Good morning. Am I audible? Before I begin I want to thank Megan and Leslie and the committee for their sterling work under adversity, not just from Covid but dealing with the challenge of finding an appropriate venue and all the other difficulties that, if you haven't worked on a Mythcon yourself, you wouldn't begin to believe. And to all the Covid-era graduates I wish a hearty congratulations!

It's appropriate that I should be talking to you today as a graduation speaker, albeit that role was unknown to me until quite recently. At my own college graduation long ago, at the History Department of the University of California Berkeley – at U.C. each department holds its own graduation ceremony – the speaker, a journalist and author named Carey McWilliams, gave a speech in the form of a long list of topics in California history which he hoped us budding historians would pursue in our future careers.

I'm not going to read out a long list of potential research topics in Tolkien and Inklings studies today in my time with you, but what I am going to do is to present five mini-talks, tentative explorations in Tolkien and Inklings scholarship, thoughts that might provide insights into the minds and characters of not just Tolkien and Lewis, but of some of their readers.   I reserve the right to expand these into full research papers on some future occasions, but I'm not proprietary: if any of you bold young graduates want to take these points and run with them, I'd be most eager to read it.

At the Mythcon/BreeMoot of 1999 in Milwaukee – that's the conference "where all the sea was boiling hot / and weather pigs had wings" – I gave a paper titled "Top Ten Rejected Plot Twists in *The Lord of the Rings*." It was subsequently published in *Mythlore* and is included in my forthcoming collection from the Mythopoeic Press, *Gifted Amateurs*. Every Guest of Honor should have a book, and this is mine.

It consisted of a series of mini-papers on various plot points in the published drafts of *The Lord of the Rings,* all of them with the same aim: to explore Tolkien's writing process. If we pull these discarded drafts out of the trash, as the late Richard C. West so memorably said, it is to demonstrate how wise the author was to throw them there. But it is also, by juxtaposing and comparing various individual ones, to find the patterns in his creativity.

So the first topic I'd like to raise today is the primary patterning lesson that I drew from the Ten Rejected Plot Twists: the expansive, even burgeoning quality of Tolkien's imagination. We can see the same patterns from the *Lord of the Rings* papers at work in the Silmarillion and his other work – and in his creation of languages. Tolkien scholars who are not specialists in linguistics tend to avoid his technical language creations, imagining that they're too complex to understand. My experience is that studies in them are not difficult to follow, and the languages show the same creative principles at work as in Tolkien's other compositions.

The most basic of Tolkien's creative techniques is growing a mighty tree of work from a tiny seed. The classic example of this is Earendel. "Eala Earendel engla beorhtast / ofer middangeard monnum sended." "Hail Earendel, brightest of angels / above Middle-earth sent unto men." Finding this cryptic reference to the morning

star, Venus, in an Anglo-Saxon religious poem prompted the young Tolkien to write a poem of his own, depicting Earendel voyaging: "Earendel sprang up from the Ocean's cup / In the gloom of the mid-world's rim; / From the door of Night as a ray of light / Leapt over the twilight brim." And that in turn gave rise to the story of his quest to Valinor and the whole backstory of the Silmarillion behind it.

Another of Tolkien's creative techniques is a vast expansion of scale. This can be seen in evolving timelines – the First Age was doubled in length; the Third Age timeline started out as what became Shire Reckoning and then had an earlier 1600 years added on to it – but the classic example of this is *The Lord of the Rings* itself. Beginning with one image – the return of the ring – as a sequel to *The Hobbit* under pressure from Stanley Unwin, Tolkien's publisher, who wanted another book to sell (note it was not even Tolkien's own idea), it then grew enormously every time Tolkien realized the story was on too small a scale and backed up to try again at a much enlarged scale. He went through four drafts before he got the story much beyond Rivendell. Tolkien's estimates as to how much remained to finish were consistently off, vastly underestimating the amount of work he'd have to do to finish the thing. At one early stage of writing about the Council of Elrond, he sent a dispirited note to his publisher saying that the book "is only about 3/4 written". In fact he had gotten only one-sixth of the way through the total narrative.

Related to this is a technique of expansion by tacking new material on. One of the first texts about the fall of Númenor was labeled "The Last Tale," thus attaching it to the existing *Book of Lost Tales* and thus, by later terminology, adding a Second Age to the Silmarillion's Elder Days. *The Hobbit* was loosely and nebulously attached to the Silmarillion – we'll get to that later – but the process of expanding that into *The Lord of the Rings* created a Third Age to go with the Second and First.

Similarly, the geography expanded. *The Hobbit* had existed in a bipartate world: the settled lands where Bilbo came from in the west, and then over the Edge of the Wild – an actual line drawn on the map – to Rivendell, the Misty Mountains, and all the other strange and adventurous lands in the east which take up the rest of the story. Wilderland it's called here, and later, in Sindarin, Rhovanion, while the area to the west where Bilbo came from becomes Eriador, and the specific homeland of the hobbits acquires the extremely domestic name of the Shire. There's a distinctive separation between them, acknowledged when Thorin in his deathbed speech calls Bilbo "child of the kindly West."

The Lord of the Rings began, at its slower pace, as something of a copy of its predecessor, though as less of a lark and more of an actual adventure with the Black Riders chasing Frodo, but the geography was the same, though much more detailed, up to another visit to Rivendell and a confab with Elrond. But at that point, instead of heading further east as the dwarf and hobbit party had done, the newly formed Fellowship of the Ring heads south, into territories unknown in *The Hobbit* save for the vaguely-located Mines of Moria. Here we find a southland where all of the lands known in *The Hobbit* are considered a distant and rather unknown North. Meanwhile the South itself is even more starkly divided than the north was, into the warring lands of Gondor

(with its ally Rohan) in the west and Mordor in the east, with some of the same west/east overtones of home vs. danger seen in *The Hobbit*. I suppose you could draw a similar west/east dichotomy between Valinor and Beleriand in the Silmarillion.

But Tolkien's technique of expanding creation that I wish to concentrate on here is the one most copiously illustrated in my Rejected Plot Twists paper, and that is growth by splitting off. Here we find most graphically illustrated Tolkien's principle of groping around in imperfect – his word – invention until the truth, "what really happened," came out in redrafting or revision.

This expresses itself frequently in *The Lord of the Rings* in the form of an action or a role being taken by an existing character and Tolkien then stopping and crossing it out. No, he says to himself. This is wrong. This isn't the person who does this. It has to be somebody else, someone new. And a new character is born.

The first and most famous example of this is the one that Christopher Tolkien read to the attendees at Mythcon in 1987 when he was Guest of Honor, from the then yet-unpublished *Return of the Shadow*. Three hobbits – in this version the one with the Ring is named Bingo – well, he changed it – are walking through the Shire, when a mysterious rider comes by, so they decide to hide. Here's what first happens:

> Round a turn came a white horse, and on it sat a bundle – or that is what it looked like: a small man wrapped entirely in a great cloak and hood so that only his eyes peered out, and his boots in the stirrups below.
>
> The horse stopped when it came level with Bingo. The figure uncovered its nose and sniffed; and then sat silent as if listening. Suddenly a laugh came from inside the hood.
>
> "Bingo my boy!" said Gandalf, throwing aside his wrappings. "You and your lads are somewhere about. Come along now and show up, I want a word with you!"

Tolkien stopped writing soon after this point. No: that is not Gandalf. It must be something else. Almost immediately, he changed the horse's color to black – it was white as he first wrote it – and added a few more details: the cloak and hood are now also black, and the face is entirely shadowed rather than the eyes peering out. With those few changes we now have, almost word-for-word, the description of the Black Rider as he appears in the finished text.

So there's the pattern. And I can demonstrate this by referring to instances in my paper. No, Gandalf isn't the horseman who hunts down Frodo in the Shire: let's invent the Black Riders. No, it isn't a hobbit, one of Bilbo's adventurous younger cousins, who is the tracker who helps Frodo out of Bree; let's invent a Man, a descendant of the Númenóreans. No, Boromir isn't the traitor who betrays the West to its enemy: let's invent

Wormtongue. No, it isn't Treebeard who imprisons Gandalf: let's invent Saruman. (That one's a little more complicated: at one point Tolkien thought Treebeard and Saruman were allies.) No, it isn't Éowyn who weds Aragorn: let's invent Arwen. This technique can even give rise to something totally new: Somebody needs to give Frodo and Sam a hand in Ithilien: let's invent (quite unconsciously this time) Faramir.

So that's the pattern of Tolkien's invention. It burgeons, it blossoms, it expands, it throws off unexpected offshoots, and it does so at a prodigious rate. Which is why it's so surprising when that invention begins to contract, to fold in on itself.

The first major example of this comes at the end of *The Lord of the Rings*. It's in "The Scouring of the Shire," and it comes in the form of Sharkey. Who is Sharkey? "The biggest ruffian o' the lot, seemingly," says Farmer Cotton, and so he is, except that, in a big but somehow inevitable surprise ("A sudden light broke on Frodo" when he realizes it), he's Saruman – who's only been in the Shire for about six weeks, by the way.

But in the original drafts for the chapter, he's not Saruman, he's just a ruffian. One whom Frodo kills in dramatic single combat, by the way. This is already the Frodo who's declared that it will not be his role to take up arms again, so the combat is an example of Tolkien's invention getting ahead of his realization of "what really happened." This is exactly what Tolkien meant when he wrote "I was not inventing but reporting (imperfectly) and had at times to wait till 'what really happened' came through."

It's unquestionable that "what really happened" is that Sharkey turned out to be Saruman. When he was a ruffian, Tolkien had difficulty figuring out which of the ruffians he was, and then there was that combat with Frodo, as ludicrous an idea as Sam knifing a Nazgûl in the back at the Cracks of Doom, which is something else that Tolkien actually wrote down. (Why his hand didn't rebel against it escapes me. Well, three of his fingers were willing enough, but his thumb and forefinger were opposed. I'm not sure if anybody got that one.)

But when Sharkey turns out to be Saruman, he can't be killed by Frodo, because that would be wrong. Saruman is "of a noble kind that we should not dare to raise our hands against," Frodo loftily informs us. The murder comes at other hands in the form of a poetic justice that Saruman aggravated himself, and his death is a stark and unforgettable scene.

But however appropriate it is, this is the first and only occasion in *The Lord of the Rings* when a new character is folded into a previously-existing one, when something unexpected fits into a slot that's already there. It's a new phenomenon in Tolkien's writing, and I see it as a herald of tendencies in his later writing to systematize, categorize, and neaten up his mythology. This had already begun when he had Gandalf provide a backstory for *The Hobbit*'s mysterious Gollum, and it reached its apex a few years later in the "Round World" version of the legendarium, when he essayed attempting to abandon most of the cosmological myth that had served the Silmarillion beautifully for forty years in favor of something that would be more congruent with scientific fact.

I believe that what was eating at Tolkien here was the evolution, which he may not have been entirely aware of himself, of his legendarium from his original intention of a *mythology* into a *history*. The extensive work he had been doing on chronological annals of the Elder Days, modeled on the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles, had a lot to do with this, and so did the writing of *The Lord of the Rings* – much closer in style and substance and ambiance to a modern novel than anything from the Silmarillion would ever be – and especially of its historical appendices. The fundamental of the legendarium had ceased being tales told around the fire and had become historical records with dates in them. Tolkien could not reconcile the legends of the Elder Days with the reliable historical records of later times, and it was the immortality and spiritual access of the Elves which made it a problem. The Eldar could remember back to those times, and they had, or once had had, direct or indirect access to the Valar, who could give them God's truth about the universe. The Elves would surely not tell lies to Men and other beings, so what they tell had to be factual in the same sense that the histories were. Tolkien did experiment with writing Mannish misunderstandings of what they'd learned from the Elves, but he didn't pursue that to a full coverage of the mythology.

Tolkien would not have settled for the solution that his son Christopher eventually employed in *The Silmarillion*, which was to let the mythology be mythology and the history be history, not worrying about the conflict over what the Elves knew. Leaving out Elves, this is in accordance with how human history has been told. The Anglo-Saxons, for instance, produced genealogical trees for their kings that traced the royal ancestry back to Woden. At what point, tracing them backwards, they cease being historically reliable and become mythological we cannot now always tell.

But it was not just in the structure of fundamentals that Tolkien's attitude towards his creation changed. He became more analytical with details in general. This can be seen in the very late writings in *The Nature of Middle-earth*, where he spends pages analyzing the life cycle of Elves compared to Men in minute mathematical detail, or the absolutely crushing moment where he decides that his beautiful mythological image of Valinor being separated from the mortal lands when the shape of the world was changed was not feasible – what happened to it *physically*? So it must have lost its Valinorian magic and become America.

In relation to one such moment, the Valar disputing the legal case of Finwë and Míriel, Christopher Tolkien brings up the reader short by pointing out "how far away from these grave Doctors seems the 'hornéd moon' that rode over Ælfwine's ship off the coasts of the Lonely Isle" in *The Book of Lost Tales*. Critic Andrew Rilstone, an intelligent Tolkienist though not a scholar, has postulated "three differently unfinished works in progress." First, the purely mythological Elder Days, the "setting of the *Book of Lost Tales*, back when Beren was an Elf, Sauron was a cat and minstrels had names like Tinfang Warble." Then, the mixed mythological-historical one we're most familiar with, "the world of *Lord of the Rings* and the published *Silmarillion*, when Hobbits, Dwarves and the sunken island of Númenor had inveigled themselves into the long-standing Elf-mythology." The stylistic difference between these two stages is primarily a growth in majesty

and seriousness: Tevildo and Tinfang disappear; the fey Tinwelent becomes the towering Thingol. And then the only partially sketched third purely historical and scientific work, "which would have made the world of *Lord of the Rings* more consistent with real-world geography, real-world astronomy and real-world theology. It would have ret-conned out the flat-earth, the sky dome, and the literal sun-chariot, and made Eru and Morgoth theologically consistent analogues for the Catholic God and the Catholic Satan." Rilstone's division makes sense to me, but though specific aspects of this have been discussed in formal scholarship, so far as I know, no scholar has really investigated the overall *pattern* of these alterations of the fundamentals of the legendarium over time.

For my part, I have faith in the mythology. The beautiful images of the ships along the Straight Road, the creation of the Sun and Moon as fruits of the Two Trees, the wave crashing over Númenor as the shape of the world is changed: these are the images sprung from Tolkien's imagination that make him a great creative writer.

I mentioned that the second stage of the legendarium, the one where it evolves into a history, was forged in part through the writing of *The Lord of the Rings*, and that raises my second topic, one that has attracted my attention since I was a baby Tolkien scholar. At my first Mythcon I gave a lengthy and extensively researched paper titled "The Development of the Concept of Middle-earth." Since this was 1976, I had to write it without the benefit of the History of Middle-earth books, without *The Silmarillion*, without even Carpenter's biography, none of which had been published yet. My conclusions were extremely speculative and are best left buried. But I have wondered ever since how this evolution happened, and more precisely on its key originating point: What is the relationship between *The Hobbit* and the Silmarillion? More precisely, how did Tolkien imagine *The Hobbit* fitting in to the legendarium at the time he was writing it? In terms of location, where did the author think that Bilbo Baggins is actually going when he sent him off on a mad and slightly bumptious expedition with thirteen dwarves and a wizard? And in terms of time, when within the timeline of the fictive universe does *The Hobbit* take place?

The answer to that last question seems pretty obvious. Turn to Appendix B of *The Lord of the Rings*, and there it is plain as day, Third Age 2941, "Thorin Oakenshield and Gandalf visit Bilbo in the Shire. Bilbo meets Sméagol-Gollum and finds the Ring. … The Battle of Five Armies in Dale. Death of Thorin II. Bard of Esgaroth slays Smaug. Dáin of the Iron Hills becomes King under the Mountain." The plot of *The Hobbit* in summary, tucked in among such events as the birth of Aragorn ten years earlier and the birth of Théoden seven years later, and these events in turn are part of a sequence that extends, once you count in *The Silmarillion*, from the creation of the universe to the beginning of the age of Man. This is the epic span of Tolkien's imaginary sub-creation; this is his legendarium.

But I hope I don't need to explain to this audience that that is an entirely retrospective, *Lord of the Rings*-based answer – there is no Third Age of the Sun in *The Hobbit*; the concept hadn't been invented yet – and *The Hobbit* looks entirely different when viewed as a stand-alone book than it does through the lens of *The Lord of the Rings*. The history of the Ring alone proves that. Tolkien was painfully aware of the inconsistencies between the "Equalizer," as Tom Shippey calls the original conception of the Ring, a tool to enable the weak and inexperienced Bilbo to be able to deal on something like equal terms with hostile elves, a wily dragon, and giant spiders, and the malignant evil of *The Lord of the Rings*.

Tolkien tried several times to anneal these problems. He was brilliantly successful in healing the original story in which Gollum tries to give Bilbo the Ring as a present, by writing the revision of chapter five in which Gollum has no such intent, and his motives are quite hostile, and then, in a sublime flash of authorial genius, Tolkien explains away the original story as a lie told by Bilbo to cover up his own sense of guilt. What makes that so brilliant a solution is that the original story really makes no sense. It feels like a lie, and what do you know, it is one.

Tolkien had less success with his 1960 attempt to rewrite *The Hobbit* in the style of *The Lord of the Rings*, preserved as the Fifth Phase of John Rateliff's *The History of The Hobbit*. This rather sorry experiment leaches the sense of fun out of the original chapters when it doesn't leave it intact, gasping in its own incongruity. Nor can I say much for those parts of "The Quest of Erebor," which is an essay in *Unfinished Tales*, which attempt to explain, in *Lord of the Rings* terms, why Gandalf invited Bilbo to join Thorin and Company at all. The problem is that the plot of *The Hobbit* has a whimsical, fairy-tale element that doesn't really work in *Lord of the Rings* terms. After Thorin raises perfectly reasonable objections to the idea of bringing a hobbit burglar along on his quest, Gandalf "spoke at last with great heat. 'Listen to me, Thorin Oakenshield!' I said. 'If this hobbit goes with you, you will succeed. If not, you will fail. A foresight is on me, and I am warning you'". That, to me, is the sound of an author telling his characters, "You will do what I say, whether you like it or not." It's a rare phenomenon in Tolkien, but it occurs here.

The underlying problem with all these attempts to reconcile *The Hobbit* with *The Lord of the Rings* is that, on one level, the texts are irreconcilable. *The Hobbit* is its own book, and demands to be read on its own terms. That's hard to do once you know the sequel. After such knowledge, what forgiveness? But we should try. If we wish truly to understand *The Hobbit*, we must take it on those terms.

When John Rateliff's study of the drafts of *The Hobbit* was published, I hoped it might help clear my question up, but instead it makes the dilemma even murkier. There are various points in the drafts where the War of the Jewels seem to be taking place in the distant past, and others where it seems to have been very recent. Nor does Tolkien appear to have evolved from one of these perspectives to the other in the course of the drafting, but to have jumped between them in an unpredictable manner.

The question really came to a head for me when I read the book's essay on the question of whether or not the Elvenking is Thingol. There are strong arguments to be made that he is, especially the reference to his hostile legacy with the Dwarves, but there is one serious problem that arises here, which is that it is a necessary part of that story that, at the end of it, Thingol is killed. Rateliff devotes some mental gymnastics to examining the possibilities that *The Hobbit* is actually set during the middle of the War of the Jewels, or that the Elvenking is Thingol reborn and returned from Mandos, or that he's an entirely different character who just happened to have the same history as Thingol, or indeed, as is stated in *The Nature of Middle-earth*, unavailable at the time to Rateliff, he was consciously trying to emulate Thingol, although considering the outcome of that story one would wonder what would be worth emulating. But I found when considering the drafts of *The Hobbit* I didn't believe any of these explanations.

Rateliff constantly warns throughout his book that one must not look at the composition of *The Hobbit* through the retrospective lens of the sub-creation as elaborated in *The Lord of the Rings*, but I think that's pretty much what's happening here. You don't have to get hung up on the existence of a separate individual named (in *The Lord of the Rings*) Thranduil to fall into this trap. If we try to figure out the Elvenking by means of the rules of the sub-creation, we're looking at *The Hobbit* through a narrow focus on the legendarium as a documented (fictive) history, with a clear timeline and clear limits on its coverage, and I don't think that's how Tolkien approached the writing of *The Hobbit*.

The key to understanding this comes in an amusing habit of Tolkien's, throughout the 1920s and 30s, of putting in allusions or thematic echoes of his Silmarillion legendarium into the stories he told to his then-young children. These allusions were entirely for Tolkien's own amusement, since none of his children had then read anything of the legendarium. *The Hobbit* was one of these allusive stories, but not the only one. There are definite echoes of the wars of the Silmarillion in the goblin attacks in the *Father Christmas Letters*, for instance; and there is the truly startling moment in *Roverandom* when Uin the whale takes Rover to see Eldamar.

> It would take the whole of another story, at least, to tell you of all their adventures
> in Uncharted Waters and of their glimpses of lands unknown to geography, before
> they passed the Shadowy Seas and reached the great Bay of Fairyland (as we call
> it) beyond the Magic Isles; and saw far off in the last West the Mountains of
> Elvenhome and the light of Faery upon the waves. Roverandom thought he
> caught a glimpse of the city of the Elves on the green hill beneath the Mountains,
> a glint of white far away; but Uin dived again so suddenly that he could not be
> sure. … "I should catch it, if this was found out!" said Uin. "No one from the
> Outer Lands is supposed ever to come here, and few ever do now. Mum's the
> word!"

There seem to be two views to take of this episode. One is to accept it, to go ahead and claim the moondog and the Pacific and Atlantic Magician and all the other assorted *Roverandom* paraphernalia for the Silmarillion cosmos, and try to explain its presence, either by stating that *Roverandom* is set before the fall of Númenor (unlikely) or that Uin has the ability to swim along the Straight Road. The other is to deny that *Roverandom* is canonical, and dismiss the episode as a joke.

I don't think either answer, that it's part of the legendarium or it isn't, is quite satisfactory. There seems to me no question that, at least on some level, the episode is a private joke by Tolkien, more for his own amusement than that of his children. We should not neglect the role of humor in the sub-creation. I mentioned earlier that it's meaningless to speak of the year 2941 in a context of *The Hobbit* alone, but the text does give the day of the week and the date of the year, the former from the entry that Bilbo forgot to put in his Engagement Tablet, *Gandalf Tea Wednesday*, and the latter from Gandalf reminding Thorin that "Thrain your father went away on the twenty-first of April, a hundred years ago last Thursday, and has never been seen by you since." Note that these are both *comic* bits of data, the one deriving its humor from butting the bourgeois hobbit up against the epic Norse adventure he's being dragged into, and the other, "a hundred years ago last Thursday," from the absurdness of the specificity. Doug Anderson in *The Annotated Hobbit* notes that this is one of only three exact dates given in the entire text, and we learn from Rateliff's *The History of the Hobbit* that the date was a victim of Tolkien's constant adjustment of the timeline in the drafting process, a rejiggering which in this case lasted into the final text, for the date was "the third of March" until the 1951 revision.

So the details of day and date are actually a kind of pseudo-specificity, and when we look at what *The Hobbit* says about the big picture, it reinforces the ambiguity of the book's status. The first words of the actual story of *The Hobbit* – that's *after* the five long paragraphs of expository explanation of hobbits in general and Bilbo in particular that no author would be permitted to get away with today – are "By some curious chance one morning long ago in the quiet of the world, when there was less noise and more green, and the hobbits were still numerous and prosperous …" *Long ago in the quiet of the world*. In other words, *Once upon a time*. It's a magical, timeless era.

So for whether *The Hobbit*, or *Roverandom* for that matter, is part of the legendarium – I think the problem in all these cases is that we're asking the wrong question and setting up the wrong dichotomy. We can draw a timeline and say that here at one end is the Elder Days, and the other end is what will later be called the Third Age, and *The Hobbit* has to be at one end or the other. With the writing of *The Lord of the Rings*, of course, it settled down at the latter end, but during the writing of *The Hobbit* we see it flickering back and forth. But that peculiar status engenders my doubt that, at the time, Tolkien was thinking that way. I submit that the answer to our conundrum lies in turning the timeline 90 degrees and looking at it from another angle. We think of Tolkien's sub-creation as a history, full of precise places and dates we get from the Appendices and

Unfinished Tales, but the legendarium only gradually evolved into that state, beginning with the Annals of Valinor and Beleriand in the early 1930s but only fully blossoming in the composition of *The Lord of the Rings*. It began as a mythology, a sequence of timeless tales to be told, that are much less specific in time and place, and it still bore much of that character at the time *The Hobbit* glanced off of it. The lack of specific place names in *The Hobbit*, in contrast to the profusion in *The Lord of the Rings*, has been noted by Shippey and other scholars, and this is significant in regard to the question of the location of *The Hobbit*.

The strong impression I get from the drafts of *The Hobbit*, and even from the finished book without the image of *The Lord of the Rings* overshadowing it, is that Tolkien originally imagined his story as a hobbit in the land of fable. Bilbo leaves his comfortable, circumscribed, country squire existence and travels to a kind of never-never land, to Faery. He *enters the book*. If we pick up a printed copy of a story, we can turn to any page and be *there*, in that place and that time, with the events of that part of the story unfolding. As Bilbo progresses along his journey, he gradually enters the timeless region of the Great Tales, and chronology is meaningless. At one point he can meet Thingol in Doriath, at another it can be long after the fall of Gondolin and its swords can be relics. But the Elven-king that we meet is not even that much *like* Thingol. Who he's *like* is … Tinwelent. In other words, the world that Bilbo wanders into is the world of the *early* Silmarillion, not the later texts.

Smith of Wootton Major enters Faerie also; the difference is he has no Gandalf, nor any personal store of knowledge of Faerian history and lore, to tell him what's going on. And you can view *Roverandom*, with its visits to the Moon and under the Sea, in the same way, with some exposition as *The Hobbit* has, except that, apart from the reference to the Undying Lands, its fables don't come from the legendarium whereas most of Bilbo's do – and even such characters in *The Hobbit* who don't appear in the Silmarillion are also fable-world denizens, some of whom (the trolls, the wargs, Smaug) are types of those which do exist there. And the rest? Well, what about Gollum? "I don't know where he came from, nor who or what he was." He's a fairy-tale monster, of unknown origin. "Far, far below the deepest delvings of the Dwarves, the world is gnawed by nameless things," says Gandalf in *The Lord of the Rings*, and Gollum is one of them. That sense of the unknown and unknowable on the edge of the story is vital to its effect, but so is the sense that those things belong there, whatever they may be. Pinning them down, giving a name to the unnamed Gollum, only came later on, as part of cleaning up the story and tying up loose ends, which eventually became the major shift in Tolkien's treatment of his sub-creation which I discussed earlier.

I'm not sure if my conception of this elusive journey is clear. I tried to think, are there any stories by other authors that treat existing literature in the way that I believe Tolkien was treating the Silmarillion when he wrote *The Hobbit*? I've found three of them, all of them postdating *The Hobbit* so they couldn't have been influences on Tolkien, and since Tolkien abandoned this conception it's unlikely to have been an influence on them. The one that most closely parallels what I believe Tolkien was trying to accomplish is *Silverlock* by John Myers Myers, and in fact you could say that, in a sense, Bilbo *is* Silverlock.

Silverlock is the story of an unimaginative, bourgeois man, who acquires that name on an island called the Commonwealth, where he meets a great number of colorful people who are all characters from classic fiction or legend, and in the course of it he becomes more accepting and understanding of the life of the imagination. *The Hobbit* is generally acknowledged to be, among other things, a bildungsroman, and Bilbo goes through a similar evolution. The joke on Silverlock is that he never recognizes the people he meets for what they are, while Bilbo knows what he's going through, and when he doesn't already know it, someone, usually Gandalf, explains it to him. But the similarity, I think, is close. In *Silverlock* there's no justification; the people are just *there*. And similarly I think it's a mistake to look for a justification in exactly when, and how, Bilbo's story is taking place in relation to the legendarium, at least in Tolkien's original drafting.

The second such story is *Are All the Giants Dead?* by Mary Norton, in which a boy goes on a moral quest to free a princess from an evil spell, in a land where the residents are characters from classic fairy tales. The big difference from *The Hobbit* and from *Silverlock* is that Norton's tale is set conspicuously afterwards. Her fairy tale heroes are all retired, older, past their prime, gearing up for one more adventure. *Silverlock*'s setting is more purely timeless. In *The Hobbit*, the famous events referred to are in the past, but there's no emphasis on their pastness as opposed to their historicity, and this largely because Elves (and, perhaps, goblins) do not age. I don't sense the interest of the era of the Silmarillion in *The Hobbit* as taking the form of nostalgia, which is curious because *The Lord of the Rings*, and such manifestations of the original legends as *The Book of Lost Tales*, are full of nostalgia, or more accurately a form of lofty regret at the passing of the days of yore.

My third example, which might be more apropos because the fairy tales are happening right now as the story unfolds, is Stephen Sondheim's musical *Into the Woods*. This stirs together a large set of fairy tales into a narrative stew, to the extent that the incongruity of juxtaposition becomes the point. But, as an example of what I'm describing, it lacks one essential element that all the others have, a protagonist who comes from outside the fairy tales.

I don't have any actual evidence that Tolkien thought this way. But it solves, at a stroke I think, the problem of the temporal setting of the story, and more importantly I think it's in keeping with the way Tolkien conceived of his story. Verlyn Flieger's book *Interrupted Music* is essentially an extended meditation on Tolkien's self-awareness of himself as a storyteller, and we're all familiar with self-aware storytelling moments within the story, from the frame storytellers in *The Book of Lost Tales*, to Sam and Frodo's conversation in Ithilien about being in a continuation of the Silmarillion, and in the Ainulindalë where the evolution of Arda is shown as a vision to the Ainur before it happens. Tolkien is coy about these; he never breaks the fourth wall; but the scholar of "On Fairy-stories" is never unaware of the kind of story he's writing.

I think what Tolkien had in mind here was to take a character that the children could identify with, a child-sized non-hero like Bilbo or a toy dog come to life, and let him explore, half-seriously and half-jocularly, the landscape of Tolkien's own imagination, both as a source for interesting stories and as a joke that only the

author himself would get, and as a child-like figure who could gape at the legends presented before him, as Pippin and Merry in *The Lord of the Rings* do before Minas Tirith and the Púkel-men.

It was the (unexpected, certainly at the time he was writing it) publication of *The Hobbit* that turned this plan inside-out. Suddenly this semi-whimsical appendix to the Silmarillion had thrust itself up out of the deep into the dry land of published words, and, to switch metaphors, the tail was now wagging the dog. When Stanley Unwin asked for a sequel to *The Hobbit*, he may have mistaken Tolkien for a Hugh Lofting or L. Frank Baum, capable of turning out a series of sequels on order, but for Tolkien the urgent question was how to reconcile this new idea of *The Hobbit* as a hard conception and a central point, instead of a semi-whimsical appendix to the main matter, to the legendarium as he'd been developing it. What was his instinctive step on receiving this request? "To complete and set in order the mythology and legends of the Elder Days." Because he didn't think he could proceed any further along these lines until he got *that* straight. And when he did set seriously to work on a sequel, one item on his agenda was to clear up and codify the time long in the future beyond the Silmarillion when a serious *Hobbit* would have to take place. This reinvented and reframed *The Hobbit* as thoroughly as the 1960 Fifth Phase would have done, only without (except for chapter five and a few minor points) touching the text. It is at this point that a full-scale concept of a History of Arda with Three Ages emerged in the crucible of writing *The Lord of the Rings* from the gradual welding together of three mythologies with originally separate inspirations: the Elder Days grown from a seed of Earendel speeding over the ocean's rim, the Númenórean Second Age similarly grown from Tolkien's Atlantis dream, and the Third Age sprouted from a hobbit living in a hole in the ground.

For my third topic I wish to turn, rather abruptly I know, to C.S. Lewis, and to the greatest mystery in Lewis's biography, because I think I've found an explanation for it that nobody else has, and that mystery is Lewis's devotion to Mrs. Moore. From the time Jack Lewis left college lodgings as an undergraduate, he lived in "a joint menage" with Mrs. Moore and, until she reached adulthood, Mrs. Moore's daughter Maureen; and this stayed in existence for over thirty years, until Mrs. Moore's hospitalization and death in 1951. This puzzled all of Lewis's friends, and even the person closest to him, his brother Warren, who joined that menage upon his retirement from the Army in 1932. Warren wrote,

> The thing most puzzling to myself and to Jack's friends was Mrs Moore's
> extreme unsuitability as a companion for him. She was a woman of very limited
> mind, and notably domineering and possessive by temperament. She cut down to
> a minimum his visits to his father, interfered constantly with his work, and
> imposed upon him a heavy burden of minor domestic tasks. In twenty years I
> never saw a book in her hands; her conversation was chiefly about herself, and

was otherwise a matter of ill-informed dogmatism: her mind was of a type that he found barely tolerable elsewhere. … Nevertheless he continued in this restrictive and distracting servitude for many of his most fruitful years.

Not everyone else agrees with the severity of this portrait – Owen Barfield, for one, said he liked her – and Warren's view may be colored by the fact that he only knew Mrs. Moore in her old age, having only joined the household when she was 60. Nevertheless Jack also made allusions in his letters to the burdens she placed upon him, made some pretty scathing remarks about the patient's mother in *The Screwtape Letters* which some have identified with Mrs. Moore, and in a letter a few months after she died Jack reported that he was "(like the pilgrim in Bunyan) travelling across a plain called Ease!" But despite any of this, while she lived his devotion to her was unquestionable. When Warren was considering joining the household, Jack wrote him an enormously painstaking letter assuring Warren that nothing would stand in the way of a resumption of their close childhood companionship but also warning him that equally nothing would be allowed to interfere with his commitment to Mrs. Moore and Maureen. He never explained the reason for this dedication, and refused to discuss the question if anyone brought it up. One time when Jack wasn't there the Inklings were discussing this mystery, and Hugo Dyson, who was never at a loss for an apposite Shakespeare quotation for any occasion, said, "O cursed fate that gave thee to the Moore!" (It's *Othello*, Act 3, Scene 3.) Everybody laughed, but when Jack heard about this quip he was really annoyed.

Jack had met Janie Moore in 1917 when he became roommates with her son Paddy in the Officers' Training Corps at Oxford, and she and Maureen moved nearby. (Paddy's father was long out of the picture, though the Moores were never divorced.) As Jack's father was even more emotionally distant than he was geographically, Jack was drawn to the Moores and tended to prefer their company. Maureen later recalled that Jack and Paddy promised each other that if one of them were killed in the war, the other would look after the remaining parent. Paddy *was* killed, and his promise is often cited as a reason for Jack's care, though it seems insufficient to explain the lifelong shared household and the intensity of Jack's subservience to Mrs. Moore's demands. Nor did Jack ever cite the promise himself.

In later years Jack often described or introduced Mrs. Moore as his mother, not always explaining that this was an informal adoptive relationship, which caused occasional confusion. (Jack's actual mother had died when he was nine.) But despite that familial cast to their bond, a lot of Lewis scholars have speculated, or even insisted, that in the early days of their acquaintance – when they met, he was 18 and she was 45 – they had a sexual relationship. There's no proof of this, but it seems generally accepted now. This was of course long before Jack's conversion to Christianity; he considered himself an atheist at the time.

And it's on the assumption that there was a sexual relationship that I've found an answer to the mystery, both to why Jack felt himself lifelong beholden to Mrs. Moore, and to why he refused to talk about it. I'm

astonished that nobody else seems to have discovered this, but apparently not. If I've missed it, let me know. I'm putting it out before an audience for the first time now.

It's in *The Screwtape Letters*, Letter no. 18. Screwtape is lecturing Wormwood about human sex. This is not Hellish propaganda here; what Screwtape says is being presented as the objective metaphysical facts of the matter. He's elucidating a statement in First Corinthians, expanding on Jesus's works in the Gospel of Mark that a man and his wife shall become one flesh. Paul to the Corinthians says that this is true of any sexual union, even with a prostitute. And Screwtape interprets this thusly: "The truth is that wherever a man lies with a woman, there, whether they like it or not, a transcendental relation is set up between them which must be eternally enjoyed or eternally endured."

If Lewis did have a sexual relationship with Mrs. Moore, then, however brief its duration, there can be no doubt that, at least after he become a Christian – and remember he had been moving towards belief for some years already – he felt this sense of an eternal bond, a transcendental relationship between himself and Mrs. Moore. What may have begun as a romantic cohabitation, and evolved into a practical living arrangement, perhaps ended in Lewis's mind as a metaphysical obligation. And no wonder too that, as a Christian, he was deeply ashamed of his earlier nonbelieving self's sins of the body and would not want to discuss this, or the metaphysical consequences of which it was a necessary cause, with anyone, not even his brother. To disguise Mrs. Moore as his mother, especially after she became in practice more a mother-figure to him, only made sense.

This also perhaps explains why Lewis never married until after Mrs. Moore died, and why, despite being a bachelor of 57, he was willing to do so. In a transcendental sense he had been married already when he was 18, so not such a crusty old bachelor after all.

For my next topic, I want to turn to a more mundane mystery in Tolkien criticism, and that is the matter of Edmund Wilson. This renowned and esteemed literary critic turned his eyes to *The Lord of the Rings* in 1956 and wrote a dismissive review published under the sneering headline "Oo, those awful Orcs."

What's striking about Wilson's review is his inability to see the book in front of his eyes. His review is loaded with some of the most imperceptive remarks ever made about *The Lord of the Rings*. He consistently spells Gandalf with a "ph" instead of "f." He writes staggering things like this: "The hero has no serious temptations; is lured by no insidious enchantments, perplexed by few problems. … As personalities [the characters] do not impose themselves. At the end of this long romance, I had still no conception of the wizard Gandalph … interminable adventures the poverty of invention displayed in which is, it seems to me, almost pathetic." And so forth. Most amazing is that he seems to have missed Frodo succumbing to the lure of the Ring at Mount Doom, because he says he was expecting something like that to happen but it never does.

Is it any wonder, then, that some have wondered if Wilson ever actually read the book, as opposed to skimming it hastily, at all? Tolkien himself may have doubted it. In the foreword to the second edition, several years later, he writes that "Some who have read the book, *or at any rate have reviewed it*, have found it boring, absurd, or contemptible."

But Wilson says in the review that he "has just read the whole thing aloud to his seven-year-old daughter, who has been through *The Hobbit* countless times, beginning it again the moment she has finished, and whose interest has been held by its more prolix successors." (That's not intended as a compliment; his explanation for adult admirers is "certain people have a lifelong appetite for juvenile trash." In a truly low point, not in the review but in his private journal, since published, Wilson explains W.H. Auden's presence among them by stating that homosexuals never become fully mature. Let's just drop that right there, shall we?)

The Lord of the Rings is not the only book to have earned Wilson's uncomprehending scorn. Wilson didn't like H.P. Lovecraft any more than he liked Tolkien. And one of his most famous articles is a root-and-branch denunciation of detective fiction titled "Who Cares Who Killed Roger Ackroyd?" Some of the specific accusations in the last – Dorothy L. Sayers "does not write very well," Margery Allingham is "completely unreadable … wooden and dead" – sound a lot like "Dr. Tolkien has little skill at narrative and no instinct for literary form."

This suggests to me that what Wilson is suffering from is an allergy: an allergy so intense as to cause him to be unable to absorb, to remember the details of, the book he's just read aloud long enough to write a review of it. He really doesn't care who killed Roger Ackroyd, or how Frodo defeated Sauron, and considers himself superior to those who do care. And that explains his inability to get facts straight or perceive the most forthright characteristics of the book.

But what exactly is it that he's allergic to? In part, yes, it's the clear and straightforward prose. But in Tolkien's case I think it's also the fantastic element. Tolkien's use of this is what Wilson reserves his strongest critique for: "An impotence of imagination seems to me to sap the whole story. The wars are never dynamic; the ordeals give no sense of strain; the fair ladies would not stir a heartbeat; the horrors would not hurt a fly."

That Wilson dislikes fantasy is disguised by his final paragraph, which begins, "As for me, if we must read about imaginary kingdoms, give me James Branch Cabell's Poictesme." This is followed by a couple sentences of praise of Cabell's depth and perception. See? it seems to say: I *do* like fantasy when it's good.

But that's not the real story, as revealed by a long consideration of Cabell's work Wilson published in *The New Yorker* a week after his Tolkien review in *The Nation*. He begins by recounting his personal history with Cabell. He had tried reading Cabell's prominent fantasies like *Jurgen* back when they were new in the 1920s, but found them utterly uncongenial: how so he does not specify; it seems to be a fundamental allergy to their very nature. But twenty years later, Wilson read – at a friend's recommendation – one of Cabell's non-fiction books, and was so attracted by it that he turned to other non-fiction by Cabell, then to his realistic novels,

and finally back to the fantasies that he, Wilson, had been avoiding, and with which, he now admits, Cabell "has written some of his most successful and well as his most ambitious books."

Do you see what happened here? From finding Cabell's fantasy as "uncongenial" as a brick wall, Wilson turned to admitting that it's much of Cabell's best work. And how did this happen? He found a way into Cabell. By finding a book which eschewed what Wilson was allergic to, he was able to grasp and appreciate the quality of Cabell's prose, the nature of his thought. And so, with a new understanding, a meeting of the minds, he proceeded, step by step, through more personal nonfiction, to realistic novels, and at last to the fantasy, and now he gets it.

If only Tolkien had published something that Wilson could likewise have used as a stepping-stool into the realm of Tolkien's mind, he might in the end have come to appreciate *The Lord of the Rings* as well. I don't know what such a book might have been. From one of the swipes in the review – "Malory and Spenser … have a charm and a distinction that Tolkien has never touched" – perhaps Wilson would have liked *The Fall of Arthur* or parts of the Silmarillion papers, had he been able to read them. I don't know.

I can offer less understanding to Michael Moorcock. Moorcock is a British fantasy and science fiction writer, the senior figure in a group of writers including M. John Harrison and China Miéville, who seem to consider Tolkien's existence a personal affront, who act as if Tolkien is responsible for all the terrible imitations that have emerged in his wake, and who are repulsed that liking Tolkien's works would be tantamount to endorsing his implied political views, and they speciously associate these with aggressive colonialism, a position Tolkien abjured.

Moorcock wrote a screed called "Epic Pooh," which says what the title implies: Tolkien's work is infantile, he says, "It is Winnie the Pooh posing as an epic". It is written in "the prose of the nursery-room. It is a lullaby, it is meant to soothe and console. It is frequently enjoyed not for its tensions but for its lack of tensions. It coddles, it makes friends with you, it tells you comforting lies." As with Wilson, one wonders what book Moorcock read, because it's certainly not *The Lord of the Rings*. With more room than Wilson, Moorcock quotes, though he prefers to quote from *Winnie-the-Pooh* rather than Tolkien, and his main quote is from the *Hobbit*-like opening of *The Lord of the Rings*; when he quotes from later in the book – claiming, like Harold Bloom on a similar mission, to be "opening it entirely at random" – he, like Harold Bloom again, takes it entirely out of context. Even more stunning is Moorcock's statement, in a companion piece, that he thinks his own dislike of the work lies primarily in there being "scarcely a hint of irony anywhere". He hasn't noticed that the whole plot is formed out of the deepest of ironies, that all those contending armies matter not a whit: the fate of the world is bound up in two guys trudging disconsolately eastward on foot.

So did Moorcock actually read the book, as opposed to opening it at random? Unlike Wilson's case, I don't believe he did. Years later, in an unrelated article, Moorcock revealed in passing that he found reading

The Lord of the Rings at all to be "a defeating struggle," and that I think explains his misapprehensions of the work. He never read it; he doesn't know what he's talking about.

My last presentation today is rather more radical, because I'm presenting a theory of my own as to how other people of the here and now, including perhaps many of you, think. This is a rather audacious thing to attempt, but since up until now my reaction to this phenomenon has been to be baffled and annoyed, and now I think maybe I get it, I count that as an advance. My natural mode of discourse is one of overweening arrogance, but I really intend to present this humbly and to ask, am I on the right track? Does this make sense?

I begin with a scene which I've seen enacted at more than one Mythcon. A newly-appearing scholar, usually a young woman, is presenting a paper on Éowyn. Éowyn is the rare example of a woman warrior in *The Lord of the Rings*. But she abruptly and inexplicably gives up her noble calling to marry some handsome hunk from Gondor. The scholar criticizes Tolkien for losing his nerve, for taking this singular woman warrior away from her rightful destiny.

The room erupts in protest. That's not what Tolkien wrote, various more senior figures lecture her. Éowyn doesn't really have a vocation to be a warrior, they say. She's not Xena or the version of Arwen in the Jackson movies. She had been driven into combat by despair. What Faramir points out to her is that her battle is over: wounded, she can no longer fight. And when the battle is won without her, despair is no longer necessary. She's free. She finds the hope she had lacked. This is what she has really wanted. She would have married Aragorn if she could. Now she finds the opportunity to be a healer, and the chance for a new love.

And they're right: that is what Tolkien wrote. So then, what is it that the scholar is complaining about? (Don't answer that: this is a rhetorical question. I'll get back to it.)

Let me give you another example, this one from Lewis: The Problem of Susan. In *The Last Battle*, the concluding volume of Narnia, we learn that Susan Pevensie, one of the original four children from *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, "is no longer a friend of Narnia" and does not go with the other Friends of Narnia when they're carried off by Aslan in the afterlife. She's become a social animal who goes to parties and dates and prefers to forget that she ever went to Narnia. This passage has infuriated many readers for years. The most extreme position is that Lewis has condemned her to Hell because she's become sexually mature.

As with Éowyn, that's not what Lewis wrote. Here's the entirety of it.

> "Oh Susan!" said Jill, "she's interested in nothing now-a-days except
> nylons and lipstick and invitations. She always was a jolly sight too keen on
> being grown-up."

"Grown-up, indeed," said the Lady Polly. "I wish she *would* grow up. She wasted all her school time wanting to be the age she is now, and she'll waste all the rest of her life trying to stay that age. Her whole idea is to race on to the silliest time of one's life as quick as she can and then stop there as long as she can."

She hasn't been damned: she's still alive and has the chance of recovering herself, though Polly doubts she will. And it's not about sexual development or sexual activity: it's about the social accoutrements associated with sex appeal and its social manifestations.

What Lewis is getting at here is something that he brought up often in essays: that trying to seem grown-up is really a childish response. It's those who are conscious of still being children who are anxious about this.

The loss of the wonder of childhood in the process of adolescence is a common topic in fiction. I find it in Norman Rockwell's 1954 painting "Girl at Mirror," which shows a girl, apparently just pre-adolescent, her doll tossed in an undignified position to the side. The girl is trying on lipstick, presumably for the first time, and comparing her visage in a mirror to that of a woman's glamor photo held in her lap. This, I thought, is Susan at the moment she loses Narnia.

And I've never read the point expressed better than in the novel *Doll Bones* by Holly Black, which won the Children's Mythopoeic Fantasy Award in 2014. The protagonists are three pre-teens whose friendship had been forged by improvising stories taking place in their shared imaginary world. But now the youngest of them fears that the other two are outgrowing it. She says that the boy will "hang out with his teammates and date cheerleaders and doesn't remember what it was like to make up stuff." And the girl is "going to be too busy thinking about boys and trying out for school plays and whatever to remember. … I hate that you can do what you're supposed to do and I can't. I hate that you're going to leave me behind. I hate that everyone calls it growing up, but it seems like *dying*. It feels like each of you is being possessed and I'm next."

It's not about sex, it's about the inherent character and social pressures of adolescence. So why is it, then, that so many people think otherwise?

I think we can approach an answer to that question by turning to an equally vexing moment in an entirely different text: the death of Tara in the TV series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.

One of Joss Whedon's goals in making *Buffy* was to break stereotypes, the expectations of storytelling in prime-time series television. For instance, *Buffy* was one of the pioneering shows in establishing season-long plot arcs.

But *Buffy* broke new ground in other areas. One thing it offered was one of the first examples on major network TV of a sympathetic same-sex couple who were major characters, Tara and her girlfriend Willow. That was bold, especially since Willow, previously only indirectly hinted at as a possible lesbian, had been one

of the principal characters of the show since day one. Then Tara enters her life and suddenly the sparks fly, not to mention the soda machines.

Another daring innovation in *Buffy* was to kill off sympathetic major characters. Not counting instances of Marvel death (they die, they come right back), and the fake-out deaths of minor characters who had looked as if they might become major, this dates back at least as far as the sudden and brutal death of Jenny Calendar in season 2. Again a real shocker. Jenny was not technically a major character, but she was often on-screen and vital to the unfolding plot, and also to the emotional life of Giles, the mentor librarian, who was a major character and whose budding romance with her was cruelly cut off.

And so, after Tara was introduced in the fourth season and her blissful romance with Willow had undergone stress to the point of breakage caused by Willow's addiction to magic – a metaphor for drug abuse if there ever was one – and had just reached happy recovery in season six, Tara is suddenly and abruptly killed by a bullet that wasn't even aimed at her. Poof, she's gone.

What the showrunners didn't realize – *or didn't they?* – is that these two bold new themes – the sympathetic same-sex couple and the lack of immunity of major characters from dying the real death – by being put in combination enacted a very old, once very obligatory, and very toxic stereotype that shouldn't have been reappearing on television in 2002: *Lesbians must suffer. You have sinned, you must be punished.*

The show got a lot of criticism for this, and a lot of "Who, me?" looks from the showrunners. But it matters less if that's not what they meant if that is what they said.

That was quite a while ago now, but it's on recent consideration that I realized it's a clue to understanding Tolkien and Lewis. The lesson of the death of Tara is, you can create an impression that's entirely different from the ingredients making it up. Tolkien didn't write a career woman who gives up her job to get married, but it's awfully close – the only real difference is whether she really wanted the job – and he framed it just as he would have if he had written the career woman. Lewis didn't damn a teenage girl to Hell because she's interested in sex, but her flaws are sex-adjacent, and he also frames it as if he had written that. Readers see Susan's nylons and lipstick as code for sexual activity because so often they are. The stereotypes hinted at are so toxic – and not obsolete; the woman punished for having sex where men get away with it is making a comeback right now in the abortion debates – that readers sensitive to them can't just brush them off. It's like antibodies sensing an infection. The exculpatory statements of Lewis's and Tolkien's innocent authorial intent read like crude whitewashing over an open wound. And that, I suspect, is what is really bothering the people complaining about Éowyn and Susan. If that should be obvious, it hasn't been explained in so many words where I've seen it; it's just been assumed. So am I on the right track here?

And I'll leave you with that question. Thank you for spending this hour of wide-ranging speculation with me.