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TOLKIEN'S MIDDLE-EARTH: RACE PERSONIFIED THROUGH ORCS

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From the time of Middle-earth's creation, a complex society of hierarchies has existed both within and among the different races and creatures in Tolkien's world. The race-constructed hierarchies speak to the way in which the different races understand themselves and those around them, just as people do in today's modern society. While embarking on the journeys of this world with Bilbo Baggins in *The Hobbit*, with Frodo and the fellowship's journey across Middle-earth to destroy the ring and Sauron in Mordor in *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, and from the creation of Arda and Middle-earth until the Third Age in *The Silmarillion*, the reader begins to get a greater understanding of the multifaceted intricacies the creatures of this world create in view of their differences. However, what role do the creatures of Middle-earth accept for themselves if they were mere corruptions of another race by someone or something that is seemingly purely evil? The Orcs present this existential question throughout Tolkien's world, most engagingly in *The Lord of the Rings*. The reader is left to determine for themselves not only how the Orcs are viewed by the rest of Middle-earth, but also how they understand themselves, where they come from, and if they are inherently evil because of the way in which they were created. Understanding the Orcs' racial identity will first be examined by understanding their creation story, then by examining the way in which they live and function among other Orcs, both with and without a formal leader, and lastly by addressing the way other races in Middle-earth refer to and understand Orcs as a creature in their world and obstacles on their journeys. Essential to this discussion is the determination of whether or not the conception of an inferior and superior race is a conscious ideological construction.

J.R.R. Tolkien's legendarium as recorded in *The Silmarillion* offers infinite insight as to the particular histories of Arda, the Elves, men, Dwarves, Middle-Earth and the warring battles between those who fought for the preservation of good and peace and those among Melkor's

ranks who sought for domination and control of the people and creatures of this world as the first Dark Lord. From these accounts of history, it is to be understood that the Elves, or more specifically the Valar, were the first of their kind and were the highest ranking of those in society, created by Eru Ilúvater to live in the Undying Lands. However, the corruptions of evil and desire for domination led Melkor in a different direction – a path of evil that would be followed during the next three ages. Melkor’s path of evil will be examined more specifically through what is perceived to be his creation of Orcs as noted from multiple sources of Tolkien’s work. To begin, the Index of the *Silmarillion* defines Orcs as “creatures of Morgoth.”¹ In this instance it is important to note that Morgoth is another name for Melkor which was given to him by Fëanor, greatest of the Noldor, after the rape of the Silmarils.² So the creatures were not *of* a certain place, but rather were *of* a certain person, thereby suggesting that he was surely their initial commander at the very least, and implications that Melkor was also the creator of the Orcs.

The Silmarillion also records what is proposed to be the origin story of the Orcs, as well. In essence, the Orcs had originally been Elves of the Quendi who fell into the hands of Melkor through capture and in his mockery and envy of the Elves, the hierarchical race of the First Age, “were put there in prison, and by slow arts of cruelty were corrupted and enslaved.”³ This possible creation of another race, and if not a creation then surely a corruption of a former creature, was not done in the likeness of Eru as had been all of the other races until this point in the history of Middle Earth. How then should the race of Orcs fit into the hierarchy of Middle-earth if they are not comparable in regards to their creation and being in their world? Their

¹ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1977) pg 345.

² *Ibid*, 342.

³ *Ibid*, 50.

creation in this instance is seemingly drawn from pure evil, if we are to understand Melkor's existence as the first Dark Lord as evil; so then what purpose should the Orcs serve other than to carry out the evil in which they were created for? *The Silmarillion* also states that "deep in their dark hearts the Orcs loathed the Master whom they served in fear, the maker only of their misery. This it may be was the vilest deed of Melkor, and the most hateful to Ilúvater."⁴ The Orcs were therefore created as a corruption of good to serve evil, to prey on the fear dubbed upon them by their leader who would inevitably change over time, and could only prosper by doing what they were bred to do: kill and promote evil.

Tolkien also offers greater insight to the creation and being of Orcs in his published letters. More formally, Tolkien writes that "Orcs (the word is as far as I am concerned actually derived from Old English *orc* 'demon', but only because of its phonetic suitability) are nowhere clearly stated to be of any particular origin. But since they are servants of the Dark Power, and later of Sauron, neither of whom could, or would, produce living things, they must be 'corruptions.'"⁵ (178) In this instance, Tolkien's use of the word *corruption* instead of creation is particularly notable because this offers the implication that Orcs are not necessarily a race of their own and could possibly be understood as racially equivalent to Elves but hierarchically and socially viewed as lesser due to their evil nature. In another letter Tolkien speaks more directly on behalf of the *creation* of Orcs:

They would be Morgoth's greatest Sins, abuses of his highest privilege, and would be creatures begotten of Sin, and naturally bad. (I nearly wrote 'irredeemably bad'; but that would be going too far. Because by accepting or tolerating their making – necessary to their actual existence – even Orcs would become part of the World, which is God's and ultimately good.) But whether they could have 'souls' or 'spirits' seems a different question' and since in my myth at any rate I do not conceive of the making of souls or

⁴ Ibid, 50.

⁵ Humphrey Carpenter, editor and assisted by Christopher Tolkien, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1981) Letter 144, pg 178.

spirits, things of an equal order if not an equal power to the Valar, as a possible ‘delegation’, I have represented at least the Orcs as pre-existing real beings on whom the Dark Lord has exerted the fullness of his power in remodeling and corrupting them, not making them.⁶

This particularly religious understanding of Orcs, as the myth of Middle-earth relates to creation being ultimately good because all things are made in the likeness of God, or rather, in the likeness of Eru Ilúvater, is consistent with Tolkien’s Letter 144 that prevents Orcs from being understood as creations, but rather corruptions. However, this comment also creates a problem if we are to understand Orcs as purely evil in nature because anything that is created by God/Eru, even corruptions of such creations, is necessarily good and cannot be inherently or purely evil. In this instance, Orcs should therefore be recognized as evil in nature, but not inherently or purely evil because being evil in nature denotes the possibility of good they hold somewhere in their corrupted beings; whether or not they choose to act in accordance with good and shy away from evil is a different question especially if their leader’s purpose for them is only for evil and in times without a leader they lack direction and power to carry on.

By accepting the history of *The Silmarillion* and that the Orcs were corruptions of Elves by Melkor from evil inquisition to be used as tools to carry out evil and death from their leader, we must accept that their potential to be evil is lessened when they do not have a leader. Throughout the First Age, many thousands of Orcs had been bred by Melkor in Angbad in order to fight his battles for the name of evil which lasted several hundreds of years. So when their leader was finally defeated in battle, to what purpose did their lives serve if not to respond to a leader and carry out their duties to kill and serve evil in war. The Lord of the Rings Wiki states that “in the millennia after Melkor’s defeat and banishment from Arda they were without a

⁶ Ibid, Letter 153, pg 195.

leader, and degenerated to small, quarrelsome tribes hiding in the Misty Mountains. Only when led by a Maia like Sauron did they begin to reclaim some of their old power and become a real danger to Middle-earth.”⁷ This explains why the Dwarves and Bilbo encountered goblins in the caves of the Misty Mountains on their journey to the Lonely Mountain in *The Hobbit*. This perhaps also accounts for why they are referred to here as goblins and not as Orcs. Their nature and general being in *The Hobbit* denotes a very different type of Orc that is seen in *The Lord of the Rings* and speaks to the dependent nature of Orcs who need a Dark Lord in order to rise to their fullest potential and be most powerful.

During this time of confusion and dismay for the Orcs as they were scattered by their enemies, power figures were still sought among their own ranks which suggest an inherent nature of obedient and submissive behavior. For instance, when the Dwarves and Bilbo encounter the goblins in the Misty Mountains, one goblin stands out among them and is referred to as ‘the Great Goblin.’ As the Great Goblin speaks to Thorin Oakenshield he demands answers for who they are and what they are doing in the Misty Mountains. After Thorin’s response, another Goblin speaks to the Great Goblin: “‘He is a liar, O truly tremendous one!’ ... He held out the sword which Thorin had worn, the sword which came from the Trolls’ lair. The Great Goblin gave a truly awful howl of rage when he looked at it, and all his soldiers gnashed their teeth, clashed their shields, and stamped.”⁸ This comment from a presumably lower ranked goblin displays the power structure created among their group by referring to the “head” goblin as the Great Goblin and addressing him as the “truly tremendous one.” Yet, even in times where evil power took hold of Middle-earth, hierarchies among the bands of Orcs formed naturally, likely

⁷ “Orcs,” *The One Wiki To Rule Them All (LOTR Wiki)*, Accessed on 8 December, 2015. <http://lotr.wikia.com/wiki/Orcs>.

⁸ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit: or There and Back Again* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1966) pg 61.

due to the power structure they had been bred to recognize and adhere to. After all, the fall of Melkor was not the end of evil in Middle-earth, and their potential would soon be reinstated. LOTR Wiki also states that “sometime around SA 1000, Sauron reappeared in Middle-earth and made the land of Mordor his realm, and then started to build the foundations of Barad-Dûr. During the War of the Elves and Sauron in SA 1700, the Orcs formed the main host of Sauron’s power.”⁹

Throughout *The Lord of the Rings*, the fellowship, while they are together and after they are broken up, encounter tribes of Orcs from different parts of Middle-earth and the conversations between the tribes not only display a hierarchy between the different tribes, but also a hierarchy within the tribe itself as similarly seen in *The Hobbit* with the Great Goblin dynamic which was aforementioned. The chapter “The Uruk-Hai” in *The Two Towers* is essential to understanding the dynamics that are created among and within the tribes of Orcs. Pippin’s observation of the differences between the groups when they started fighting speak on behalf of the Orc’s physical differences, as well as their hierarchical differences. Pippin has seen “a large black Orc, probably Uglúk standing facing Grishnákh, a short crook-legged creature, very broad and with long arms that hung almost to the ground. Round them were many smaller goblins. Pippin supposed that these were the ones from the North.”¹⁰

This passage does one of many things, the first of which is noting the physical characteristics of the Orcs. The reference here to the blackness of the Orcs can be inferred as a direct relation to the darkness, or absence of light, seen throughout Tolkien’s legendarium. Darkness consistently has a direct correlation to evil and Morgoth, in part because of his raping

⁹ “Orcs,” *The One Wiki To Rule Them All (LOTR Wiki)*, Accessed on 8 December, 2015. <http://lotr.wikia.com/wiki/Orcs>.

¹⁰ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Two Towers* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1982) pg 50.

of the Silmarils which contained the Light of Valinor from the Two Trees, bringing all the light to the Land of the Valar in Arda. Therefore, the darkness is a remittance of this light which Melkor brought upon the Valar and all of Arda in the First Age. Tolkien also comments on the appearance of Orcs in Letter 210 by saying “the Orcs are definitely stated to be corruptions of the ‘human’ form seen in Elves and Men. They are (or were) squat, broad, flat-nosed, sallow-skinned, with wide mouths and slant eyes: in fact degraded and repulsive versions of the (to Europeans) least lovely Mongol-types.”¹¹ However, Tolkien’s “sallow-skinned” comment is a contradiction to the blackness Pippin referred to, possibly suggesting the variations of skin color among the Orcs and supporting the racial hierarchical theory. Uglúk is the leader of the Orcs from Isengard, whereas the other leader, Grishnákh, is an Orc who reports directly to Sauron. If we are to follow that Uglúk was the black Orc, and Grishnákh was the type of Orc Tolkien referred to in Letter 210 with sallow-skin, then physical racial constructions of the modern world would certainly apply to the racial constructions of Middle-earth in accordance with an Anglo-European view. On a similar note, “The Uruk-Hai” chapter also speaks about the physical appearance of the Isengard Orcs as “a grim dark band, four score at least of large, swart, slant-eyed Orcs with great bows and short broad-bladed swords.”¹² Again, reference is made to their darkness, but there is also description of their slanted eyes which suggest an assumption can be made that this is a common trait among all Orcs of Middle-earth.

The second point the passage from Pippin makes is there is a perceived difference and hierarchy that other races in Middle-earth understand when looking and interacting with the Orcs. Pippin notes that there are “many smaller goblins” around Uglúk and Grishnákh and

¹¹ Humphrey Carpenter, editor and assisted by Christopher Tolkien, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1981) Letter 210, pg 274.

¹² J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Two Towers* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1982), pg 54.

assumes that they are from the North. The fact that Pippin refers to these creatures as goblins and not Orcs denotes a significant difference that was aforementioned: the different power levels of Orcs between *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* where references to Goblins denote a lack of power and evil leadership and Orcs denote a dominating force of evil empowering the Orcs to act according to their command. In this instance, the Orcs led by Grishnákh are the most dominant because they are directly overseen by Sauron himself; the Orcs led by Uglúk are the second among the hierarchy since they are the Orcs of Isengard and commanded by Saruman who is but a lesser force of evil under Sauron; this leaves the Northern Orcs at the bottom of the hierarchy with no leader among them as dominant as Grishnákh or Uglúk and less malicious in comparison to the other Orcs because of their lack of evil leadership. The Orcs of Sauron also display their greater importance to the powers of evil in Middle-earth when Grishnákh shivers and licks his lips, “as if the word [Nazgûl] had a foul taste that he savoured painfully. ‘You speak of what is deep beyond the reach of your muddy dreams, Uglúk’... ‘Nazgûl! Ah! All that they make out! One day you’ll wish that you had not said that. Ape!’ he snarled fiercely. ‘You ought to know that they’re the apple of the Great Eye.’”¹³ Grishnákh is clearly disgusted here with the Isengard Orcs’ lack of knowledge about the Nazgûl, considering their critical role in Sauron’s plot to find the Ring and ultimately suggests that the closer to the leader of evil an Orc is, the more prestigious and powerful an Orc becomes within their own racial identity.

Understanding that Orcs view themselves in the context of evil is critical to understanding how other races of Middle-earth view the Orcs as a racial construct, as well. In no instance throughout *The Hobbit*, *The Silmarillion*, or *The Lord of the Rings* do races such as Elves, men, dwarves, hobbits, or even other powers of evil recognize the Orcs as similar or

¹³ Ibid, 55.

comparably better to any other creature of Middle-earth. Since the beginning of their *corruption*, Orcs have been bred for evil purposes, namely, to fight on behalf of evil in war, and have understood themselves in the context of evil throughout history. Similarly, the only time the reader sees a considerably tame conversation between Orcs and another race from Middle-earth was with the Great Goblin in the Misty Mountains from *The Hobbit*, but even then the conversation ended not in reason, but in an ensuing chase and hopeful battle (on behalf of the goblins).

The very lack of conversation about the Orcs throughout the journey of the fellowship to destroy the Ring and reinstate Aragorn as King also says something about the way other races generally understand the nature of Orcs. Upon the initial dissolution of the Fellowship and in the confusion that promptly ensued, Gimli, Legolas, and Aragorn discovered five slain Orcs who had not been killed by any of them. Rather than fearing for another enemy afoot, Legolas claimed that ““enemies of the Orcs are likely to be our friends.””¹⁴ This assertion shows that they are not the only ones in Middle-earth who believe the Orcs to be one of the enemy. In addition, each time anyone from the fellowship comes upon a hoard of Orcs, either dead or alive, it is either celebratory acknowledgement for their death or a battle that ensues, for example, the battle at Helm’s Deep. Other race’s lack of remorse and general acknowledgement demonstrate that there is no possibility of viewing the Orcs as anything but evil or tools of the enemy that must be defeated.

Despite the fact that within Middle-earth a hierarchy of races exists among Elves, men, dwarves, and so on, largely in relation to their time spent in Middle-earth/Arda, all of these races

¹⁴ Ibid, 24.

can agree upon their mutual hatred for the Orcs and their conscious recognition of them as the lowest of society and perhaps racially uncategorizable because they were not created by Eru and were corruptions into purely evil devices. The fact that they were designed to be malicious tools, subservient to higher powers is far more important in this case than is the fact that they were not created by Eru because throughout *The Silmarillion* there is no account given for where the hobbits come from despite a detailed account of nearly every other creature in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Not to mention, the Dwarves are said to be a creation by another creature, as well. More importantly, the conscious ideological construction of Orcs as a superbly inferior race by the other races throughout Middle-earth speaks to the insignificant racial identity Orcs assume in Tolkien's legendarium.

In summation, the Orcs of Middle-earth are generally understood as evil beings, at least in their nature, by all creatures in their world, including themselves. In fact, the belief in acting on behalf of evil is what gives the Orcs greater purpose and direction in their own lives, as seen by comparing the goblins of *The Hobbit* to the Orcs of *The Lord of the Rings*. In turn, this creates a hierarchy among the Orc population based on the strength of their subservient and evil nature. By examining Orcs through their creation story, or rather, their *corruption* story, by exploring the way in which they live, function, and refer to one another among other Orcs, and by observing the way in which other races of Middle-earth speak and view Orcs lead the reader of Tolkien's works to a greater understanding that Orcs are evil by nature and dutifully recognize themselves as such among other Orcs and races. These findings further submit to the grander racial construction of Middle-earth and the Orcs' acceptance of their own racial identity.