



FACULTAD DE FILOLOGÍA

## **Grado en Lengua y Literatura Inglesas**

Trabajo de Fin de Grado

# Tracing Tolkien's Sources of Inspiration: Adventure, History and British Culture in His Major Works

**Alumna:**

Ana Martínez Velasco

**Directora:**

Manuela Palacios González

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**Curso académico 2018/2019**



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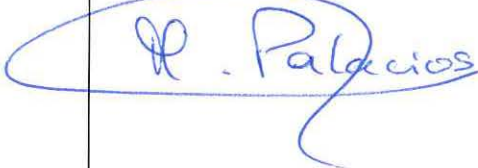

SOLICITO a aprobación do seguinte título e resumo:

**Título:** Tracing Tolkien's Sources of Inspiration: Adventure, History and British Culture in His Major Works.

**Resumo** [na lingua en que se vai redactar o TFG; entre 1000 e 2000 caracteres]:

The objective of this project will be to identify the main sources that inspired John R. R. Tolkien to write his work the way he did. This dissertation will be divided into two main parts: one dealing with the author's life and the socio-historical context he lived in, with a focus on his views on war, religion and ecology and how these aspects are represented in his work, as he participated in the First World War and was a religious man and an ecologist. Another part will deal with the literary influences he received, such as Arthuric legends, Norse culture, European mythology and other related contents he used. The objective is to trace the way British culture impregnates Tolkien's fantasy world. The works by Tolkien used for this dissertation will be those belonging to the *legendarium* – the compilation that contains all the works that are part of the mythology of the Middle Earth, but especially *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Hobbit* and *The Silmarillion*.

Santiago de Compostela, 5 de noviembre de 2018.

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## Introduction

Fantasy literature may be considered the most popular genre these days, but what many people do not know is that fantasy was not a very distinguished genre until the twentieth century. Tom Shippey (2000: xvii), claims that one of the different bases to call Tolkien “the author of the century” is because heroic fantasy is now a commercial genre: after the success of *The Lord of the Rings* heroic fantasy has become a literary form with many imitations today. Tolkien could be considered, in a way, the creator of today's fantasy genre, but in fact he only brought it back, as Shippey maintains:

One of the things that Tolkien did was to open up a new continent of imaginative space for many millions of readers, and hundreds of writers – though he himself would have said [. . .] that it was an old continent which he was merely rediscovering [. . .] Tolkien did not invent heroic fantasy, but he showed what could be done with it; he established a genre whose durability we cannot estimate. (Shippey, 2000: xviii)

Tolkien's success bringing back heroic fantasy is undeniable. We only need to see the amount of fantasy books written since the publications of *The Hobbit* (1937) and *The Lord of the Rings* (1954). Before them, fantasy was not a popular genre and Tolkien was not taken seriously as a writer because of this. Fantasy was only considered folklore and childish literature, and Tolkien was conscious of this when, at the beginning, he intended to write *The Hobbit* as a book for children. However, he finally gave his work a mature tone that, mixed with the fantasy ambientation, captivated many readers and transformed fantasy literature's reputation. Most of today's fantasy works will surely be compared to Tolkien's works, especially very relevant fantasy sagas like G.R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*, Terry Pratchett's *Discworld*, Joe Abercrombie's *The First Law* or even J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter*. Nevertheless, a significant part of the genre's success is due to the cinematographic adaptations of many of these works.

In spite of Tolkien's great relevance in the genre, it would be a mistake to name him the 'creator' of fantasy. It is true that he, unintentionally, made the genre prevalent by showing people what could be done with fantasy, as Shippey said, but he did not invent it, only modernized it. Shippey (2000: xviii) called Tolkien the Chretien de Troyes of the twentieth century, as Chretien, in the twelfth century, did not invent the Arthurian romance, but showed what could be done with it. Tolkien, like Chretien, became part of the canon of a genre that existed before, and was a source of inspiration for others later.

The aim of this dissertation is to identify the constitutional elements of modern fantasy by means of exploring the connections between Tolkien's work and his own sources of inspiration. It is known that his works were influenced by others and that he added many classical elements to them. For this reason, my intention is to explore the possible influences Tolkien could have received and consider how he introduced them into his work.

In order to do so, this dissertation has been divided into two main sections. The first section of this paper examines the socio-historical context in which Tolkien lived. Firstly I talk about his life and the possible impact it could have had on his work, and then I develop three topics that I consider highly relevant to understand Tolkien's mind: war, religion and ecology. The three topics were important in his life, as he participated in the First World War, was a religious man and also very keen on nature. This can be seen in his biography but also in his stories, in very different forms.

The second section deals with the literary and cultural influences he received, especially during his academic years. As a philologist, he spent all his life in contact with languages and literature from different sources. In this section I attempt to show the possible connections between his work and other literary and cultural sources, including fairytales, Norse mythology, Anglo-Saxon culture, Arthurian legends, the concept of the hero and the creation of languages, amongst others.

The bibliography that I have consulted for this dissertation consists mainly of critical works and essays by other authors. Some of them are Spanish translations due to the lack of English original material in libraries, as in the case of Tolkien's biography by Humphrey Carpenter, who did very important research on the author's life with the help of Christopher Tolkien. I also found it very useful to use Tolkien's letters, edited and selected by Carpenter too, to explore Tolkien's personal opinions and interests, as well as explanations about his stories. Other useful material was Tolkien's essay *On Fairy Stories*, as well as books by other authors such as Jane Chance, David Colbert, Lin Carter, Tom Shippey, David Day or Braulio Fernández.

The selected works this study deals with are the ones that belong to the *legendarium*, the collection of stories that take place in Arda, the world of Middle-earth. This was the name used by Tolkien to refer to his work, a Latin word that was used to call a collection of legends. The *legendarium* contains a huge amount of material and therefore I decided to only focus on what I considered the most relevant and representative works, which are *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Hobbit* and *The Silmarillion*. The first two were published during his life and the third one was still unfinished when he died. *The Silmarillion* was completed and published by his son Christopher four years later, even though the book tells about the creation of Arda and the story of the 'First Age' and the other two take place during the 'Third Age'. These are the most important works in this dissertation, although there are references to other stories like *The Tale of Beren and Lúthien*.

The methodology includes the comparison between the possible sources of inspiration with the works mentioned before, which was problematic because one cannot be sure if a reference was done on purpose, unconsciously, or if it was even connected at all. My intention is to give a contrasted analysis of the different points of view to finally reach a conclusion on what we could consider as sources of inspiration for Tolkien's works.



## 1. The Socio-Historical Context of Tolkien's Work

### 1.1. Biography

In order to understand Tolkien's sources of inspiration it is important to know his life experiences and how he was affected by them. However, Tolkien himself would have been very critical with this approach, as he was against using biographism to analyse a work. He declared in a letter:

One of my strongest opinions is that investigation of an author's biography (or such other glimpses of his 'personality' as can be gleaned by the curious) is an entirely vain and false approach to his works – and especially to a work of narrative art, of which the object aimed at by the author was to be enjoyed as such: to be read with literary pleasure. (Tolkien, 1999: 452)

However, in this chapter, I do not intend to explain the literary work in terms of the writer's life, but to explore the possible connections between life and art, between Tolkien's personal interests and the cultural influences he received, such as other literatures, mythologies and languages.

The biographer Humphrey Carpenter wrote *J. R. R. Tolkien: A Biography* with Tolkien's approval, even though he disliked biographies. Based on his letters, diaries and other notes, this authorised guide to Tolkien's life will be the way to illustrate the biographical contents I intend to relate to his work.

John Ronald Reuel Tolkien was born on 3 January 1892 in Bloemfontein, South Africa, because his father Arthur went there to work. In 1895 he went with his mother, Mabel, and his younger brother Hilary to Birmingham, England, while his father stayed in South Africa to work with the intention to join them soon. They never saw each other again, as his father died in February 1896 in Bloemfontein, where he was buried. That summer, the family moved from Birmingham to Sarehole, and H. Carpenter says that living in the countryside when his imagination was opening out had a deep and permanent effect on him (1990: 19). It was a small, isolated house with no traffic, and the family often forgot the city was near. In that place the two brothers played and learnt to be



like the locals. It was then that his mother began his education, teaching him handwriting, drawing and what he liked the most, languages like Latin and French. He also read a lot, especially fairy stories or Arthuric legends. He really enjoyed stories about dragons, and when he was seven he tried to write one.

It was about a dragon. I remember nothing about it except a philological fact. My mother said nothing about the dragon, but pointed out that one could not say 'a green great dragon', but had to say 'a great green dragon'. I wondered why, and still do. The fact that I remember this is possibly significant, as I do not think I ever tried to write a story again for many years, and was taken up with language. (Tolkien, 1999: 229)

In 1900 Mabel converted the family to Catholicism and Tolkien entered King Edward VI School, and soon they had to move to Birmingham so he could go to school, after four important years in Sarehole.

There, in Birmingham, he started to learn Greek and Middle English, which he found fascinating. Because of the mother's health, the family had to move to the countryside once again, to Rednal, a place near Birmingham, and Tolkien had to go to school walking to the station and then taking a train, and coming back when it was dark.

In 1904, Mabel died from diabetes and the Tolkien brothers were protected by Father Francis Morgan, a friend of the family, and went to live with an aunt. Carpenter claims that losing his mother made Tolkien become a pessimist, and that religion took the place his mother had previously occupied, helping him emotionally and spiritually (1990: 28). The loss of his mother had taken him away from the place where they had been so happy, so he associated the place with her. His idealization of the rural landscape grew because of his loneliness, and his love for the rural world of his youth would become an essential part of his texts, linked to the love for his mother (Carpenter, 1990: 29-30).

Soon Tolkien discovered more languages to learn. He was interested in Anglo-Saxon, Greek, Gothic, Old Norse and Spanish, and started inventing his own languages and translating texts. In 1908 the brothers moved to Mrs. Faulkner's

house, with other orphans. It was there that sixteen-year-old Tolkien met nineteen-year-old Edith, and they became friends and then fell in love. When Father Francis discovered their romance he sent the brothers to a new place and forbade Tolkien to see her until he was 21. From that moment Tolkien's life was entirely centered on school and he was always with men. Carpenter wrote that Tolkien entered in an exclusively masculine society. When young boys were beginning to discover female company, he was trying to forget it. All the good things in his life during the next three years were shared with men and not with Edith, and maybe that was why he associated male company with good things in life (Carpenter, 1990: 40). This is relevant because Tolkien has been falsely accused of being a misogynist for not including many women in his stories (and a racist because his good characters are white), but we have to take into account that he was used to being surrounded by white men.

In that school he and some friends created the Tea Club or T.C.B.S. in which they shared readings and poetry. That was his last year in school, and then he went to study in Oxford, where, again, he was surrounded by men. In this period he discovered Finnish, which was the seed for him to create the fictional language "Quenya" or "High Elvish", a very important one for his future stories.

He then turned 21, and that same day he wrote Edith a letter, who answered she was going to marry someone else. But he did not give up and finally she broke her engagement and they decided to marry. The problem was that she would have to convert to Catholicism, which she did, and they got married in 1916. His marriage to Edith was very important for his literature, as she was the inspiration for the character of Lúthien, the elvish maiden who chose mortality to be with Beren, a mortal. Edith's conversion to Catholicism could be the inspiration for Lúthien's choice.

In 1914 the T.C.B.S. met again, and Tolkien decided to be a poet and to start writing texts that were related to each other. He started creating a history behind the poem of Eärendel the Mariner, although he did not know what it was going to

be about. Carpenter said he did not see himself as a creator of stories but as a discoverer of legends, and this was because of his private languages. He needed a story to support his languages, he could not create a language without speakers. Once he had the language, it was the time to decide who spoke it (Carpenter, 1990: 61).

At the age of 24 he was called to join the war and took part in the Battle of the Somme, in France. He received the news that a member of the T.C.B.S. had died and short after this another one of them died too. Tolkien was stricken with “trench fever” and was sent back home. After the war, he started writing *The Silmarillion* and developing his mythology. He also worked on the *Oxford English Dictionary*, and then his sons were born in 1917, 1920, 1924, and his daughter in 1929. In 1924 he started working as a professor of English at Leeds, but in 1925 he moved to Oxford to work as a professor of Anglo-Saxon where he worked for 20 years.

In Oxford a relevant part of his life starts, as he created the ‘Inklings’ with other writers such as C. S. Lewis and Charles Williams. This was, again, a reading club where the members shared their writings and passion for literature. They were the first readers of some parts of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, as well as his friends.

It was while working in Oxford when *The Hobbit* was started. Tolkien was correcting exams when he found a blank paper, in which he wrote “in a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit”. He did not know what a *hobbit* was, but the word gave him the idea and not the other way around, so he decided to find out more about the *hobbits* (Carpenter, 1990: 122). And that was the link he needed to connect his stories, how it all began. He wrote it as a book for children, a very different tone from that of his next writings.

*The Hobbit* was published in 1937 and was a huge success. Tolkien was constantly asked for a second part and his book *The Silmarillion* was rejected, so he started writing *The Lord of the Rings*, a darker and more complicated story but

not as complex as *The Silmarillion*. The trilogy was published in 1954 and 1955, after years of revisions. The trilogy was also a success, which gave him fame and money.

He finally retired from his work as a professor in 1959 and the family moved to Bournemouth in 1968, until Edith died in 1971, and then he came back to Oxford and died in 1974, at the age of 81. He could never see his biggest work, *The Silmarillion*, published, but his third son Christopher finished and published the work and some other unfinished texts, as well as Tolkien's personal letters. Many of Tolkien's texts are published today thanks to Christopher Tolkien.

## 1.2. Tolkien and the War

The war was an important event in his work and life. Tolkien had to live through the two great wars, which had a great impact on him. He was a soldier in the First World War as well as his friends, and some of them died because of it. His son took part in the Second World War. Taking this into account, the presence of the war in his work is understandable and well portrayed. My intention is not to claim that Tolkien portrayed the war in his stories just because he lived in that time, but to try to analyse his points of view about this matter and how important it was for him and for his work.

As David Colbert wrote, many readers thought Tolkien had based *The Lord of the Rings* on the Second World War. This could make sense considering the parallels between the war of the ring and the real facts that happened in Europe. Readers related the ring to the atomic bomb, the war being initiated by a dictator and soldiers from different parts getting together to fight the common enemy (2003: 105). Of course, this was denied by Tolkien, who had started writing *The Lord of the Rings* years before the beginning of the Second World War. Apparently it was all a coincidence, or, as C. S. Lewis commented on *The Lord of the Rings*, the stories were not invented to reflect any particular situation

from the real world; the real events started to happen, in a horrible way, imitating the model he had previously invented (qtd. in Carpenter, 1990: 135).

Braulio Fernández Biggs defends that it is understandable that readers made this parallelism, especially former soldiers in the postwar period reading about the Battle of the Pelennor from *The Lord of the Rings* and remembering their own battles (2003: 108). It is understandable, but it is a mistake. Tolkien denies any influence but at the same time he recognises some connections in the description of the landscapes:

The Lord of the Rings was actually begun, as a separate thing, about 1937, and had reached the inn at Bree, before the shadow of the second war. Personally I do not think that either war (and of course not the atomic bomb) had any influence upon either the plot or the manner of its unfolding. Perhaps in landscape. The Dead Marshes and the approaches to the Morannon owe something to Northern France after the Battle of the Somme. (Tolkien, 1999: 321)

Tolkien insists on differentiating the story from its author and defends that his work is not an allegory: “I have no didactic purpose, and no allegorical intent. (I do not like allegory (properly so called: most readers appear to confuse it with significance or applicability) but that is a matter too long to deal with here.)” (Tolkien, 1999: 309). But first we need to know what an allegory is and why Tolkien admits there may be some “applicability”. An allegory is defined in *The Routledge Dictionary of Literary Terms* as

an ‘extended metaphor’ in which characters, actions and scenery are systematically symbolic, referring to spiritual, political, psychological confrontations [. . .] Allegory’s distinctive feature is that it is a structural, rather than a textural symbolism; it is a large-scale exposition in which problems are conceptualized and analysed into their constituent parts in order to be stated, if not solved. (“allegory”)

This is why readers thought Tolkien was referring to something else when he wrote his story. Tolkien dislikes the term “allegory” and uses the term “applicability” to admit his work can be referring to something else, but it

depends on the interpretation the reader wants to make: "There is no 'symbolism' or conscious allegory in my story. . . That there is no allegory does not, of course, say there is no applicability. There always is [. . .] there is I suppose applicability in my story to present times" (Tolkien, 1999: 282).

Of course, Allegory and Story converge, meeting somewhere in Truth. So that the only perfectly consistent allegory is a real life; and the only fully intelligible story is an allegory. And one finds, even in imperfect human 'literature', that the better and more consistent an allegory is the more easily can it be read 'just as a story'; and the better and more closely woven a story is the more easily can those so minded find allegory in it. But the two start out from opposite ends. You can make the Ring into an allegory of our own time, if you like: an allegory of the inevitable fate that waits for all attempts to defeat evil power by power. But that is only because all power magical or mechanical does always so work. You cannot write a story about an apparently simple magic ring without that bursting in, if you really take the ring seriously, and make things happen that would happen, if such a thing existed. (Tolkien, 1999: 140)

This means that, although the author had no intention of writing about his time, he lets the reader make an interpretation of the work by relating it to what s/he considers appropriate.

As mentioned before, Tolkien was also a soldier and participated in the Battle of the Somme and in the trench war, until he was sick and was sent home. There he saw other soldiers dying, including some friends, something that affected him deeply. And of course, he did not like the war situation and the fact that he uses it as a main theme in his stories is to show the horror and not to praise it. When his son Christopher was sent to South Africa as a pilot in the second world war, he used to send him long letters telling him what he was writing and what was happening to the family, as well as talking about the war situation. He wrote this to Christopher in January 1945, a few months before the end of the war:

I have just heard the news..... Russians 60 miles from Berlin. It does look as if something decisive might happen soon. The appalling destruction and misery of this

war mount hourly : destruction of what should be (indeed is) the common wealth of Europe, and the world, if mankind were not so besotted, wealth the loss of which will affect us all, victors or not. Yet people gloat to hear of the endless lines, 40 miles long, of miserable refugees, women and children pouring West, dying on the way. There seem no bowels of mercy or compassion, no imagination, left in this dark diabolic hour. By which I do not mean that it may not all, in the present situation, mainly (not solely) created by Germany, be necessary and inevitable. But why gloat! We were supposed to have reached a stage of civilization in which it might still be necessary to execute a criminal, but not to gloat, or to hang his wife and child by him while the orc-crowd hooted. The destruction of Germany, be it 100 times merited, is one of the most appalling world-catastrophes. Well, well – you and I can do nothing about it. And that shd. be a measure of the amount of guilt that can justly be assumed to attach to any member of a country who is not a member of its actual Government. Well the first War of the Machines seems to be drawing to its final inconclusive chapter – leaving, alas, everyone the poorer, many bereaved or maimed and millions dead, and only one thing triumphant: the Machines. As the servants of the Machines are becoming a privileged class, the Machines are going to be enormously more powerful. What's their next move? .... All the love of your own father. (Tolkien, 1999: 125)

As we can see, Tolkien was feeling pessimistic about the war, even though he felt it was going to end soon. He thought the only winners of the war were the machines and that people would only get poorer, injured and dead. Also, it seems relevant that he says “orc-crowd”, basically calling the Nazis “orcs” even though he claimed he did not have that intention when writing the book. This comparison between Nazis and orcs has been done many times by readers and critics because of the resemblances between them: they are the enemy in the war, the evil army following its leader. This makes clear his position against the war, but a reader sometimes could think that he was defending it, as *The Lord of the Rings* is a story in which it is necessary to fight to defeat the enemy. So, was Tolkien a pacifist?



According to David Colbert (2003: 107), *The Lord of the Rings* defends the idea that every fight is a mistake, as pacifism means the arms are never the answer, not even to fight the enemy. The hobbits are described as people that never had war, and the character Tom Bombadil is the true symbol of pacifism, as he did not even choose side. However, Tolkien does this to show the ideal way to act in this situation, but in the end all characters, even the hobbits, have to fight in the war of the ring, to become soldiers just like Tolkien himself, because it was necessary to defeat the enemy. In the end, Tolkien thought human mistakes make war necessary and had to accept it. So Tolkien's vision of war is represented by Frodo's and Bilbo's characters: wanting peace but accepting to fight for it.

### 1.3. The Religious Man

As a Christian man, Tolkien was influenced by religion and that is reflected in his work, although in a subtle way. If we only take into account *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*, the religious dimension of the stories may be hard to distinguish, as the societies Tolkien wrote about do not seem to practice any religion. In contrast, he then wrote *The Silmarillion*, which has a more explicit religious dimension because it tells the story about the creation of the world and the different races, with a more 'Biblical' tone.

The only criticism that annoyed me was one that it 'contained no religion' (and 'no Women', but that does not matter, and is not true anyway). It is a monotheistic world of 'natural theology'. The odd fact that there are no churches, temples, or religious rites and ceremonies, is simply part of the historical climate depicted. It will be sufficiently explained, if (as now seems likely) the *Silmarillion* and other legends of the First and Second Ages are published. I am in any case myself a Christian; but the 'Third Age' was not a Christian world. (Tolkien, 1999: 233)

Tolkien defends his story was not explicitly Christian (the 'Third Age' meaning the period corresponding to *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, while *The*

*Silmarillion* corresponds to the 'First Age'). This is true, he created a world with no explicit religion, or at least the characters do not practice any. But *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, unconsciously, defend religious values and he recognises them as a Catholic:

*The Lord of the Rings* is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision. That is why I have not put in, or have cut out, practically all references to anything like 'religion', to cults or practices, in the imaginary world. For the religious element is absorbed into the story and the symbolism. (Tolkien, 1999: 191)

The religious element Tolkien mentions in his letter refers, according to Colbert (2003: 141-142), to the values the story shows, like mercy and hope. Colbert claims that Tolkien wanted the book to show religion instead of talking about it by showing his faith trusting divine power. He maintains that if it were not for that compassion towards Gollum he would never have destroyed the ring (by accident, but still), and Frodo would have kept it in the end and the mission would have failed. If it were not for the hope every character shows, the enemy would have won. The values they have are crucial for the story.

The point is that what Tolkien means when he claims his work is religious and Catholic is not that he took Biblical elements and introduced them directly in his mythology, but that he took the religious feeling he had and transmitted it. *The Lord of the Rings* is a book about faith, although not in an explicitly religious way.

However, the reader could recognise Biblical elements in the text, more specifically in *The Silmarillion*, as this book takes place in the First Age and therefore tells about the legendary origins of Arda (the world in which all the stories are set). Again, we are dealing with what Tolkien would call 'applicability'. One reader could think about the origins of this world and relate it to the Bible, while another one could think of Norse mythology. Furthermore, Tolkien claims Arda is monotheistic while, as Patrick Curry (2003: 161) points out, it is only monotheistic by name, as Eru Ilúvatar (God) only had a role in

history once, when he created the world and the Valar. The Valar are like minor gods and are more active and present in history. This ends up being more polytheistic than what Tolkien claimed, and Curry says this cannot be, by definition, fundamentally Christian. If we analyse the roles of the Valar, we could think of the Greek gods, as there is a Valar of the waters, of death, of the earth, of the stars, and so on. The Valar resemble paganism while Eru resembles the Christian God, and there are other elements we could relate to Christianity, but that would mean coming back to applicability and what the reader, using personal experience, can interpret from a text.

What is clear is that Tolkien's work is religious and pagan at the same time because it has elements of both, and the way to combine them was, quoting Tolkien, with "a monotheistic world of 'natural theology'" (Tolkien, 1999: 233). As I explain in the next section, there is a war between nature and machinery. What Tolkien did was designing a theology that was extremely linked to nature and making the enemy a dark power destroying it. Eru is the only one who can create, and he creates the races and the natural elements. When Sauron tries to create he can only make corruption because that is his sin, he tries to do something that only Eru can do. David Colbert comments on the character of Sauron being like Satan (2003: 148), as their stories coincide in being fallen angels and convincing humans to disobey and being expelled from their home. This comparison is an interpretation of a probable inspiration for Sauron's figure. Another possible link is the relation between Heaven and Hell and their corresponding places in Arda, Heaven being Valinor, or the Land of the Valar, where the gods live, and Hell being Mordor, where the dark, destructing power comes from. The descriptions of the places could perfectly be Biblical references because of their similarity, one as a beautiful, natural land full of life, peace and goodness and the other as a dark, evil place full of fire and smoke. But this is an interpretation and Tolkien would have probably denied any (conscious) relation.

#### 1.4. Tolkien the Ecologist

Based on his life or not, the reader can easily tell that one important message of the work is that of the defense of nature against industrialization. A way to simplify this matter is to establish a relation in which the role of “Good” is played by nature and “Evil” is the machinery that destroys it.

Tolkien was very keen on nature and always gave it an important role in everything he wrote. Forests are always present in his stories and are described with detail, and his “good” characters are the ones from the rural world or connected to nature. This was a reference to himself, a man who wanted to have a simple life in the rural world far from the industrialization that was taking place in England at that time. It is known that Tolkien was against industrialization, as Carpenter told in his biography. Tolkien considered industry was destroying England and that there was not a forest or a hill untouched. He also used to complain every time he saw a new road crossing a field (1990: 93). He did not even have a car. Tolkien wrote in a letter to his son Christopher in July 1944 that “Labour-saving machinery only creates endless and worse labour” (Tolkien, 1999: 99), showing his contempt for machines.

David Colbert (2003: 68) has written that Tolkien's desire of making the world green again was due to his memories of the time when he lived in the countryside with his mother. When she died, he and his brother were sent to Birmingham to live with their aunt, and from his window he could only see the smoke of the factories instead of the trees. Carpenter said that Tolkien's love for his mother made him idealize the rural world in which they lived, and that love for the countryside would become the central aspect of his stories.

Birmingham was apparently another important source of inspiration for him, as Lin Carter has wondered if the city could have been the origin of his description of Mordor, with the smoke of the factories, the darkness and dirtiness of its wasted land. This relation is just a speculation, but Carter declares that the

green countryside that surrounds Birmingham was in Tolkien's mind when he wrote about the Shire (2002: 26).

His work reproduces his way of thinking about industrialization. If we take the characters that have the role of "evil" and we analyse their descriptions we can see how Tolkien gives machine qualities to them. In the war of the ring, evil characters 'use' machinery and 'are' machinery. Here is a description of Saruman, the White Wizard, from *The Two Towers*, chapter 4: "He is plotting to become a Power. He has a mind of metal and wheels; and he does not care for growing things, except as far as they serve him for the moment. And now it is clear that he is a black traitor" (Tolkien, 1954). Saruman is a character that represents this idea and who is usually linked to industrialization. He was a wizard that was supposed to defend the world with his role of a wise man, but instead he is corrupted by the desire for power. In the war for power, the way to win is using technology. It seems ironic that a character that is so wise gets corrupted by technology, which shows Tolkien's ideas about industrialization taking over nature.

The previous description of Saruman is provided by a very relevant character for this matter: Treebeard, the 'ent'. It seems important that the one who calls the wizard "a mind of metal and wheels" is exactly the antagonist creature. An ent is not a tree, but it was Tolkien's way to give trees a voice and a 'personality'. This is relevant because Tolkien lets trees speak for themselves and also stand to fight against machines. But first, we need to know how he came up with this idea, and apparently it was because of Shakespeare. Here is what Tolkien wrote in a letter regarding the origin of the word *ent*:

But looking back analytically I should say that Ents are composed of philology, literature, and life. They owe their name to the *eald enta geweorc* of Anglo-Saxon, and their connexion with stone. Their part in the story is due, I think, to my bitter disappointment and disgust from schooldays with the shabby use made in Shakespeare of the coming of 'Great Birnam wood to high Dunsinane hill': I longed to devise a setting in which the trees might really march to war. And into this has

crept a mere piece of experience, the difference of the 'male' and 'female' attitude to wild things, the difference between unpossessive love and gardening.” (Tolkien, 1999: 227)

According to David Day (1999: 15), what happened is that Tolkien disliked *Macbeth* and that inspired him “in a negative way”. Apparently he was disappointed with the resolution Shakespeare gave to the Great Birnam wood because Tolkien imagined a forest marching and, instead, it was only an army disguised like a marching forest, so he decided to make his own forest come to live. This is how the idea of Fangorn Forest rebelling against the machines of Isengard was born.

Tolkien was so keen on trees that he gave each forest on the Middle Earth its own personality, just like he did with races of creatures. For him trees had feelings and they interacted with other creatures.

In all my works I take the pan of trees as against all their enemies. Lothlórien is beautiful because there the trees were loved; elsewhere forests are represented as awakening to consciousness of themselves. The Old Forest was hostile to two legged creatures because of the memory of many injuries. Fangorn Forest was old and beautiful, but at the time of the story tense with hostility because it was threatened by a machine-loving enemy. Mirkwood had fallen under the domination of a Power that hated all living things but was restored to beauty and became Greenwood the Great before the end of the story. It would be unfair to compare the Forestry Commission with Sauron because as you observe it is capable of repentance; but nothing it has done that is stupid compares with the destruction, torture and murder of trees perpetrated by private individuals and minor official bodies. The savage sound of the electric saw is never silent wherever trees are still found growing. (Tolkien, 1999: 462)

Trees are omnipresent in his stories, not only physically as a forest, but also symbolically. Let's take the example of the White Tree of Gondor, the symbol of this kingdom. The actual white tree is in Minas Tirith, but it is currently dead and it is not even the original one. At least four different samples of the original tree

had been planted in Gondor. For these people, the trees symbolize the long story of this kingdom and its pride, but for the reader the tree becomes a different symbol. The White Tree dies before the war of the ring and there are no samples left during the Third Age, the time of *The Lord of the Rings*. The fact that the dead tree is still kept by soldiers symbolizes the decadence of the kingdom of men, but also hope, because the tree will bloom when Gondor has a new king. Here Tolkien uses the image of the tree to give hope by creating a complex history and genealogy for a single tree.

His passion for trees was there since he was a child living in Sarehole. His mother taught him about botany but he was more interested in the feelings he had about plants, especially trees. He enjoyed drawing them but mainly being around them and even talking to them. He explained that there was a willow he loved to climb and that one day it was cut and left there. He was sad for that and never forgot it (Carpenter, 1990: 22).

Apart from the ents, there are creatures that are strongly linked to nature: the hobbits. The figure of the hobbit is very relevant to defend the idea of the message Tolkien wanted to transmit, and it is that of the peaceful, simple countryside life. To finish the first part of this dissertation my intention is to compare Tolkien himself with the fictitious figure of the hobbit in the sense of the values they shared.

As I explained in the biography, Tolkien wanted a peaceful life. His desire was to write his legendarium, take care of his family and live far from the war and the industrialization of the cities, and this description reminds us of Bilbo Baggins. This is Tolkien's description of the hobbits: "They are entirely without non-human powers, but are represented as being more in touch with 'nature' (the soil and other living things, plants and animals), and abnormally, for humans, free from ambition or greed of wealth" (Tolkien, 1999: 176). And this is his description of himself: "I am (obviously) much in love with plants and above all



trees, and always have been; and I find human maltreatment of them as hard to bear as some find ill-treatment of animals” (Tolkien, 1999: 233).

Carpenter explains this relation also by quoting Tolkien, he claimed he was a hobbit except for the size. He loved trees, gardens and unmechanized farms; he smoked a pipe, liked simple food, ornamental waistcoats and mushrooms. He went to bed late and woke up late, and did not travel much. He also named the hobbit's house 'Bag End', that was the name of his aunt Jane's farm in Worcestershire, where his brother was then living. He said that the Shire from his books was 'his home', but the village of Hobbiton was actually inspired by Sarehole, in Birmingham, where he had spent some important years of his youth. Hobbits are not only part of Tolkien's personal experiences; he once claimed that hobbits are just rustic English people, small in size and in imagination, but not small in courage or latent power. Carpenter explains that hobbits represent the combination of small imagination with great courage, which frequently leads to surviving, as Tolkien had seen in trenches. Tolkien once mentioned his impression of survival thanks to the courage of small people with great power (Carpenter, 1990: 124).

I think this sums up very well that, unconsciously or not, Tolkien chose to create the hobbits according to his image and ideals: a peaceful Englishman connected to the land and guided by his morals.

## 2. Literary and Cultural Influences

### 2.1. Tolkien's Search for an English Myth

I was from early days grieved by the poverty of my own beloved country: it had no stories of its own (bound up with its tongue and soil), not of the quality that I sought, and found (as an ingredient) in legends of other lands. There was Greek, and Celtic, and Romance, Germanic, Scandinavian, and Finnish (which greatly affected me); but nothing English, save impoverished chap-book stuff. Of course there was and is all the Arthurian world, but powerful as it is, it is imperfectly naturalized, associated with the soil of Britain but not with English; and does not replace what I felt to be missing. (Tolkien, 1999: 167)

As Tolkien himself declared, he felt that England lacked stories of its own unlike other nations that had them. Greece had *The Odyssey*, Finland had *The Kalevala* and Iceland had the *Edda*. Tolkien mentions the Arthurian world as something related to Britain but not with England. Hostetter says that even *Beowulf* was a story that could have had these characteristics, written in Old English and composed in his land, but the story did not take place in England, and Tolkien considered that a mythology for England should be English in its language and in its land, and that is why he excluded it from English national mythology (Hostetter, 2003: 95).

Tolkien felt his beloved country needed a story that would give it its deserved mythology, and that is why he started his own, based on other national literatures and also on the English land and history, and at the same time giving it a language with English-related roots. His first intention was to design his languages and then he realised he needed speakers and a story to support those languages, to be an excuse for their origin and their evolution. So he felt the need to create the world he wanted: "I had a mind to make a body of more or less connected legend, ranging from the large and cosmogonic, to the level of romantic fairy-story [. . .] which I could dedicate simply to: to England; to my country" (Tolkien, 1999: 168).

The aim of this second part is to identify some of the possible literary and cultural influences that conditioned Tolkien when he wrote his books. What Tolkien said about this inspiration was that these stories grow from the 'leaf-mould' of the mind, what one has seen, thought or read, and seems forgotten. What he had in his mind was, especially, linguistic material which helped to create his fantasy alongside many other elements he had learnt from other sources (Fernández, 2003: 15).

## 2.2. Fairytales and *The Hobbit*

"I think the so-called 'fairy story' one of the highest forms of literature, and quite erroneously associated with children (as such)" (Tolkien, 1999: 233). Tolkien had a great interest in fairytales, a genre that was usually dismissed for being directed to children, a belief that he did not approve. He wrote an essay called *On Fairy Stories* in which he explained and defended the genre. According to Fernández Biggs (2003: 69), Tolkien maintained that fairytales had to contain moral elements but not to be applied in a specific way to the real world, because that way it would be transformed into an allegory, which Tolkien disliked. What Tolkien meant was that fairytales taught a moral (religious) lesson in an imaginary world. In his essay he argued that 'fairy' comes from "Faerie, the realm or state in which fairies have their being", and involves

many things besides elves and fays, and besides dwarfs, witches, trolls, giants, or dragons: it holds the seas, the sun, the moon, the sky; and the earth, and all things that are in it: tree and bird, water and stone, wine and bread, and ourselves, mortal men, when we are enchanted . . . Faerie itself may perhaps most nearly be translated by Magic—but it is magic of a peculiar mood and power, at the furthest pole from the vulgar devices of the laborious, scientific, magician. (Tolkien, 2008: 32)

The book that was more influenced by fairytales was *The Hobbit*. One reason could be the fact that he was used to inventing stories for his own children and it was going to be, in fact, a book for children, in style and content:

'The Hobbit' was written in what I should now regard as bad style, as if one were talking to children. There's nothing my children loathed more. They taught me a lesson. Anything that was in any way marked out in 'The Hobbit' as for children, instead of just for people, they disliked—instinctively. I did too, now that I think about it. (qtd. in Chance, 2001: 49)

Tolkien wrote the book to be read by children and incorporated elements from the 'Faerie' world, including fantastic creatures, as in many fairy stories that contain very different species of creatures. His intention when he created the hobbits was comic, an entertainment, based on fairytales: "Mr Baggins began as a comic tale among conventional and inconsistent Grimm's fairy-tale dwarves" (Tolkien, 1999: 32). This is relevant because the treatment the hobbits receive is much more laughable in this story than in any other, and also the dwarves, which most of the time have the role of a comic relief instead of being relevant characters. Tolkien also took the popular image of a greedy talking dragon keeping his treasure, which does not appear in his 'more mature' stories like *The Lord of the Rings*, in which the dragons are believed to be extinct and even something only from legends. The image of the trolls of the forests that eat people is also there. Another very relevant figure of this genre is the wizard. Magic is not explicitly present anywhere in Tolkien's legendarium (there is something supernatural, but it is related to the divine power of the Valar, not magic), so the figure of the wizard could be confusing. What Tolkien actually meant with 'wizard' was related to 'wisdom', to knowledge. Gandalf is important for his wisdom, not for his magic, and has the traditional role of the wise old man that helps the others.

But the "consolation" of fairy-tales has another aspect than the imaginative satisfaction of ancient desires. Far more important is the Consolation of the Happy Ending. Almost I would venture to assert that all complete fairy-stories must have it. At least I would say that Tragedy is the true form of Drama, its highest function; but the opposite is true of Fairystory. Since we do not appear to possess a word that expresses this opposite—I will call it *Eucatastrophe*. The *eucatastrophic* tale is the true form of fairy-tale, and its highest function. (Tolkien, 2008: 75)

Here Tolkien explains an important concept: the 'eucatastrophe'. He gives this name to the characteristic happy ending of fairytales. This applies when things are going wrong and suddenly, like a miracle, something good happens and all ends well. In *The Hobbit*, after the battle, Bilbo gets to go back home, richer and wiser, after all. This also applies to *The Lord of the Rings*, when the 'eucatastrophic' moments could be the arrival of the eagles to rescue Frodo and Sam from death, or the ents' decision to go to war and defeat Saruman.

### 2.3. Norse Mythology and *The Silmarillion*

Tolkien had a great interest in Norse mythology and his work was highly influenced by it, in aspects such as polytheism, magical creatures and objects, stories and languages. In the first part I mentioned that Tolkien was influenced by the Christian religion but also by paganism. If the reader analyses the passage of the creation of Arda in *The Silmarillion*, s/he may notice that the theology Tolkien developed was very similar to pagan religions like the Norse one. In *The Silmarillion*, there is a god that created Eä, Arda and the Valar whose name is Eru Ilúvatar, 'Eru' meaning 'The One' and 'Ilúvatar' meaning 'Allfather' ('Father of all') in Tolkien's invented language 'Quenya' or 'High Elvish'. The fact that he named Ilúvatar 'Father of all' is, of course, not a coincidence, as that is one of the names for Odin, a very important god from Norse mythology. There is also the aspect of the creation of the minor gods, or 'Valar' for Tolkien, as both mythologies contain a set of beings that dominate the Earth, with less power than Ilúvatar or Odin but much more than that earthly creatures may have. Another interesting connection is the fact that Tolkien also designed the End of the World after a great battle called 'Dagor Dagorath' ('battle of battles'), in which the forces of Light and Darkness would fight. After the battle, the world would be purified. This is similar to the 'Ragnarök' of Norse mythology, in which the End of the World would happen after a great battle, and Tolkien also

acknowledged this connection: “a final battle which owes, I suppose, more to the Norse vision of Ragnarök than to anything else” (Tolkien, 1999: 170).

There is also the name of Tolkien's Middle-Earth, as in Norse mythology the land for human beings was called ‘Midgard’, meaning something like ‘land in the middle’. This was not exactly the source of inspiration for the name but the meaning is the same, as Tolkien explained: “It is just a use of Middle English *middel-erde* (or *erthe*), altered from Old English *Middangeard*: the name for the inhabited lands of Men 'between the seas'” (1999: 233). In Norse mythology, Midgard was the land for human beings while Asgard was for the gods, and this division reminds us of Aman, the land of the Valar, and the Middle-Earth, the land of mortals. The deities of both mythologies (the Norse one and Tolkien's one) visited the land of mortals frequently, to interfere in human matters either with good intentions, like the Valar Yavanna that comes to the Middle-Earth to take care of nature, or with bad ones. I found it interesting that there is a connection between Melkor, the wicked Valar of the *Silmarillion*, and Loki, the god of mischief of Norse mythology, as Loki tries to destroy Yggdrasil, the Tree of Life from the Norse cosmogony, but he fails, while Melkor succeeds in destroying the Two Trees of Valinor, as if Tolkien had taken the idea and had completed it.

Norse mythology comes mainly from the *Prosaic* and *Poetic Edda*, collections of texts from Iceland that influenced Scandinavian literatures. From the *Poetic Edda* Tolkien took many elements, such as the names of 16 of his dwarves and of Gandalf himself (Carter, 2002: 220). Carter also comments on a text that belongs to the *Edda* as an important source of inspiration for Tolkien: the legend of Siegfried, or Sigurd, who killed a dragon and discovered a magical ring. There are different versions for this story and the most developed one is *The Ring of the Nibelung*, the opera by Richard Wagner. Carter makes a list of the elements of this story as sources for Tolkien's work, like the dragon keeping the treasure, the golden magic ring that is actually a curse, the ability to turn invisible related to the treasure, the broken sword that is fixed, the dragon being killed by a wound

on the chest, and some others (2002: 232). This legend has had many different versions through time, like *The Song of the Nibelungs*, *The Ring of the Nibelung* and others, and Carter claims that Tolkien knew all of them because some of these elements vary in the different versions. What Tolkien denied was that his ring had anything to do with the 'Nibelungen Ring', as he said "Both rings were round, and there the resemblance ceases" (1999: 324). Maybe he did not take this element directly, but the connection is easily made and there is no doubt that he knew the story, as he wrote a poem about the same legend called *The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún*.

One last element of the Norse mythology that Tolkien took was the elves. Generally, the elves, especially in fairytales, are small, ugly and naughty creatures, but in Norse mythology, as Colbert mentions, the elves were inferior to the gods but with a great power, and beautiful and even brighter than the sun. Tolkien blamed Shakespeare for making his elves silly and popularising this representation, but he succeeded in returning the elves to the original idea of Norse tradition by creating them as tall, beautiful, sensitive and a wise human-like race (Colbert, 2003: 52-54).

#### 2.4. Anglo-Saxon Culture and Rohan

Tolkien, as professor of Anglo-Saxon in Oxford, was fascinated by this culture and its literature and used it as a source of inspiration. We can identify, again, names, characters and cultural elements in Tolkien's work that come from Anglo-Saxon culture, especially applied to the culture of the realm of Rohan. The names for this culture are taken from the Anglo-Saxon language and are used for concepts that have to do with this period. An example of this is how the people of Rohan call their land: Riddermark or simply the Mark. Lin Carter says 'mark' comes from Old English 'mearc' meaning 'frontier, limit', and it was how Anglo-Saxons called a territory, and in Tolkien's language 'Riddermark' means 'land of the riders'. Carter also discovered more meanings, such as, for instance,



that the name of King Théoden means 'chief', that Mordor comes from 'morthor' meaning 'murder', that 'warg' comes from 'wearg' and means 'wolf, wicked' and, as I mentioned in the first part, that 'ent' means 'giant' (2002: 255-256). Also, in Rohan, the names for the characters that are part of King Théoden's family contain the particle 'eo', related to the horses, as the horse is the symbol of this realm, and the name of the 'rohirrim', that are the knights of Rohan, means 'lords of the horses'. There are many other names that come from Old English in Tolkien's legendarium.

Carter claims that Frodo's name comes from an episode of the *Gesta Danorum* or *History of the Danes* by Saxo Grammaticus, in which there is a king called 'Frode' who kills a huge serpent that keeps a treasure the same way that Bard kills Smaug in *The Hobbit* and Siegfried kills Fafnir in the Norse legend, by wounding its chest. Another similarity is that both characters wear an invincible coat of mail and are related to golden rings (2002: 248-249).

But the most important Anglo-Saxon source is *Beowulf*. Tolkien had translated and commented *Beowulf* and there is no doubt he used it for his work. David Day claims that *Beowulf* allowed Tolkien to imitate Sigurd's legend from the *Edda*, as at the beginning of the poem the hero, here called Sigmund, appears as the hero who killed the dragon and got the treasure of the ring. *Beowulf* also kills a dragon, time after killing the monster Grendel, and gets the treasure. Day compares the story of *Beowulf* with *The Hobbit*. In both, the dragons are woken up when a thief steals a goblet and escapes, and then the dragon destroys the human settlements that are near. But there is an important difference: in the case of *The Hobbit*, it is not Bilbo who kills the dragon, but Bard the Bowman, because it is not Bilbo's role to be the epic hero, an aspect that I explain in section 2.6. Like in *Beowulf*, the hero dies, but in *The Hobbit* the one who dies heroically is Thorin Oakenshield, the leader of the dwarves, fulfilling the role of the epic hero that did not correspond to Bilbo (1999: 84).

*Beowulf* and *The Hobbit* share similarities in the story but, as I explained before, Tolkien also based Rohan's culture upon the Anglo-Saxons, and Day compares the description of the Hall of King Hrothgar in *Beowulf* with that of Rohan's Meduseld, the Golden Hall in *The Lord of the Rings*. Both are described as golden, situated on a hill, and the ceilings were an imitation of Odin's golden ceiling in Valhalla (1999: 85).

## 2.5. The Arthurian World and Gondor

Tolkien also wrote a poem called *The Fall of Arthur*, showing his interest and knowledge about the Arthurian World. My intention is to relate this matter to the fictitious realm of Gondor, as I have done with Rohan and Anglo-Saxon culture, by establishing connections between some relevant elements. The most clear example, or at least the first one that comes to a reader's mind when comparing the two matters is the parallelism between Aragorn and Arthur. David Day explains this relation saying that actually Arthurian romances were based on much older myths and legends, which were pagan, while Arthur is based on a Christian world. He compares Arthur, Sigurd and Aragorn, as the three of them are the only heirs to the throne of their kingdom, lost it and were raised anonymously until their fate came (1999: 61). There is an important comparison between the stories of these characters: while Arthur's mission consists in looking for the Holy Grail, Aragorn wants to destroy the ring, and both missions imply the same process of a physical and spiritual journey to become a king.

Another comparison by Day is the fact that the three characters have magical legendary swords. In the case of Arthur, he proved his right to own Excalibur when he took it out of the stone, and something similar occurred with Sigurd's legend when only his father was able to take the sword out of the tree where Odin put it. On the contrary, Sigurd and Aragorn inherited broken swords and they cannot be kings until the swords are forged again. Although Arthur's sword was supposedly unbreakable, it also breaks, which results in three heirs with

broken swords (1999: 65). Aragorn's sword was called Narsil when it belonged to Elendil, Aragorn's ancestor, and when it was forged again it was named Andúril. The act of giving a new name to a the same sword sounds like a resurrection, as if the sword was born again with a renewed purpose, a Christian topic that Tolkien introduced in his work on Gandalf's character, when he died as Gandalf the Grey and was brought back to life as Gandalf the White by Ilúvatar, for he had an important role in the War of the Ring.

Gandalf is very relevant in relation with the Arthurian world too, as he reminds us of Merlin, Arthur's mentor and wizard. Day also compares the figures of Gandalf, Merlin and Odin, as the three are non-human beings with powers. They are the counselors of the kings, although they are not interested in earthly powers, and they guide the hero. They even look the same, with long white beards, wearing a hat and a robe and carrying a cane, the popular image of a wizard or a wise old man. Odin was an immortal Norse god, Merlin was probably a Celtic god and Gandalf was like a demigod. Once they end their role as mentors they leave the land of the mortals (1999: 67).

There is one last element to compare the Arthurian world with Tolkien's mythology, and it is related to the end of the life of the hero. In a legend, when Arthur is mortally wounded after a battle, he is taken on a boat by a Fairy Queen to Avalon, situated at West, where he would be cured and live forever. This is something that also happens at the end of *The Lord of the Rings*, and Tolkien, according to David Colbert (2003: 166), took this from Celtic mythology, where in the West and travelling across the sea are the lands where people go before death. Colbert claims that when Christianity was introduced in England, the idea of Heaven was mixed with that of the journey by sea to the land of death. The result was a series of texts called *imrama* that combined the journey by sea with looking for the Christian Paradise, and Tolkien also wrote a poem about that. He mixed this concept with his mythology and placed the Undying Lands to the West of the Middle-Earth, which is the place where the Valar live and where the elves and the heroes go when their lives end, so he chose to name this place, in

the elvish language Quenya, 'Avallónë'. Colbert claims that Tolkien wanted this to be a reinterpretation of the origin of Avalon in the Arthurian legend, as the events of *The Lord of the Rings* are supposed to have occurred in our world long before our days. The difference between them is that it is Arthur who goes to Avalon, but Aragorn does not go to the Undying Lands. The one who goes there to cure his mortal wounds this time is Frodo, the true hero of the story. In the end, even though there are many similarities between Arthur and Aragorn's characters, it is Frodo who goes to the land of the heroes like Arthur. In the next section, I explain why Frodo is the real hero.

## 2.6. The Hero

Every great story has a great hero, and Tolkien knew this and applied it to *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*. He did something very interesting with this figure: he chose to make his main character different from the classical epic hero and designed one that was more similar to that of the fairytales, the one that becomes a hero 'by accident'. At the same time, the reader could argue that the true hero of *The Lord of the Rings* is not Frodo Baggins but Aragorn, the heir to the throne of Gondor, the hero whose destiny was written. Aragorn and Frodo are two different types of hero which I am going to explain and distinguish by calling them 'the epic hero' and 'the fairytale hero'. Tolkien took the two versions and applied them to his work, first in *The Hobbit* and then in *The Lord of the Rings*.

The first hero, Bilbo Baggins from *The Hobbit*, was not the hero the readers were used to. The classical epic hero of the great stories does not take place here. Bilbo is an unusual hero because he was never meant to be a hero. Bilbo, at the beginning of *The Hobbit*, was just another hobbit that would never leave his home and go on an adventure. When Gandalf appears and convinces him to go on a mission he goes but always thinks of how much he misses his home and a good breakfast, and that becomes his motivation: this hero has to accomplish a

mission and he only wants to do it quickly so he can return home soon. His mission is actually epic, he is supposed to kill a dragon so the dwarves can have their treasure back. It is the kind of mission that would bring him fame and glory, but he does not want that, he only thinks of coming back home. The same happens with Bilbo's nephew, Frodo Baggins, in *The Lord of the Rings*, who always thinks of returning back home during his journey. The idea of coming back home is highly relevant, as the subtitle of *The Hobbit* is 'There and Back Again', a reminder of the importance of coming back home after the journey. By doing this, Tolkien gives us a hero that is actually humble, kind, homesick,... the hero that could be a totally normal individual, to whom Tolkien identified himself and that could be literally anyone.

What is interesting about this hero is that Tolkien did not actually create it, but made him resurrect. Tolkien, with his love for fairytales, applied the characteristics of the fairytale hero to his work, something different from what was typical. In fairytales, and also in Biblical stories, the heroes are unexpected, they are not meant to do what they do but they finally do it because people can be ennobled, an idea that fascinated Tolkien. Colbert (2003: 45) argued that even though *The Lord of the Rings* looks like an epic adventure, it is actually a fairytale. Tolkien wanted a hero with other qualities than strength or height, and Frodo in his journey discovers abilities that he did not know he had, like courage, determination or patience. Tolkien wrote: "I love the vulgar and simple as dearly as the noble, and nothing moves my heart (beyond all the passions and heartbreaks of the world) so much as 'ennoblement' (from the Ugly Duckling to Frodo)" (Tolkien, 1999: 180). Bilbo was not a hero until he becomes one, but he is still not an epic hero: he rides a pony, he defeats the trolls with his intelligence and not by fighting, and names his sword 'sting' because it is small but can hurt, just like him. So here we can conclude that Tolkien's motivation towards this hero was to show this 'ennoblement', how to be a self-made hero.

In contrast with this figure we can find a character – or characters – that have the role of the classical hero. The characteristics we may attribute to these

characters are related to being destined to achieve great things, with being a descendant of an important lineage, and this means to be born a hero. This is the hero the readers were used to. Like King Arthur, Aragorn (*The Lord of the Rings*) had a powerful sword waiting for him to help him become the king that was promised. Like Siegfried and Beowulf, Bard (*The Hobbit*) kills the dragon and gets glory. These are the heroes the reader expects to find in a fantasy story, especially Aragorn, who uses his sword and his royal blood to defeat the enemy, and who is the hero whose destiny was written.

It is important to remark one difference between these two types of heroes, and it is that the epic hero actually defeats the enemy, while the fairytale hero “fails” in his mission. What I mean by ‘fail’ is that Bilbo, and especially Frodo, fail in their mission at the last moment. Both complete all the journey physically and spiritually, but Bilbo does not kill the dragon and Frodo does not throw the ring to the Cracks of Doom. Tolkien comments on Frodo being a failure:

Frodo indeed 'failed' as a hero, as conceived by simple minds: he did not endure to the end; he gave in, ratted. . . . I do not think that Frodo's was a moral failure. At the last moment the pressure of the Ring would reach its maximum – impossible, I should have said, for any one to resist, certainly after long possession, months of increasing torment, and when starved and exhausted. . . . Frodo undertook his quest out of love – to save the world he knew from disaster at his own expense, if he could; and also in complete humility, acknowledging that he was wholly inadequate to the task. His real contract was only to do what he could, to try to find a way, and to go as far on the road as his strength of mind and body allowed. He did that. (Tolkien, 1999: 346-347)

Frodo failed as a hero but not as a person. His failure made him more human, the reader can identify more easily with a hero that makes mistakes. Frodo was never meant to be perfect, he was meant to be a believable representation of a normal individual, and he truly was that.

There is actually a third hero that we cannot forget, a character that was underrated but that was even braver than the others: Samwise Gamgee.

According to Tolkien himself, Sam was not an inspiration from old literature as the others, but was actually created as a reflection of the English soldier, of the privates and batmen he knew in the 1914 war (Carpenter, 1990: 65). Sam was another normal hobbit like the others, no one especial, but he had great values. He was loyal, patient, determined, brave, and always knew what he was fighting for. These were, for Tolkien, the qualities of the English soldiers he met at the war and that he introduced in this character. They show what a true hero should be like.

## 2.7. Languages

Tolkien, before being a writer, was a linguist. He started creating languages since he was very young. When his mother started his education, she taught him Latin and French, and he discovered his interest in languages and how they worked, the sounds, the form and the meaning of words. He was interested in literature but always related to language, and in a letter he tells an anecdote:

I first tried to write a story when I was about seven. It was about a dragon. I remember nothing about it except a philological fact. My mother said nothing about the dragon, but pointed out that one could not say 'a green great dragon', but had to say 'a great green dragon'. I wondered why, and still do. The fact that I remember this is possibly significant, as I do not think I ever tried to write a story again for many years, and was taken up with language. (1999: 229)

His early interest in philology made him create his own languages. By 1915 he had worked on a language based on Finnish, and when he wrote poems in that language he felt he needed a story to support it. He thought he could not create a language without speakers, and then was the time to decide who spoke his new language, eventually fairies or elves, and then he started creating his mythology (Carpenter, 1990: 61).

This proves how important languages are in Tolkien's work: even more important than the story itself, as the story is based upon languages and not the



other way around: "The invention of languages is the foundation. The 'stones' were made rather to provide a world for the languages than the reverse" (Tolkien, 1999: 233).

Tolkien based his languages on other tongues, and the two most important ones are 'Quenya' and 'Sindarin'. Both are elvish languages, but Quenya is High Elvish and Sindarin is Grey Elvish, which means that the first one is like a sort of Latin because it is used in ceremonies and important events, the way Latin is used in Church, whereas the second one is a more common tongue. One could think that these languages are mutually intelligible as both are elvish, but actually each one is based on a different language: Quenya is based on Finnish, a language that Tolkien loved, and Sindarin is based on Welsh (Day, 1999: 138).

## 2.8. Other Sources of Inspiration

To finish this part I want to mention some other sources of inspiration, and the first one is the famous Greek myth of Atlantis and the story of Numenor from *The Silmarillion*. According to Colbert (2003: 100), it all started with a dream Tolkien used to have, in which a giant wave covered the land, and that increased his interest in the myth of Atlantis. Then he created the civilization of Numenor, in which the men became evil because of Sauron's influence, and were punished by the deities just like in the myth of Atlantis, flooding the island into the sea. In the story of Numenor, the survivors get to the Middle-Earth and establish in a place they call Gondor, and the kings of this realm, Aragorn included, are the descendants of the Numenoreans and live a long life. There is no doubt Numenor is Tolkien's Atlantis, and apparently, after writing about this, the dream of the giant wave stopped.

The last thing I want to explain is about the time and place where all the stories of the legendarium are set. We already know that the universe is called 'Eä', the planet 'Arda', the continent where *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* are set is the Middle-Earth and that Aman, the continent in the West, is

the home of the deities. Inside its geography, the places are not situated randomly, they follow the geography of our world:

The action of the story takes place in the North-west of 'Middle-earth', equivalent in latitude to the coastlands of Europe and the north shores of the Mediterranean [. . .] If Hobbiton and Rivendell are taken (as intended) to be at about the latitude of Oxford, then Minas Tirith, 600 miles south, is at about the latitude of Florence. The Mouths of Anduin and the ancient city of Pelargir are at about the latitude of ancient Troy. (Tolkien, 1999: 407)

He intended to place Hobbiton near Oxford as Hobbiton was his representation of his beloved English countryside. The cardinal points also coincide, the expression 'to go west' means to sail to the end of the world, and of course the term 'land in the middle' is used to name lands in other cultures, as in the case of Anglo-Saxons, as a place in the middle of the sea. As for the time, it is imaginary, although the place is 'real':

I am historically minded. Middle-earth is not an imaginary world [. . .] The theatre of my tale is this earth, the one in which we now live, but the historical period is imaginary. The essentials of that abiding place are all there (at any rate for inhabitants of N.W. Europe), so naturally it feels familiar, even if a little glorified by the enchantment of distance in time. (Tolkien, 1999: 257)

The second part of this dissertation has analysed the main possible cultural and literary sources of inspiration that Tolkien used in his three major works. However, they are frequently only suppositions and Tolkien does not usually admit the connections of his work with others.

## Conclusions

Throughout this dissertation some interesting concepts have appeared, as well as some problems regarding the task of identifying the possible sources of inspiration for Tolkien's work.

The first problem appears on exploring Tolkien's life due to the fact that it is not commonly accepted to relate an author's life or personality to his/her work. Even Tolkien maintained that the "investigation of an author's biography [. . .] is an entirely vain and false approach to his works" (1999: 452). However, in the first part of this essay I defended that there are some connections between his personal interests and events that occurred in his life with the content of his books, some of them more evident than others. The most obvious one would be Tolkien's own identification with the hobbits and England's rural world with The Shire, showing his clear intention to defend his beloved countryside and its peaceful way of life, something that he corroborated in his letters multiple times. Another evident inspiration from his life was his wife Edith, who received the name of Lúthien in *The Tale of Beren and Lúthien*, the story about an immortal elf-maiden who chose mortality to be with Beren, a mortal. This might only be a theory if Tolkien had not ordered to write the names on their tombstone: under her name it says 'Lúthien' and under his it says 'Beren'. One more way we can relate his life to his work is the evident lack of female characters in his stories. If we read his biography we can easily notice that he was almost always in male exclusive environments, such as in school, in college and at war. His contact with females was reduced to his mother, who died when he was 12; his wife, whose relationship was forbidden until he was 21; and his daughter, who was born when he was 37. Taking this into account, one can understand why Tolkien used few female characters. Anyway, the representation they got is very positive.

Apart from these events from his life, there are some features of his personality we can identify throughout his work in the form of a message, sent consciously or not. About the war, we have seen that his way of dealing with this

issue was defending pacifism, that the ideal life is to live in peace, but at the same time he defends the need to fight for what is worth to fight, to save what is good. Although *The Lord of the Rings* is about a war for power, the war is depicted as something necessary to defeat the enemy and not as attractive or to be encouraged. About religion, we observe that his Catholic beliefs were reflected in his books. Quoting Tolkien, “*The Lord of the Rings* is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision” (1999: 191), and that sums up why we can claim there are religious elements in his work, especially values like faith and mercy. Finally, regarding ecology, Tolkien constantly expresses his love for trees and how nature should prevail over machines, which he identifies as the real enemy. His desire to live in a greener England far from the growing industrialization is made clear in his personal letters and in the message of his works.

Taking this into account, we now face the problematic assumption that the life and personality of the author have been attached to his work, contrary to the extended tendency to disconnect them. I propose a solution to this issue by bringing back the concept of ‘applicability’. Tolkien’s work has been in many occasions suggested to be an allegory of the First World War, something that Tolkien denied multiple times in his letters. In the Foreword to the second edition of *The Lord of the Rings* he wrote: “I think that many confuse 'applicability' with 'allegory'; but the one resides in the freedom of the reader, and the other in the purposed domination of the author” (2012, Foreword N.P.). He preferred the term ‘applicability’, that resides in the freedom of the reader to interpret the meaning of a story. However, he admits some of the author’s values can be reflected in his work, not in an allegorical way but in a ‘fairy-story’ manner:

There is no 'allegory', moral, political, or contemporary in the work at all. It is a 'fairy-story'. . . Because I think that fairy story has its own mode of reflecting 'truth', different from allegory . . . and in some ways more powerful. . . So something of the teller's own reflections and 'values' will inevitably get worked in. This is not the same

as allegory. We all, in groups or as individuals, exemplify general principles; but we do not represent them. (Tolkien, 1999: 252)

Summing up, the term 'applicability', the reader's freedom to interpret a text, can be the way to identify some of the author's features into the work, if we take into account that those connections are hypotheses. It is not possible to know how much of unconscious allegory there is in his works, but Tolkien gives the reader the chance to interpret the text as the reader thinks it is appropriate, which is what this dissertation has done.

Moving on to the second problem I faced writing this essay, there is the question of the literary and cultural influences. When trying to relate the contents of Tolkien's works to their possible sources, I found out he usually denied the connections. *The Hobbit* has been frequently related to *The Nibelungen Ring* by Wagner, and Tolkien said that "Both rings were round, and there the resemblance ceases" (1999: 324). This is the case with many other related sources, since he usually denied his probable inspirations, so it is impossible to be sure, even though the sources were more than justified.

As a solution to this problem I found a concept that Tolkien called the 'leaf-mould of the mind'. In a letter he was asked if the name of 'Gondor' had something to do with 'Gondar' in Ethiopia and he replied that he had never heard that name but that "Nonetheless one's mind is, of course, stored with a 'leaf-mould' of memories (submerged) of names, and these rise up to the surface at times, and may provide with modification the bases of 'invented' names" (1999: 446). This means that all that has been seen, thought or read and has been forgotten can come back to the surface of the mind in an unconscious way. Carpenter said we can still detect the shape of some of the leaves of the leaf-mould, like the Alpine trek of 1911, the goblins of the 'Curdie' books of George Macdonald, or an episode in *Beowulf* when a cup is stolen from a sleeping dragon (1990: 126). This theory lets the reader interpret other works as sources taking into account that Tolkien knew them and that these works were in the

back of his mind when he was writing. Moreover, all of the different possible sources I have explained in this dissertation were supported by critics.

Apart from this, while reading about Tolkien I discovered some interesting features that I think make him a very special author, and I would like to add them to conclude this dissertation. One was the high interest he had in languages, much more than in literature. For him, literature was only necessary to support languages, something different from adding invented languages to support an imaginary world, which is more usual. If he wanted his languages to be alive he needed speakers and a story, as he claimed in a letter when he was correcting an article about himself: "The imaginary histories grew out of Tolkien's predilection for inventing languages. He discovered, as others have who carry out such inventions to any degree of completion, that a language requires a suitable habitation, and a history in which it can develop" (1999: 406). He discovered that "legends' depend on the language to which they belong; but a living language depends equally on the 'legends' which it conveys by tradition" and that languages like "Volapük, Esperanto, Ido, Novial, etc etc are dead, far deader than ancient unused languages, because their authors never invented any Esperanto legends [. . .] I began with language, I found myself involved in inventing 'legends'" (1999: 250).

The other interesting fact I noticed was that when he talked about the creative process of his stories he normally used the word 'discover' instead of 'create'. He treated his imaginary world as if he was only the observer and not the creator. We can find statements like "I don't feel worried by the discovery that the ring was more serious than appeared" (1999: 141), "I have yet to discover anything about the cats of Queen Berúthiel" (1999: 230) or "I once scribbled 'hobbit' on a blank page of some boring school exam paper in the early 1930's. It was some time before I discovered what it referred to!" (1999: 233). He made it sound as if the stories just happened before he actually knew them, as if he did not decide what was going to happen in them. When Tolkien showed the poem *Earendel* to his friend G. B. Smith, the latter asked what it was really about. Tolkien then

replied: 'I don't know. I'll try to find out.' Not to invent, but to find out. He did not see himself as an inventor of stories but as a discoverer of legends (Carpenter, 1990: 61). Furthermore, sometimes he received letters from readers asking their doubts, and on some occasions his reply was that he did not have the answer. When he was asked what happened to the Entwives, his answer was "I don't know", and about the character Tom Bombadil he said that he was a mystery even for him.

This has been an analysis of the three most representative works written by Tolkien by means of comparing some of their elements to their possible sources of inspiration. It was not possible to know for sure what Tolkien would have considered a source for his work, as he defended that "the investigation of a work of narrative art, of which the object aimed at by the author was to be read with literary pleasure", should not be an approach to his work. He understood that readers may want to analyse it, but this attitude did not have his sympathy, "as should be clearly perceived in Vol. I p. 272: Gandalf: 'He that breaks a thing to find out what it is has left the path of wisdom'" (1999: 452). Considering this, Tolkien was reluctant to talk about what may have inspired him, while critics dare to make various hypotheses. This dissertation has given a contrasted analysis of the different points of view to finally reach a conclusion on what we could consider as sources of inspiration for Tolkien's works; works of such importance that they have become themselves the sources of inspiration for today's modern literature.



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