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Keeping Alive the Memory: Modern Philosophies of Myth in Tennyson and Tolkien

Reader response theory states that a literary text is never fully formed until it enters the mind of the reader, who uses his or her personal experiences and understanding of the world to fill in the gaps. Our realities thus influence the stories we read and tell. However, the converse is just as true; the stories we hear, read, and tell throughout our lives leave an indelible mark upon our realities. We all carry within us the narratives of our cultures, which in turn influence the art we create. Alfred, Lord Tennyson and J.R.R. Tolkien both understood this concept and implemented it in their respective works, *Idylls of the King* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Though both authors drew from ancient mythic traditions in cultures that viewed myths as superstitions of the past or children's entertainment, both of their works reflect their cultural situatedness. By displacing current issues of their respective eras into mythical settings of the past, both authors sought to confront what they perceived as problems of their times.

I intend to compare and contrast these two authors' methods and ideologies of mythmaking, with special regard to the ways their work both reflects and intends to influence their cultural values. While Tennyson uses his setting of the traditional Arthurian myth primarily as a literary device to highlight the Victorian need for a heroic moral guide to fill the gap recently left by Christianity, Tolkien's reasons for his use of myth are much more deep-seated. The lack of respect for myth and religion and the desire for individual autonomy in the Modernist era were, for Tolkien, deeply disturbing, and as a result his work becomes a meta-commentary on the social importance and legitimacy of myth.

Because Tennyson's *Idylls* are adaptations of stories from a pre-existing tradition, it is imperative that we determine which elements of Arthur's character are particular to Tennyson. According to Padel, Tennyson's primary source of inspiration for his *Idylls of the King* was Sir Thomas Malory's fifteenth century text, and the first comprehensive collection of stories from the Arthurian tradition, *Le Morte d'Arthur*. Padel argues that Malory "emphasized Arthur's heroic dignity and grandeur" in his account (*Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*). Yet Malory's Arthur, though surely noble, is still a deeply flawed character, as exemplified by his incestuous affair that results in the birth of Modred. Tennyson, on the other hand, elevates Arthur to a near-perfect status; he omits the incestuous plot altogether, instead making Modred the legitimate son of Arthur's half-sister Bellicent. Tennyson reminds us of Arthur's perfection again and again, often referring to him as "the blameless Arthur." Indeed, Tennyson's Arthur seems to be a messianic figure, the "Christ that is to be" celebrated in *In Memoriam* (Tennyson wrote both *In Memoriam* and *Idylls of the King* not long after another Arthur, his friend Arthur Henry Hallam, died). Tennyson's comment in the "Dedication" that "[t]he shadow of His loss drew like eclipse / Darkening the world" (Tennyson 13-14) seems awfully indicative of the darkening of the sky following the crucifixion. Similarly, the "uproar made by those / Who cried, 'He is not Uther's son'" (*Idylls of the King* I.42-43) calls to mind the Pharisees' similar declaration that Christ is not the Messiah.

This perfect, Christ-like representation of Arthur might seem like a step backward from Malory's more realistic, deeply flawed hero. Indeed, John Rosenberg comments that "[t]he majority of Tennyson's contemporaries believed that the modern poet's proper business is to portray modern life," and that "[t]o this day the prejudice persists that Tennyson's doom-laden prophecy of the fall of the West is a Victorian-Gothic fairy tale" (Rosenberg 149). Yet

Tennyson's choice to depict Arthur in such a way reflects a notion deeply rooted in the Victorian consciousness. Tennyson marries the concept of Arthur as a near-perfect human being to contemporary ideas of evolution and the need for humanity to overcome its primal, animalistic tendencies. Tennyson, like many of his contemporaries, believed that humanity possessed qualities of both the animal and the divine, and that for humans, evolution towards the divine came not through a selfish will to survive, as is the case with animals, but through morality and altruism. Evolutionary theory was new to Tennyson's audience, and in a culture already growing disillusioned with Christianity, many latched onto its promises of progress as the new "Christ that is to be." It seems only natural that Tennyson would wish to portray a symbol of this new ideal to make up for the gap left by Christianity.

Despite his emphasis on evolution, however, Tennyson is not a strictly Darwinian evolutionist. In fact, in *In Memoriam*, he laments the Darwinian view of "Nature, red in tooth and claw" (*In Memoriam* LVI.15). The evolution of Arthur does not occur via a process of natural adaptation necessary for survival, nor does it follow a long process over several generations. Instead, it is the individual who evolves of his own free will for the purpose of personal betterment according to the moral standards of Tennyson's time. The evolution of Arthur is spiritual rather than scientific.

Tennyson's Arthur demonstrates a promise of evolution from the very beginning. King Leodogran's call to Arthur for aid toward the beginning of the first idyll comes with the declaration that "'between the man and beast we die'" (*Idylls of the King* I.45). Pre-Arthurian England is depicted as a wasteland "[w]herein the beast was ever more and more, / But man was less and less" (Tennyson I.11-12). To further the symbol of the prevalence of brute animalism, Tennyson offers descriptions of men raised by wolves who would "mock their foster mother on

four feet, / Till, straighten'd, they grew up to wolf-like men, / Worse than the wolves" (Tennyson I.31-33). When Arthur arrives, he "[drives] / The heathen; after, [slays] the beast" (Tennyson I.58-59), signifying his ability to overcome his primal urges and thus "evolve" closer to the state of the divine.

The evolutionary hierarchy between Arthur and his subjects is illustrated by Sir Percivale's description of the sculptures in the hall at Camelot in the Grail narrative:

> …four great zones of sculpture, set betwixt
>
> With many a mystic symbol, gird the hall
>
> And in the lowest beasts are slaying men,
>
> And in the second men are slaying beasts,
>
> And on the third are warriors, perfect men,
>
> And on the fourth are men with growing wings,
>
> And over all one statue in the mould
>
> Of Arthur, made by Merlin, with a crown,
>
> And peak'd wings pointed to the Northern Star. (*Idylls of the King* VIII.232-240)

Arthur is the ideal human being, and as such possesses the authority to rule over less perfect men; or, as Alan Lupack comments, "[i]n the evolutionary scheme of the *Idylls*, Arthur has evolved beyond most men and thus can be an example to them" (Lupack 148). And yet, even though Arthur is a perfect, ideal human, Tennyson is not. Perhaps it is for this reason that for all his perfection, Arthur does not play much of an active role within the narrative, lest Tennyson inadvertently portray traits that could be perceived as imperfect. As Jerome Buckley notes, "he is a shadowy background presence, a legendary hero off fighting the heathen, or at his own court an aloof voice of command and judgment, always a rather remote yet available standard of

reference" (Buckley 177). Instead, "he functions primarily as a centre of moral and religious values … distanced from the poem's narrative action" (Brooks & Bryden 158). Arthur functions less as a character within Tennyson and more as the moral fulcrum upon whom the balance of the kingdom rests.

This portrait of the hero is consonant with other philosophies of the day as well. In his famous essay "On Heroes and Hero-Worship," the Victorian sociologist Thomas Carlyle gives a description of the ideal hero that sounds remarkably like Tennyson's Arthur:

> He is … [t]he light which enlightens, which has enlightened the darkness of the world; and this not as a kindled lamp only, but rather as a natural luminary shining by the gift of Heaven; a flowing light-fountain, as I say, of native original insight, of manhood and heroic nobleness;--in whose radiance all souls feel that it is well with them. (Carlyle, "On Heroes and Hero-Worship")

This "native original insight" Carlyle describes also sounds incredibly anticipatory of Modernism, against which Tolkien writes in *The Lord of the Rings*. According to Crystal L. Downing, "Modernists celebrated persons of genius who advanced the evolution of society by rising above it in order to generate totally original perceptions" (Downing 79). If evolution was Tennyson's Messiah, then the ideals of autonomy and progress were simply an extension of this idea as the Modernists' Messiah. If the Victorians saw themselves as members of a race striving to evolve morally and intellectually, then the Modernists viewed themselves as the triumphant results of that evolution: "autonomous, independent of conventional influences and societal restraints" (Downing 79).

Along with this emphasis on original thought came an outright rejection of the religious traditions that the Victorians had already all but abandoned. Downing notes that "[w]hereas in

Victorian England many intellectuals despaired over the fact that they could not sustain intellectual integrity in the house of Christianity, in the next century more and more intellectuals were celebrating the house's fall, rejoicing that humankind had progressed beyond the need for religion" (Downing 70). To Modernists, all forms of religion and myth inhibited human progress because they were social constructions that severely limited original thought. The Modernist disdain for the supernatural affected Tolkien on two levels. Firstly, it challenged Tolkien's academic interest in ancient mythic traditions because it viewed them as primitive superstition. Secondly, it challenged Tolkien's own personal convictions as a devout Catholic. It is because of this that while Tennyson's work is strikingly consonant with the philosophies of his times, Tolkien attempts to deconstruct Modernism and make a case for the legitimacy of myth in his own mythology, *The Lord of the Rings*.

Unlike the *Idylls*, *The Lord of the Rings* is an original work, part of Tolkien's attempt to create a mythology for England. Tolkien was on the whole dissatisfied with the Arthurian tradition as a British mythology; he commented that it was "associated with the soil of Britain but not with [the culture of the] English" (*Letters* 144), and he felt that "its 'faerie' [was] too lavish and fantastical, incoherent and repetitive" (*Letters* 144). Yet while *The Lord of the Rings* is largely an original story, Tolkien still turned to ancient Norse and Celtic mythologies for inspiration for his world. But perhaps most importantly, Tolkien turned to his own devout Catholic beliefs to offer an alternative to the mythic Modernism of the likes of Tennyson. It is no surprise that Tolkien, writing as a Christian in an age when Christianity was regarded as a primitive relic of the so-called "Dark Ages," would also look to other traditions of the past as a mode of expressing his unabashedly pre-modern philosophies to counter Modernism. Tolkien believed that the doctrine of self-advancement and progress for the sake of progress hailed by

Modernism ran counter to the Christian doctrine of self-sacrifice and the need for community. He was greatly concerned with the implications of Modernist ideals for his Christian understanding of the natural world and human ethics.

Tolkien's concern for the natural world is evident in his contrast of the elves' picturesque woodland dwellings with the desolate, fiery wasteland of Mordor, but perhaps in no place does he demonstrate this concern more obviously than in Saruman's industrialization of Isengard. When the wizard Saruman, once a lover of the natural world, betrays the characters to the Enemy, he turns the once lush, green environment of Isengard into an industrial wasteland, ripping down all the trees and turning the area surrounding his tower of Orthanc into a mechanized war factory. When Gandalf relates the story of his imprisonment on the pinnacle of Orthanc, he notes that "whereas the landscape had once been green and fair, it was now filled with pits and forges…. Over all [Saruman's] works a dark smoke hung and wrapped itself about the sides of Orthanc" (*The Lord of the Rings* 260). Yet Saruman's fall to evil is not immediate, but a gradual surrender to pride and power. As T.A. Shippey notes, it

> starts as intellectual curiosity, develops as engineering skill, turns into greed and the desire to dominate, corrupts further into a hatred and contempt of the natural world which goes beyond any rational desire to use it…. The 'applicability' of this is obvious, with Saruman becoming an image of one of the characteristic vices of modernity, though we still have no name for it—a kind of restless ingenuity, skill without purpose, bulldozing for the sake of change. …the Sarumans of the real world rule by deluding their followers with images of a technological Paradise in the future, a modernist Utopia; but what one often gets

… are the blasted landscapes of Eastern Europe, strip-mined, polluted, and even

radioactive. (Shippey, *Author of the Century* 171)

Saruman's desire to control and subdue the natural world ironically mirrors Arthur's taming of the wilderness in Tennyson. However, the desire to evolve and become perfect is not, for Tolkien, an admirable one at all. One of the first clues of Saruman's betrayal comes when Gandalf sees him in a many-colored robe as opposed to his customary white, proclaiming that "'White … serves as a beginning. White cloth may be dyed. The white page can be overwritten; and the white light can be broken" (*The Lord of the Rings* 259).

The metaphor is rather obvious: Saruman attempts to evolve by encompassing and ruling all things at all times, but the desire to do so has corrupted and twisted his mind. He attempts to create new things out of his "native original insight" just as he dyes his white robes, but in so doing he disregards and destroys something that was already present and good to begin with: the natural world. This very closely parallels Modernist philosophies of technology subduing both the natural and, by extension, the supernatural. Crystal L. Downing summarizes this philosophy as evidenced by the very architecture of the Modernist era, pointing out that Modernist architects "desired to improve a world that no longer had any need for religion. For Modernist architects, technology, not God, would save humanity" (Downing 96). As such, "the sleek linear lines of Modernist architecture symbolized evolution: the progressivism of 'original' individuals who surmounted outmoded ideas" (Downing 96). Perhaps it is no accident that Tolkien describes Saruman's tower of Orthanc (which, incidentally, means "Cunning Mind" in the language of Rohan) as "[a] peak and isle of rock … black and gleaming hard" (*The Lord of the Rings* 555) to mirror the sharp, utilitarian lines of Modernist architecture, a monolithic form standing in sharp contrast to the wilderness below.

Saruman fails in his quest for power because he ultimately fails to recognize where that power comes from in the first place. He loses what autonomy he already has in his thirst for more. In Tolkien's words, "all those arts and subtle devices, for which he forsook his former wisdom, and which fondly he imagine[s] [are] his own, [come] but from Mordor; so that what he made was naught, only a little copy, a child's model or a slave's flattery" (*The Lord of the Rings* 555) of the work of Sauron. In a striking reversal of Arthur's conquest of the wilderness in the *Idylls*, the wilderness comes back to conquer industry and reclaim the land midway through *The Lord of the Rings* when the tree-like, forest-dwelling Ents (with the assistance of Merry and Pippin) storm Isengard, laying waste to the structures built by Saruman and leaving him defenseless in his tower of Orthanc. Saruman later attempts to turn the Shire into an industrialized dystopia when the hobbits return from their quest, but by that point in the novel he has lost much of his power and is easily defeated.

Once again, this parallels the world of architecture, this time in the context of Modernism's downfall and the beginning of the postmodern age. Downing draws attention to the world's disillusionment with Modernism in light of the 1972 demolition of the Pruitt-Igoe worker housing complex in St. Louis, a complex "so impersonal that tenants of the identical concrete slab apartments did not care for them—in either sense of 'care for'" (Downing 95). Saruman's cold pragmatism and disregard for the natural world are, in the end, his undoing. We might easily compare the Pruitt-Igoe worker housing with what Saruman twists the Shire into; an impersonal industrial complex that operates like a machine. However, just like the architects of the Pruitt-Igoe complex ignored the value of aesthetically pleasing architecture for its own sake, so Saruman ignores the valuable role the natural world plays in any culture. By destroying the landscape of the Shire, Saruman is by extension destroying the hobbits' way of life. While the

pragmatic architecture of the Pruitt-Igoe drove its tenants to apathy to the point that the complex fell into disrepair, Saruman's totalitarian rule over the Shire incites the population to anger. As Merry says, "[t]hey hate all this, you can see. … They just want a match … and they'll go up in fire" (1007).

Just as the depiction of Isengard illustrates the implications of Modernist ideas for the natural world, Tolkien expresses his concern for Modernism's effect on human spirituality and ethics in the seductive power of the Ring, and the need for the characters to resist its draw. The craving for autonomy, then, is simply another form of enslavement for Tolkien. Those who turn to the Ring in an attempt to gain more power for themselves as individuals find their will twisted to serve the Enemy, their free will ironically lost in the attempt of finding more. Saruman himself "ha[s] a mind to capture the Ring, for himself" (*The Lord of the Rings* 497) to serve his own ends, but he becomes little more than a puppet of Sauron. Even those who attempt to use the Ring's power as a weapon against the Enemy, such as Boromir, either fail or inadvertently end up serving the Enemy. This concept resonates deeply with the Christian idea that "whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for [Christ] will save it" (Luke 9:24, NIV). It is only those who sacrifice their power and their livelihood who can keep it and find true fulfillment.

Tolkien is quite unique in his treatment of the evil of the Ring, defying conventions of both traditional myth and Modernist writing. In most traditional mythologies, the heroes must confront very literal monsters. Beowulf fights Grendel; Ulysses must outwit the Cyclops. Conversely, Modernist writing, deriving much of its technique from Freud, dealt largely with matters of the psyche; the protagonist must always confront something residing entirely within

his or her own mind. The protagonist, to Modernists, is both the hero *and* the monster. By contrast, in Tolkien,

> [o]ne can never tell for sure … whether the danger of the Ring comes from inside, and is sinful, or from outside, and is merely hostile. … It is a mistake just to blame everything on evil forces 'out there', the habit of xenophobes and popular journalists; just as much a mistake to luxuriate in self-analysis, the great skill of Tolkien's contemporaries, the cosseted upper-class writers of the 'modernist' movement. (Shippey, *Author of the Century* 142)

The Ring, then, is at once a literal and metaphorical monster. It undeniably wields an external force upon the characters, but it does so by awakening the greed and malicious thoughts already residing within them.

The Ring feeds off characters' power and attempts to twist it to do the Enemy's bidding, and because of this, the most powerful characters, who in Tennyson have the best chance of evolving past their primal state, are in Tolkien the most vulnerable to the Ring's power, and thus all the more capable of doing evil. . As Gandalf says when Frodo attempts to offer him the Ring, "With that power I should have power too great and terrible. And over me the Ring would gain a power still greater and more deadly" (*The Lord of the Rings* 61). Frodo and Sam later glimpse this power when they see Galadriel tempted by the Ring in Lórien. Frodo, in a moment of despair and fear of failing in his task to destroy the Ring, offers it to Galadriel. She proclaims,

> In place of the Dark Lord you will set up a Queen. And I shall not be dark, but beautiful and terrible as the Morning and the Night! Fair as the Sea and the Sun and the Snow upon the Mountain! Dreadful as the Storm and the Lightning!

Stronger than the foundations of the earth. All shall love me and despair! (*The*

Lord of the Rings 366)

In the hands of Galadriel, arguably the most powerful character in the novel, the Ring would

likely bring about the undoing of the world. It is for this reason that the Ring must be destroyed,

for it twists the power of all who wield it for evil.

The *Idylls* also features an artifact that threatens to prevent the characters from doing

good in the form of the Holy Grail. Most iterations of the Arthurian myth feature the Grail

narrative as a heroic quest in which the Grail, the cup used by Christ at the Last Supper, is

successfully recovered and Galahad, the purest knight in Camelot, ascends into heaven after

having received divine revelation from the experience. Tennyson, on the other hand, who

according to Lupack "did not believe in the mystic experience of the Grail, and … saw the quest

for it as a distraction from the practical duties to which knights should attend" (Lupack 150),

deconstructs the Grail narrative in an attempt to illustrate the deceptiveness of superstition.

Lupack notes that, especially in the Grail narrative, "Tennyson consistently balances appearances

and reality, and 'the true and the false' …; and he presents characters who must cope with the

fact that things are sometimes better and often worse than they initially seem" (Lupack 146-147).

Pursuit of the supernatural, for Tennyson, only distracts from pursuing the greater good

of the natural world, whereas for Tolkien, the supernatural is the greater good, provided that it is

not corrupted or manipulated like the supernatural power of the Ring. Tennyson gives the Grail

narrative an unreliable narrator in the form of Sir Percivale, always leaving us in question of

whether we can trust the knight's interpretation of events. Percivale and the other knights all go

to seek the Grail even though the vision of it only appeared to Galahad. Arthur rightly recognizes

this as a sign that "for such / As [Galahad] … is the vision, not for these" (*Idylls of the King*

VIII.293-294), and warns the knights that they "follow wandering fires / Lost in the quagmire" (*Idylls of the King* VIII.319-320).

What the knights interpret as a divine signal that they should all go and seek the Grail, Arthur recognizes as a misreading of appearances. In the end, all the knights fail except Galahad, for none but Galahad possesses true humility. "If I lose myself, I save myself" (*Idylls of the King* VIII.178), he declares when he seats himself at the Siege Perilous, and it is because of this that Galahad is chosen for the quest. The other knights, by contrast, have motives of glory for themselves, neglecting their duty and making the mistake of "leaving human wrongs to right themselves" (*Idylls of the King* VIII.894). When the knights return from their quest, bruised, battered, and much fewer in number, Arthur advises them not to trust appearances, saying,

> Let visions of the night or of the day
>
> Come, as they will; and many a time they come,
>
> Until this earth he walks on seems not earth,
>
> This light that strikes his eyeball is not light,
>
> This air that smites his forehead is not air
>
> But vision – yea, his very hand and foot –
>
> In moments when he feels he cannot die,
>
> And knows himself no vision to himself,
>
> Nor the high God a vision, nor the One
>
> Who rose again: ye have seen what ye have seen. (*Idylls of the King* VIII.906-915)

Arthur's knights have made the mistake of confusing vision with truth, and seeking the supernatural instead of the material good. Despite his distrust of the supernatural, however,

Tennyson does not altogether decry religion, as demonstrated by Arthur's reference to the actual Christ. Instead, he has Arthur make a distinction between what Tennyson believes to be responsible religion and superstition. In the eyes of many Victorians, including Tennyson, myth and religion existed to preserve the moral order, not establish community with the divine. As Carlyle puts it, "that of 'Hero-worship' becomes a fact inexpressibly precious; the most solacing fact one sees in the world at present. There is an everlasting hope in it for the management of the world" (Carlyle, "On Heroes and Hero-Worship). The knights' pursuit of visions is fruitless not because it is religious, but because, in Tennyson's eyes, they misunderstand the purpose of religion.

Tennyson's skepticism of the supernatural and his emphasis on good work is consistent with other writings of Carlyle's as well. In "Past & Present," Carlyle laments the present state of England, noting that free-market capitalism has produced an upper middle class reaping undeserved benefits from the overworked lower classes. The solution to the problem, Carlyle posits, is a return to good, honest work that will, in his view, create heaven on earth. He writes, "But it is to you, ye Workers, who do already work, and are as grown men, noble and honourable in a sort, that the whole world calls for new work and nobleness. … O, it is great, and there is no other greatness" (Carlyle, "Past & Present"). This is the duty that Arthur's knights have neglected; they go chasing after appearances of the divine rather than elevating themselves to the status of the divine. As Carlyle puts it,

> [h]ad they known Nature's right truth, Nature's right truth would have made them
> free. They have become enchanted; stagger spell-bound, reeling on the brink of
> huge peril, because they were not wise enough. They have forgotten the right
> Inner True, and taken up with the Outer Sham-true. … Foolish men mistake

transitory semblance for eternal fact, and go astray more and more. (Carlyle, "Past

& Present")

Carlyle's comment here seems ironically postmodern for a writer who so uncannily anticipated

Modernism in other respects, but it holds true in Tennyson's Grail narrative. The knights in the

narrative mistake the signifier (the vision of the Grail) for the signified (Christ). What keeps the

text firmly rooted in Modernism, however, is Tennyson's view that the signified is itself a

signifier; Christ represents a moral end to be achieved rather than an end in and of himself. So it

is that the knights mistake means for ends, and as such are led into confusion and destruction.

Everything is just as both Arthur and Carlyle warn, and it signifies the beginning of the end of

Camelot. Yet Percivale closes the narrative remarking on Arthur's speech quoted above, "I knew

not all he meant" (*Idylls of the King* VIII.916), reminding the reader once again of his human

frailty.

Tolkien, too, deconstructs the traditional quest arc in *The Lord of the Rings.* Verlyn

Flieger has called the quest to destroy the Ring an "'anti-Grail' quest" that "features ordinary

people, not knights, as does Malory's" and in which the "heroes fight reality, not visions; they

are beset with mud, dust thirst, hunger, and despair rather than the Grail quest's demonic

temptations that vanish in a puff of smoke" (21). Even aside from obvious fact that Tolkien's

characters are on a quest to get rid of, rather than find, a powerful artifact, Tolkien's quest

narrative differs from the tradition in other ways as well. *The Lord of the Rings*, like the Grail

narrative, is very episodic at times, but unlike Malory's Grail narrative and very much like

Tennyson's, the "episodes" have very real, lasting consequences. Gandalf falls in Moria, the

elves leave Middle Earth, and Frodo is forever altered by the quest, and not entirely for the

better.

Tolkien also acknowledges the perils of human frailty in the high stakes he sets in place for his characters' quest. Perhaps it is for this reason that he chooses to make the "hero" of his myth a community, a fellowship, rather than a single character. Most of the myths from which he drew his inspiration were about either gods or, in the case of *Beowulf*, seemingly superhuman characters that reflected cultural ideals—not so different, in fact, from Tennyson's Arthur. Most mythic heroes are perfectly capable of carrying out their tasks on their own; by contrast, Shippey notes, "this does not apply to Gandalf or Aragorn, still less to Frodo: Gandalf can feel fear and cold, Aragorn age and discouragement, Frodo pain and weakness" (Shippey, *The Road to Middle Earth* 159). In addition, as previously mentioned, all of them have the capability to fall prey to evil and capitulate to the Enemy. Tolkien stresses many times throughout the novel that neither Frodo nor any other member of the Fellowship could possibly complete the task of destroying the Ring alone. This does not, of course, mean that none of the characters possess any superhuman qualities—this is, after all, still a myth. Shippey is quick to point out that "Aragorn can run 135 miles in three days; he lives in full vigour for 210 years, dying on his birthday. Around him cluster characters who are immortal, like Elrond or Legolas, who can make fire or ride on eagles, while he himself can summon the dead" (Shippey, *The Road to Middle Earth* 159). However, this fact also serves to further highlight the gravity of the characters' situation; if none of these powerful characters can face evil alone, things must be dire indeed.

In this way, Tolkien deconstructs the Modernist hierarchy of power set in place by Tennyson. For Tolkien, there is no Tennysonian figure capable of fully overcoming evil. This isn't to say that *The Lord of the Rings* doesn't contain characters who seem, at times, Arthurian. Aragorn in particular is very close to a Middle Earth Arthurian figure; he leads most of the major battles in the novel and at the end takes the throne of the nation of Gondor. But his gruff

mannerisms and melancholy nature hardly bring to mind any portrayal of Arthur, and he (or any other character, for that matter) has not achieved the perfection that Tennyson's Arthur has.

Tolkien, however, does not simply invert the binary between power and lack of it in his portrayal of the Ring. He never treats the power of Gandalf and the Elves, for example, as inherently bad, and the appointment of Frodo as Ring-bearer comes more out of a practical need than any particular virtue associated with his lack of power. When the Elves and their magic pass from Middle Earth, all the characters mourn what is lost because of it. Instead, it is the dissatisfaction with the power one is given, and the thirst for more, that causes evil. In fact, the most sensible characters in the novel approach their power in a very matter-of-fact manner. When Pippin asks one of the Elves in Lothlórien if Elven cloaks are magic, the Elf responds,

> I do not know what you mean by that.… They are fair garments, and the web is good, for it was made in this land…they have the hue and beauty of all…things under the twilight of Lórien that we love; for we put the thought of all that we love into all that we make. (*The Lord of the Rings* 370)

To the Elves, their magical power is in its pure form as second-nature as breathing, and they accept it as incidental to their way of life, untainted by greed.

Tolkien thus replaces even the traditional medieval concept of heroism with a more thoroughly Christian medievalism that defied the Modernist assumptions of its day. I say this because even in most of the traditional epics from which Tolkien draws his inspiration, the protagonist is a pinnacle of strength physically, mentally, and morally. Beowulf singlehandedly slays monsters; Odysseus outwits a Cyclops; Arthur is a guardian of justice. In *The Lord of the Rings*, the character that most closely resembles an individual protagonist, the hobbit Frodo, is by contrast small, peace-loving, and from a simple (though not simple-minded) culture. At the

start of the novel, Frodo's sensibilities are more or less aligned with those of most hobbits, who "love peace and quiet and good tilled earth" (*The Lord of the Rings* 1) and generally don't care much for adventurous escapades. These character traits are signified even by the name "Frodo" itself.

T.A. Shippey has theorized that Frodo's name likely derives from "Fróthi," a pacifist king from Norse myth. According to legend, Fróthi was a king of immense wealth, and yet his reign marked a long period of peace during which "there were no murders, no wars, no robberies, and gold rings lay untouched in the open" (Shippey, *The Road to Middle Earth* 156). This resilience to greed brings to mind Frodo's resilience to the Ring's power and his ability (for the most part) to carry the Ring without succumbing to its evil. The peace of Fróthi changed, however, when two giantesses employed in his service built "an army to kill Fróthi and take his gold" (Shippey, *The Road to Middle Earth* 156). Just as Fróthi's kingdom is undone by greed, so Middle Earth has the potential to be undone by greed and excess of power. Yet Tolkien sets Frodo apart from Fróthi by putting the task of preventing this fate in Frodo's hands. Fróthi is ultimately a victim of the greed of others, but Frodo's own potential for evil gives him the responsibility to resist not only the temptation of greed, but of violence itself.

What, then, are we to make of the many battle sequences depicted in *The Lord of the Rings*? While *The Lord of the Rings* has many pacifistic undertones, it does not portray war as always wrong. Tolkien also draws heavily from the Norse tradition, in which evil will inevitably win, but good is still worth fighting for. This concept is apparent at the outset of nearly every battle in the novel; no matter how bleak the circumstances or how slim the chances of victory, the characters are always willing to fight the long defeat. When the forces of Rohan ride out to aid Gondor in the siege of Minas Tirith, Théoden declares, "the King of the Mark himself will

come down to the land of Gondor, though maybe he will not ride back" (*The Lord of the Rings* 799). Similarly, when Gandalf proposes the plan to march on Sauron's fortress of Barad-dûr as a distraction enabling Frodo to destroy the Ring, he declares,

> …it may well prove that we ourselves shall perish utterly in a black battle far from the living lands; so that even if Barad-dûr be thrown down, we shall not live to see a new age. But this, I deem, is our duty. And better so than to perish nonetheless—as we surely shall, if we sit here—and know as we die that no new age shall be. (*The Lord of the Rings* 880).

Tolkien is careful to point out, however, that it is not the fighting itself that is glorious, but rather the cause for which the characters fight. He glorifies fighting the long defeat, but he does not shy away from portraying the cost of fighting. His depictions of the aftermath of battles, even victorious ones, are startlingly apocalyptic, haunted by images of carrion fowl.

Andrew Lynch has written extensively comparing Tolkien's treatment of warfare in *The Lord of the Rings* to Tennyson's treatment in *Idylls of the King*. Lynch is correct in his observation that Tennyson depicts battles through vague, elevated language that focuses on the concept of glory through war than on the details of battles themselves. Lynch rightly points out that

> [s]eeing his own era as morally superior to Geoffrey of Monmouth's or Malory's, Tennyson committed himself to capturing the true 'spirit' or 'ideal' of Arthurian chivalry without much of its troubling military substance, omitting any but legendary history and far reducing the characteristic medieval interest in the detail of wars and tournaments. (Lynch 77)

This, in addition to his vague characterization of Arthur, serves to keep the characters in the audience's good graces; too much detail would horrify an audience that believed itself to be past the warlike days of the "Dark Ages."

Lynch makes the mistake, however, of confusing Tolkien's occasional structural similarities to Tennyson with ideological ones. He draws attention to their similarities of vocabulary, their elevated style when describing battles, and their "habit of displacing psychological and moral analysis onto descriptions of landscape, weather, architecture, and ornament" (Lynch 85). Lynch's observations are on-target, but the conclusion he draws from them—that "[a]s a war story, *The Lord of the Rings* … is more of a late utterance in a Victorian medievalist poetic … than either a medieval or a mid-twentieth-century text" (Lynch 78)—is erroneous. Tolkien and Tennyson do write in similar styles at times, but all this demonstrates is that both authors are very intentionally writing in an archaic style, which is hardly out of place in works with intentionally archaic subject matter. Furthermore, while Tolkien does use grand, elevated language in his description of battles, he almost always balances this out with realistic depictions of their aftermath.

Lynch ignores another key point about the battles in *The Lord of the Rings*: victory is rarely achieved through sheer force alone. He argues that "Tolkien principally makes the War of the Ring into a theater of heroic action in which the military prowess of groups and individuals is recognized as necessary, ennobling, and deeply effective" (79), and that "the frequent archaism, much greater than Tolkien's normal practice, in the battle scenes of *The Lord of the Rings* indicates the special status he gave to military prowess" (82). But he neglects to mention that the War of the Ring itself is not the means of defeating Sauron. In the words of Gandalf, "Victory cannot be achieved by arms, whether you sit here to endure siege after siege, or march out to be

overwhelmed beyond the River" (*The Lord of the Rings* 878). Instead, Sauron himself instigates the war out of paranoia that "one may suddenly appear, wielding the Ring, and assailing him with war, seeking to cast him down and take his place" (*The Lord of the Rings* 497). Gandalf comments that "imagining war he has let loose war, believing that he has no time to waste" (*The Lord of the Rings* 497). All battles in the story, therefore, are merely fought to keep the forces of Sauron at bay and buy Frodo time to complete the quest of destroying the Ring. Even the climactic battle before the gates of Mordor functions as little more than a distraction for Sauron's armies enabling Frodo and Sam to make their way to the mountain of Orodruin to destroy the Ring unhindered. Aragorn does not lead the armies of the West against the army of Mordor for personal glory; he does so for the sake of another.

Tolkien, then, does not glorify military prowess in and of itself; otherwise Sauron might be defeated simply by killing him directly in battle. Instead, he values military prowess only when the character in question exercises one of two qualities. The first quality is the judgment to know when a demonstration of military prowess is and is not necessary or ethical, such as Frodo's decision not to kill Gollum. The second is the ability to use military prowess for selfless reasons, even if it means sacrificing oneself. The latter is demonstrated by Théoden's decision to aid Gondor in the Battle of Pelennor Fields even though Gondor did not aid Rohan in their time of need, and by Aragorn's plan to divert Sauron's attention from Frodo by engaging the armies of Mordor in battle even though it means almost certain death. Tolkien's stylistic choices do not glorify military prowess in and of itself, but are instead meant to bring to mind the Christian qualities that defined medieval heroes such as those found in Malory. For characters who demonstrate great military skill, as with supernatural power, the judgment to know when and when not to use it according to the Christian principles of mercy and selflessness is key.

However, Tolkien does employ black-and-white morality at times, as do many of the mythic traditions that influence his work. Lynch argues that

> battle alignments, as in Tennyson's self-styled "parabolic" wars, are also moral alignments. Tolkien mainly treats the nature of war according to the sides involved, which are identified by the rightness and wrongness of their overall causes. One side, led by Aragorn and advised by Gandalf, fights a "medieval" war of named volunteers and pledged faith, while the bad side is "modern," with its nameless conscripts, machines, slaves, and creatures of Sauron. (Lynch 87)

Lynch makes a notable observation in pointing out Tolkien's treatment of medieval versus modern warfare. It is an observation that Verlyn Flieger echoes in her essay on Tolkien and postmodernism, and the fact that Tolkien has his antagonistic characters adopt the trappings of twentieth century warfare (Flieger even notes the use of a flamethrower at one point) further cements his distaste with most aspects of Modernist culture.

Yet most fascinating about this is not when Tolkien adheres to the black-and-white morality he sets up, but when he breaks the rule, such as a scene in which Sam encounters a fallen Haradrim soldier, a servant of the Enemy:

> He wondered what the man's name was and where he came from; and if he was really evil of heart, or what lies or threats had led him on the long march from his home; and if he would not really rather have stayed there in peace. (*The Lord of the Rings* 661)

Tolkien makes a point of mentioning that this scene is "Sam's first view of a battle of Men against Men, and he [does] not like it much" (*The Lord of the Rings* 661). This is probably also the reason why most of the battles in *The Lord of the Rings* happen between men and Orcs;

dehumanizing the enemy makes the battle sequences less ethically questionable to contemporary audiences. This lends weight to Lynch's argument that Tolkien wishes to avoid the more problematic aspects of warfare whenever possible, but Sam's encounter with the dead soldier renders invalid his assertion that Tolkien "gives an absolute aesthetic and moral privilege—aesthetics and morality becoming quite indistinguishable—to one side only" (Lynch 87-88). Not only does Tolkien create moral ambiguity with regard to the human servants of the Enemy, but he also makes a clear distinction between aesthetics and morality, demonstrating how the Enemy can use appearances to deceive. The scene in which Frodo first meets Aragorn perfectly demonstrates this. Frodo chooses to trust Aragorn despite his haunted appearance and gruff nature, saying that "one of [Sauron's] spies would—well, seem fairer and feel fouler, if you understand" (*The Lord of the Rings* 171).

Lynch is also rather too hasty in pegging Aragorn as a straightforward Arthurian character, and he likens Aragorn's return to the throne of Gondor to the return of Arthur Tennyson anticipates in the *Idylls*, saying that

> [t]he iconic quality of Aragorn emblematizes the simultaneously desired presence and absence of the past in Tolkien's heroic nostalgia. Is it that a statue has come to life, the heroic past returned, or that Aragorn's new status removes him from the contingent world of time, of "lesser men," into what is already a perfected retrospective understanding? The core of Aragorn's greatness is that it is already archaic. In such moments Tolkien, one might say, equally desires the return of the heroic age and the rememorializing of its loss—a renewal of the Tennysonian covenant with an idealized medievalist violence, but carefully removed from

historical scrutiny, as the true idiom of national and personal heroic potential.

(Lynch 88)

In actuality, Tolkien's Aragorn serves as more of a deconstruction of the Arthurian archetype. Lynch reads Aragorn's character arc as a Tennysonian evolution toward greatness, making the transition from lowly ranger to the almost superhuman King of Gondor, and refers specifically to a passage in which Aragorn seems transformed into a statuesque figure in the midst of battle. However, Aragorn does not "change," as Lynch suggests; his true nature is merely revealed over the course of the novel. Gandalf's riddle foreshadows this when Aragorn first appears: "*All that is gold does not glitter*" (*The Lord of the Rings* 170). His statuesque image in battle reflects the heroic figure that he can become when necessary, but also speaks to the fact that although he is powerful, he chooses to humbly assume the guise of a normal person.

This humility continues right up to Aragorn's coronation. To the surprise of all present, Aragorn, when presented with the crown, hands it back to Faramir, saying, "By the labour and valour of many I have come into my inheritance. In token of this I would have the Ring-bearer bring the crown to me, and let Mithrandir [Gandalf] set it upon my head, if he will; for he has been the mover of all that has been accomplished, and this is his victory" (*The Lord of the Rings* 968). Aragorn recognizes himself as just one of many who contributed to the salvation of Middle Earth. While his coronation signifies the dawning of a new age for the peoples of Middle Earth, he places himself no higher than any other characters, and recognizes his debt to all the characters present. Aragorn's greatness might be archaic both to other characters and the audience, but the humility with which he handles his greatness makes him a specifically Christian hero.

Perhaps most important in the discussion of Tolkien and warfare, however, is the fact that Frodo, the main focus of the story, is neither a great king nor a powerful warrior. As much as mainstream culture and even the literary world remember *The Lord of the Rings* for its depiction of grand battles (especially after Peter Jackson's film adaptations), its chief protagonist is remarkably absent from them. Tennyson's Arthur is visible to all and essential to the story, yet he rarely enters the narrative structure. His grand feats in battle are painted in broad strokes so as to avoid the problem of showing such a pinnacle of human morality engaging in violent acts. Tolkien, on the other hand, portrays Frodo in the opposite light. The novel's narrative structure focuses mainly on him, and his actions determine the fate of the world, yet within the story itself and in the scheme of the War of the Ring, he functions as a regular, almost anonymous character working below the radar. His deeds, while essential, are not glorious or heroic in the traditional sense; he merely views them as necessary. He is, in almost every respect, an anti-Arthur.

Although Aragorn, like Tennyson's Arthur, is a political figure, we must note that Frodo, the character on whom the fate of the entire world rests, is not. In a commentary on W.H. Auden's review of *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien writes that

> Frodo's duty was 'humane' not political. He naturally thought first of the Shire, since his roots were there, but the quest had as its object not the preserving of this or that polity, such as the half republic half aristocracy of the Shire, but the liberation from an evil tyranny of all the 'humane' – including those, such as 'easterlings' and Haradrim, that were still servants of the tyranny. (*Letters* 240-241)

This statement further cements the notion that in Tolkien, not all servants of the enemy are truly evil, and many are in fact redeemable. Once again, Tolkien has incorporated his Christian

outlook on life into the moral fabric of his world, and the merciful way Frodo treats others perfectly embodies Tolkien's philosophy of redemption.

Shippey traces Frodo's journey towards pacifism throughout the novel, "from … when he stabs the Moria troll, to … when he threatens to but does not stab Gollum" (Shippey, *The Road to Middle Earth* 157). Frodo is merciful even to outright servants of the Enemy; when the hobbits have Saruman at their mercy at the end of the story, Frodo stops Sam from trying to kill him, saying, "Do not kill him even now. For he has not hurt me. And in any case I do not wish him to be slain in this evil mood. … He is fallen, and his cure is beyond us, but I would still spare him, in the hope that he may find it" (*The Lord of the Rings* 1019). However, perhaps the best lens through which to view Frodo's increasingly merciful and pacifistic nature throughout the novel is his relationship with Gollum, a creature whose mind has been twisted and poisoned by the Ring. At the beginning of the novel, Frodo cannot possibly understand why Gandalf has not killed Gollum "after all those horrible deeds," and believes that Gollum "is as bad as an Orc, and just an enemy. He deserves death" (*The Lord of the Rings* 59).

Frodo has very good reason to wish death upon Gollum; at the novel's opening, Gollum betrays the Ring's location to the Enemy, sending the servants of Sauron after Frodo. Yet later, when Frodo meets Gollum face-to-face, he remarks, "Now that I see him, I do pity him" (*The Lord of the Rings* 615). Frodo, more than any other character, understands the mental agony that Gollum has endured because of the Ring's warping of his mind. Gollum, in a way, acts as a symbol for what Frodo could become; he was once very much like a hobbit before the Ring took hold of his mind. At the same time, he functions as an illustration of the very Christian notion that no one is beyond redemption. Gandalf and Frodo show pity for Gollum because while there is "not much hope that Gollum can be cured before he dies … there is a chance of it" (*The Lord*

of the Rings 59). It is fitting, then, that the pity of Frodo triggers Gollum's rediscovery of his

good, former self. When Frodo first mentions the name "Sméagol," Gollum's former name, here

representative of the part of himself not corrupted by the Ring, Gollum declares, "Poor, poor

Sméagol, he went away long ago" (*The Lord of the Rings* 616). Yet as Frodo continues to show

compassion for him, Gollum's motivation in acting as Frodo and Sam's guide to Mordor

becomes less for personal gain (the chance of stealing the Ring) and more for a genuine desire to

help them. Conversely, Gollum's selfish and twisted side returns when Faramir and his men

threaten to execute Gollum against Frodo's wishes.

Tolkien's sympathetic portrayal of Gollum brings to mind medieval portrayals of the

Arthurian character Modred, who fatally wounds Arthur in battle, particularly Malory's

depiction, in which Modred is both Arthur's nephew and illegitimate son. Just as Gollum's return

to evil is motivated by his mistreatment by Faramir, Modred hates Arthur because Arthur

abandoned him out of shame when Modred was an infant. This does not make either character's

actions any more excusable, of course, but it does give them a motive for their actions that

allows the audience to understand and sympathize with them. The idea that Gollum can still be

redeemed, then, is almost defiantly medieval in comparison to Tennyson's treatment of the

character, a gravely irredeemable foil for the blameless Arthur. While Gollum and Malory's

Modred are perverted and twisted into evil by external circumstances, the morality of

Tennyson's characters depends entirely upon their own choices. This treatment of Modred as evil

by choice rather than evil by circumstance resonates with the Modernist ideas of autonomy

Tennyson anticipates and Tolkien rejects; the actions of Tennyson's Modred are committed

completely independently of any external influence. In the same vein, Tolkien's Gollum and

Malory's Modred express the Christian notion that no individual is ever too far gone to be

redeemed. While Gollum's vices end up saving the world in the end—his unrelenting greed for the Ring leads him to inadvertently destroy it when Frodo cannot—the flaws of Tennyson's characters result in the destruction of Camelot.

While Tolkien draws inspiration from pre-Modern traditions and his work unquestionably reflects his Catholic beliefs (considered "medieval" by most Modernist thinkers), *The Lord of the Rings* is also quite postmodern both in its structure and in some of the ideas it presents with regard to the importance of myth. As a cultural outsider, being a devout Christian in a society dismissive of religion of any kind, Tolkien was likely very aware of the multiple interpretive communities that exist within the world. In addition, Tolkien did not intend for *The Lord of the Rings* to stand alone as an autonomous work. In a letter to Milton Walden, he details his intentions to "draw some of the great tales in fullness, and leave many only placed in the scheme, and sketched. The cycles should be linked to a majestic whole, and yet leave scope for other minds and hands, wielding paint and music and drama" (*Letters* 145). This statement is simultaneously pre-modern and postmodern. While structurally a work with multiple contributors across multiple media closely resembles pre-modern myth, Tolkien's awareness of his work as a constructed mythology sounds unmistakably postmodern. While Tolkien recognized himself as the individual creator of Middle Earth, he also realized the effect his situatedness—in both his Christianity and his background in ancient and medieval myth—had on his writing. He realized that he was indebted to the interpretive communities he chose to inhabit rather than Modernism, and wished to expand those communities. However, if Tolkien was to offer an alternative to the social construction of Modernism, simple, defiant archaism was not the route to take. Instead, he carefully makes his work a hybrid of pre-modern content with a Modernist structure.

Flieger draws attention to Tolken's hybridity with regard to style and setting, observing "a deliberate mix of the realistic and the fantastic, each supporting the other" (Flieger 19). In addition to the blend of medieval and modern warfare discussed earlier, she notes that the novel opens in the practical, no-nonsense culture of the Shire, from which Frodo, Sam, Merry, and Pippin are thrust into the world of myth by circumstances. Flieger demonstrates that Tolkien writes *The Lord of the Rings* in two distinct styles: the "epic" medieval style, and the "low" common English style (21-22). In this way, *The Lord of the Rings* looks "like a medieval, or pseudomedieval, or imitatively medieval fantasy epic/romance/fairy tale, while in specific places in the narrative *sounding like*—in spirit, in character, and (most important but least noticed) in tone—a surprisingly contemporary twentieth-century novel" (Flieger 23). By offering this tension between structure and subject matter, Tolkien demonstrates an acute awareness of his existence in multiple interpretive communities as a man writing a pre-Modern myth and espousing pre-Modern philosophies within the Modernist era.

Tolkien's use of archetypes rather than the psychologically complex characters common in Modernist novels remains defiantly medieval. But even this has traces of stylistic hybridity; while the more powerful characters such as Legolas and Aragorn are archetypal, the hobbit characters are more complex. Because Tolkien's work is a hybrid—an epic myth in the form of a prose novel—at least some of his characters need to be relatable to his audience in order to demonstrate the applicability of the story. As Thomson notes, "[i]n writing a traditional romance Tolkien has thrust forward his hobbits as a hostage to modern realism. Yet they could not be too much in the realistic tradition or they would spoil his whole design. That is why they are not humans. On the other hand, because their natures are so engagingly human, they serve the reader

as a point of contact and enable him to enter sympathetically into an extraordinary world."

(Thomson 56).

The hobbits, in this way, act almost as an audience surrogate, and as such the audience does not realize the grand scope of the narrative until Frodo himself does late in the first volume. Thomson points out that the first volume of *The Lord of the Rings* is written in the third-person limited voice from Frodo's perspective, just like many novels. It has

> a certain neatness of plot at the beginning and end, but the entire central section—
> over half the novel—is in the tapestry tradition. We move from one land to
> another, one event to another, one leader to another. The result is a detailed yet
> panoramic view of a whole world in movement and turmoil. We have our first
> complete glimpse of that world, of its great vicissitudes and multifarious
> activities, in Frodo's vision from the top of Amon Hen as he looks out from the
> Seat of Seeing and finds everywhere the signs of war and endless movement.
> (Thomson 49)

Frodo's vision from the Seat of Seeing is his first clue that the story is much larger than himself, and as he realizes this, the narrative style shifts to a broader, more elevated style. Frodo's situatedness undergoes a significant shift here, and along with it the situatedness of the reader. The story that began as a sequel to Tolkien's children's book *The Hobbit* has at this point transformed into a sprawling epic. The very plot structure shifts as well, transitioning from a single narrative thrust when the Fellowship of the Ring is united, but branching out into a more complex structure with multiple subplots when the Fellowship dissolves at the end of the first volume.

The dissolution of the Fellowship of the Ring is merely one example of the sense of loss with which both Tennyson and Tolkien imbue their myths. As Brooks and Bryden note, "Tennyson's sense of the idealism Arthur can inspire is always accompanied by an equivalent consciousness of the inevitability of failure" (Brooks & Bryden 259). The loss of Arthur for Tennyson, however, is not merely the loss of the pinnacle of humanity, an example to be sought after, though that does factor into it as well. The loss is much more personal; it is unlikely that Tennyson adapted the legend of Arthur without another Arthur—his friend, Arthur Henry Hallam, who passed away at the age of twenty-two—in mind. In fact, many critics read Tennyson's account of the departure of Arthur as a mystification of his sorrow over Hallam's death. John D. Rosenberg argues that "elegy and idyll are, if not the same poem, variations on the same theme—Tennyson's single overriding theme—the theme of loss" (Rosenberg 147). He also comments that "Tennyson's profoundly personal quest for reunion with Hallam in *In Memoriam* becomes, in *Idylls of the King*, a profoundly impersonal despair for the passing not only of a hero, but of civilization itself" (Rosenberg 144). While Tennyson had already to some extent explored his grief over Hallam in light of the Victorian faith crisis in *In Memoriam*, in the *Idylls* they seem to be one and the same. Yet while *In Memoriam* laments the loss of Christianity as a constant, the end of the *Idylls* seems more concerned with the need to resurrect the ideal of the blameless, autonomous hero.

Ironically, many critics have attempted to place the blame for the fall of Camelot on Arthur. Jerome Buckley has noted that "Arthur is conspicuously ineffective when brought into dramatic relation with the real men of the Round Table and the complex tumultuous woman who is his Queen" (Buckley 177). This is, to some degree, true; unlike Frodo, Arthur by nature cannot comprehend or empathize with the imperfect people surrounding him, because he himself is

perfect. But are we to blame Arthur for this, or is he simply a victim of circumstance? Clyde de

L. Ryals argues that Arthur

> …set out to found a society based on freedom, but to his sorrow he learned that he
> could not create a free man. His will simultaneously desired social freedom and
> social slavery. For a while Arthur is content with self-deception, but in the end he
> can no longer avoid recognizing his deceptions and the unsolvable paradox of
> reality. For the imposition of his heroic authority, his will, upon reality meant the
> denial to others of their own moral responsibility. Arthur stands, finally, in moral
> terms, as both the hero and the villain of the *Idylls of the King*. (Ryals 90)

Yet Tennyson does not, I think, blame Arthur for the failure of his subjects. That Arthur would

banish Lancelot and sentence his own wife to be executed demonstrates that he places much

emphasis on the individual moral responsibility of his subjects. Instead, Arthur is a crowning

example of the Modernist genius: the autonomous, misunderstood hero ahead of his time. He

remains the "blameless Arthur" to the very end.

However, although Tennyson's Arthur is a pinnacle of Modernist heroism, we must

remember that his knights are not. As Tristram says, "We are not angels here, / Nor shall be"

(*Idylls of the King* X.693-694). The delicate balance that the perfect Arthur creates in Camelot is

easily upset by the failure of Arthur's knights to carry out his ideal vision for the kingdom.

Simply put, "Arthur is too far above average men and women for them to live up to his

standards" (Lupack 152). The dissolution of Camelot is brought about by misdeeds committed

for selfish reasons: Guinevere's infidelity to Arthur through her affair with Lancelot, and

Modred's exposure of the affair in order to serve his own greed for the throne and hatred for

Lancelot. That Camelot crumbles from within is essential to understanding Tennyson's version

of the Arthurian myth. Lupack writes that "[t]he Arthurian world, like the modern world, has great potential for improving the human condition; but it seems that such an ideal is always frustrated by the failings and imperfections that are inherent in the world and in those who inhabit it" (Lupack 147). The *Idylls* carry with them the implication that the ideal of Camelot, as glorious as it is, can never be fully realized until all of humanity has evolved into the status of the perfect and the divine.

If Arthur is Tennyson's "Christ that is to be," then his resurrection is still to come, and it is one for which Tennyson waits expectantly. Ryals points out that "what we witness is not the *death* of the King but, rather, his *passing* from one world to another" (Ryals 66). After being gravely wounded in battle by his nephew Modred, Arthur is borne on a ship to the mystical land of Avalon. In this there is a glimmer of hope amid all the sorrow. Near the closing of the last idyll, Sir Bedivere declares his hope that "after healing of his grievous wound / [Arthur] comes again" (*Idylls of the King* XII.450-451). Tennyson, like so many others before him, holds fast to the belief that Arthur "was not dead, only sleeping, and would come again" (Padel). The idyll closes with the sun rising, "bringing the new year" (*Idylls of the King* XII.469). The age of Arthur has ended, and now it is up to humanity to emulate his example.

The Lord of the Rings, like the *Idylls*, concludes with the end of a great civilization, not the salvation of it. At the end of the story, the Elves leave Middle Earth for the faraway land of Valinor, never to return. This event is foreshadowed throughout the entire novel. The Elven realm of Lothlórien in particular has an undertone of melancholy. When Aragorn leaves the hill of Cerin Amroth on the way into Lórien, Tolkien makes a point of mentioning that he "came there never again as a living man" (*The Lord of the Rings* 352). Furthermore, the Fellowship arrives in Lórien in winter, symbolizing the end of an era, and their departure is described with

great sorrow. Even Galadriel's song as she bids the company farewell is fraught with lamentation for what must be lost: "*O Lórien! The Winter comes, the bare and leafless Day; / The leaves are falling in the stream, the River flows away. / O Lórien! Too long I have dwelt upon this Hither Shore / And in a fading crown have twined the golden elanor*" (*The Lord of the Rings* 373).

However, while the Camelot of the *Idylls* crumbles from within because Arthur's subjects fail to live up to his moral example, the Elves' departure from Middle Earth is voluntary, though necessary for the preservation of Middle Earth. After Galadriel is tempted by the Ring and realizes what harm it could do in her hands, she makes the decision to "diminish, and go into the West, and remain Galadriel" (*The Lord of the Rings* 366). Though it gives her great sorrow to leave her home realm of Lothlórien, Galadriel is willing to make the sacrifice for the preservation of Middle Earth. Because of the great power of the Ring and the decay of nature, the Elves decide to leave rather than risk more peril for the world. This voluntary action demonstrates that glory in Tolkien comes not through military prowess, as Lynch seems to argue, but through willingness to sacrifice for the welfare of another.

The ending of *The Lord of the Rings* bears a striking resemblance to the conclusion of the *Idylls*. Frodo, like Arthur, is wounded at the end of the story, but Frodo's wounds are emotional and spiritual rather than physical, and have accumulated over time due to his struggle with the power of the Ring. Though his only physical wound is the loss of a finger, that wound "symbolizes the eradication of a part of himself. Those who perform great deeds do so at a cost to their own natures. They will never be the same again, nor will the world appear to them the same" (Thomson 53). He returns to the Shire a much more somber, quiet hobbit, and finds that he cannot resume his old life at the Shire. He has simply seen too much and suffered too many pains to return to the innocent hobbit he was. Finally, he decides to leave Middle Earth forever to

sail to the land of Valinor with the Elves. He has the following heartfelt exchange with Sam before he leaves:

> 'But,' said Sam, and tears started in his eyes, 'I thought you were going to enjoy the Shire, too, for years and years, after all you have done.'
>
> 'So I thought too, once. But I have been too deeply hurt, Sam. I tried to save the Shire, and it has been saved, but not for me. It must often be so, Sam, when things are in danger: some one has to give them up, lose them, so that others may keep them.' (*The Lord of the Rings* 1029)

For a work so markedly different from the *Idylls* in its philosophies and its approach to medievalism, *The Lord of the Rings*'s ending is remarkably similar, at least on surface level. As Lynch has noted, "Tolkien leaves us finally not with Frodo or Aragorn but with Sam Gamgee, just as the *Idylls* ends not with Arthur but with Bedivere, also staring westward, as his master's vessel passes beyond sight into a mysterious realm and a new age begins on earth" (Lynch 88). Yet in many very important aspects Tolkien distinguishes his ending from Tennyson's: Frodo, like the Elves, chooses to leave Middle Earth, while Arthur leaves Camelot out of necessity and circumstance. Whereas Arthur remains constant and blameless even when it seems as though all of Camelot has turned on him, Frodo sees his home restored to much of its former glory even though he finds himself irrevocably changed. The end of an old age and the beginning of a new one, which is met with sorrow in Tennyson, is in Tolkien depicted in a much more fatalistic fashion, though still bittersweet; the final line in the novel comes when Sam returns home after seeing Frodo off and remarking, "Well, I'm back" (*The Lord of the Rings* 1031). Both in spite of and because of everything that has happened over the course of the story, life goes on. Lastly, and most importantly, Arthur's departure sees him as the perfect victim of an imperfect world;

Frodo's choice to leave is an act of utter humility and self-denial. While Arthur embodies the misunderstood genius that Modernists strove to be, Frodo's selflessness embodies Tolkien's Catholic medievalism.

To save one's homeland despite never being able to reap the benefits is the ultimate act of sacrifice for Tolkien. It is this kind of self-denial, and not the destruction of the Ring, that is Frodo's chief heroic action in the novel; Frodo ultimately fails to destroy the Ring, but in freeing the Shire from the totalitarian rule of Saruman when he cannot return to that life, he completes his character arc from unsuspecting hobbit to truly selfless hero. In this, too, Frodo reflects Tolkien's Christian sensibilities; he has lost his livelihood so that others may keep theirs. If the ideals respectively expressed by Tolkien and Tennyson are their Christs that are to be (whether literal or metaphorical), the ends that Frodo and Arthur meet can both be viewed as crucifixions. But only Frodo's is a voluntary self-crucifixion and, therefore, truly Christlike.

One ideological commonality that both the *Idylls* and *The Lord of the Rings* have in their endings, and the idea with which I will conclude my argument, is the power of myth. Tennyson relies on the power of myth to keep the dream of Camelot alive. Arthur's final request to Sir Bedivere, the last of his knights, is to "let [his] voice / Rise like a fountain for [Arthur] night and day" (*Idylls of the King* XII.416-417). By repeating Arthur's story, Bedivere, and by extension Tennyson, are in a sense keeping Arthur and the ideals for which he stood alive to their audience in the present. The ideal of Camelot is not merely a future possibility, but

> happening *now* in a multiplicity of presents: in the narrative present of the *Idylls*,
> in Tennyson's present as he writes the poem, and in the audience's present as the
> poem is read. Here, in effect, is Tennyson's answer to the problems of relevance
> that Arthurian material raised for him at the beginning of his career. Like

Bedivere with Excalibur, Tennyson learns to trust mythic matter to the inherent

nature of myth itself, for it is precisely myth's open-endedness, its peculiar

resistance to closure, that allows it to be perennially remade. Permanence resides

not in the fixity of having been, but in the fluidity of becoming, of being

permanently now. (Brooks & Bryden 256)

Similarly, when Frodo departs for Valinor at the end of *The Lord of the Rings*, he gives

Sam the Red Book in which he has written all of his adventures, saying, "you will read things out

of the Red Book, and keep alive the memory of the age that is gone, so that people will

remember the Great Danger and so love their beloved land all the more" (*The Lord of the Rings*

1029). Even this parallel with Tennyson has fundamental differences in its execution. Most

notably, Arthur implores Sir Bedivere to tell his (Arthur's) story as an individual. Frodo, on the

other hand, merely tells Sam to tell people all that has happened, almost leaving himself out of it.

Although he arguably plays the most important role in the story, Frodo recognizes that he is not

autonomous; his quest would be impossible without every single character involved. Frodo

wants the story told not for any personal glory, but for the preservation of the ideals that allowed

it to happen. For Tennyson, the ideal and the hero are one and the same; for Tolkien, part of

heroism is recognizing the difference between oneself and the ideal for which one fights.

Secondly, Frodo does not merely ask Sam to retell the story, but to live out his own life

as one. For Tolkien, the continuing power of myth goes beyond simply telling and retelling the

story over and over again. When Frodo gives Sam the book, he remarks, "The last pages are for

you" (*The Lord of the Rings* 1027). Sam must not only retell the story that has already happened,

but also live out his own continuation of the story. By ending his myth on such a structurally

self-aware note, Tolkien also challenges his readers to not only keep the spirit of the legend

alive, as Tennyson urges his readers to do, but to go out and live their own mythologies. As Frodo's uncle Bilbo comments in Rivendell earlier in the novel, "Don't adventures ever have an end? I suppose not. Someone else always has to carry on the story" (*The Lord of the Rings* 232). This sentiment is quintessentially medieval; myth and personal history are one and the same by the end of *The Lord of the Rings*. It is quite an appropriate ending for an author who believed that his own Christianity was myth become fact.

This, above all else, is Tolkien's purpose in writing *The Lord of the Rings*: demonstrating the legitimacy and necessity of myth and religion in culture. That *The Lord of the Rings* in many passages becomes a case for its own legitimacy as literature stands as yet another testament to Tolkien's anticipation of postmodernism. Tolkien places a great emphasis on the oral traditions of the cultures he creates, and many times the narrative pauses for detours into old songs and legends. Throughout the story, not just at the end, the characters seem keenly aware that their lives are part of a mythic tale. The Fellowship experiences a living myth in the form of Lothlórien, as demonstrated by Frodo's feelings as he crosses into the elven land: "it seemed to him that he had stepped over a bridge of time into a corner of the Elder Days, and was now walking in a world that was no more" (*The Lord of the Rings* 349). Sam even remarks, "I feel as if I was *inside* a song" (*The Lord of the Rings* 351). But perhaps the most blatant example of life as myth in Tolkien comes when Sam muses on his and Frodo's situation in the context of the mythic tradition:

> Still, I wonder if we shall ever be put into songs or tales. We're in one, of course; but I mean: put into words, you know, told by the fireside, or read out of a great big book with red and black letters, years and years afterwards. And people will say: "Let's hear about Frodo and the Ring!" And they'll say: "Yes, that's one of

my favorite stories. Frodo was very brave, wasn't he, dad?" "Yes, my boy, the

famousest of hobbits, and that's saying a lot." (*The Lord of the Rings 712*)

This moment shows Tolkien at his most structurally self-aware; Sam envisions the story of

himself and Frodo being put down into a book, which, of course, it is. Not only that, but he

imagines it being shared among an interpretive community, which it is, given the massive and

ever-growing fan-base the story has garnered. But aside from all this, it drives home Tolkien's

point that life and myth are one and the same.

And it is this that marks the fundamental difference between Tolkien's approach to

mythmaking and Tennyson's. *Idylls of the King* is an undeniably Modernist work, one that

"[relies] very heavily on literary allusion…. If the reader does not follow the allusion, does not

realize the contrast between the words in their original context … and in their modernist context,

then the point is lost" (Shippey, *Author of the Century* 313). Tolkien, on the other hand, does

refer to literary works, but "the source of the allusions *does not matter*. The words work best

when they have become quasi-proverbial, common property, merged with ordinary language, 'as

old as the hills'" (Shippey, *Author of the Century* 314). We might say that the sources of the

allusion have become fully absorbed by Tolkien's own situatedness, becoming an integral part of

his identity as an author. While Tennyson employs the structure of an epic poem as a literary

device to demonstrate the need for an autonomous moral hero, Tolkien's concern lies with the

need for myth itself. As Shippey puts it, "Tolkien's approach to the ideas or the devices accepted

as modernist is radically different because they are on principle *not literary*. He used 'mythical

method' not because it was an interesting method but because he believed that the myths were

true" (Shippey, *Author of the Century* 315). To the Modernist reader, this approach seems

backwardly medieval, but Tolkien, unlike most medieval mythmakers, and certainly unlike

Tennyson, understands the limits of his perspective as well. Where Tennyson chastises the superstitious knights from afar for trusting false visions in his Grail narrative, Tolkien

> showed his characters wandering in the wilderness and entirely mistaken in their guesses not because he wanted to shatter the 'realist illusion' of fiction, but because he thought all our views of reality *were* illusions, and that everyone is in a way wandering in a 'bewilderment', lost in the star-occluding forest of Middle-earth…. (Shippey, *Author of the Century* 315-316)

So it is that while Tennyson, in attempting to utilize the past to merely comment on the present, inadvertently creates a work firmly lodged in the Victorian episteme, Tolkien ironically manages to transcend his own situatedness by drawing attention to it. His story inhabits past, present, and future in its presentation of medievalism and Modernism and its anticipation of postmodernism, and because of this, *The Lord of the Rings* becomes a true myth for a contemporary age.

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