

Marquette University  
**e-Publications@Marquette**

---

4610 English: Individual Authors: J.R.R. Tolkien

English Department

---

10-1-2015

# Goblins, Greed, and Goodness: The Symbolic and Narrative Degradation of Goblins within The Hobbit

Katelyn Stine  
*Marquette University*

---

A paper completed for English 4610.

Katelyn Stine

Dr. Gerry Canavan

ENGL 4610

18 December 2015

Goblins, Greed, and Goodness  
The Symbolic and Narrative Degradation of Goblins within *The Hobbit*

---

Throughout *The Hobbit*, J.R.R Tolkien establishes a variety of races that range on a diverse scale of good and evil. Within this spectrum, Goblins are portrayed as being the most evil in comparison to every other race on Middle Earth. Tolkien utilizes a variety of literary devices -from a repeated symbolic association with fire to their physical intolerance to environmental elements such as sunlight- to establish the complete disconnection between the Goblins and the natural world. This detachment allows their race as an entirety to become the embodiment of evil, which functions as a plot device throughout the narrative. Goblins play a vital role within *The Hobbit*, as their race is ultimately degraded to being a mere symbol for evil. This serves as a reference for the goodness of other races. Additionally, the initial portrayal of the Goblins in *The Hobbit* is significant because throughout Tolkien's legendarium, "orcs are, in both quality and literal reference, interchangeable with "goblins" in folklore and Victorian fairy-telling" (Tyellas 5). *The Hobbit's* illustration of the Goblin race acts as the most fundamentally primitive representation of a race that is later referenced as Orcs throughout *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion*. Therefore, the Goblins play a unique and noteworthy role within the narrative of *The Hobbit*; the race itself is dehumanized into a representation of evil, which serves as a standard for defining goodness within the entire racial context of Middle Earth. This is a major source of Tolkien's plot development throughout the novel. Additionally,

there is a significant contrast between Tolkien's literary depiction and Peter Jackson's modern day cinematic portrayal of the Goblins in the film, *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey*. The evolution seen in the film is reflective of modern society's discomfort with using race to classify the inherent qualities of an entire group of people.

#### GOBLINS AS THE EMBODIMENT OF EVIL

---

Throughout *The Hobbit*, Tolkien establishes the entire Goblin race as one dimensional and static. Through Bilbo's interaction with the Goblins in the tunnels under the Misty Mountains, Tolkien portrays Goblins as the epitome of evil. This is exemplified through their initial description as, "big goblins, great ugly-looking goblins" that were "rough, and pinched unmercifully, and chuckled and laughed in their horrible stony voices" (The Hobbit 57). The external physical description of the Goblin as deeply unattractive serves as an initial reflection of the inherent unmerciful and wicked nature of their race. In addition, a character's voice is often symbolic of how that particular individual views and contributes to the world surrounding him or her. Consequently, the description of the Goblin's voices as "horrible" and "stony" illustrates the destructive and unfeeling way that they contribute to their surrounding world, both in the tunnels under the Misty Mountain, and to Middle Earth as a whole. The initial portrayal of the Goblins as vile is further solidified when it is stated that they are, "cruel, wicked, and bad-hearted. They make no beautiful things...hammers, axes, swords, daggers, pickaxes, tongs, and also instruments of torture, they make very well, or get other people to make to their design, prisoners and slaves that have to work till they die for want of air and light" (The Hobbit 59). Through

the depiction of the race as “bad-hearted,” Tolkien’s synecdochically uses the description of a Goblin’s hearts to represent the cruel nature of its entire being. The destructive nature of the Goblin race within the world is further established through their role in the creation of weapons, or “instruments of torture.” The inhumane treatment of prisoners and slaves removes their society from the fundamentally good elements of nature, such as air and light. This is significant as it establishes a separation between the Goblin race and nature, which, as seen through the fates of their prisoners, ultimately leads to death. Thus, Goblins play an active and central role in the creation of weapons; this reflects the pain and suffering that they impose on society, which enforces Tolkien’s representation of the race as vile.

Throughout many of his works, Tolkien utilizes imagery relating to the landscape of middle earth to reflect the goodness, or lack thereof, present within his characters. This is depicted in the critical essay *The Mirror of Tolkien: The Natural World and Community in the Lord of the Rings*, where Resta states, “Tolkien infused his mythology with his belief in the intrinsic value of beings of the natural world; thus, many of the Free Folk are closely linked with Nature” (Resta 2). Through the lendarium, the relationships that certain characters have with the landscape of Middle Earth serves to exemplify their awareness, value and respect (or lack thereof) for the natural order of the world, and the creatures living within it. For example, in *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*, the mountain of Orodruin is the physical manifestation of Sauron’s presence. It is described as, “the Mountain of Fire. Ever and anon the furnaces far below its ashen cone would grow hot and with a great surging and throbbing pour forth rivers of molten rock from chasms in its sides. Some would flow blazing towards Barad-dur down great channels; some would

wind their way into the stony plain, until they cooled and lay like twisted dragon-shapes vomited from the tormented earth” (The Return of the King 879). The symbol of fire is strongly associated with Sauron’s rise of power. Through phrases such as “throbbing,” “blazing” and “tormented earth,” Tolkien’s use of diction portrays the destructive effects that Sauron has on the environment. Tolkien’s mention of furnaces also serves as a possible reference to the rise of industrialization, which he perceived as the modern day destruction of nature. The description of Orodruin is significant, as it strongly exemplifies Tolkien’s use of nature to directly reflect the inherent evil of Sauron. The dark imagery utilized in this depiction of Orodruin concretizes Sauron’s complete disregard for the natural order of the world; his ultimate goal is complete unchallenged power, which demolishes any societal order or balance present in Middle Earth. Ergo, Tolkien utilizes the environmental landscape of Middle Earth to echo the personal qualities of his characters.

Similarly to Tolkien’s portrayal of Sauron and Orodruin, the Goblins in *The Hobbit* are also portrayed as being disconnected from nature; this leads to their characterization as wicked creatures. The communal disregard for elements of nature is portrayed through music, where the Goblins sing:

*“Burn, burn tree and fern!  
Shrivel and scorch! A fizzling torch  
To light the night for our delight  
Ya hey!” (The Hobbit 98)*

Through his use of a song, Tolkien depicts cohesion and solidity within the Goblin race. Aside from the Great Goblin, no individuality is presented throughout their population; consequently, the reader views the race-and their disregard for the order of nature-as a

uniform force. The lack of individuality of the Goblins throughout *The Hobbit* removes any complexity or culture within their race; consequently, their race is degraded to being a symbol of evil rather than personified characters. This is further exemplified when the goblins set fire to trees that Bilbo, the dwarves and Gandalf are in, which they, “fe[e]d with leave and dead branches and bracken....till the running fire was licking the fuel piled under the trees. Smoke was in Bilbo’s eyes, he could feel the heat of the flames” (The Hobbit 98). Tolkien utilizes the imagery of the fire and the trees to once again emphasize a disconnection between the Goblins and the rest of nature surrounding Middle Earth. This is analogous to his symbolic use of fire in his portrayal of Orodruin, and consequently illustrates the destructive nature of the Goblin race. Furthermore, the suffocating nature of the smoke demonstrates the restricting effect that the destruction of nature has on “Free Folk” in Middle Earth, such as hobbits, elves and humans. Tolkien utilizes the natural elements within middle earth to exhibit the devastating qualities of the Goblin race as a whole.

Additionally, Tolkien exploits the location of the Goblins’ living space to concretize the malicious nature of the race. This is initially established through the depiction of the living underground as “deep, deep, dark” in the “heart of the mountains,” where “the passages there were crossed and tangled in all directions” (The Hobbit 57). The physical separation of the Goblins from the rest of the societies living in Middle earth distinguishes their race as being estranged and detached. Bilbo, a Hobbit, and the dwarves are unable to follow the organization of the Goblin’s home, simply perceiving their dwellings to be “crossed and tangled.” This further emphasizes the disjunction present between the races. The caves under the Misty Mountain serve as a metaphor for the Goblin’s position in the

hierarchy of Middle Earth; their race is both literally and figuratively lower than or “less than” the other races, such as the elves, hobbits, or eagles. This idea is portrayed in Robert T. Tally’s critical essay, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Orcs: Simple Humanity in Tolkien’s Inhuman Creates*, where Tally states that the Elvan, Human, Dwarf, and Hobbit races are distinct from the “evil races” of Trolls, Goblins/Orcs and Dragons, and that “racial characterization are consistent with the discourse of his time and, in any event, consistent with the “hierarchical world” in which his mythic history unfolds” (Tally 20). This exemplifies the correlation between the physical placement of the Goblins’ living quarters and their placement within the racial hierarchy found throughout Tolkien’s legendarium.

The separation of the Goblins from the rest of Middle Earth is also exemplified through their separation from natural elements, such as light. They “don’t like the sun: it makes their legs wobble and their heads giddy” (*The Hobbit* 84). The sun is often symbolic as the primary source of the day, light and life itself. Yet, the Goblin’s have an inability to physically function within the context of natural sunlight; this reflects that the Goblin’s environment of isolation and segregation from the rest of the world is unnatural. They have the inability to properly function as a true “race.” They lack fundamental characteristics such as culture, individuality, and a connection with the most primitive elements of Middle Earth. This is further illustrated through setting of the big cavern that is “lit by a great red fire in the middle, and by torches along the walls” (*The Hobbit* 58). Through his description of the underground setting, Tolkien again establishes the Goblins as being separated from all natural light. The only light source available is the red fire. This is significant as the color red is often representative of emotions such as hatred and anger; this accurately parallels with the reactions of the Goblins upon finding Thorin’s

possession of Orcist, the Goblin-cleaver. In addition, Tolkien again utilizes the literary symbolism of fire to depict the destructive nature of the Goblin race. Their living environment completely separates them from all the elements of the natural world. Consequently, Goblins lack any racial identity or diversity; their lifestyle is simply darkness, devastation, hatred and violence. This degrades the Goblin race to become the embodiment of evil within Tolkien's legendarium. Hence, Tolkien's literary use of light establishes the Goblins as an isolated race that is representative of wickedness.

#### THE USE OF GOBLINS AS A STANDARD FOR GOOD AND EVIL

---

Tolkien utilizes the presence of the Goblin race within *The Hobbit* to establish a standard of reference for the determination of good and evil. This is first established through the introduction of the character of Gollum, where it is stated that he, "like meat too. Goblin he thought good, when he could get it; but he took care they never found him out. He just throttled them from behind" (*The Hobbit* 68). Through Gollum's diet, Tolkien establishes an animalistic hierarchical association between Goblins and Gollum. Through his literal dietary consumption of Goblins, Tolkien figuratively associates their stereotypically evil characteristics with his character. This ultimately foreshadows the darkness of his character that becomes evident throughout the *Lord of the Rings*. Moreover, similarly to the Goblins, Gollum also lives underground and in complete darkness. His initial portrayal suggests that he, like the Goblins, is secluded from the natural world; this is solidified when it is stated that he, "lost all his friends and was driven away, alone, and crept down, down into the dark under the mountain" (*The Hobbit* 69).



The proximity of Gollum's home to the tunnels of the Goblin's indicates that he also lacks a social connection to stereotypically denoted "good" races, such as the Hobbits. Tolkien uses the physical description of his home to establish that Gollum endures the same isolation from the rest of Middle Earth that the Goblins experience. Thus, the recurring characteristics strongly associated with the Goblin race can be used to place Gollum on the evil spectrum on the gamut of good and evil within Tolkien's legendarium. This is significant as it foretells many of Gollum's intentions and behavior as his character develops throughout the progression of *The Lord of the Rings*.

Contrastingly to Gollum's character, the Goblins also assist in defining the heroic characters within Tolkien's legendarium, such as the Eagles. The Goblins are established as the foil race compared to the Eagles; the juxtaposition between these two serves as a plot function that allows moments of eucatastrophe to occur. Eucatastrophe is defined as the sudden and unexpected change of events that prevents destruction of protagonists, such as saving Bilbo in *The Hobbit*. The conflict present between the Goblins and Eagles is illustrated when the Eagles save Bilbo, Gandalf and the Dwarvian Company from death by the Goblin's fire: "Over them swooped the eagles; the ark rush of their beating wings smote them to the floor or drove them far away; their talons tore at goblin faces" (*The Hobbit* 99). In terms of physical placement within Middle Earth, the Goblin's and Eagle's occupy fundamentally different roles, both in terms of a race and as a plot device. While the Goblins inhabit underground tunnels that are separated from the rest of Middle Earth, the Eagles contrastingly act as the superior race. They are noble and knowledgeable creatures of the sky. Goblins act as villains within the plot narrative; consequently, this gives the Eagles the opportunity to fulfill a heroic role. The presence of Goblins is essential to the

plot development, as their race embodies the antihero role, and allows races such as the Eagles to fulfill the opposing heroic role. This leads to the development of narrative moments of eucatastrophe. Therefore, through the context of *The Hobbit*, the Goblin race acts as a standard of evil that allows the Eagles to be originally defined as good. This original portrayal of the Eagles remains accurate throughout Tolkien's legendarium. In *The Silmarillion*, the Great Eagles are aligned with Manwe, "to whom all birds are dear...had sent forth the race of Eagles, commanding them to dwell in the crags of the North, and to keep watch upon Morgoth" (*The Silmarillion* 110). The association between the Eagles and the Lord of the Valar, Manwe, exemplifies Tolkien's historically consistent portrayal of the Great Eagles as virtuous throughout his works. In *The Lord of the Rings*, the Eagles provide additional moments of eucatastrophe when Gwaihir rescues Gandalf the Grey from Isengard tower, and through their assistance in the Battle of the Morannon. Thus, the presence of the Goblins in *The Hobbit* is significant as they act as a standard for evil; this allows the Eagles to act as heroes in the narrative.

The Battle of Five Armies provides the ultimate example of the Goblins literary role within *The Hobbit*, both as a symbol for evil, but also as a narrative plot device. Prior to the arrival of the Goblins and Wargs on the Lonely Mountain, the Men of Dale, Dwarves, and Elves fight over the dragon Smaug's treasure. Tolkien utilizes gold, whether through Smaug's treasure or Bilbo's ring, throughout his legendarium as a physical manifestation and representation of evil. This is emphasized in *Morgoth's Ring*, where it is stated that, "Morgoth's power was disseminated throughout Gold, if nowhere absolute (for he did not create God) it was nowhere absent" (Christopher Tolkien 400). This creates a direct link between all gold present in Middle Earth and the source of evil powers. Ergo, the selfish

conflict over treasure initially establishes the human, dwarf, and elven races as being associated with these evil forces. Yet, upon the arrival of the Goblins and Wargs, “all other quarrels were forgotten” because “the Goblins were the foes of all” (The Hobbit 256). Tolkien establishes the Goblins as the fundamental embodiment of evil throughout *The Hobbit*. Consequently, their race acts as a universal enemy, which provides a standard for defining the goodness of others. The presence of the Goblins as a symbol for evil acts as a plot device, as it gives the dwarves, humans and elves the racial perspective that drives them to form an alliance. Moreover, because the Goblins act the personification of evil, their race is completely dehumanized. This is illustrated when the narrator describes the Goblin casualties, stating, “The rocks were stained black with goblin blood...Once again the goblins were stricken in the valley; and they were piled in heaps till Dale was dark and hideous with their corpses” (The Hobbit 258-259). Both the narrator and the characters within *The Hobbit* exhibit a complete disregard for the value of Goblin life. The race as a whole is the quintessential representation of evil; this degrades the entirety of the race. They function as a mere symbol for wickedness; both within the societal context of Middle Earth, and within the narrative plot development of Tolkien’s legendarium. This makes their lives, essentially, insignificant. Consequently, the Goblins do not function as an actual race within its society, but instead as a mere symbol that serves a narrative function within the context of *The Hobbit*.

## MODERN DAY DISCOMFORT WITH HOMOGENIZING RACIAL GROUPS

---

The juxtaposition between Tolkien's literary portrayal and Peter Jackson's interpretation of the Goblin race in the film *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey* exposes an evolution of racial understanding within the modern world. Since Tolkien's original publication of *The Hobbit* in 1937, society's perception of race and individuality has changed. In the essay *The Unnatural History of Tolkien's Orcs*, Tyellas states that, "The out-of-date racial stereotyping [in Tolkien's works] is regrettable. In Tolkien's more focused orc/human comparisons in correspondence, Tolkien compares Axis members in WWII and even evil Englishmen to Orcs. In the recent LOTR films, the special effects interpretations of the orcs are more racially neutral than Tolkien's description" (Tyellas 4-5). This exemplifies how Tolkien's surroundings, such as the prevalence of World War II, impacted his writings; like any author, his works are influenced by the historical time period. Tolkien's description of the entire Goblin race as evil or less capable is not unlike the European's perception of the Germans in World War II or of the Asian culture in the 1930s. Furthermore, Tyellas reveals the discomfort that modern day readers have with degrading an entire race into a single stereotype. This is further exemplified in Lawrence Blum's critical essay *Stereotypes and Stereotyping: A Moral Analysis*, where he states, "The cognitive distortions involved in stereotyping lead to various forms of moral distortion" (Blum 1). The contemporary essay illustrates the modern day perspective that homogenizing an entire racial group is, at its core, an immoral action. This stance is exemplified through the contemporary movement to educate Americans on Islamic culture in order to combat the negative stereotypes associated with extremist groups, such as

Islamic State of Iraq and the Syria, more popularly known as ISIS. For the most part, individuals living in modern society are significantly more uncomfortable with a one-dimensional representation of a racial group; this contrasts to the historical mindset at the time that Tolkien wrote his legendarium.

In the film, *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey*, the portrayal of the Goblins significantly contrasts from the novel. Modern day readers of Tolkien are uncomfortable with the idea of an entire race being perceived as completely evil and an universal enemy. This is most strongly exemplified in Jackson's portrayal of the Goblins in the scene "Goblin Town." In the extended edition film, the Goblins play instruments, such as the gong and the drums. The Great Goblin also sings a solo and dances. This is significant as music is often indicative of harmony, beauty and artistic creativity, which are depicted through Eru and the Ainur's composition of music before the beginning of time in *The Silmarillion*. Ergo, Jackson's addition of an individual's singing and dancing to the scene reveals positive qualities about the Goblin culture and, as a result, humanizes the race as a whole. The Great Goblin sings his song, then states, "catchy isn't it? It's one of my own compositions" (Dir Peter Jackson). Through this whimsical depiction of The Great Goblin, the film deviates from Tolkien's one-dimensional depiction of the Goblin race. While the Goblins still function as the enemy to the dwarves and Bilbo, Jackson adds humanistic elements such as musical instruments, dancing, and humor to the Goblin race. This adds individuality to the characters, which challenges their homogeneous representation in the novel. In addition, The Great Goblin's use of the modern phrase "warts and all" provides a connection between the goblin race and contemporary society (Dir Peter Jackson). Overall, Jackson's portrayal of the Goblin race is significantly more personable and relatable compared to their

depiction in the novel. This consequently demonstrates the historical development of society's perception of race over the last 60 years.

Ultimately, while the Goblins only participate in three scenes throughout the entirety of *The Hobbit*, their role is vital to the progression of the narrative. Tolkien portrays the entirety of their race as one unit. The only individual Goblin character identified in the novel is the Great Goblin, who is killed by Gandalf upon his introduction. His death strips Goblins of any history, cultural diversity or connection with nature, which are dominating characteristics that contribute to the racial identity of other races, such as the Elves or Humans. Consequently, the entire Goblin race is diminished into becoming a mere symbol for evil within the context of Middle Earth. They act as a universal enemy in Tolkien's legendarium, which serves as a standard for defining other races as good and evil. This is concretized by a total disregard for a value of Goblin life in the Battle of Five Armies and in the tunnels under the Misty Mountains. Moreover, the concept of perceiving an entire race as one homogenous entity is a philosophy that has become less prevalent over time. Jackson's filmic depiction of the race adds elements of culture, individuality and personality to the Goblins that are not present in the novel; this reveals the immorality that modern day society associates with stereotyping racial groups as a whole unit. Therefore, the presence of the Goblin race within the narrative of *The Hobbit* is vital; they serve as universal enemies that embody evil, which standardizes the racial hierarchy in Middle Earth, and allows narrative moment of eucatastrophe to occur. In addition, a comparison between Tolkien's one-dimensional literary depiction and Jackson's dynamic cinematic portrayal of Goblins reveals a shift in society's perception of race over time.

## Works Cited

- Blum, Lawrence. "Stereotypes and Stereotyping of Others." *Philosophical Papers* 33.3 (2005): 251-81. University of Massachusetts, Nov. 2004. Web. 17 Dec. 2015.
- Resta, Anna Marie. "The Mirror of Tolkien: The Natural World and Community in the Lord of the Rings | Resta | Trumpeter." *The Mirror of Tolkien: The Natural World and Community in the Lord of the Rings | Resta | Trumpeter*. Trumpeter, 1990. Web. 07 Dec. 2015.
- Tally, Robert T., Jr. "Let Us Now Praise Famous Orcs: Simple Humanity in Tolkien's Inhuman Creates." *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams and Mythopoeic Literature* 29.111/112 (2010): 17-28. *A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*. Fall 2010. Web. 10 Dec. 2015.
- The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey*. Dir. Peter Jackson. Warner Brothers UK, 2013. DVD.
- Tolkien, J. R. R., and Christopher Tolkien. *Morgoth's Ring: The Later Silmarillion, Part 1, the Legends of Aman*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993. Print.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Hobbit*. New York: Mariner, 2012. Print.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Return of the King*. New York: Mariner, 2012. Print.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Silmarillion*. New York: Mariner, 2014. Print.
- Tyellas. "The Unnatural History of Tolkien's Orcs." *The Unnatural History of Tolkien's Orcs* (n.d.): 1-12. Web. 6 Dec. 2015