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Cover Page Footnote

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Why is Bilbo Baggins Invisible?: The Hidden War in *The Hobbit*

by Jane Beal, PhD

In *The Hobbit*, Bilbo becomes invisible whenever he slips on his magic ring, which Gollum lost and Bilbo found under the Misty Mountains. This power serves Bilbo (and the plot) on the adventure that leads the hobbit and the dwarves to the Lonely Mountain to confront the dragon Smaug, but it is not simply a convenient device in the plot: it has much greater meaning. Indeed, *The Hobbit* prompts key questions for readers about the power of invisibility: why is Bilbo invisible? What is the symbolic, moral, and psychological significance of Bilbo's invisibility? Upon what experience and knowledge did Tolkien draw when imagining the implications of invisibility in his story? Study of the text of *The Hobbit* and some of its contexts suggests three unique, interrelated explanations for Bilbo's invisibility.

A philological investigation of the key word "invisible" shows that it entered the English language in the Middle English period and that the literature that made use of the word distinctly associated it with two traditions: one linking invisibility to the divinity of God and the other linking it to illicit choices of human beings. Interestingly, in late-medieval English literature, the latter category was often connected to the use of a magic ring, with the power to make its wearer invisible, which facilitated questionable moral behavior. Tolkien, a philologist, was aware of the etymology and uses of the word "invisible" in medieval literature, and he chose to make use of the second philological tradition in his use of the word "invisible" in *The Hobbit*. This specific philological explanation for Bilbo's invisibility is connected to Tolkien's broader Catholic imagination, which was informed by the Augustinian concept of evil as the absence of good. It gradually appears that invisibility is a symbolic way of representing evil-as-absence in Tolkien's mythology.

Tolkien's development of the significance of Bilbo's invisibility rests not only on philology and theology, but a specific story from classical philosophy and its reception in later medieval literature: the story of the ring of Gyges. While scholars have noted the connection between Gyges' ring and Bilbo's ring – namely, the power of invisibility both convey – the shared moral implications constitute a key connection that deserves to be further explored. In Gyges' story, which is found first in Plato's *Republic*, hypothesizing the possibility of invisibility gives Socrates and Glaucon the opportunity to debate how being unseen by the judgmental eyes of others in society would affect a man's moral

decisions. Just as Gyges' invisibility gives him the ability to do evil without being caught or condemned, so too does Bilbo's invisibility, though his character is only corrupted gradually (and, by good fortune, not completely).

Underneath the symbolic and moral meaning of Bilbo's invisibility lies the psychological significance of it. Because the character of Bilbo Baggins is uniquely tied to J.R.R. Tolkien's authorial identity within *The Hobbit*, this essay also explores aspects of Tolkien's life – specifically, his role as a signals officer in World War I – that may have provided a motivation for making Bilbo invisible. As a signals officer, Tolkien was present, but not seen, with soldiers on the battlefield in a way curiously like Bilbo was present, but not seen, with the dwarves on key moments in their journey. Such invisibility could be empowering, allowing the invisible person to intervene in situations of conflict for the good of his allies, but it could also lead to unexpected vulnerability. At a deep level, invisibility in *The Hobbit* may be a psychological metaphor for the feeling of invisibility soldiers sometimes experience when overwhelmed by the “shell shock” of wartime experience. It is also directly linked to the moral issues explored in the story of Gyges and the Augustinian concept of evil as the absence of good. For soldiers, both seen and unseen, are engaged in the morally questionable activity of planning to kill and then killing their enemies.

At all three levels of significance – symbolic, moral, and psychological – Tolkien explores a hidden war in *The Hobbit*: the cosmic conflict between good and evil, the microcosmic struggle with temptation that takes place in the human heart, and ultimately (if indirectly), his own experience in World War I. Understanding this full range of meaning gives the reader an opportunity to appreciate that invisibility is not a mere plot device, a simple magic trick to escape complex conflicts that Bilbo encounters in *The Hobbit*. Instead, invisibility becomes a means of revealing truth.

Philology and Theology: The Symbolic Significance of Bilbo's Invisibility

The word “invisible” came into the English language in the Middle English period from Late Latin via Old French. In terms of etymology, the Latin *in-* means “not” and *visibilis*, a third declension adjective from the verb *video* (“I see”), means both “can be seen, seeing” (active) and “may be seen, visible” (passive).¹ So the

¹ This etymology can be verified in a variety of Latin dictionaries, including the Latin Lexicon online: <http://latinlexicon.org/definition.php?p1=2063268>.

word in English simply means “not able to be seen.” This etymology, and the meaning of the word, is relatively straightforward and simple – at first blush.

The Middle English Dictionary (online) gives two, slightly more expanded definitions, both of which Tolkien would have known: “not perceptible to sight, invisible by nature” and “temporarily invisible, unseen.”² Examples of the first sense use of the word in Middle English literature are given in sentences from the Wycliffite Bible, Rolle’s Psalter, writings associated with Saint Anne and Saint Bridget, Chaucer, Lydgate, and others. In these cases, the word “invisible” is associated with God, with Jesus who represents the invisible God, and with the spiritual reality that God sees all things, both visible and invisible. Examples of the second sense of the word in Middle English, however, are strikingly different in tone and connotation.

Many of the examples are from secular literature, they specifically mention a stone or a ring that makes the person wearing it invisible (Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*, Lydgate’s *Troy Book* and *Pilgrimage of the Life of Man*, and the *Alphabet of Tales*), and they are associated, not with the goodness of the invisible God, but with illicit romance (Chaucer’s *Legend of Good Women*) and murder (Malory).³ It appears that Tolkien – a philologist, a maker of dictionary definitions for the *OED*, and a translator of both Old English and Middle English

² “Invisible,” *Middle English Dictionary* (online).

<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/medidx?type=byte&byte=87520412&egdisplay=compact&gs=87528136>.

³ Here is the complete list as cited in the Middle English Dictionary (online):

[\(a1393\) Gower CA \(Frf 3\)](#) 5.3574: If a man wol ben unsein, Withinne his hond hold clos the Ston, And he mai invisible gon. [\(a1393\) Gower CA \(Frf 3\)](#) 5.4028: Sche..made hirselves invisible. [c1400 St.Anne\(I\) \(Min-U Z.822.N.81\)](#) 2886: He couthe be ay when he walde Invisibele eueray ware. [c1425\(a1420\) Lydg. TB \(Aug A.4\)](#) 1.3030: Who-so-euer in his hond hit [an agate ring] holde..he schulde be invisible. [c1430\(c1386\) Chaucer LGW \(Benson-Robinson\)](#) 1021: Venus hadde hym maked invysible. [c1450\(?c1408\) Lydg. RS \(Frf 16\)](#) 6784: Eliotropia..Maketh a man Invisible. [c1450 Alph.Tales \(Add 25719\)](#) 428/15: He fand a ryng, be þe whilk he made hym selfe invisible. [c1450 Capgr. Rome \(Bod 423\)](#) 16: Fro þat hill he went inuysible to naples. [\(a1470\) Malory Wks.\(Win-C\)](#) 80/22: There com one invisible and smote the knyght. [a1475\(?a1430\) Lydg. Pilgr.\(Vit C.13\)](#) 10284: I haue a certeyn ston Wherthorgh..I kan me makyn invysible Whan that me lyst. [a1500 Ashm.1447 Lapid.\(Ashm 1447\)](#) 58: Ovtalmus ys a stoune..hytt schall make the ynvysibell.

See <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=byte&oldtype=medhb&byte=87520449&refs=87520740>.

– was aware of these two different uses of the word “invisible” in Middle English: one associated with good and one associated with the *absence* of good. In creating the world of Middle-earth, in which the power and meaning of specific words could be made manifest through story, he seems to have drawn specifically on the second set of meanings associated with the word “invisible” in the Middle English literary tradition with which he was so familiar.

In “Seeing in the Dark, Seeing by the Dark: How Bilbo’s Invisibility Defined Tolkien’s Vision,” Michael Wodzak (2014) observes that modern optical theory informs us that images form in our brains when light strikes and is absorbed by the retina. If, however, a person is invisible, how can light affect the retina at all? Whether light passes through the body of the invisible person, or is bent around him, that light has no retina to affect. Therefore, a completely invisible person ought to be completely blind.⁴

Wodzak notes that Bilbo, however, *can* see when invisible, in part because he is not *completely* invisible. As Tolkien writes in Chapter 5 of *The Hobbit* about the invisibility imparted by the Ring: “only in sunlight could you be seen, and then only by your shadow, and that was a faint and shaky sort of shadow.”⁵ In other words, the invisibility is not total. So neither is the invisible hobbit’s lack of vision. Bilbo (and other characters who are or become invisible in Middle-earth) does see, but not very well. Rather they see, as Tolkien describes it in *The Lord of the Rings*, “as through a mist”⁶ (Frodo) or as if “all things about ... were not dark, but vague”⁷ (Sam). As Strider says of the nine, invisible ring-wraiths, they “do not see the world of light as we do.”⁸ To Wodzak’s insightful explanation of

⁴ Michael Wodzak, “Seeing in the Dark, Seeing by the Dark: How Bilbo’s Invisibility Defined Tolkien’s Vision,” In *The Hobbit and Tolkien’s Mythology: Essays on Revisions and Influences*, edited by Eden, Bradford Lee (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2014), 138.

⁵ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Annotated Hobbit*, revised and expanded, ed. Douglas A. Anderson, (Boston, Mass. and New York, N.Y.: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2002), 129.

⁶ Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring* (Boston, Mass. and New York, N.Y.: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1965a), 416.

⁷ Tolkien, *The Return of the King* (Boston, Mass. and New York, N.Y.: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1965c), 343. This language has a biblical resonance: “Now we see through a glass, darkly ...” (1 Cor. 13.12).

⁸ Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring* (Boston, Mass. and New York, N.Y.: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1965a), 202. Qtd. in Wodzak, “Seeing in the Dark,” 140.

Tolkien's scientific understanding of optical theory may be added some additional theological perspectives on invisibility in *The Hobbit*.

In medieval literature, when someone is invisible, he is not present to the eyes of those around him. In that sense, he is absent. Especially in literary instances in which invisibility is being used by a character to hide himself, out of mixed motives, so that he may accomplish an illicit or unjust deed, invisibility corresponds to the morally questionable heritage of the invisibility granted by the ring of Gyges (discussed further below).

Symbolically, invisibility in *The Hobbit* may represent the Augustinian conception of evil as the uncreated absence of good or corruption of good. In the natural world of this earth and of Middle-earth, creatures made by the Creator were meant to be seen and visible to one another. The annulling or elimination of visibility to a state of *invisibility* suggests the erasure or absence of good and the consequent descent into an evil state.

Tolkien's Christian worldview, his Catholic imagination, and the specific influence of Augustinian views of creation and the nature of evil on his mythology of Middle-earth, have been recognized by scholars.⁹ T.A. Shippey (2003) sums up Tolkien's understanding of evil in *The Road to Middle-earth*, where he contrasts Boethian and Manichean views, and asserts:

One of these [the Boethian view] is in essence the Orthodox Christian line, expounded by St. Augustine and then by Catholic and Protestant teaching alike ... This says that there is no such thing as evil: 'evil is nothing,' is the absence of good, is possibly even an unappreciated good ... Corollaries of this belief are that evil cannot itself create, that it was not in itself created (but sprang from a voluntary exercise of free will by Satan, Adam and Eve, to separate themselves from God), that it will in the long run be annulled and eliminated, as the Fall of Man was redressed by the

⁹ See, for example, Thomas W. Smith, "Tolkien's Catholic Imagination: Mediation and Tradition," *Religion and Literature* 38 (2006), 73-100. A number of other studies have considered the influence of Tolkien's Christian faith on his writing. One recent book on the subject is Craig Bernthan, *Tolkien's Sacramental Vision: Discerning the Holy in Middle-earth* (Oxford: Second Spring Books, 2014). See also Ralph C. Wood, *The Gospel according to Tolkien: Visions of the Kingdom in Middle-earth* (Louisville, K.Y.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003) and Peter Kreeft, *The Philosophy of Tolkien: The Worldview behind the Lord of the Rings* (San Francisco, Calif.: Ignatius Press, 2005).

Incarnation and Death of Christ. Themes like these are strongly present in *The Lord of the Rings*.¹⁰

As elsewhere in *The Lord of the Rings*, in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Book I, chapter 9, “A Knife in the Dark,” the state of invisibility is symbolic of the theme. This is vividly clear when a Ringwraith pierces Frodo’s shoulder with a Morgul blade on Weathertop, and Frodo begins to fade. As Gandalf later informs Frodo in Book II, Chapter 1, “Many Meetings,” the splinter was buried deep and working its way inward: “They tried to pierce your heart with a Morgul-knife which remains in the wound. If they had succeeded, you would have become like they are, only weaker and under their command. You would have become a wraith under the dominion of the Dark Lord.”¹¹ Thus, Frodo would have faded and become invisible, and in his invisible state, he would have done evil according to the will of Sauron.

In *The Hobbit*, both the state of invisibility and the desire for it implies a capacity to do evil. This is first obvious in Chapter 5, “Riddles in the Dark,” when Gollum desperately wants the ring that Bilbo has pocketed because, upon entering the state of invisibility, he believes he will be able to more easily murder Bilbo and eat him – a plan similar to ones he carried out on many other occasions. In contrast, Bilbo’s first act when invisible is to escape Gollum’s murderous intentions, which is hardly an evil act. But the evil influence of the ring is already evident when Bilbo conceals the ring and its role in his escape when he is reunited with Gandalf and the dwarves. Bilbo’s desire to continue to possess the ring and to experience the power of invisibility it grants – without being questioned, without the ring being taken from him (as he took it from Gollum), and without giving credit to a magical object when the dwarves are crediting his ingenuity and courage – makes him into a liar.¹²

Bilbo’s character, however, is firm and good overall, so the morally devastating effect of the ring’s evil power is not evident immediately. Instead, the

¹⁰ T.A. Shippey, *The Road to Middle-earth* (Boston, Mass. and New York, N.Y.: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2003), 159.

¹¹ Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings: FR*, 50th Anniversary Edition (Boston, Mass. and New York, N.Y.: Houghton Mifflin Company), 222.

¹² As Tolkien’s moral conception of the ring grew while working on *The Lord of the Rings*, he found ways to re-write the story of Bilbo’s acquisition of the ring in darker terms. This is clear in the prologue, part 4 “Of the Finding of the Ring” and in the conversation between Gandalf and Frodo in chapter 2, “The Shadow of the Past,” in *The Fellowship of the Ring*.

effect gradually increases over time, even while Bilbo is trying to use the ring to do good. In order to understand how a person of good moral character is corrupted by a ring's power of invisibility, it is necessary to examine the original source of this motif: the story of the ring of Gyges.

***Philosophy and Literature:
The Moral Significance of Bilbo's Invisibility***

In the history of ideas represented in literature, the thematic link between invisibility and individual moral conflict begins with Plato's *Republic* and the ring of Gyges. In his published letters, Tolkien makes occasional reference to Greek philosophy,¹³ but none at all to Plato, his *Republic* or the tale of Gyges, and the biographies of Tolkien by Carpenter and Garth do not mention Gyges or Tolkien's knowledge of his story, either. Nevertheless, Tolkien was familiar with Plato's *Republic* as a result of his undergraduate studies at Oxford, which, before he turned his attention to Old English, Middle English, and Old Icelandic, were originally in Classics and Greek philology.¹⁴ Furthermore, the wide spread use of allusion to the story of Gyges and his ring in Greek, Latin, French, and English literature makes it inevitable that Tolkien encountered references to the story in his later reading.¹⁵ An examination of the story of the ring of Gyges, and the link between invisibility and immorality, clearly reveals the connection to Tolkien's use of the same kind of thematic link in *The Hobbit*, in which the war between good and evil that takes place when heart encounters temptation is very much at issue.

¹³ See, for example, Tolkien, "94 Letter to Christopher Tolkien," in *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, ed. Humphrey Carpenter with Christopher Tolkien (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1981 and Boston, Mass. and New York, N.Y.: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1995, repr. 2000), 107.

¹⁴ Tolkien, "131 Letter to Milton Waldman," 143-161 and cf. Humphrey Carpenter, *J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biography* (Boston, Mass. and New York, N.Y.: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1977; rev. and rpt. 2000), chap. 5 an 6.

¹⁵ On the reception of the story of Gyges and his ring, evident in allusions in several extant Greek and Latin literary works, including Cicero, Ptolemaus Chennus, Philostratus, Nonnus (commenting on Gregory Nanzanius), and Dionysius of Halicarnassus, among others, and in French and English, including Ioannes Tzetzes, Rabelais, Du Bellay, La Fontaine, Robert Greene, Beaumont and Fletcher, Ben Johnson, Robert Herrick, and so on, see Kirby Flower Smith, "The Literary Tradition of Gyges and Candaules," *The American Journal of Philology* 41 (1920): 1-37. Kirby characterizes the reception of the tale of Gyges as a "sometimes thin but always persistent literary tradition of more than a millennium" (7).

Before considering Gyges, his ring, and its relevance to *The Hobbit*, it is helpful to acknowledge some other magic rings that influenced Tolkien's conception of Sauron's ring. From Norse mythology, Odin's magic ring, called *Draupnir* ("the dripper"), would multiply itself by eight every ninth night. Not coincidentally, Tolkien's one ring is related to several others in Middle-earth, which were made with its power, including the nine given to mortal men doomed to die. Richard Wagner's opera, *The Ring of Nibelung* (ca. 1848-74), features a ring, called *Andvarinaut* ("Andvari's gift"), that grants dominion over the world to the one who possesses it; Wagner's work is sourced in the *Nibelungleid* legend, a twelfth-century, high German epic, which had been re-discovered in 1755, and in *The Volsunga Saga*, sources Tolkien knew very well.¹⁶ This ring, which has the power to produce gold, had a bloody history: Loki tricked Andvari into giving it to him, and in revenge, Andvari cursed it; Loki then gave it to Hreidmar, the king of the dwarves, but Fafnir murdered the king in order to take the ring from him – and then turned into a dragon in order to guard it. Siegfried later slew Fafnir, took the ring, and gave it to Brynhildr, but the ring's curse continued to wreck havoc. It appears that Tolkien synthesized various aspects of these different magical rings when he endowed the one ring of Sauron with its diverse powers. The power of invisibility, specifically, is sourced in the tale of Gyges¹⁷ – and this is the power of the ring that is particularly emphasized in *The Hobbit* before the other powers associated with the ring are further, thematically developed in *The Lord of the Rings*.¹⁸

¹⁶ Tolkien tried to dismiss critical comparisons between his ring epic and Wagner's, but Tolkien's deep love of Northern mythology, and particularly the saga tradition, is well-known: his Kolbitar / Coalbiters, an Oxford reading group, met to discuss the sagas weekly in the 1920s, and in his published letters, Tolkien specifically acknowledged that "Sigurd the Volsung" was a direct source for his tale of Turin and Niniel in *The Silmarillion* ("Letter to Milton Waldman") and the conversation between Sigurd and Fafnir was a direct source for the conversation between Bilbo and Smaug ("122 Letter to Naomi Mitchison").

Admittedly, in the context of refuting a misleading preface to Åke Ohlmarks' Swedish translation of *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien denied that there was any connection between Sauron's ring and the ring in the *Nibelungleid*: "both rings were round, and there the resemblance ceases" ("220 Letter to Allen and Unwin"). However, it is generally accepted among Tolkien scholars and enthusiasts that a line of influence exists between the two. The primary similarity is, of course, that Andvari's ring and Sauron's ring both have an evil power of dominion over the world.

¹⁷ The power of invisibility is granted by many magical objects in classical and medieval literature: the helmet of Hades, magical cloaks, and so on. The association between the power of invisibility and a magic ring, however, begins in the western literary tradition with Plato.

¹⁸ Other magic rings in medieval literature include Aladdin's, which could summon djinn; see "The Tale of Aladdin and the Lamp" in any edition of *A Thousand and One Arabian*

Although acknowledged as a probable source for Tolkien's invention of a ring endowing its wearer with the power of invisibility,¹⁹ the story of Gyges in Plato's *Republic* is not only an early source, but also presents a parallel idea: namely, that the ability to walk unseen by the judging eyes of others gives the magic ring wearer a greater degree of freedom to act without fear of consequences.²⁰ While Gyges uses the greater moral freedom he discovers in the state of invisibility to do evil, Bilbo Baggins, in contrast, uses it as a moral force for good – at least at first. Tolkien's "eucatastrophic" re-writing of themes in the story of Gyges may be influenced by later, medieval uses of the Gyges story – in, for example, the Welsh *Mabinogion*'s tale of Sir Owein (called "The Lady of the Fountain") – in which a ring of invisibility has a role in saving life. However, the real connection between the exemplum of Gyges and the episodic quest of Bilbo Baggins is not simply the ring's magic, but the protagonist's immorality. For while Bilbo does some good with his ring and the invisibility it grants him, he also begins to tell lies under its influence and, eventually, to use the ring's power of invisibility to avoid people he does not want to deal with.

In Plato's *Republic*, Book II, Glaucon, the brother of Plato, is questioning Socrates' assertion that men are capable of being just or of carrying out the work of justice. Glaucon suggests that the supposed evidence of justice seen in the world is actually comes about because of social pressures and expectations:

Nights. The Ring of Solomon, which could similarly summon djinn, is sourced in medieval Arabic literature as well. Sir Perceval's ring, which protected him from blood loss in battle and essentially rendered him invincible, is described in various medieval Arthurian legends of England and Europe. Sauron's ring has a tendency to draw the evil Ringwraiths (like djinn) to the ring-bearer, but the power it gives its wearer does not render him invincible, as the attack on Frodo on Weathertop in *The Fellowship of the Ring* clearly shows.

¹⁹ In *The Annotated Hobbit*, the revised and expanded edition, Douglas Anderson observes in note 31 that "rings of invisibility are often traced back to the story of Gyges in Book II of *The Republic* by Plato" (133). The source is discussed in Eric Katz, "The Rings of Tolkien and Plato: Lessons in Power, Choice, and Morality," in *Lord of the Rings and Philosophy: One Book to Rule Them All*, ed. Gregory Baasham and Eric Bronson (Chicago, Ill.: Open Court, 2003), 5-20.

²⁰ The tale of Gyges also appears in the *Histories* of Herodotus, and while it has a similar plot to the tale in the *Republic* of Plato, it lacks the element of the ring of invisibility. Herodotus treats the tale as part of the history of Lydia, with attention to the problems of tyranny and economy (notably, the invention of minting of coins), while Plato treats it as a case study, a moral *exemplum*, which Socrates and Glaucon discuss in the context of debating whether justice is better than injustice and whether any human being with greater power than his fellows can maintain it. For comparison of the versions of Herodotus and Plato, with reference to a version by Xanthos, see Marc Shell, "The Tale of Gyges," *Mississippi Review* 17 (1989): 21-84.

people do what is right because people are watching them. If they weren't being watched, people wouldn't do what is right. He turns to the story of the ring of Gyges to provide parabolic evidence of what he means. In re-telling the story, he claims that if people were invisible – if no one could see them and the consequences of their actions would therefore not come home to roost, as it were – then they would not act justly. Glaucon first tells his story and then makes his point:

According to the tradition, Gyges was a shepherd in the service of the king of Lydia; there was a great storm, and an earthquake made an opening in the earth at the place where he was feeding his flock. Amazed at the sight, he descended into the opening, where, among other marvels, he beheld a hollow brazen horse, having doors, at which he stooping and looking in saw a dead body of stature, as appeared to him, more than human, and having nothing on but a gold ring; this he took from the finger of the dead and re-ascended. Now the shepherds met together, according to custom, that they might send their monthly report about the flocks to the king; into their assembly he came having the ring on his finger, and as he was sitting among them he chanced to turn the collet of the ring inside his hand, when instantly he became invisible to the rest of the company and they began to speak of him as if he were no longer present. He was astonished at this, and again touching the ring he turned the collet outwards and reappeared; he made several trials of the ring, and always with the same result-when he turned the collet inwards he became invisible, when outwards he reappeared. Whereupon he contrived to be chosen one of the messengers who were sent to the court, where as soon as he arrived he seduced the queen, and with her help conspired against the king and slew him, and took the kingdom.

Suppose now that there were two such magic rings, and the just put on one of them and the unjust the other; no man can be imagined to be of such an iron nature that he would stand fast in justice. No man would keep his hands off what was not his own when he could safely take what he liked out of the market, or go into houses and lie with any one at his pleasure, or kill or release from prison whom he would, and in all respects be like a God among men. Then the actions of the just would be as the actions of the unjust; they would both come at last to the same point.

And this we may truly affirm to be a great proof that a man is just, not willingly or because he thinks that justice is any good to him individually, but of necessity, for wherever any one thinks that he can safely be unjust, there he is unjust. For all men believe in their hearts that injustice is far more profitable to the individual than justice, and he who argues as I have been supposing, will say that they are right. If you could imagine any one obtaining this power of becoming invisible, and never doing any wrong or touching what was another's, he would be thought by the lookers-on to be a most wretched idiot, although they would praise him to one another's faces, and keep up appearances with one another from a fear that they too might suffer injustice.²¹

Indeed, Glaucon goes beyond saying that people would not simply act unjustly if they were invisible; they would be idiots not to take advantage of their power to get what they want!

Later in *The Republic*, Book X, Socrates answers this argument, denying that justice results from particular social pressures and expectations. Rather, the original purity and beauty of the immortal soul is revealed by her love of wisdom, virtue, and the company she keeps, and, as Socrates says:

... Justice in her own nature has been shown to be best for the soul in her own nature. Let a man do what is just, whether he have the ring of Gyges or not, and even if in addition to the ring of Gyges he put on the helmet of Hades.²²

Justice is best for the soul, and the virtuous person is happy because he is rationally in control of his appetites. Even if a man has the ring of Gyges, together with the helmet of Hades – either of which would make him invisible, and both of which would presumably make him doubly or utterly invisible – he should still do

²¹ Benjamin Jowett, “*The Republic* by Plato, Book II,” *The Internet Classics Archive* (1994-2009): <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/republic.3.ii.html>. Benjamin Jowett also edited a Greek text of Plato's *Republic* with Lewis Campbell, first published by Oxford University Press in 1871, which is now available online. Greek readers are welcome to consult it and compare it to the English: <https://archive.org/details/PlatosRepublicInClassicGreek>. There are several other recent translations of Plato's *Republic* now available, but I use Jowett's translation, with reference to his Greek edition, because Jowett's edition was probably Tolkien's text for the *Republic* when he was a student at Exeter College, Oxford University studying classics from 1911 until he changed the focus of his studies to English language and literature in the summer term of 1913.

²² Jowett, trans., “*The Republic* by Plato, Book II.”

what is just. Injustice comes with consequences, including personal unhappiness, but virtue is its own reward.

Certainly Tolkien's own Christian world-view aligned with this moral concept. He incorporates it into his mythology with the wisdom of Job – that is, with the acknowledgement that many people suffer even when they have not acted unjustly, but others have. But while the theme is present, and the symbolic ring, Tolkien's Bilbo Baggins is clearly no Gyges: the plots of their stories are different.

Gyges descended into the depths of the earth following an earthquake to find his ring near a dead body; Bilbo descended into the depths of the mountains of Moria following storm and goblin-capture to find the one ring not far from Gollum, a creature very much alive – and hungry. Gyges discovered his ring's power in the company of shepherds; Bilbo, in the company of dwarves. Gyges uses his ring to seduce the queen, kill the king, and take power over a country. Bilbo uses it to escape Gollum and goblins under the Misty Mountains, to aid his friends and help them escape from danger, to slip into the vastness of Smaug's lair and steal back a cup that rightfully belongs to the dwarves, to get away from his stubborn comrades and try to negotiate peace with Bard, and to hide himself during the Battle of the Five Armies. At first blush, it seems, in fact, that while Gyges uses his ring for evil, Bilbo uses it for good.

This plot motif – using a ring of invisibility to save a life, as Bilbo does – appears in the Arthurian legends of Owein. In the fourteenth-century, Welsh *Mabinogion*, in the tale of “The Lady of the Fountain,” a woman named Luned gives a ring of invisibility to Owein in order to lead him safely away from captivity and certain death to a place where he can hide until she can introduce him to her mistress so he may marry her. In the process of rescuing Owein, who has been imprisoned for killing the knight who guarded the titular Lady's fountain, Luned specifically says to him:

What deliverance I can for thee, that will I do. Take this ring and put it on thy finger, and put this stone in my hand, and close thy fist over the stone, and so long as thou conceal it, it will conceal thee too. And when they of the castle get heed, they will come to fetch thee, to put thee to death because of the man. And when they see thee not, that will vex them. I shall be on the horse-block yonder, awaiting thee, and thou shall see me even though I shall not thee. And come thou and place thy hand upon my shoulder,

and then I shall know that thou hast come to me. And the way I go
then, come thou with me.²³

The ring of invisibility, and its link to an eventual seduction plot of the Lady whom Luned serves, appears to be sourced, ultimately, in the story of Gyges.²⁴ Yet the medieval writer of the *Mabinogion* has shifted responsibility for the machinations in romance from the protagonist to the ruling lady's servant, and the use of the ring from giving the protagonist direct access to the ruling lady to indirect access, which is preceded, in point of fact, by the protagonist's own salvation from imminent death. It is this good use of a ring of invisibility to rescue a captive and save his life that is notable in comparison to Bilbo Baggins' use of his own ring of invisibility in *The Hobbit*.

Yet it is not accurate to say that Bilbo's use of the ring is entirely good. As noted above, by the time Bilbo is using it to help steal from Smaug, the story seems to imply that Bilbo has become prideful about what he has accomplished while invisible in the past ("Ring-winner and luck-wearer ...").²⁵ In his foolhardiness, he puts his own life at risk, not realizing the dragon can smell him even if he can't see him. A long, riddling conversation with an evil dragon is never a good idea, yet Bilbo (like Sigurdr) has one. Later in the development of the story, readers learn that he uses the ring to hide from unpleasant callers and relatives (such as Lobelia Sackville-Baggins). This idea of hiding from others, of deliberately choosing not being seen by them, is aligned in the story of Gyges with the tendency toward action that is not virtuous.

By the time Tolkien was at work on *The Lord of the Rings*, he was re-writing Bilbo's account of the finding of the ring and his use of it to clearly show that the ring had a *corrupting* effect on Bilbo's character. Bilbo *lied* about the

²³ "The Lady of the Fountain," in *The Mabinogion*, trans. Gwyn Jones and Thomas Jones (London: J.M. Dent, 1949, rpt. 2003), 137.

²⁴ It is worth noting that in the twelfth-century, Old French, Arthurian romance "The Knight with the Lion," the protagonist Yvain receives a ring that functions in a similar way from a maiden named Lunette. Chrétien de Troyes' tale of Yvain is a more direct source through which the Platonic tale of Gyges is transmuted. The elements from the story of Gyges that reappear in "The Lady of the Fountain" (Owein) and "The Knight with the Lion" (Yvain) have been noted elsewhere in scholarly studies. See, for example, Eugene Vance, "Chrétien's Yvain and the Ideologies of Change and Exchange," *Yale French Studies* 70 (1986): 42-62, who remarks that "Lunette's ring has striking resemblances, functionally speaking, to the ring of the tyrant Gyges as evoked by Herodotus and Plato" (51).

²⁵ Tolkien, *The Annotated Hobbit*, ed. Anderson, 279.

ring, he *hid* the knowledge of it and its powers from others, and he *used* it to achieve his own ends and appear heroic in the eyes of others.²⁶ Gandalf particularly expresses his concern about Bilbo's deceptive behavior to Frodo in second chapter of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, "The Shadow of the Past":

"Then I heard Bilbo's strange story of how he "won" it [the ring], and I could not believe it. When I at last got the truth out of him, I thought at once that he been trying to put his claim to the ring beyond doubt. Much like Gollum with his 'birthday present.' The lies were too much alike for my comfort. Clearly the ring has an unwholesome power that sets to work on its keeper at once. That was the first real warning I had that all was not well."²⁷

In the fourth section of his "Prologue" to *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Tolkien commented on Bilbo's differing stories, the one that he told to others (and set down in his memoirs) and the one that Gandalf's insistence provoked him to reveal:

Gandalf, however, disbelieved Bilbo's first story, as soon as he heard it, and he continued to be very curious about the ring. Eventually he got the true tale out of Bilbo after much questioning, which for a while strained their friendship, but the wizard seemed to think the truth important. Though he did not say so to Bilbo, he also thought it important, and disturbing, to find that the good hobbit had not told the truth from the first: quite contrary to his habit.²⁸

This commentary suggests that the basically "good" hobbit, Bilbo, is being corrupted by the evil influence of the ring, which causes him to lie when he should tell the truth.

In essence, the chief power of the ring – invisibility – is linked to evil influence and the corruption of virtuous character in both Plato's tale of Gyges in *The Republic* and Tolkien's tale of Bilbo Baggins in *The Hobbit*. This is a key

²⁶ For much more extensive detail, see John D. Rateliff, *The History of the Hobbit* (Boston, Mass. and New York, N.Y.: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2007).

²⁷ Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*, 50th Anniversary Edition, 48.

²⁸ Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*, 13.

idea that goes beyond a simple connection between two rings that grant the power of invisibility to their wearers. For Tolkien uses the motif to reveal hidden meaning, the struggle with temptation, the war between good and evil that is hidden in the heart. This war takes place in the microcosm of man, and, according to Augustine, the macrocosm of the universe, but also in particular historical and biographical circumstances. Tolkien's experience of World War I as a signals officer is one example, the one that is hidden in *The Hobbit* and subtly shapes it. Exploring this connection allows the reader to consider the psychological significance of Bilbo's invisibility.

History and Biography: The Psychological Significance of Bilbo's Invisibility

Like many soldiers who served in World War I, Tolkien experienced trauma from the violence he witnessed, the deaths of his friends, and threats to his own life on the battlefield.²⁹ New threats to his sons' lives during World War II sharply reminded him of his own past experiences, which it is clearly evident from the letters he wrote to his sons and to others in this time period, in which his memories of World War I are intermixed with his thoughts, feelings, and opinions of World War II. During World War II, Tolkien served as an air warden on the domestic front while two of his sons served as soldiers internationally. Michael Tolkien trained as an anti-aircraft gunner in the British army while Christopher Tolkien trained as a pilot in the Royal Air Force (RAF) in South Africa. Tolkien wrote many letters to both of his sons, to encourage them and express his love for them in their absence. He also wrote to his editor, Stanley Unwin, about them. On *circa* March 18, 1945, after learning of the death of a pilot from Christopher's group of cadets in his first flight in a Hawker Hurricane, which was a single-seat fighter aircraft, Tolkien confessed: "My heart is gnawed out with anxiety."³⁰ He did not want his children to die in the war, but he was afraid this might happen.

²⁹ For an overview of Tolkien's experiences in WWI, Humphrey Carpenter, *J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biography*. John Garth's admirable study, *Tolkien and the Great War: The Threshold of Middle-earth* (Boston, Mass. and New York, N.Y.: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2003), gives further detail as well as analysis of the impact of Tolkien's wartime experiences on the development of his mythology. See also Janet Brannan Croft, *War and the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger Publishers, 2004) and Michael Livingston, "The Shell-Shocked Hobbit: The First World War and Tolkien's Trauma of the Ring," *Mythlore: A Journal of J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature* 25 (2006): 77-92. Livingston discusses the likelihood of Tolkien's personal experience of "shell shock," that is, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and how it is embodied in the character of Frodo.

³⁰ Tolkien, "98 Letter to Stanley Unwin," 112.

Thus, it is not difficult to see the influence of this anxiety on the mood of *The Lord of the Rings*. But Tolkien actually began to explore wartime trauma earlier, in a lighter and less obvious mode, in *The Hobbit*.

Because of Tolkien's well-known aversion to biographical criticism, the extent of the biographical in his mythological writings has been under-explored. But careful study reveals myriad details in Tolkien's high fantasy literature that directly correspond to his ordinary lived experience. Among these details are those that support the idea that Bilbo Baggins is Tolkien's psychological representative in *The Hobbit*.

In his letters, Tolkien directly commented on some of these details and correspondences. For example, in a letter of October 25, 1958 to one of his readers, Debra Webster, Tolkien wrote, "I am, in fact, a hobbit."³¹ He elaborated on how his own practices and tastes correspond to those of Shire-folk:

I am in fact a Hobbit (in all but size). I like gardens, trees and unmechanized farmlands; I smoke a pipe, and like good plain food (unrefrigerated), but detest French cooking; I like and even dare to wear in these dull days, ornamental waistcoats. I am fond of mushrooms (out of a field); have a very simple sense of humour (which even my appreciative critics find tiresome); I go to bed late and get up late (when possible). I do not travel much.³²

These claims, taken together with the fact that Bilbo Baggins is represented within the world of Middle-earth as the author of *The Hobbit or There and Back Again* (and of which Tolkien is, obviously, the actual author in this world), beg the question: did Tolkien view himself, at some level, as *the* hobbit, Bilbo Baggins?

Tolkien's biographer Humphrey Carpenter (1979) identified a series of elements from Tolkien's life that re-appear in Bilbo's life. These included, among other points of interest, the fact that Bilbo's mother, Belladonna Took, resembled Tolkien's own mother, Mabel Suffield, in being one of three daughters of a father who lived to be nearly one hundred; Bilbo's home, "Bag End," was what local people called the farm of Tolkien's Aunt Jane in Worcestershire; and the larger country of the Shire, with its mill and river, is remarkably like Warwickshire in

³¹ Tolkien, "213 Letter to Deborah Webster," 288.

³² Tolkien, "213 Letter to Deborah Webster," 288-89.

the West Midlands and the specific environs of Sarehole where Tolkien spent formative years.³³ Since Carpenter's analysis, so many more connections between Tolkien and Bilbo have been discovered that William Christian Klarner (2014) could claim "Bilbo contained much more of Tolkien himself, the author as a person, than any other character."³⁴ Yet at least one series of correspondences has remained unexplored: the connections between Bilbo's moments of invisibility and Tolkien's service as a signals officer in World War I.

As part of the 11th battalion of the Lancashire Fusiliers, Tolkien served as a signals officer. This involved communicating with English troops on the battlefield using a variety of modes: semaphore flags, Morse dots and dashes flashed out with a lamp at night and a heliograph by day, the field telephone, rockets, carrier pigeons – sometimes even human runners.³⁵ Tolkien's particular role meant that he was, in effect, present with the soldiers who were fighting, but he was not always visible to them. His voice was audible through the telephone wires, and his messages made clear through flashing lights, even when he was physically absent. As a signals officer, in fact, he was often *invisible* to the very people whose lives he was seeking to protect or save with vital information in situations of military conflict.

Seeing this can lead to a general awareness of a similarity between Tolkien's role in World War I and Bilbo's role in Thorin's Company. Almost every time Bilbo becomes invisible in *The Hobbit*, he does so in relation to a situation of danger, usually a direct threat to the dwarves (who may be comparable to soldiers in wartime), in an attempt to rescue Thorin's company. Once invisible, Bilbo follows a pattern: he communicates with the dwarves themselves, uses his words to encourage them, and leads them to a way out of danger that dupes the enemy and gives them the victory. This pattern corresponds to Tolkien's responsibilities as a signals officer.

The pattern holds true when Bilbo uses the power of invisibility in Mirkwood in order to free the dwarves from the giant spiders. He destroys the

³³ Carpenter, *J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biography*, 179-80.

³⁴ William Christian Klarner, "A Victorian in Valhalla: Bilbo Baggins as the Link between England and Middle-earth," in *The Hobbit and Tolkien's Mythology*, ed. Brad Eden (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2014), 152.

³⁵ Carpenter, *J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biography*, 87-88 and John Garth, *Tolkien and the Great War: The Threshold of Middle-earth*, 114-15. Note that the radio had been invented and was in use during World War I, so it is possible that Tolkien may have used radio communication on the battlefield as well.

spiders' threads and webs – their means of communication as well as entrapment of their prey – with his flashing sword, which is visible (like lamps and heliographs) even when he is not.³⁶ The pattern of “communication – encouragement – escape – victory” holds true shortly after the battle with the spiders when the dwarves are captured by the Elves of Mirkwood as well.

Bilbo remains invisible for a prolonged period of time during their imprisonment (thus avoiding it himself), and he communicates with Thorin in his lonesome prison cell and then with all the other dwarves, sharing Thorin's orders that they are not to capitulate to the Elven King's demands:

So it was that Bilbo was able to take secretly Thorin's message to each of the other imprisoned dwarves, telling them that Thorin their chief was also imprisoned close at hand, but no one was to reveal their errand to the king, not yet, not before Thorin gave the word. For *Thorin had taken heart again* hearing how the hobbit had rescued his companions from the spiders, and was determined once more not to ransom himself promises to the king of a share in the treasure, until all hope of escaping in any other way had disappeared—until in fact the remarkable Mr. Invisible Baggins (of whom he began to have a very high opinion indeed) altogether failed to think of something clever. The other dwarves quite agreed when they got the message.³⁷

Thus Bilbo communicates, he encourages, and he is on the verge of thinking of “something clever” by which to free his friends. He does so, of course, by putting the dwarves in the wine barrels that are shoved into the River Running and sent back to Laketown.

Fairy tale-wise, the pattern repeats a third time in chapter 12, “Inside Information,” when Bilbo descends into the Lonely Mountain to confront the dragon Smaug – not once, but twice. The first time, he slips on his ring, descends into the dragon's lair, and obtains a “great two-handed cup.”³⁸ The dwarves are

³⁶ Tolkien, *The Annotated Hobbit*, ed. Anderson 212 (italics added). Tolkien's biographers, Humphrey and Garth, have recalled the mess of wires that could be strung across the battlefield, a situation that may relate to Tolkien's Mirkwood spider webs.

³⁷ Tolkien, *The Annotated Hobbit*, ed. Anderson 227 (italics added).

³⁸ Tolkien, *The Annotated Hobbit*, ed. Anderson 271. It is worth recalling that the source for this moment of the theft of the cup can be found in Tolkien's beloved Old English epic, *Beowulf*.

thrilled with this token of their great treasure. Balin is so encouraged, so “overjoyed,” that he “picked Bilbo up and carried him out into the open air” while Bilbo hardly notices “the excitement of the dwarves, or how they praised him and patted him on the back and put themselves in all their families for generations to come at his service.”³⁹ Smaug, on the other hand, is vastly displeased.

Bilbo discovers this when he puts on his ring and goes down to see the dragon again to find out whether he has a weak spot that might allow them to defeat him and take possession of the whole treasure hoard. In his invisible state, Bilbo ends up having a lengthy conversation with the enemy, for it turns out they share a common language. Bilbo becomes over-bold, and indeed, the narrator comments that “he was in grave danger of coming under the dragon-spell.”⁴⁰ Even though Smaug cannot see him, he can *smell* him – and he spouts fire at the invisible hobbit, who is singed and barely gets away with his life, running back up the tunnel to the dwarves. Yet in this process, Bilbo does see the hole over the dragon’s heart, and he later communicates his knowledge to a thrush, who will in turn take it to Bard, the Bowman, who will successfully use the knowledge of the enemy’s vulnerability to slay the dragon.⁴¹

In the Battle of the Five Armies that follows the dragon’s death, Bilbo is invisible, looking miserably on what appears to be a great defeat. He takes a stand among the Elves on Ravenhill “partly because there was more chance of escape from that point, and partly (with the more Tookish part of his mind) because if he was going to be in a last desperate stand, he preferred on the whole to defend the Elvenking.”⁴² This statement about Bilbo is remarkably consonant with Tolkien’s mental state in World War I, for Tolkien often felt miserable himself but metaphorically “took his stand” with Faerie, the Perilous Realm, writing about the Elves of Middle-earth in his ever-developing mythology despite (or perhaps as a

³⁹ Tolkien, *The Annotated Hobbit*, ed. Anderson, 271-72.

⁴⁰ Tolkien, *The Annotated Hobbit*, ed. Anderson, 281.

⁴¹ Even the complexity of this communication, using the intermediary of the thrush, may connect to Tolkien’s lived experience, for he was trained to use birds in battlefield communications.

⁴² Tolkien, *The Annotated Hobbit*, ed. Anderson, 344. This is quintessentially a Tolkienian feeling. Compare with Tolkien’s short story, “The Smith of Wootton Major,” *Tales from the Perilous Realm* (Boston, Mass. and New York, N.Y.: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2008), 243-81.

means of escape from the terrifying reality of) the violence of war that surrounded him.

Shortly after his rousing declaration that the eagles are coming, Bilbo is knocked unconscious by a stone that crashes into his helm. His sudden inability to participate in the battle can be compared to Tolkien's own, occasioned by trench fever, which resulted in a medical leave and his return to England. However, the fact that Bilbo is brought down by a blow to the head (rather than a fever, for example) is certainly meaningful to the story on a thematic level. It is not only Bilbo's body, but also his brain that has been wounded by the war and violence that he has witnessed.

For it seems that Bilbo is, at least to some extent, traumatized by his experience of war as Tolkien himself may well have been. Bilbo's traumatic stress begins early in the novel when he learns of the dragon during the "unexpected party" when Thorin informs him he may never return from the adventure:

Poor Bilbo couldn't bear it any longer. At *may never return* he began to feel a shriek coming up inside, and very soon to burst out like the whistle of an engine coming out of a tunnel. All the dwarves sprang up, knocking over the table. Gandalf struck a blue light at the end of his magic staff and in the firework glare, the poor little hobbit could be seen kneeling on the hearth-rug, shaking like a jelly that was melting. Then he fell flat on the floor, and kept calling out "struck by lightning, struck by lightning!" over and over again, and that was all they could get out of him for a long time. So they took him and laid him out of the way on the drawing room sofa with a drink at his elbow, and they went back to their dark business.⁴³

This reaction looks remarkably like a symptom of "shell-shock," the diagnosis doctors developed for soldiers with certain symptoms during World War I, a diagnosis that would later be called "post-traumatic stress disorder."⁴⁴ PTSD is characterized by intense fear and terror after witnessing or experiencing life-

⁴³ Tolkien, *The Annotated Hobbit*, ed. Anderson, 47.

⁴⁴ In *The Hobbit*, chapter 4, "Over Hill and Under Hill," Bilbo's terrible nightmare in the cave in the Misty Mountains, from which he awakens with a great shout just before the goblins capture the dwarves, is another moment that could be likened to a PTSD symptom.

threatening harm.⁴⁵ Even if Tolkien did not experience clinical “shell shock” himself, he certainly would have known other soldiers who did.

In June of 1916, Tolkien was deployed to the France, where he experienced first-hand what he later called the “animal horror”⁴⁶ of trench warfare at the Battle of the Somme. While in France, Tolkien repeatedly witnessed the devastating effects of war. He saw men wounded and killed before his eyes by guns, tanks, and explosions; he saw hundreds of men’s bodies and dismembered body parts lying in the trenches or on the field. Ordered out to the battlefield in command of British soldiers beginning on July 14, he carried – and was trained to fire at German soldiers — a Webley .455 Mark VI Revolver. By chance or skill, he was never physically wounded, but like other men, he lived with the constant threat of death while he was caught up in the conflict in France. That threat was never more real than when he learned of the deaths of two of his closest friends with whom he had formed a literary club, the TCBS (the Tea Club and Borrovia Society).

Tolkien’s friend R.Q. Gilson was killed at La Boisselle on July 1, the first day of the offensive. Tolkien’s friend G.B. Smith wrote to tell him of his death, saying:

I saw in the paper this morning that Rob has been killed. I am safe, but what does that matter? Do please stick to me, you and Christopher. I am very tired and most frightfully depressed at this worst of news. Now one realizes in despair what the TCBS really was. O my dear John Ronald, what ever are we going to do?⁴⁷

Tolkien and Smith met up at Acheux on August 19, spent days talking, and shared a meal together at Bouzincourt where they came under fire but were, miraculously, uninjured.⁴⁸ Later, however, Smith was killed. After contracting “trench fever” and returning to England, Tolkien learned of Smith’s death in

⁴⁵ The diagnostic criteria for diagnosing PTSD is provided in the DSM IV, available online: <http://www.mental-health-today.com/ptsd/dsm.htm>. The criteria have been slightly revised and updated in the DSM V. See http://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/PTSD-overview/diagnostic_criteria_dsm-5.asp.

⁴⁶ Garth, *The Great War*, 290.

⁴⁷ Qtd. in Carpenter, *J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biography*, 94-95.

⁴⁸ Carpenter, *J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biography*, 95.

December in a letter from the fourth member of the TCBS, Christopher Wiseman: “My dear J.R., I have just received news from home about G.B.S., who succumbed to injuries received from shells bursting on December 3rd. I can’t say much about it now. I humbly pray God I may be accounted worthy of him.”⁴⁹ Tolkien was deeply affected by the deaths of his friends and the horror of war.

Various scholars have observed how Tolkien’s war memories found expression in his mythology of Middle-earth.⁵⁰ In fact, Tolkien first began to write down his ideas for this mythology under the influence of his friends in the TCBS in 1914 when he was both in school at Oxford and in training with the Army in preparation for deployment. But it seems that his mythology gave him something to do, something to think about, a world to escape into during his time on the battlefield.⁵¹ He was actually working on his imaginary languages while he was at Army officer training lectures. This behavior suggests that he was using mythology and linguistic invention as a coping mechanism to deal with the terror and the trauma literally taking place all around him. As T.A. Shippey (2003) has remarked:

... there would be no surprise in seeing Tolkien, the Lancashire Fusilier, survivor of the Somme, as deeply and early marked by fear of death, starting to write his fables of the Undying Lands and the potentially deathless elves in reaction or compensation ... There is no doubt that Tolkien often dwelt on the *langoth*, the heartache endured by those who felt, or hoped, that there was an Undying Land at the other end of the Lost Road.⁵²

When the extent of Tolkien’s wartime experience of violence and trauma is reviewed, Bilbo’s invisibility becomes much more than a convenient metaphor for Tolkien’s experiences as a signals officer. Clearly, Both Bilbo and Tolkien are

⁴⁹ Qtd. in Carpenter, *J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biography*, 96.

⁵⁰ See John Garth, *Tolkien and the Great War*; Croft, *War and the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien*; and Livingston, “The Shell-Shocked Hobbit.” See also Raymond Michael Vince, “War, Heroism, and Narrative: Hemingway, Tolkien, and Le Carré: Storytellers to the Modern World” (University of South Florida, Ph.D diss., 2005).

⁵¹ Tolkien highly values Escape, as he describes it, in his essay, “On Fairy-Stories.”

⁵² T.A. Shippey, *The Road to Middle-earth: Revised and Expanded Edition* (Boston, Mass. and New York, N.Y.: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2003), 370-71.

present, by means of their voices, although they are unseen or absent in their bodies.

On a much more complex psychological level, however, Bilbo's invisibility conveys the deeper reality Tolkien or any soldier might have experienced: *feeling* unseen, unrecognized in personhood or humanity by both friends and enemies alike, in the midst of the violence of war that warps everyone's ability to perceive what is real, true, and good. Invisibility even implies the fear of becoming a disembodied ghost or spirit after death, given that the threat of death was omnipresent in war.⁵³ So Tolkien's depiction of Bilbo's moments of invisibility in *The Hobbit* reflects his responsibilities as a signals officer and reveals either his own traumatic experiences of loss or the experiences of other soldiers (and probably both). At various levels, but to a considerable extent, World War I is "hidden" in *The Hobbit*.

Conclusions

Why is Bilbo Baggins invisible? This study suggests that Tolkien's knowledge of philology, theology, philosophy, literature, history, and his own life experience all contribute to the development of the symbolic, moral, and psychological significance of invisibility in *The Hobbit*. Tolkien's role as a signals officer in World War I meant that he was often, in effect, invisible to those he was serving and seeking to save on the battlefield; like Bilbo when he was invisible, he could be heard, but not seen. Tolkien's knowledge of medieval literature, and the tradition associated with the story of the ring of Gyges in Plato's *Republic*, suggests that when people's actions are not visible and open to the moral scrutiny of others, they may become self-serving and cease to be virtuous. Tolkien's theology – his Catholic imagination – is informed by his philology (not surprisingly!), so that being invisible (or being "not able to be seen") becomes a way of metaphorically representing evil as the absence of good in the world.

The contexts for Bilbo's invisibility are connected to a hidden war in *The Hobbit*: World War I, the war between good and evil that takes place in heart when it faces temptation, and the war that takes place on a much grander scale between good and evil in the created world and the cosmos. Tolkien lived through World War I, read through temptations of the heart depicted in medieval literature, and held to Christian teaching about the battle between good and evil raging across the whole universe. Naturally, but subtly, and nevertheless

⁵³ Here it is useful to recall once more Frodo's experience of being stabbed by the Ringwraith's Morgul knife on Weathertop (discussed above).

purposefully, he wove these elements into his mythology so that he might influence his readers for good.

While Bilbo is still holding onto the ring at the end of *The Hobbit*, lying about how he obtained it and using it to avoid “unpleasant callers” by whom he does not wish to be seen, he will not always do so. The ring’s evil, like most evil in the world, affects Bilbo without his full awareness or consent, but affect him it does, and deeply. Unlike many ring-bearers before him, however, Bilbo will give up the ring of his own accord. So gradually, he will become free of its corrupting influence. His will thus will become truly free, and Frodo, representing the next generation, will undertake the heavy responsibility of seeking to destroy the ring and its evil, and the ring will be destroyed despite the fact that Frodo gives into the ring’s temptation in the fires of Mount Doom.

In his essay on Tolkien’s Catholic imagination, Thomas W. Smith (2006) speculates that the infusion of Tolkien’s world-view in his mythological works is not a matter of explicitly teaching Christian doctrine, but rather a matter of providing readers with a way of seeing:

Belief is not only a matter of assenting to particular doctrines. That is a dimension of religious belief, but it is not the most important one. People assent to particular doctrines because they see reality through a specific lens. They believe *in* these realities because they believe something *about* reality. In this vein, Tolkien says, “I have not put in, or have cut out, practically all references to anything like ‘religion,’ to cults, or practices, in the imaginary world. For the religious element is absorbed into the story and symbolism” (L 172). That is, he refuses to place any particular religious practices or doctrines into his stories because they would only obscure the vision as a whole. So when we ask, “What is Tolkien’s Catholic imagination?” we are asking, ‘How do Catholic artists like Tolkien see the world and how is that vision incarnate in their art?’ As Flannery O’Connor wrote, a Catholic work of fiction is ‘one in which the truth as Christians know it has been used as a light to see the world by’ (Fitzgerald 173).⁵⁴

So, while the temporarily invisible characters in Tolkien’s stories cannot be seen by their fellow characters within the confines of Middle-earth, for readers, the problems of invisibility – moral, symbolic, and psychological – are illuminated by

⁵⁴ Thomas W. Smith, “Tolkien’s Catholic Imagination,” 74.

the story. In this sense, invisibility actually makes truth visible. Invisibility consequently becomes a prelude to redemption.

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