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Abstract

A careful study of “the orcish question,” in which the author investigates their behavior, conversations, and interactions with other races in order to propose some challenging conclusions about racism, souls, and Tolkien’s purpose in creating orcs the way he did.

Additional Keywords

Race and racism in J.R.R. Tolkien; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Orcs



LET US NOW PRAISE FAMOUS ORCS: SIMPLE HUMANITY IN TOLKIEN'S INHUMAN CREATURES

ROBERT C. TALLY, JR.

IN J.R.R. TOLKIEN'S SPRAWLING *LEGENDARIUM*, the mythic world of Middle-earth and its suburbs, Orcs provide a seemingly endless supply of enemies to challenge the mettle of the noble Elves, Men, Dwarves, and Hobbits. As every reader of the books (and every viewer of the blockbuster films) knows, Orcs are the inevitable foot soldiers of "evil," employed by both the traitorous wizard Saruman and the Great Enemy Sauron in *The Lord of the Rings*, forming the infantry of Morgoth's vast armies in *The Silmarillion*, and being the one race against which all others unite in *The Hobbit's* Battle of Five Armies. For the most part, good and evil are strictly demarcated in Tolkien's world (with a few interesting exceptions), but, even by that almost Manichean standard, Orcs are presented with surprising uniformity as loathsome, ugly, cruel, feared, and especially terminable. In Tolkien's world, as Mary Ellmann once put it, "the only good Orc is a dead Orc" (225).

Yet, as dedicated readers discern, Tolkien could not resist the urge to flesh out and "humanize" these inhuman creatures from time to time. In such examples as those I discuss below, Tolkien presents Orcs who have human—even humane—qualities, notwithstanding their generally negative characteristics. This fact makes it a bit disturbing, then, that Tolkien's heroes, without the least pang of conscience, dispatch Orcs by the thousands. Indeed, letters and unpublished manuscripts reveal that Tolkien himself struggled with the metaphysical and moral problems he had set up by inventing and using Orcs as he does.

This uneasiness is understandable when considering the origins of Orcs (i.e., in Tolkien's world, not the philological or folkloric origins in ours), a subject of some disagreement as even Tolkien changed his mind over time. The canonical view presented in *The Silmarillion* is that the Elves "by slow arts of cruelty were corrupted and enslaved; and thus did Melkor breed the hideous race of the Orcs in envy and mockery of the Elves" (*Silmarillion* 47). In *The Two Towers*, Treebeard explains to Merry and Pippin that "Trolls are only counterfeits, made by the Enemy in the Great Darkness, in mockery of Ents, as Orcs were of Elves" (III.4.486). Elsewhere in *The Silmarillion*, the surmise that Orcs were former Elves—specifically the Avari or Dark Elves, who did not go to Valinor as did the Light Elves—is given further credence: "Whence they [the

Orcs] came, or what they were, the Elves knew not then, thinking them perhaps to be Avari who had become evil and savage in the wild; in which they guessed all too near, it is said" (*Silmarillion* 103–104). This explanation would make the most sense in Tolkien's *legendarium*, if only because Orcs appear after Elves but before Men in the mythic history of Arda. However, as Dimitra Fimi points out, "the thought that the hideous and malicious Orcs were once Elves—the 'highest' beings of Middle-earth—became increasingly unbearable to Tolkien" (155). Indeed, in unpublished manuscripts written in the 1950s and 1960s (see, e.g. *Morgoth's Ring* 408–425), Tolkien toyed with several different ideas to explain the Orcs' existence, ranging from corrupted Men (rather than corrupted Elves) to low-level Maia (and hence, fallen "angels" like Sauron himself) and even to automata without reason who were essentially puppets controlled by Morgoth or Sauron (an admittedly unlikely scenario). There is even the vague suggestion that Orcs *were* a kind of man, distant cousins of the Drúedain or related to the Púkel Men who appear in *The Return of the King*. "[S]ome thought, nonetheless, that there had been a remote kinship, which accounted for their special enmity. Orcs and Drúgs each regarded the other as renegades" (*Unfinished Tales* 401–02). And, as Christopher Tolkien concludes, "This then, as it may appear, was my father's final view on the matter: Orcs were bred from Men" (*Morgoth's Ring* 421).

The crucial philosophical point in the various arguments concerning Orc origins is that their *very existence* shows they have value and are worthy of being. An article of faith in Tolkien's world is that only God (in the Elvish, Eru or Ilúvatar) can *create*, and the evil ones—whether Melkor (a.k.a. Morgoth, Tolkien's original Satan figure), or Sauron (Melkor's acolyte and successor), or Saruman (who apparently breeds his own Orcs or "half-Orcs")—can only *pervert* that creation. To put it another way, no new "souls" or "spirits" can be created. Frodo explains as much to Sam when he states: "The Shadow that bred them [the Orcs] can only mock, it cannot make: not real new things of its own. I don't think it gave life to the Orcs, it only ruined them and twisted them" (VI.1.914).

Indeed, this principle is dramatized and made perfectly clear in *The Silmarillion's* description of the origin of Dwarves. Aulë, a Vala (or "good" god) who longs to share his great knowledge with pupils and becomes impatient waiting for the Elves to awaken, actually creates Dwarves, but they are merely as clay figurines or puppets with no independent being. Ilúvatar chastises Aulë for attempting a thing "beyond thy power and thy authority" (*Silmarillion* 37–38), but even so Ilúvatar grants his wish by giving the Dwarves life. Incidentally, Tolkien emphasizes that the instinct or desire to create new things—that is, to become like God himself—almost inevitably leads to the Fall, visible in Melkor's own downfall, as well as Fëanor's, in the *Silmarillion*; tellingly, both Sauron and Saruman are Maiar of Aulë, known for their otherworldly abilities in crafts and creativity. A possible exception is the creation of *myth*, which Tolkien, speaking

as Philomythus, claims was “our right (used or misused)” (“Mythopoeia” 87), so one might argue that the sin lies in the abuse of the gifts of creativity rather than in their prudent employment. But Tolkien shows a clear preference for those who sustain or preserve that which already exists over those who would attempt to create anew. What this episode of Aulë and the genesis of the Dwarves underscores is that not even the Valar, the most powerful entities in the world, have the power to create new beings or imbue creatures with life. What this also means, of course, is that anything that in fact *has life*, has it with the tacit if not explicit approval of Ilúvatar. As Tolkien concedes in a letter, drafted but unsent, “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” (*Letters* 195). Hence, like Men and Elves, Orcs are in a way also the “Children of Ilúvatar.”

In a nutshell, as Tom Shippey puts it, “though he became increasingly concerned over the implications of the orcs in his story, and tried out several explanations for them, their analogousness to humanity always remained clear” (“Orcs, Wraiths, Wights” 186). Orcs partake of a humanity that renders them familiar and akin, albeit loathsome, to the race of Men. For example, although we do not meet any female Orcs, *The Silmarillion* establishes that Orcs “had life and multiplied after the manner” of Elves and Men, that is, sexually (47). Indeed, it seems that Orcs, like Elves, can interbreed with humans, as Saruman is said to breed “half-Orcs” or “goblin-men” (III.7.524). It is hinted, though not confirmed, that the “squint-eyed southerner,” an agent of Saruman who appears to conspire with Bill Ferny in Bree, may be part Orc; at least Frodo certainly thinks so: “He looks more than half like a goblin” (I.11.176). In effect, then, Orcs are well established to be physically human, if not spiritually so, throughout the *legendarium*.

What is more, Tolkien moves well beyond anatomical similarities between Men and Orcs. Tolkien alludes to or describes actual Orc cultures and civilizations. Although “[O]rcs entered Middle-earth originally just because the story needed a continual supply of enemies over whom one need feel no compunction” (Shippey, *Road to Middle-earth* 233), Tolkien obviously provides much more ethnographic and social background for Orcs than such a plot-device would require. The Orcs of Middle-earth are shown to have real communities and even families. In *The Hobbit*, for instance, Gandalf declares, “The Goblins are upon you! Bolg of the North is coming, O Dain! whose father you slew in Moria” (17.281); the actual battle in which Bolg’s father, Azog, is killed by Dáin Ironfoot is described in the Tale of Years in *The Lord of the Rings* (Appendix A.1049). Hence, vengeance and familial honor motivate the assault, more so than some inherently evil nature. Vengeance is undoubtedly one of the *human, all-too-human* impulses driving the Orc attack, especially after Gandalf had killed the Great

Goblin, governor of the Orc village in the Misty Mountains. Far from being mindless drones, robots, or clones (which is George Lucas's solution to the ethical problem in *Star Wars*), Orcs are "'rational incarnate' creatures" (Tolkien, *Letters* 190), who have deeply human feelings, conventions, and cultures. In fact, perhaps even more than the Elves, whose near-perfection marks them with a profound otherness, Orcs are shown to be human.

One may well wish to view "the Orcish question" through the lens of race or racism. It is true that one can only read about the "swart" and "slant-eyed" Orcs so many times without becoming offended. In a notorious letter, Tolkien himself invites a racial characterization of Orcs: "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" (*Letters* 274). Race, in the modern sense (and therefore also in a somewhat anachronistic sense), is itself a pressing concern in Tolkien's world, as Tolkien establishes elaborate hierarchies based upon bloodlines and familial heritage among and within the races of Elves, Men, Dwarves, and Hobbits, not to mention in distinguishing them from the "evil" races of Orcs, Trolls, Dragons, and so on. Fimi has discussed the problem of race in Tolkien at length, concluding that Tolkien's sometimes objectionable racial characterizations are consistent with the discourse of his time and, in any event, consistent with the "hierarchical world" in which his mythic history unfolds (Fimi 131–59). Somewhat less charitably, Peter Firchow has concluded that the underlying ideology of *The Hobbit* and other writings supports an essentially fascist worldview (see Firchow). Yet the overall world of fantasy adventure requires a broadly understood enemy class, which may or may not be identifiably a race or a species, so that the heroes have an endless source of enemies to fight. For example, in the Tolkien-influenced world of *Dungeons & Dragons*, along with the numberless video-game derivatives, a veritable "Orc Holocaust" is not only the result but the aim of the adventures (see Sofge), and the language of race makes this practice seem all the more abominable.

However, even if one were to accuse Tolkien of racism (which I am not doing), racism alone would not explain Tolkien's treatment of the Orcs. The apparently racial image of Orcs is still wholly different from Tolkien's treatment of different "races" of Men, and Orcs are not treated in the same way that humans of color are, whether enemies like the Southrons or the Easterlings, or allies like Ghân-buri-Ghân. For instance, consider Sam's sympathy for the "swarthy" Southron, cut down while fleeing, his "brown hand" still clutching a broken sword: "He wondered what the man's name was and where he came from; and if he was really evil at heart, or what lies or threats had led him on his long march from his home; and if he would not really have rather stayed there in

peace" (IV.4.661). Of course, Sam—who longs for home and peace frequently in *The Lord of the Rings*—does not consider what potential "lies and threats" have brought his own company to wage war on diverse peoples and races of the South and East; more to the point, Sam shows no sympathy at all for slain Orcs. Even humans in the service of evil may not be "evil at heart," but the unquestioned assumption of the "free peoples" of Middle-earth is that Orcs must be evil by nature.

Later, when the Ring is finally destroyed and Sauron vanquished, many of the humans in Mordor's service flee, surrender, or continue fighting, but Tolkien depicts Orcs as mindless ants that "wander witless and purposeless and then feebly die" (VI.4.949), a characterization that does not easily square with what we had learned of Orcs in earlier scenes, as I discuss below. In *The Lord of the Rings*, Orcs do not sue for mercy or seek peace, and therefore Tolkien need not imagine any Orcish civilization post-Sauron or any peaceful accord (or at least *détente*) between Orcs and Men in the Fourth Age. Notably, in the distinction between enemy Men and enemy Orcs, Tolkien is willing to accord some rights and respectability even to these fallen or lowborn humans fighting on Sauron's behalf, as when Aragorn—now King Elessar of Gondor—releases the Easterlings who had surrendered on the battlefield, makes peace with the swarthy men of the South, and frees the thralls of Mordor, granting them lands in that region (VI.5.968). No such accommodations are made for the Orcs, who lack any human rights in Tolkien's world. Hence, race or racial prejudice is not really the issue. Even with Tolkien's race-based hierarchies, even with racial description of Orcs (as Mongol-types), and even with the surmise that Orcs are in fact a twisted or corrupted form of Men, Orcs in Tolkien's world are not viewed as a subordinate or inferior race of humans, but as entirely inhuman.

As Janet Brennan Croft has elaborated in some detail, this "demonization of the enemy" is a logical strategy not only within the fictional world of Middle-earth, but also in the real world of wartime ideology. Croft cites Paul Fussell's account in *The Great War and Modern Memory* of the "gross dichotomizing" on the part of propagandists of the era: "'We' are all here on this side; 'the enemy' is over there. 'We' are individuals with names and personal identities; 'he' is a mere collective entity. We are visible; he is invisible. We are normal; he is grotesque. Our appurtenances are normal; his, bizarre" (Fussell 75; qtd. in Croft 47–48). Such "demonization" may even be taken literally in *The Lord of the Rings*: Orcs may actually *be* demons, according to one alternative theory of Orcish origins in which Orcs are lesser *Maiar*, not unlike the monsters Shelob and Ungoliant, Balrogs, and Sauron himself (see *Morgoth's Ring* 414); furthermore, Tolkien states that the very word "orc" derives from a Old English term for "demon" (*Letters* 177–78). In wartime letters to Christopher Tolkien, Tolkien compares the Germans to Orcs, albeit in a strictly metaphorical sense. Tolkien

was not one of those propagandists observed by Fussell. He did not confuse actual Germans with their demonic caricatures, and his sympathy for all soldiers is clear throughout his work. In fact, as he pointed out in one letter, referring to the horrors of combat, "I think the orcs as real a creation as anything in 'realistic' fiction [...] only in real life they are on both sides, of course" (*Letters* 82). Tolkien clearly recognizes that his Orcs, while horrible, are not inhuman. As a practical matter, however, it is easier to fight and to cheer on the fighters if one can be convinced that the other side is irredeemably evil. The demonization of the enemy, in the hawkish rhetoric of war and in the seemingly escapist genre of fantasy, might also be said to validate the most atrocious views. As Firchow writes, referring to the genocidal bloodlust of such popular film series as *The Terminator* and *Star Wars*, "one can conjecture that it probably has much to do with the apparently universal psychological need to find some category of being whom we can all love to hate" (31). Orcs certainly fit the bill.

Yet Tolkien occasionally reveals a not entirely unsympathetic view of Orcs, in which what might be called their simple humanity becomes visible. I am thinking especially of two scenes from *The Two Towers*—the conversation between Shagrat and Gorbag, and the interactions of Uglúk and Grishnákh—which disclose more than one would expect about the role of Orcs in the geopolitical system of Middle-earth. From a storyteller's perspective, strictly speaking, these scenes also give the reader additional insights that may help to complete the "big picture" of the narrative, which is, after all, fragmented and divided after the disbanding of the Fellowship of the Ring, as the reader must follow three distinct parties on separate journeys (Frodo and Sam toward Mordor, Merry and Pippin in Fangorn Forest, and Aragorn, Legolas, and Gimli in Rohan). If nothing else, the Orc's point of view is quite different from that of others, and thus these scenes depict images that may counteract or enhance the imagery in the overall scheme of things. As Michael N. Stanton notes, "the worms'-eye view of what is going on among top strategists gives us a refreshingly irreverent perspective on supposedly terrible and powerful Evil" (142).

Shagrat and Gorbag's conversation takes place after Frodo and Sam have sneaked past the great citadel of Minas Morgul and ventured through a tunnel leading into Mordor, the tunnel guarded by the giant spider Shelob and patrolled by Orcs. After Frodo is paralyzed by Shelob and Sam defeats her, Sam overhears a discussion between Shagrat, the commander of the Tower of Cirith Ungol, and Gorbag, a captain of a group of Orcs from Minas Morgul. Shagrat mentions that the captured "spy" (Frodo) is "something that Lugalbúrz wants" (IV.10.737), employing a familiar metonymic form: *Lugalbúrz* is the Orc's name for Barad-dûr, the tower that stands as the seat of power in Mordor (thus, this is like saying "the White House wants it" or "the Kremlin wants it"). When Shagrat

cannot explain why such a trifle is actually so significant, Gorbag scoffs, “Oho! So they haven’t told you what to expect? They don’t tell us all they know, do they? Not by half. But they can make mistakes, even the Top Ones can” (IV.10.737). The scene is revealing. These are hardly mindless drones, slaves to their masters’ bidding, carrying out orders without question. Indeed, Shagrat is circumspect enough to note warily that Gorbag’s statement is dangerous—in a whisper he says, “They may, but they’ve got eyes and ears everywhere” (737)—and he urges that they slip into a recess to continue the discussion more freely.

The gist of this conversation is that Shagrat and Gorbag have each noticed that “something has slipped,” that the war may not be going as well as they had been led to believe, and that the “Big Bosses” (the fearsome Nazgûl or Ringwraiths and Sauron himself) are troubled by new developments. As Gorbag puts it, “ay, even the Biggest, can make mistakes. Something nearly slipped, you say. I say, something *has* slipped. And we’ve got to look out. Always the poor Uruks to put slips right, and small thanks” (IV.10.738). Shagrat and Gorbag, both captains in the armies of Mordor, here appear as worried employees, not sure if their superiors are as competent as claimed, but absolutely certain that the decisions made by their bosses will directly affect them, likely for the worse. These are reasonable, and altogether human, concerns.

More human still, Shagrat and Gorbag imagine life without “big bosses.” As unseemly as their dream may be, it clearly expresses a desire for freedom, opportunity, and friendship that most readers—in another context, perhaps—would find laudable. After sparring over which was worse, serving under a Nazgûl or having to keep Shelob company, Gorbag concludes:

“I’d like to try somewhere where there’s none of ‘em. But the war’s on now, and when that’s over things may be easier.”

“It’s going well, they say.”

“They would,” grunted Gorbag. “We’ll see. But anyway, if it does go well, there should be a lot more room. What d’you say?—if we get a chance, you and me’ll slip off and set up somewhere on our own with a few trusty lads, somewhere where there’s good loot nice and handy, and no big bosses.”

“Ah!” said Shagrat. “Like old times.” (IV.10.738)

This might well be the American Dream. Gorbag’s hope for a future, *if* the war goes well, is underscored by Shagrat’s nostalgia for the good old days. The message is clear: These Orcs are not having any more fun than the Men of Gondor, the Elves of Rivendell, or the Dwarves of the Iron Hills. War is Hell, for all parties involved.

An earlier scene offers further perspective on Orcish cultures. After Merry and Pippin have been abducted and the Fellowship of the Ring disbanded, the Orc leaders debate the best course of action. Tolkien employs a

kind of free indirect style to present Pippin's own limited perspective, which is how we learn that the Orcs speak different languages or dialects, but they can also speak the lingua franca of all races. "One of the Orcs sitting near laughed and said something to a companion in their abominable tongue. 'Rest while you can, little fool!' he said then to Pippin, in the Common Speech, which he made almost as hideous as his own language" (III.3.445). Later Pippin hears many Orcs speaking heatedly; to his surprise, "many of the Orcs were using the ordinary language. Apparently the members of two or three quite different tribes were present, and they could not understand one another's orc-speech" (445). As it turns out, there are at least three distinct groups, and each has its own priorities with respect to the mission.

Uglúk, a commander of the Uruk-hai loyal to Saruman, insists that the prisoners be returned as quickly as possible to Isengard, Saruman's redoubt. Grishnákh, an Orc from Barad-dûr (or Lugbúrz) who seems to be looking out for Sauron's interests, opposes him. And an unnamed group of northern Orcs, presumably of the same ilk as those who fought under Bolg's leadership in *The Hobbit*, aim to kill the prisoners and want nothing to do with the contest between the two towers in this world war. "We have come all the way from the Mines to kill, and avenge our folk. I wish to kill, and then go back north" (III.3.446). The three groups bandy about insults, calling the others *apes*, *swine*, *maggots*, and *fools*, employing the sort of language that might have been used by disparate groups of humans. Uglúk and his elite forces win out, but clearly the "evil" so often mentioned in Tolkien is not nearly as monolithic as it is usually thought. Orcs, like Men, may debate strategy, question authority, and dream of a better future. And Orcs, like Men, have different cultures, languages, and philosophies.

This applies to Orcish morality and politics as well. Uglúk reminds the company that "these lands are dangerous: full of foul rebels and brigands" (III.3.446). Of course, he is referring to noble warriors such as Éomer of the Rohirrim. As readers, we understand the reversal in meaning; when Uglúk says "rebel," we know that we should be on that rebel's side. Similarly, when Gorbag makes reference to a "regular elvish trick" (IV.10.740), we see how an adjective used throughout *The Lord of the Rings* in a most positive sense would be employed in the pejorative by one whose people had been at war with the Elves . . . well, forever. Significantly, this is not a reversal of values à la Milton's Satan ("Evil, be thou my good"), but rather a moral valuation absolutely consistent with that of Elves, Men, Dwarves, and Hobbits. All agree with Orcs that a given characteristic—here, disloyalty—is immoral. These Orcs do not call a thing "good" that an Elf or Man would call "bad" or "evil." Rather Orcs actually maintain the same values. As Shippey puts it, "Orcs here, and on other occasions, have a clear idea of what is admirable and what is contemptible behavior, which is exactly the same as ours" (*J.R.R. Tolkien* 133).

Orcs reveal themselves (or, rather and perhaps against his own better judgment, Tolkien reveals Orcs) to have quite human qualities. They seek wise leaders and freedom from tyranny. They want loyal companions (“trusty lads”) as do Sam, Frodo, and the rest of our heroes. They want an end to the war and a life without anxiety. Their open fear of “Whiteskins” and Elf warriors falls directly in the same category as Gondor’s fear of Orcs, Trolls, and other invaders. True, they do want wealth, and greed is a vice they certainly have, but in this too they are not unlike all who inhabit Middle-earth, where the Dwarves’ greed for gold and Men’s lust for power is matched by the avaricious compulsion of the Elves to keep things in a state of pure changelessness.

One might even go so far as to suggest that the Orcs are, at times, more humane than the Men, Dwarves, and Elves, at least when it comes to certain matters. Frodo tells Sam that, while Shagrat’s prisoner, he was given food by the Orcs (VI.1.893). Uglúk gives Pippin a liquor or draught that invigorates him, though it is unpleasant to the taste (as are many medicines, of course); perhaps this elixir is the Orcish equivalent of the Elves’ *miruvor*. Uglúk then rubs a salve into Merry’s wound, essentially healing it (“The gash in his forehead gave him no more trouble” [III.3.448]). Of course, this “humane” treatment of the hostages is founded upon practical reasons having nothing to do with kindness: Shagrat needs to deliver his prisoner unspoiled to Sauron, and Uglúk must keep his captives alive but also needs them to be able to run under their own power. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that in the many long wars and fearsome battles in the three ages of Middle-earth, nowhere does Tolkien depict any kindly treatment towards Orc prisoners-of-war on the part of Men or Elves. Indeed, no Orcs are taken prisoner at all, even for the purposes of learning of enemy plans. They are killed unceremoniously and without remorse. Simply recall Legolas and Gimli’s Orc-killing game, and imagine how ghastly it would be if the heads of non-demonized enemies were the goals tallied upon the scorecard.

Owing to his religious beliefs perhaps, among other reasons, Tolkien hesitated to pronounce Orcs “irredeemably bad” (*Letters* 195), although he could not really envision any true salvation for them, unlike Gollum, who at least comes close to redemption and who does in fact make possible, albeit inadvertently, the salvation of the world. For the record, I believe that this complexity makes Gollum one of *The Lord of the Rings*’s most interesting characters. Even the most evil creatures, in theory, ought to be redeemable. As a survivor of the Great War and the father of Second World War veterans, Tolkien also exhibits a knowing ambivalence towards warfare, even amid the tremendous bloodshed of his tales, and there should be at least grudging respect for the Orc warriors and their fearsome battles with the heroes of the West. Tolkien never seems to invite the reader to sympathize with the Orcs directly, but neither could he make them entirely inhuman, completely lacking in those

characteristics which would allow for their possible redemption. At the same time, however, he could not go so far as to endorse their humanity, perhaps for reasons having to do more with narrative integrity than overall morality. It is true, as Shippey has pointed out, that a definitive recasting of the origins of the Orcs and of their behaviors in the books "would have involved, to be consistent, a complete revision of all his earlier work" (*Road* 234).

One might protest that my argument is awfully selective, that the Orcs—with whatever human qualities on display in these few passages—are horrible creatures, with utterly appalling characteristics and behavior. Yet that position is already well established, as it is the prevailing view of all of Tolkien's heroes as well as almost all of his readers. In the two passages I have described, and in a few other places here and there across Tolkien's *legendarium*, Orcs can be viewed in a somewhat more complicated and interesting manner. My purpose here is not to show how Orcs are in fact good and not evil, but to trouble the facile assumption that they are only and inherently evil. Orcs, along with Gollum or Saruman or even Sauron, are more complex, and a proper consideration of the overall ethics of Middle-earth might carry us *beyond good and evil*, in Nietzsche's evocative phrase. Of course, Tolkien is not Nietzsche, but neither is he the apologist of a black-and-white morality that some of his early critics derided him for being (see, for instance, Shippey's expert repudiation of Edwin Muir's critique in *Road* 154–60). Tolkien discloses the ethical struggles of very "good" people, who are nevertheless conflicted and full of nuance. These would include enemies like Sauron (initially) and Saruman (for a long time), such noblemen as Denethor and Boromir, lofty Elves like Fëanor and even Galadriel, proud Dwarves like Thorin, as well as the tragicomic Gollum. Orcs too might be similarly nuanced and fleshed out in all their complexity. But, as Hal Colebatch has pointed out, Tolkien did not want to make the ethical conundrum raised by Orcs the subject of his work. "A book about Orcs from the inside would have been a different kind of book, perhaps something like *The Lord of the Flies* [...]. From a literary or story-telling point of view Orcs were necessary as enemies expressing certain facts about the nature of evil" (Colebatch 143). Indeed, the anarchic world of Tolkien-inspired fan fiction provides stories "from the Orc's point of view" that do suggest a sort of sympathetic or humorous humanity ("Alas, poor Ufthak! . . . I knew him well"). And the British fantasy writer Stan Nicholls, with his *Orcs* trilogy, has perhaps set the standard for a more complete depiction of Orcish personalities and cultures, although set in a world somewhat different from Tolkien's. Nevertheless, the story of such creatures—rational though simple, seduced and tortured by dark forces, yet with the possibility of redemption—might make for a cracking good tale in its own right.

Without giving this matter undue gravity—it is telling, perhaps, that the letter in which Tolkien suggests that Orcs are not "irredeemably bad" was not

sent, on the grounds that, in his words, “It seemed to be taking myself too importantly” (*Letters* 196)—I would mention that every appearance of Orcs is necessarily situated in a context that must present them in a poor light. That is, the tales are told from the point of view of Hobbits, Elves, and Men. Compare the exchanges among Orcs cited above, which demonstrate that the Orcs depict their enemies in a similarly negative light, as when Gorbag refers to the Great Siege during which Sauron was defeated as “the bad old times” (IV.10.739). Similarly, the perspective and orientation of the reader, who is definitively positioned as already anti-Orc before the stories even begin, influences this discussion. One simply views Orcs differently if they are established from the beginning as inherently evil. (To use a Biblical example, it is hard to imagine that the intended audience of the Book of Joshua sympathizes with the Canaanites when Joshua, at God’s command and with His aid, invades one city after another, killing “all the souls that were therein; he let none remain” [see, e.g., Joshua 10:37]). Readers more attuned to possible injustices in the West—for example, readers not pleased by the imperialism of the Númenóreans in establishing Gondor to begin with, by the fundamentally antidemocratic social organizations, or the lack of opportunity for those not immortally established at the top of the hierarchy in Lothlórien or Rivendell (where Celeborn and Galadriel and Elrond have ruled for thousands of years)—might be more open to a world in which Sauron or Saruman is victorious. Who knows? From the Orcs’ point of view, the War of the Ring may very well be seen as a war of Elvish and Gondorian aggression against their own ways of life. In these texts, Tolkien’s Orcs are given just enough humanity to make one wonder.

So, when you reread *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* (or when you watch the movies, including *The Hobbit* films currently in production), by all means cheer on your good-natured Hobbit heroes, respect the industrious and faithful Dwarves, admire the wise and beautiful Elf leaders, and celebrate the courage and skill of the noble human warriors. But also, in some small part of your imagination, raise a glass to Shagrat and Gorbag, to Uglúk and Grishnákh, to Bolg and Azog, and to some billion unnamed but still “‘rational incarnate’ creatures” who struggle to make a life worth living in this perilous realm. Perhaps, in some divine plan only hinted at in their own metaphysics, it is the Orcs who will inherit Middle-earth.



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