of his abnegation in carrying his burden for the sake of others closely parallels the New Testament characterization of Jesus being “exalted to the highest place” because he took on “the very nature of a servant (...) and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!” (cf. Philippians 2:5-11).

Germanic literature, his vehement denial of influence rings false. But even if certain thematic elements and props have been surreptitiously borrowed from the *Nibelungelied* (Ryder, 1962) or Wagner's *Ring Cycle*, the revenge-oriented sentiments and pessimistic atmospheres found in these older works have little in common with the core values Tolkien was attempting to express in *The Lord of the Rings*.

In fact, there is another type of "ring" that may just as easily have been on Tolkien's mind at the time of his writing, one that has a very obvious relationship to the story on multiple levels. In C. S. Lewis's Martian trilogy novel, *That Hideous Strength* (Lewis, 1996), one protagonist is portrayed as having a strong desire to belong to an Inner Ring of influential professionals (cf. Lewis, 1944). According to Zaleski and Zaleski, "The desire for the Inner Ring, Lewis maintained, is "one of the great permanent mainsprings of human action"; as a temptation more insidious than ambition or lust, the ambition to create strong relationships with a group of capable, like-minded people so as to improve the chances of achieving one's own ideal ends is liable to make someone "who is not yet a very bad man do very bad things," even to the point of "taking over one's personality" unless measures are adopted to actively prevent it (Zaleski & Zaleski, 127). Although Tolkien had some reservations about *That Hideous Strength* (which was read aloud at meetings of "the Inklings," a literary society he took part in; cf. Carpenter, 1997, p. 198), it seems likely that this profound misgiving concerning Inner Ring orientation, expressed so clearly by Lewis, would have been in accord with his own thoughts on the matter. Never one to actively seek the approbation of his peers, Tolkien continued to 'do his own thing' throughout his career and, fittingly, met with acclaim not through his scholarly research (although his academic writings were first-rate and well-

received by those properly positioned to appreciate them), but rather through the ‘fairy-stories’ his colleagues so vehemently detested.

In fact, one of the great ironies in *The Lord of the Rings* can be vaguely intuited in the title of the first volume in the series, *The Fellowship of the Ring*. If Frodo’s Ring is clearly understood as the “One Ring” of Power created to dominate all the others, the normal association of non-Ringbearers with the caretaker of the ring would be enslavement. ‘Fellowship,’ on the other hand, is a completely voluntary relationship of equals and, as such, would normally be alien to any group centered on the Ring. When one fully realizes that the “Fellowship” is nothing more than a band of relatively selfless volunteers that is hoping for nothing more than to be of assistance to Frodo as he carries his dangerous burden, we begin to see the group as the very antithesis of Sauron and his Ringwraiths. Rather than being dominated, each member helps voluntarily until they finally *elect to follow a different pursuit*. In this context, Sam, the longest serving member of the fellowship, displays remarkable dedication to Frodo by helping him to “bear” his burden “as long as it is [his] to bear” (Vol. I, 95). In going the distance in this peculiar example of non-obligatory service, his heroism is demonstrated and his sincere motivations are amply confirmed.

In this way, rather than gradually having their individual identities eroded by an ongoing relationship of subjugation to a more powerful Ring-wielder, each member of the Fellowship (with the single exception of Boromir) proves themselves trustworthy and readies themselves for greater trials and personal responsibilities to come: If submitting to the Ring is a degrading, morally vacuous, soul ‘un-making’ experience, accompanying the one who bears it is seen to aid one in developing a higher level of moral and spiritual perfection. Consequently, to the extent that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts

absolutely¹⁴, keeping power in check (or assisting another person as they attempt to keep great power in check) must conversely be ennobling. Just as the purest example of dictatorship is seen in the rule of one individual over a population incapable of resistance, the guarding of the levers of power against the dangers of dictatorial overreach is most noble and effective when it is rightly perceived to be a crucial civic duty and shared community responsibility.

VII. Is *The Lord of the Rings* a novel of ideas?

Bowman (2006, p. 272) notes how some “suppose that [Tolkien’s work] can appeal only to relatively naïve readers” and “would not reward the kind of critical analysis that more sophisticated fiction” often affords. Similarly, Burns asserts that Tolkien’s “likes and dislikes, values and preferences” (which are evident through a myriad of clues) result in “unequivocal characterization” and immodest “moral certitude” (49). To this, one might respond that, the morals Tolkien valorizes tend to be those that are relatively uncontroversial in Judeo-Christian and ‘Western’ ethical norms: loyalty, respect for tradition, humility, mercy, self-discipline and self-sacrifice. In contrast to these virtues, the ‘values’ of Sauron, namely, lust for power and the domination of others, certainly do seem ‘evil’ (that is, if such an archaic-sounding word can still be said demarcate anything at all). If the moral certitude expressed by *The Lord of the Rings* boils down to a promotion of commonplace virtues over conspicuously objectionable vices, it seems strange that exhibiting moral certitude should even be considered problematic.

¹⁴ “Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely” was a comment of Lord Acton to Bishop Mandell Creighton, April 5th, 1887 (Quoted in Morris, 739). Tolkien would surely have been aware of this commonly referenced axiom.

In any case, the claim that Tolkien's work demonstrates "unequivocal characterization" in particular needs to be disputed. For while the author's preferred virtues and detested vices may indeed be readily apparent, the characters in the story all fall along a broad spectrum of moral attainment with everyone falling short in one way or another. The cast of characters includes no absolute moral paragons (including even exemplars said to be deserving of 'honor' like Gandalf and Frodo); neither does it include any irrevocably evil villains (including Gollum and perhaps even Sauron, at least as he was characterized in certain early sections of *The Silmarillion*).

While it is probably accurate to state that Tolkien's narrator avoids the novelistic tendency to make satirical observations that undermine "the characters or the goals they are trying to achieve" (Bowman, 282), it is simultaneously true that while the apparent values and the stated good intentions of characters are often taken at face value, the question of whether the characters will have the moral fortitude to actually live up to their goals and ideals is constantly in question. In this sense, the tension in Tolkien's vision is not philosophical but moral. Once having ascertained the good and also after understanding it to be exceedingly difficult to attain, will it in fact be attained or will the task prove too difficult? Tolkien seems to think that attaining the good will often involve sacrifice and so the key issue in *The Lord of the Rings* is not the question of "what good is" but rather "what is the value in personal sacrifice that the truly good warrants"? Conversely, evil choices, once made, often necessitate "greater effort and sacrifice" (*Letters*, 237) on the part of others to compensate.

If *The Lord of the Rings* is found to be a more ethically thought-provoking and philosophically serious work than *The Hobbit* was, the reason for this surely lies in the fact that it was consciously written more for "grown-ups" than *The*

Hobbit was (*Letters*, 42). By discarding the condescending narrator asides and occasionally flippant tone found in its predecessor work, and by infusing it with the lofty moral tenor of *The Silmarillion*, *The Lord of the Rings* ended up being a considerably more nuanced and politically complex work than *The Hobbit*.

One of the most profound transformations that occurs is that of the light-hearted Hobbits (including individuals named Merry and Pippin!) who leave the Shire in fear and return capable of rousing the Shire's normally risk-averse inhabitants and vanquishing a foe as shrewd and formidable as Saruman. Furthermore, when they do so, they state their case in terms of 'national' self-determination. If Bilbo returned to the Shire richer and wiser, the Hobbits in *The Lord of the Rings* return with political idealism, leadership skills, and a willingness to risk personal loss for the sake of the common good.

From the tone utilized throughout *Farmer Giles of Ham* and at the outset of *The Hobbit*, it seems safe to conclude that their author considered both stories to be a kind of long-form fairy-tale. Did Tolkien consider *The Lord of the Rings* to be a fairy-tale in the truest sense of the word? While it certainly contains some of the crucial elements, in the final analysis, one might argue that he did not. For on at least one occasion he recognized that his work perhaps ought to be classified as "epic" (*Letters*, 58). And though it does have a very pronounced 'epic' flavor to it, the work also includes many aspects more typical of a modern novel.

With respect to his manner of writing, *The Lord of the Rings* reads much more like a novel than any of Tolkien's previous works. There are more extended descriptive passages explaining the psychologically complex thought processes of its characters than in *The Hobbit*: compare, for example, the detailed descriptions of the approach to Mt. Doom (Vol. 3, 266-267) with Bilbo's vivid yet comparatively terse impressions at first sight of the Lonely Mountain (*The Hobbit*,

176-177). Directly quoted dialogue, mostly non-existent in *The Silmarillion* and kept to a bare minimum in *The Hobbit* becomes a prime source of character development in *The Lord of the Rings*: the silly, greedy banter of the dwarves as they try to recruit Bilbo at the beginning of *The Hobbit* (8-26) seems exceedingly childish when juxtaposed with the somber atmosphere, serious debate points, and swirling undercurrents of pride and mutual suspicion throughout much of the conversation during the Council of Elrond (e.g. 315-336). In retrospect, *The Hobbit*, while certainly having a number of novel-like qualities, may more accurately be thought of as a crucial waystation along the road Tolkien followed as his writing style developed from mythological storyteller to fantasy novelist.

One key difference between Tolkien's oeuvre and most fairy stories (as generally understood) is that Tolkien's placing of his individual tales within the overall framework of a fictional mythology means that while "happy endings" can be sought for (by characters such as Bilbo) at the level of the individual tale, in fact, "closure is never complete" (Bowman, p. 276). This open-ended nature allows for a succession of "eucatastrophes" to punctuate episodes and tales without any final victory being achieved; on the other hand, while evil always remains, the availability of "eucatastrophes" never precludes hope for the future. In Tolkien's fantasy, "happy ending closure" is as desirable as it is "elusive and never absolute" (Bowman, p. 277). Through this genre-blending compromise, Tolkien has very effectively grafted 'fairy-tale' optimism onto the more relevance-indeterminate and open-ended tradition of the modern novel.

Another relatively novelistic aspect of Tolkien's fiction is the way in which its carefully detailed and painstakingly described depiction is accomplished at the expense of its "mythic authenticity"; as Hunter astutely notes, "[t]o be as portable as myths are required to be (...) they must be narratives that can move

beyond whatever specific conditions gave rise to them” (136). Unlike the Oedipus myth (e.g. Sophocles, 1962) which has been retold countless times in various versions, the mythical quality of Tolkien’s stories are derivatively mythical (both with respect to the author’s own closed system and the broader realm of Northern myth outside it) but not inspirationally so. That is, while Tolkien’s fantasy works give the superficial impression of being simple written transcriptions of Middle-earth’s mythological history, Tolkien’s exertion of copyright protection brooks no variations and allows for only one ‘authoritative’ version of each story. More important, however, the strengths of *The Lord of the Rings* go beyond the realm of icons, typologies, archetypal narrative structures, and symbols to include deft staging, effective pacing, fascinating stylistic elaboration, and the thoughtful interweaving of multiple narrative strands, aspects of literary quality only hinted at in *The Silmarillion*.

And yet the ‘epic’ qualities of Tolkien’s work are undeniable. Many have thought the dramas of Shakespeare to have exceptional literary value because they portray such a multiplicity of complicated characters and flesh out the worldview of each in such convincing ways. Consequently, the tension found in Shakespeare stems at least partially from audience sympathies toward characters in turmoil when confronted with any number of readily comprehensible dilemmas. In contrast, Tolkien focuses not on the emotional or societal crucibles experienced by characters in the throes of their problems but upon the ways in which generations are linked, for better or worse, by the wise or foolish choices made by individuals during their time in the spotlight. That is to say, Tolkien is less concerned about the lived feelings associated with being in a particular predicament than with the surplus or lack of a will ‘epic’ enough to extricate oneself. Tolkien’s fantasy is brimming with heroes, replete with villains, and

awash with the morally conflicted but it is difficult to identify a fully wrought character that might reasonably be termed a “victim.”

It is this bracing sense of moral responsibility and the ways in which it intermeshes with nagging civilizational concerns that sets Tolkien’s fiction apart from much of what has been written in the last 100 years. That moderns and post-moderns have been captivated by moral dilemmas and enervating existential quandaries points to an unwillingness or inability to move beyond the intense immediacy of traumatic individual circumstances to confront larger philosophical issues including the repercussions of action beyond the time of one’s immediate progeny and the nature of a good society.

With the best of intentions, Tolkien declares that “...the Elves are *not* wholly good or in the right” while the “Men of Gondor were similar: a withering people whose only ‘hallows’ were their tombs” (*Letters*, 197). Although his standards for judgment may be relatively more defensible within the boundaries of the fictional world of his own creation, many 21st century intellectuals will wince at his eagerness to offer qualitative judgments on the conduct of whole societies, even allowing for the fact that they are entirely fictional. In a multicultural world, Tolkien’s various critiques of his created civilizations set a disturbing precedent. For if fictional cultures can be evaluated according to some vaguely compelling set of outside standards, then the same standards might potentially be applied to real world cultures. And if real world cultures can be critically appraised then can judgements concerning the morality of individuals be far behind?

Nevertheless, it would be surprising if, in this age of alliances of convenience and endlessly splintering aesthetic preferences, Tolkien could not find a following. The author himself was a thoroughgoing proponent of the idea that individual tastes will necessarily inform aesthetic preferences. The author

was quick to dismiss Auden's hyperventilated claim that if anyone were to profess dislike for *The Lord of the Rings* he would "never trust their literary judgment about anything again" (Letters, 229). And so we have come full circle to the problem posed at the outset of this article: critics who reject Tolkien tend to dismiss his work not so much upon the merits but because they are skeptical that the genre it exemplifies could possibly express ideas 'literary' enough to deserve their attention.

In the previous sections, the author has attempted to make a number of points concerning Tolkien's fantasy works. First, it was asserted at length that *The Lord of the Rings* is not a fairy-tale, strictly speaking; while sharing characteristics with the epic tradition, its mode of communication is primarily that of the modern novel. Secondly, it was argued that *The Lord of the Rings* is superior to *The Silmarillion* and *The Hobbit* both with respect to stylistic execution and also in terms of the consistency with which its ideational core is informed by a coherent moral outlook. Thirdly, it has been observed that while the "optimism" and "happy endings" so prevalent in fairy-tales may seem quintessentially unliterary, if one takes Tolkien's idea of "eucatastrophe" seriously, his fantasy certainly has literary value: *The Lord of the Rings* in particular seems a prime example of how the happy ending of fairy-tales may be productively fused with the open-endedness of modern novels to express philosophical and theological viewpoints consistent with a Judeo-Christian worldview.

In retrospect, to the extent that Tolkien's philosophical worldview and his aesthetic goals differ fundamentally from so many other modern authors, it is natural that his mode of stylistic expression should be seen to align so closely with his philosophical concerns. It is also natural that his works might seem deficient when judged by the standards normally applied to genres and works

reflecting a fundamentally different outlook. To rightly consider the quality of Tolkien's literature, the best way to draw meaningful distinctions will be to compare his works with other works of fantasy, whether his own or those of his many successors.

With respect to his own primary criterion for judgement of literary quality, Tolkien was predictably opinionated. In his view, a good story "must succeed as a tale, excite, please, and even on occasion move, and within its own imagined world be accorded (literary) belief" (*Letters*, 233). When considered in such terms, Tolkien's writings have proved so successful that the literary movement his works inspired have come to be appreciated mostly in such terms. Nevertheless, at his best, Tolkien's authorial skills go well beyond his obvious "imaginative" creativity: the morally serious philosophy of human conduct that he so vividly expressed by way of *The Lord of the Rings* brings into sharp focus many long-neglected human virtues. If the present age is found to be lacking in forgiveness, humility, mercy, personal responsibility, or self-sacrifice, perhaps an overly narrow definition of "literature" is partially to blame.

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