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**Killing Tolkien: The Legendarium and Death of the Author**

Koncept „smrti autora“ aplikovaný na Tolkienovo Legendarium

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## **ABSTRAKT**

Tato teze analyzuje interpretaci díla J.R.R. Tolkiena za použití konceptů uvedených v eseji Smrt autora Rolanda Barthese. Soustředí se na Legendarium (sbírku příběhů z Tolkienova světa Ardy) a jeho interpretace. Tato teze argumentuje proti naprostému přehlížení Tolkienových úmyslů jakožto autora při analýze jeho díla, namísto toho argumentuje pro vyvážený pohled na jeho obsah. Tolkienovo literární dílo je velmi oblíbeným námětem pro filmové adaptace, které tedy práce rovněž vnímá jako svébytné interpretace, ať již zjevně respektují autorský záměr nebo nikoli.

## **KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA**

J. R. R. Tolkien, Roland Barthes, smrt autora, alegorie, alegoreze, Legendarium, Silmarillion, literární analýza, interpretace

## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis analyses the interpretation of the works of J.R.R. Tolkien using the concepts put forward in Roland Barthes' essay Death of the Author. It focuses on the Legendarium (the collection of stories within Tolkien's world of Arda) and interpretations of it. The thesis makes a case against complete disregard of Tolkien's authorial intent when analysing his work, and instead argues for a balanced view of the content. Tolkien's literary oeuvre has enjoyed a steady popularity as source material for filmic adaptations, which is why our analysis treats these as legitimate interpretations of the original, varying in their respect for Tolkien's authorial intent.

**KEYWORDS**

J. R. R. Tolkien, Roland Barthes, death of the author, allegory, allegoresis, The Legendarium, The Silmarillion, literary analysis, interpretation

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## 1 Introduction

In 1937, *The Hobbit* by British writer and professor John Ronald Reuel Tolkien was first released to critical acclaim. It won, among other accolades, the New York Herald Tribune award for the best juvenile story of the season upon its release (“Frequently Asked Questions”). Its three-part sequel published between 1954 and 1955, *The Lord of the Rings*, is likewise widely considered to be one of the cornerstones of the modern fantasy genre, with its influence being felt in novels, tabletop games, board games, movies, videogames and more.

It is then no surprise that both these works, as well as their posthumously published prequel *The Silmarillion*, have been studied and analysed many times. Searching for “Tolkien” yields over ten thousand results on the online academic library JSTOR, and there exist countless other articles, video essays, or tweets about Tolkien’s works.

Many of those analysts, be they scholars or amateurs, have interpreted Tolkien’s work as being an allegory. Tolkien himself replied to multiple letters asking him about the allegorical nature of his work. However, Tolkien denied any intentional allegorical elements in *The Lord of the Rings*. In fact, in the foreword to the second edition of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, he famously proclaimed:

*“I cordially dislike allegory in all its manifestations, and always have done so since I grew old and wary enough to detect its presence. I much prefer history – true or feigned– with its varied applicability to the thought and experience of readers. 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”* (16).



However, allegorical and symbolic readings of Tolkien prevail despite his opinions on the matter. This persistent discrepancy between authorial intent and the interpretive hunches of his audience may be regarded as rather paradoxical. This thesis will therefore seek to examine this discrepancy through the prism of the “Death of the Author” concept developed by Roland Barthes.

## **2 Theoretical part**

### **2.1 What is an allegory?**

Within the scope of literature, allegory is generally understood to be a device, through which a character, place, object or event within a story can be seen as a hidden representation or a symbol of a similar concept outside of the story, often with a particular political or religious significance. Allegory can be very broad, representing somewhat vague ideas like justice, camaraderie or revenge. However, it can also be intended as a specific reference that symbolically hints at concrete historical or mythological events or characters.

For an element of a work to be allegorical, there needs to be a level of separation. For instance, Francis Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* is not an allegorical work, even though it admittedly abounds in colour symbolism and other symbolic overtones. Although the characters and events are fictional, they are not symbolic. Instead, they are a direct representation of the flaws of the American Dream.

Unlike *The Great Gatsby*, fables are an obvious example of allegory. Even some of the oldest fables within the European cultural tradition, such as those written by Aesop, are readily understood as an allegorical representations of human behaviour through animal stereotypes.

A more recent canonical example of similar allegorical manoeuvring is George Orwell's *Animal Farm*.

In this modern fable, animals toiling under an irresponsible farmer revolt under the leadership of the farm's pigs. Soon however, they realise that the pigs are even more cruel than the farmer and have started working with the farmers from other farms. As Peter Davidson notes, this is a clear and intentional allegory for the Russian October Revolution and Stalin's subsequent totalitarian leadership. The farmer is a symbol of the Tzar, the animals are widely understood as a symbol of the oppressed proletariat, and the pigs are a symbol of the Bolsheviks (Davidson, pars. 3-4).

Orwell was a talented satirist and it is generally assumed that he utilised allegory intentionally and precisely. However, many works originally not intended to be allegorical are interpreted as such. Such is the case with Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. While on trial for his homosexuality, which was only decriminalised in 1967 in England (Sexual Offences Act 1967), Wilde claimed:

*"In writing a play or a book, I am concerned entirely with literature—that is, with art. I aim not at doing good or evil, but in trying to make a thing that will have some quality of beauty."* (qtd. In Linder)

What may be logically surmised is that Wilde's quote, in keeping with the premise of the Art for art's sake, indicates the ultimate purpose of a piece of art, be it written, painted or sculpted, is to emanate beauty and engage the readers on purely artistic merits, not to exude allegorical significations with potential moral, educational or political overtones.

Despite this caveat, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is often interpreted as an allegory. In her essay “*The Picture of Dorian Gray*”: *Wilde's Parable of the Fall*, American writer Joyce Carol Oates describes Wilde’s novel simultaneously as “as transparent a mediaeval allegory and its structure as workmanlike as that of Marlowe’s *Dr. Faustus*,” and as a convoluted, knotted puzzle (419).

### **2.1.1 Who decides?**

The disconnect between Oates’ interpretation of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Wilde’s worldview demonstrates a curious fact: Authors, especially after their death, have no power to stop critics from interpreting their work in ways they may not have intended.

American Medievalist Morton W. Bloomfield discusses allegory in his article *Allegory as Interpretation*, claiming that it is the way literary documents become relevant. He argues that different works of art can be interpreted differently at different points in history, which may infuse them with new currency (302). He also notes that while allegories and interpretations revitalise the works, what truly gives them life in the first place is their literal, non-allegorical text, or their “letter” (317).

Bloomfield distinguishes two general types of interpretation, those being historical and ahistorical. Historical interpretation analyses works within the context of their time period, while ahistorical interpretation seeks to find universal truths in it, although Bloomfield argues that “universal” actually means contemporary as there are no true universals. (301)

Peter Berek in his article *Interpretation, Allegory and Allegoresis* elaborates on Bloomfield’s points. He distinguishes between the concepts of *allegory* and *allegoresis*. As Berek argues, while allegory is a conscious effort of the author and an integral part of the work, allegoresis

is the act through which scholars, critics and other readers interpret the work and find potentially unintended allegory (118).

It may therefore be concluded that the answer to the question “Who decides whether a work of art is allegorical?” is: “It depends.” The field of literary interpretation is perhaps as old as literature itself, with countless critics and authors weighing in on the matter of allegory. While some authors consciously and openly utilise allegory, others do not, and scholars may interpret their works differently after all.

### **2.1.2 Allegory vs. analogy**

Allegory is far from being the only literary device commonly used to give secondary meaning to a text. Returning to Tolkien’s quote from the introduction to this thesis, a similar concept is applicability. This is very similar to Berek’s allegoresis, with perhaps the difference that while allegoresis is the process used by scholars, applicability is a property of the work itself, which lends itself to interpretations by readers of any educational level.

Allegory and applicability are also different from analogy. They are similar in some ways, specifically in being literary devices through which an element of a text is based on a real world or religious concept, event, or person. Where they differ is the use of symbolism. Allegory means that an element of a work is a symbol of a real world person, concept or event. There is an element of metaphorical connection between them. However, analogy means there is no symbolism, the story at hand just happens to be loosely applicable to some other narrative.

To further explore the difference, let us examine *A Song of Ice and Fire* by American writer George R. R. Martin. This epic fantasy saga is, as the author admits, heavily inspired by the

real history of the British Isles, but “cranked up to 11” (Martin). The War of the Seven Kingdoms specifically resembles the Wars of the Roses, with the Lannisters and Starks even having similar names to those of the houses of Lancaster and York. Both these wars were wars of succession, with complex webs of characters, alliances and betrayals.

*A Song of Ice and Fire*, however, is not an allegory for the Wars of the Roses. There are numerous differences between the two events, timelines and character relations, not to mention the presence of dragons and magic. Yet even if they were nearly identical, *A Song of Ice and Fire* does not represent the Wars of the Roses on a deeper, metaphorical level.

Nonetheless, *A Song of Ice and Fire* does contain an element which can be read allegorically. While most of the Seven Kingdoms are engaged in their petty conflict and politics, the real threat is brewing in the north. The Others, also called the White Walkers, are mysterious supernatural creatures, bringing with them an endless winter and an army of the undead, intent on wiping out all of humanity.

The White Walkers are generally seen as a personification of global climate change, which is likewise generally ignored by those rich and powerful. Martin himself said in an interview with *The New York Times* that “[...]in a very broad sense, there’s a certain parallel there” (Sims).

He has also however denied the series being an allegory. In 2013, at an event in Sydney, Martin was asked whether his books were also intended as allegories for climate change. He compared himself to J. R. R. Tolkien, claiming he did not intentionally write allegory, and that “[...] if [he] really wanted to write about climate change in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, [he]’d write a novel about climate change in the 21<sup>st</sup> century” (qtd. in Hughes).

## 2.2 Barthes and the Death of the Author

The disconnect between authors' own opinions and the critics' interpretations started being broadly considered in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley in their 1954 essay *The Intentional Fallacy* introduced a concept of the same name, describing a problem of the era's critics who utilised literary analysis as a method of analysing the mind of the author (Britannica).

Another highly prominent critic engaging with this problem was French philosopher and critic Roland Barthes. A key figure in the field of semiotics and structuralism, Barthes is known for his collection of essays titled *Mythologies*, examining the relationship of contemporary society to myths and mythology, and the creation of modern myth. In it, he examines the way in which contemporary figures and celebrities become proliferated in society, to the point of becoming symbols, independent of the actual person. As one example, Barthes takes professional wrestlers, who through their performance in the ring or cage become iconic figures larger than life, heroes or villains depending on the "storyline" of their league (13-23).

Barthes was an important figure in the fields of semiotics and structuralism, being one of the foundational figures of post-structuralism. Structuralist critique analyses literary works in relation to established cultural and environmental structures. These structures can be the plot or genre, or the motifs contained within the text. Semiotically, structuralism arranges the sign (text, language), concrete reality outside of the text, and the relationship between them into a superstructure. Structuralism however has been criticised as a mode of critique. British Scholar Catherine Belsey notes that structuralist critique is at a danger of collapsing all difference.

Post-structuralism arose in the 1960s as a response to and criticism of structuralism. Post-structuralism posits that the relationship between the signifier and the signified is not fixed, and that critique and interpretation are a fluid process. Extrapolating from this linguistic observation, Barthes applies this to literature in his essay *The Death of the Author*, where he argues against the author being the sole source of a work's semiotic meaning.

*The Death of the Author* is a rebuttal of critics' practice of using the Author's intentions as the ultimate meaning of a work. Instead of asking "what does the author mean by this," Barthes argues that the correct approach when reading a text should be "what can be interpreted from this?" (par. 6)

Barthes also examined the role of the author. He claims that the author as a "God" of their work is a relatively novel concept in literary criticism. Before the rise of empiricism or rationalism, a narrative tended to be shared not by the author, but instead by a mediator (par. 4).

Barthes's memorable phrase was meant figuratively, yet his concept has also been treated slightly more literally in some recent artistic renditions. In her 2018 video essay, also titled *Death of the Author*, film critic and writer Lindsay Ellis gives an example of author John Green. The plot of his 2012 novel *The Fault in our Stars* revolves around a teenage cancer patient seeking out the author of her favourite book, trying to find out what happened to the characters after the novel ended.

Green's fictional author Peter van Houten, in a very Barthesian manner, metaphorically kills himself, and proclaims that he does not know, since the book was a work of fiction and none of the events depicted really happened. The idea of authorial death is given more literal

resonance in the novel, because Peter seems to be deliberately drinking himself to death (due to a tragic and premature loss of his daughter to cancer). Like Barthes in *The Death of the Author*, Green, through the character of van Houten, criticises the idea of the author as the sole arbiter of canonicity and meaning in a work (qtd. in "Death of the Author," 02:45-03:35).

As Barthes says, assigning the Author and their intentions as the ultimate "answer" to a text stifles any further analysis. When gauging the authorial intent becomes the predominant purpose of literary critique, as it was in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Barthes argues that the work becomes only a tool for psychoanalysis of the author, and loses its own significance (par. 6).

However, Ellis has pointed out that inexperienced media analysts, such as literature students, can often misunderstand Barthes. The theory and framework of the Death of the Author is not, as she mentions, a way to enjoy media created by "problematic" authors without feeling the guilt of supporting them (00:25-01:10).

A notable and relevant "problematic" author is J.K. Rowling, creator of the *Harry Potter* series and the associated Wizarding World franchise. In the past, she was mostly just mocked for superfluous post-hoc additions to the canon of Harry Potter, like proclaiming Albus Dumbledore to have been gay (but not actually developing this characterisation within the text of either *Harry Potter* or the later released *Fantastic Beasts* movie series), or revealing on Twitter that until the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Hogwarts had no toilets and the students would relieve themselves in the hallways and use a spell to vanish the evidence (Renfro).

Recently, Rowling has been widely criticised, including by Harry Potter actor Daniel Radcliffe, for holding transphobic views and supporting British anti-trans hate groups



(Romano). As a result, many of her (former) fans started distancing themselves, the fandom and even the franchise itself from Rowling, joking that vocaloid star Hatsune Miku was the actual author of Harry Potter (Haasch).

But separating the art from the artist under Barthes's philosophy is, as Ellis says, an application of literary theory, and is wholly separate from examining the ethics of media consumption. Although the Author is removed from the work, the purpose here ultimately is to assuage the perceived guilt, and not to engage with the work in a novel way (01:10-01:40).

## **2.3 Tolkien: life and work**

### **2.3.1 Tolkien's life by Carpenter**

Humphrey Carpenter was a British writer, BBC Radio presenter and biographer, famous for his series of *Mr Majeika* children's books and biographies of British writers, composers or other artists. Upon his death in 2005, he was called a "gently mischievous broadcaster and prolific writer" ("Humphrey Carpenter").

Carpenter wrote an authorised biography of J.R.R. Tolkien, aptly titled *Tolkien: A Biography*. Together with Tolkien's son Christopher, he was also the editor of Tolkien's published Letters. As this thesis concerns interpretations of Tolkien's works related to his life and views, it is conducive to include a cursory summary of Tolkien's biography.

John Ronald Reuel Tolkien (called Ronald by his family) was born in 1892 in Bloemfontein, then capital of the Orange Free State to Arthur and Mabel Tolkien (12). Carpenter notes an event in his infancy, when he was bit by a tarantula. Although Tolkien grew up with "no

especial dislike of spiders,” Carpenter highlights the fact that giant venomous spiders were later prevalent in Tolkien’s writing (13).

When he was three years old, his family moved back to England after the sudden death of his father, eventually settling in a village near Birmingham. According to Carpenter, his life in the English countryside featured many trees, gamgee tissue (named for its inventor, a Dr. Gamgee) an angry farmer nicknamed “the Black Ogre” by young Ronald and his younger brother Hilary, or an old watermill, retrofitted with a steam engine; all of them elements which later in some shape of form resurfaced in *The Hobbit* or *The Lord of the Rings* (21-23). Since his early childhood, Tolkien demonstrated an aptitude for linguistics, having created multiple rudimentary languages with his cousins (39).

His mother died in 1904 (33). As she had recently converted to Catholicism, Ronald and his brother were brought under the guardian wing of local priest, father Francis Morgan. They stayed at a certain Mrs Faulkner’s boarding house, where Ronald met Edith Bratt (43). Soon he fell in love with her, and (despite initial disapproval and a ban on interacting with her by Father Francis) eventually got engaged to her in early 1914, having convinced her to convert to the Catholic Church (76).

By this time, Tolkien had been studying English at Exeter University, having gained an interest in philology and a deepened interest in linguistics. He did not join in The Great War immediately as it started, instead finishing his degree in 1915 and joining the army immediately after (87). During his service, he participated in the battle of the Somme and lost all but one of his friends from the T.C.B.S., an informal organisation of friends of which he was a core member (97).

After the war and birth of his first son John, Tolkien returned to academia, working as a lexicographer of the Oxford Dictionary (100). He also continued working with Old and Middle English texts, including a modern edition of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (118) or a posthumously published version of *Beowulf*. He had also been working on his magnum opus, the *Legendarium*. Inspired by the Finnish *Kalevala*, Icelandic *Edda* and Old English texts, Tolkien's "mad hobby," as he called it (85), involved creating fictional Elvish languages and a world for them, eventually turning into his own mythology.

In 1925, Tolkien became Professor of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford (121-122). He was a founding member of a group called The Inklings (166), consisting of various friends around Oxford University, including C.S. Lewis, author of the Chronicles of Narnia series, who attributed his conversion to Anglicanism to Tolkien's influence (162-165).

At some point, he started writing *The Hobbit*. Carpenter is not exactly certain when, as neither was Tolkien, but in 1936, the draft came into the hands of an employee of George Allen & Unwin, who persuaded him to finish it. Stanley Unwin (majority owner of the publishing house) gave the book to his then ten year old son Rayner, who wrote a glowing review (202-203). It was published to great success the following year.

Tolkien was promptly asked to write a sequel to *The Hobbit*. Though he submitted a draft of the *Quenta Silmarillion*, the publishers deemed it unviable and asked for a more traditional sequel. Thus, *The Lord of the Rings*, "the new *Hobbit*," was born (206-208).

The completion of this story was significantly delayed several times, by both the Second World War and Tolkien's own creative problems. After finishing the full story, he bounced the manuscript between publishers, unsuccessfully attempting to have it published alongside

the (still incomplete) *Silmarillion* (238-240). Finally, Allen & Unwin eventually approved the book's publication in three volumes (245).

*The Lord of the Rings* released to generally favourable reviews from both the critics and general audiences (248-249), in both Britain and (initially as just a pirated copy) in the United States (256-257). In America especially, it quickly gained a cult following in the Underground community (261). This proved to be a double-edged sword for the ageing Professor, as he and his wife were bombarded by letters, phone calls (often by excited Americans in the middle of the night) and photographers outside of their house (266).

Tolkien retired in 1959 and they moved house several times. After Edith's death in 1971, Tolkien moved one last time to Oxford and died in 1973, aged eighty-one (128). Ronald and Edith share a grave in Wolvercote cemetery, their gravestone calling them Beren and Lúthien, after the pivotal characters of *The Silmarillion*.

### **2.3.2 Tolkien's legacy**

After Tolkien's death, his son Christopher, who had also collaborated with him on maps for *The Lord of the Rings*, became the head of his Estate and editor of his leftover writings and drafts. Thanks to him, *The Silmarillion* was finally published in 1977. Over the coming decades, essentially until his death in 2020, Christopher also compiled and edited *The History of Middle-Earth*, a twelve-volume series analysing the Legendarium and its creation, and a number of standalone extended versions of stories from *The Silmarillion*, including the story of *Beren and Lúthien*, released in 2016.

These posthumous releases are undoubtedly part of the reason for Tolkien's endurance as a popular author. A significant role has however been played also by the numerous adaptations

of his work (chief among them Peter Jackson's movie trilogies of *The Lord of the Rings* and later *The Hobbit*) and the countless authors inspired by his writings.

In his non-fiction anthology *A Slip of the Keyboard*, English author of fantasy comedy Terry Pratchett wrote about Tolkien:

*"J.R.R. Tolkien has become a sort of mountain, appearing in all subsequent fantasy in the way that Mt. Fuji appears so often in Japanese prints. Sometimes it's big and up close. Sometimes it's a shape on the horizon. Sometimes it's not there at all, which means that the artist either has made a deliberate decision against the mountain, which is interesting in itself, or is in fact standing on Mt. Fuji."* (104)

This quote eloquently explains Tolkien's influence on the modern fantasy genre, specifically on so-called High Fantasy. Before him, the fantasy genre was focused more on whimsy than grand narratives and worldbuilding. This distinction is made clear by comparing *The Lord of the Rings* to Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* or L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*.

Tolkien's depictions of fantastical creatures soon became tropes in the genre. While fairy tales contain Disney-esque dwarfs (akin to those in the *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* movie), fantasy novels and games contain dwarves; noble warriors often armed with battle axes, warhammers, and Scottish accents. Likewise, fantasy Elves (also spelled Tolkien's way, distinct from the traditional elves) are tall and noble, and any contrasting depiction, as Pratchett insinuates, is a conscious decision by the author to distance themselves from Tolkien's metaphorical Mt. Fuji.

What Tolkien popularised among fantasy authors is the concept of Mythopoeia, also used as the title for a poem in his short book *Tree and Leaf*. Though this term, meaning “myth-making,” was used before, Tolkien’s definition relates to modern myth invention and creation of new fantastical universes (“Mythopoeia”). Tolkien named this process sub-creation, to avoid infringing on God’s domain. Pratchett with his Discworld, George Lucas and the Star Wars Galaxy, or any Dungeon Master playing *Dungeons and Dragons* with their friends, they all engage in mythopoetic sub-creation.

### **2.3.3 Tolkien versus allegory**

To return to Tolkien’s famous quote: He disliked allegory, or at least “proper” allegory as a conscious tool used by the Author to dominate discourse about their work. As he however clarifies alongside almost every mention of allegory, “most readers appear to confuse it with significance or applicability” (Letter #215).

Tolkien understood that interpretations of his work could not be prevented, and included among these interpretations are those viewing his work as allegorical. Although he vehemently denied his works being allegorical in nature, he admitted the presence of allegorical language, or at least language which can be interpreted as allegorical (Letter #131).

As Tolkien also notes in Letter #109 To Sir Stanley Unwin, “[...] Allegory and Story converge, meeting somewhere in Truth.” As he explains, a story is not intelligible unless it contains a representation of real life, the most perfect of which being allegory, and the most perfect allegory being one which can be read ‘just as a story.’ But he also warns that Allegory and Story are two opposites of the Truth. Tolkien gives the example of the One Ring, which

holds within itself the Power of Sauron, and as such can be read as both an allegorical representation of power, or merely a literal plot element which needs to be destroyed to save Middle-Earth.

In the same letter, Tolkien also emphasises the difference between an allegory and a moral. Although he has denied having a didactic purpose or allegorical intent (Letter #215), he understands that any story worth telling contains within itself a moral teaching. The struggle between light and dark (as described by Rayner Unwin in a letter which Letter #109 is replying to) for Tolkien is a part of history and life, not an allegorical moral. As Tolkien explains, the actors of light and dark or good and evil are individual characters, and though they contain universal truths and archetypes, they are not allegorical representations.

Tolkien's inspiration for the *Legendarium* was primarily his love for fairy-stories and for myth, not allegory (Letter #131). In his essay *On Fairy-Stories*, originally given as a lecture at the University of St. Andrews, Tolkien explains his attitude towards the relationship between allegories and fairy-stories. He also concurrently likens mythology to the fairy tale. As he describes, stories told of gods and heroes of yore were originally mythologisations and personified allegories of natural processes and elements (the sun, rain, night and so on), but by being humanised and assigned to heroes and characters, they were allowed to turn from myth to legend to folk-tale to fairy-story.

Specifically, Tolkien gives the example of Thórr. Thórr is the Norse god of thunder, wielding a powerful hammer Miöllnir, which may be easily interpreted as a representation of lightning. Tolkien then asks: Which came first? An allegorical folk tale explaining and

personifying the natural processes of thunderstorms; or a strong, violent redbeard farmer, whose story gradually grew into that of a mighty god?

Thórr may be either or both (Tolkien is not certain, as origins of myths are nigh on impossible to find), but as Tolkien describes, he is regardless a prominent member of mythological aristocracy. Despite that, Tolkien considers the tale of Thórr in the *Elder Edda* “just a fairy-story.” As he explains, it is a somewhat primitive, simple folk story. But since Thórr started existing as the god of thunder, the fairy-tale has existed alongside him. Though the story may have changed over the centuries, the allegory of Thórr as thunder exists, and without it, the character would not (12).

A fairy-story then is, in Tolkien’s view, one which presents its events as “true.” Tales presenting their fantastical as merely made up, or as a dream (such as Lewis Carroll’s Alice stories), are not according to Tolkien fairy-stories. Tolkien presents fairy-stories as taking place within the Faërie - a mystical realm bordering human experience (7).

Another type of stories Tolkien excludes are beast-fables. Although Tolkien liked fables, he considered them distinct from fairy-stories and the Faërie, as they are stories “[...] in which the animal form is only a mask upon a human face, a device of the satirist or the preacher” (7-8). In other words, beast-fables are allegorical stories, representing human natures and behaviours, while tales of the Faërie (though they may and often do contain moralistic elements) are presented as their own, consistent reality.



### **3 Analytical part**

#### **3.1 Common readings of Tolkien**

As mentioned, the works of J. R. R. Tolkien have been subject to countless analyses, ranging from academic to laical. These analyses examine the numerous themes present in the text, such as power, mortality, decay, nature, friendship, camaraderie, destiny and many more. Naturally, a number of these analyses congregate on the central themes, depending on which form of literary theory they choose to apply to Tolkien. Following is an examination of some such common analyses, including those of the filmmakers adapting Tolkien to both the big and small screen. A specific area to be examined is the adherence (or lack thereof) of the analysis to the theory of the Death of the Author.

##### **3.1.1 Tolkien and race**

The issue of racial divide and animosity in Tolkien's works is one long discussed by fans and scholars alike. It gained prevalence with the release of Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* movie trilogy. The primary argument, as presented among others by Stephen Shapiro of Warwick University, can be rephrased as such:

The orcs, depicted as having dark or yellow skin, slant eyes and deformed features, are racially coded as black or Asian people. This, in combination with their role as an unrelenting horde of pure evil assaulting the heroes and the lands of the Free Peoples (who are all described as fair of skin), is a racially insensitive representation at best, or blatant racism at worst (qtd. in Bhatia).

However, as noted by Anderson Rearick III in his article *Why is the only good orc a dead orc? The dark face of racism examined in Tolkien's world*, the argument revolves largely

around the depictions in Jackson's movie trilogy (863). Rearick argues that Tolkien's orcs are closer to demons or other evil spirits, having originated as Goblins (with goblins in fact being a subgroup of Tolkien's orcs living in the Misty Mountains) from various Germanic mythologies. He also warns against seeing race where it is not. Sauron is not described as a Dark Lord because of his ethnicity, but because of the Manichean symbolism of light and dark as representations of good and evil, which also prevalent in Christian thought (870).

This is, however, not the only race related issue in the Legendarium. Even among the "good" races of Middle-Earth, there existed notable divides. While the numerous groups of elves mostly differed only by language and location, there were more notable differences in the race of Men.

While all Men (this word was used by Tolkien in its original Germanic meaning, encompassing all humans regardless of gender) had the Gift of Ilúvatar and were mortal, they were segregated between the High Men (Númenóreans and their descendants), Middle Men and the Men of Darkness. The Númenóreans were physically superior to the lesser races, being taller in stature and physically stronger, having significantly longer lifespans and being (seemingly naturally) better rulers.

This was explicitly stated within the text of the Silmarillion, where Tolkien writes:

*"[...] Gondor waned, and the line of Meneldil son of Anárion failed. For the blood of the Númenóreans became much mingled with that of other men, and their power and wisdom was diminished, and their life-span was shortened, and the watch upon Mordor slumbered."* (369)

This passage in particular is very reminiscent of ideas presented by proponents of eugenics and scientific racism. As Dr. Helen Young of Deakin University, author of *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature*, points out in an interview for Pacific Standard Magazine, the fantasy genre and Tolkien especially is loved by white supremacists, specifically by members of Stormfront, a notable online Neonazi forum.

As Young explains, medievalism and the fantasy genre are linked by white supremacists to an imagined period of glory of a white Europe; racially, culturally and religiously homogeneous. She links these ideas to 19<sup>th</sup>-century Anglo-Saxonism, a belief in the supremacy of British and American people and a justification of their imperialism. She claims that Tolkien was, though perhaps not consciously, racist, and through him 19<sup>th</sup>-century race theory still permeates the fantasy genre.

Adaptations of *The Lord of the Rings* have addressed the problem of race in various ways. Ralph Bakshi's 1978 animated adaptation avoids the problem by not basing their orc designs on any specific human race, instead giving them a more animalistic design with large teeth, longer werewolf-ish snouts and glowing eyes. Their armour and clothing (though hard to decipher with the movie's use of filtered and rotoscoped footage) does not likewise look to be inspired by any one particular culture, instead being simple rags or torn up tunics.

Peter Jackson's trilogy, as mentioned previously, is a large source of the racial discourse around *Lord of the Rings*. Many of the orcs and Uruks, such as Uglúk and Grishnák (played by Nathaniel Lees and Stephen Ure respectively), have black skin. The evil Haradrim, men under Sauron's command, have uniforms inspired by Middle Eastern cultures, with black

turbans and clothes, while the Easterlings (coming from Rhûn, east of Mordor) wear armour somewhat resembling that of Japanese Samurai.

The trilogy is, however, not absolutist when it comes to racial representation. Many of the orcs have pale skin, including Gothmog, the commander of Sauron's army assaulting Minas Tirith, whose facial features were (according to Frodo actor Elijah Wood) based on producer Harvey Weinstein (qtd. in Lockyer). The prequel trilogy *The Hobbit* likewise contains orcs and goblins who are predominantly pale in complexion.

Amazon's show *The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power* (developed by showrunners J. D. Payne and Patrick McKay) explicitly attempts to alleviate the racial problems in the Legendarium. As such, the orcs are once more pale, almost chalk white, and some of the characters from the "good" races are played by actors of colour. Most notable among them are Ismael Cruz Cordóva as Arondir the elf, and Sophia Nomvete as Disa, wife of dwarven prince Dúrin.

These characters have been subject to much criticism online, mostly for their race, or for their hair not being accordant to established Middle-Earth conventions (Arondir's hair being very short which is unseen in an elf, and Disa's facial hair being very thin for a dwarf woman) (Heritage). These characters are however original to the show. The characters established in Jackson's movies have kept their ethnicity, and their relatives are the same as them. The only character from Tolkien's writing, who in the show is portrayed by a person of colour, is then Tar-Míriel, portrayed by Cynthia Addai-Robinson, an actress of mixed Ghanaian and American parentage.

Tolkien's personal opinions on race, as expressed in his Letters, appear mixed. He opposed racist thought, criticising Hitler and his party for misappropriating the word Aryan and Nordic iconography (Letter #45), but he also described the orcs as “[...] degraded and repulsive versions of the (to Europeans) least lovely Mongol-types” (Letter #210). In another letter to his proofreader, he clarified that the orcs are not based on any personal experience of his, instead owing to the tradition of goblins (Letter #144).

He was probably more progressive than the average man of his time, as evidenced by his expressed admiration for the Jewish people (Letters #29, #30, #176), and his mother allegedly voiced criticism of the Boer treatment of native South Africans (Carpenter 13), but the language and ideas of the time still took some hold in him.

Once the work has been divorced from Tolkien's views and the author has figuratively been killed, it seems fairly unimportant what Tolkien personally thought about race. The themes and symbols are present, whether intended or not, and as such the orcs are subject to being interpreted as a symbol of real world races. And yet, connecting those themes to Tolkien's personal views and biases, and using them to judge his authorial intent, or to claim that he was personally racist, is a case of intentional fallacy.

### **3.1.2 Tolkien and gender**

A common criticism of Tolkien's work dating back to the release of *The Lord of the Rings* is the lack of female characters. In his review for *The Sunday Times*, J. W. Lambert complains that the story has “[...] to all intents and purposes no women” (qtd. in Carpenter, p. 249).

This is of course an exaggerated statement, as Éowyn, Arwen or Galadriel play somewhat significant roles in the story. Of the three, Éowyn is notable for physically participating in the battle against Sauron's forces within the text, as Galadriel's contribution and destruction of the fortress of Dol Guldur was relegated to the Appendices. Admittedly, *The Hobbit* features virtually no women, only mentions the mothers of some of the male characters.

Women are more numerous in *The Silmarillion*. The Valar are split between the sexes almost evenly, Galadriel has a more notable role, and most notably, it tells the story of Lúthien Tinúviel, a story of a love between a man and an elven princess so powerful it moved the heart of Mandos himself (keeper of the Houses of the Dead, the elven afterlife) who allowed Lúthien and her lover Beren to return from the dead and live out their mortal life.

Female characters in the Legendarium are, however, still outnumbered by men. Many critics have cited this as evidence of Tolkien's sexism, such as Candice Fredrick and Sam McBride, who called Middle-Earth "[...] very Inklings-like, in that while women exist in the world, they need not be given significant attention and can, if one is lucky, be avoided altogether" (qtd. in Hatcher, p. 43).

As Melissa McCrory Hatcher points out, Tolkien probably was indeed the "[...] stodgy, sexist Oxford professor that feminist scholars paint him out to be" (p. 44). However, she still concedes that critiquing *The Lord of the Rings* for its lack of female characters and criticising Tolkien himself should be dichotomised into two separate discussions, and the bulk of the feminist analysis should instead focus on how the work portrays the women who are actually present (p. 44).

Hatcher's analysis, particularly that of Éowyn, does not seem to account for the historical context of Middle-Earth. Tolkien's world is a mythology inspired by Anglo-Saxon legends, to the point that the language and names of the Rohirrim are abundant with Old English elements, such as Éowyn's name itself, meaning "horse-lover" or "horse-joy."

Éowyn can then be considered another element of Anglo-Saxon tradition in Tolkien's writing, that being a shield-maiden. Shield-maidens are fairly common in Scandinavian folklore, therefore it is reasonable to assume Tolkien's inspiration for her character originated there.

Out of the major adaptations of Tolkien, Bakshi's was the least kind to its female characters. Due to runtime constraints, Arwen was completely omitted from the film, and Éowyn, while present, has no lines of dialogue. Galadriel is the only woman with any notable presence in the movie, and the scene with Frodo gazing into her Mirror is reasonably faithful to the source material, but even her role is significantly truncated, omitting for instance her gifts to the Fellowship.

Jackson's movies attempted to expand the roles of the female characters. Arwen replaced Glorfindel in rescuing Frodo after he was stabbed by a Ringwraith, and her scenes with Aragorn from the Appendices were moved into the movie. Éowyn too saw more screen time, and while Galadriel did not, her portrayal is faithful to the books.

For *The Hobbit*, a multitude of changes were made to facilitate an inclusion of women. Gandalf's quest to combat the Necromancer received significant screen time and featured all the members of the White Council, including Galadriel. New characters were also invented, including Evangeline Lilly's Tauriel, a Silvan elf of Mirkwood. This character was,

however, heavily criticised, not solely for being an original addition not based in Tolkien's writing, but also for being at the centre of a love triangle, as the love interest for both Legolas and Kili, including by Lilly herself (Lilly, par. 7).

Amazon's *The Rings of Power* also features women more prominently. Galadriel, now played by Morfydd Clark, is a primary character, as well as Nazanin Boniadi's Bronwyn and Markella Kavanagh's Nori (characters original to the show). More secondary characters were created for the show, such as the aforementioned Disa or Ema Horvath as Eärien, Isildur's sister.

It can be presumed the inclusion of these characters was motivated by a desire to appear more progressive (and have more female audience members, therefore increasing profits) in contrast with both the rest of television, and with Tolkien himself. They have however been criticised, not only for illegitimate sexist reasons, but also for furthering gender stereotypes where previous adaptations did not. Specifically, the hairstyles in the show appear to reinforce modern fashion standards, with male elves all having short hair and Disa having virtually no beard (Hibberd).

The showrunners have addressed this criticism, claiming that Tolkien was not definitive on the issue of dwarf women's beards or elven hair length, and they wanted to depict a society at a different time point, with a different fashion (qtd. in Hibberd).

To kill the Author in this context, one must regard the role of women in the work without regarding Tolkien's views. And the truth is, women in Tolkien's books have a much smaller role than men. Claiming that *The Hobbit* or *The Lord of the Rings* is a sexist work is then



not unreasonable. However, to conjecture any views Tolkien might have personally held based solely on the text of his work is once more intentional fallacy.

### **3.1.3 Tolkien, sex and queerness**

A topic closely connected to Tolkien's image of women is that of sexuality and queerness, or rather their absence within the text. Although Tolkien often writes of love, like the love between Beren and Lúthien, Aragorn and Arwen or Samwise Gamgee and Rosie Cotton, that love is textually only romantic, never sexual. While characters have children, their sexual relationships are strictly implicit. As Catharine Stimpson says, Tolkien's writing showcases his "Childish," "nasty" and "evasive" view of sex (qtd. in Timmons, 1).

As Tolkien was evasive of any depictions of sexuality, and women were not very present, it was almost inevitable for queer readings of the text to arise. Many of Tolkien's male characters show a deep affection to each other, which through a queer lens may appear romantic in nature.

In her article for *Polygon* titled *Queer readings of The Lord of the Rings are not accidents*, writer and cartoonist Molly Ostertag specifically singles out the relationship between Frodo and Sam. Samwise was extremely devoted to Frodo, in a manner Ostertag likens to that of a batman (a servant, bodyguard and companion to his commanding officer) in the trenches of the first World War. As evidence, she presents a passage from *The Two Towers*, particularly the chapter *Of Herbs and Stewed Rabbit*, where Sam contemplates his love (understood to be platonic) for Frodo. Another piece of Ostertag's evidence comes from *The Return of the King*, ch. *The Tower of Cirith Ungol*, where Sam, upon rescuing the captured Frodo, kisses him on his forehead and reassures him that he is no longer dreaming.

As a Catholic, Tolkien himself was fairly conservative on the topic of sexuality. He discussed the theological matters of sex and marriage in Letter #43 to his son Michael, where he claims:

*“Christian marriage is not a prohibition of sexual intercourse, but the correct way of sexual temperance – in fact probably the best way of getting the most satisfying sexual pleasure, as alcoholic temperance is the best way of enjoying beer and wine.”*

As for homosexuality, Carpenter says that “Tolkien claimed that at nineteen he did not even know the word,” (qtd. in Ostertag), however as Ostertag mentions, Tolkien was personally acquainted with multiple openly homosexual people, including his great friend W. H. Auden, and he was the teacher and fan of writer Mary Renault, a lesbian icon.

Though there is little to no textual evidence for homosexuality in the Legendarium (outside of the subtext), Tolkien curiously utilised the words “queer” and “gay” fairly often. However, as he lived in a time when their meaning as “homosexual” hadn’t yet been established or solidified, he used them in their original meaning, that being “strange” and “joyful” respectively.

As mentioned, Bakshi’s animated movie had barely any time for female characters, let alone romance. As such, Aragorn’s love toward Arwen is not depicted, although he does tell the hobbits the tale of Beren and Lúthien. Galadriel is depicted alongside her husband Celeborn, though they do not interact; and Éowyn, as mentioned, is present in a single scene with no lines of dialogue, thus she can not express any romance, or be target thereof.

Jackson’s trilogy is a source of many of the queer readings of the text. As Ostertag writes, the movies were released at a time when “gay” was a very common insult, yet they featured

depictions of positive masculinity and intimate male affection, such as Aragorn gently kissing a dying Boromir's forehead. The relationship between Frodo and Sam is likewise very intimate, and easily perceived as romantic.

*The Hobbit*, as mentioned, added a female character in Tauriel, infamous for her interspecies romance with the dwarf Kili, and the aforementioned love triangle featuring them and Legolas. This change was allegedly facilitated by studio executives, according to Lilly, for a presumed reason of recapturing the romance between Aragorn and Arwen from the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy.

During the filming of *The Rings of Power*, fan speculations were rampant about the show's depiction of sexuality. These worries increased drastically when a rumour started spreading of an intimacy coordinator being hired (Contreras). After the success of HBO's *Game of Thrones* show, fans were scared of Amazon going the same route and attempting to make Middle-Earth more "gritty" and "realistic" by including nudity and sexual violence. These rumours however did not come true, and love in the show is, like in Tolkien's writing, only romantic and not sexual (and definitely not homosexual).

The characters of Bronwyn and Arondir are notable for being a male elf and a female human in love. Their story mirrors those of Beren and Lúthien and Aragorn and Arwen, though now with the genders swapped. These characters are original to the show, and their love can be presumed to have been motivated by the writers' desire to add more stakes and drama to the storyline of the Southlands.

Curiously, Galadriel's husband Celeborn is absent from the show. In the seventh episode titled *The Eye* (dir. Charlotte Brändström), Galadriel claims he was captured by Morgoth's

forces, which is in contradiction to the established lore of the Legendarium. As of this thesis being written, only the first season has been released, and as such the true fate of Celeborn (at least within the story of the show) is not known. However, it can be speculated that this change was made in order to facilitate Halbrand's reveal as Sauron in the following episode (dir. Wayne Che Yip), when he tries to seduce Galadriel to rule alongside him.

Queerness in the Legendarium was with all likelihood not intended by Tolkien to be present. As such, anyone reading *The Lord of the Rings* as a story of a homoerotic relationship between Sam and Frodo engages in applying the theory of the Death of the Author. As Ostertag says, their reasoning is most likely a lack of openly queer characters in the history of fiction, and the historical persecution of homosexuals. Without textual evidence, underrepresented minorities will "claim" characters as their own using subtext. However, to use such subtext to claim Tolkien wrote of queerness would be fallacious, as the subtext was most likely not intended by the Author.

### **3.1.4 Tolkien and faith**

As mentioned previously, Tolkien was openly, unequivocally and vocally a devout Roman Catholic. He has stated in a number of his letters, as well as in interviews, that the Legendarium is fundamentally a Christian work, "[...] unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision" (Letter #142).

Evidence can be found within the text itself. The *Ainulindalë*, first chapter of *The Silmarillion*, bears a striking resemblance to the biblical book of *Genesis*. Eru Ilúvatar, much like the God of the Bible, arose from nothingness and created the Ainur (angels) to help him in creating the physical world. However, one of those angels (Satan/Melkor) desired

dominion over the universe, and introduced discord into the angelic choir and evil to the world.

Ilúvatar however differs from the Christian God in significant ways: For one, he rarely directly intervenes with the matters of Middle-Earth. The Valar (high order of the Ainur who directly aided in creating the world) were more involved, but even they interacted with Middle-Earth infrequently. Among Ilúvatar's interventions is Gandalf's resurrection after his battle with the Balrog of Moria ("The Two Towers," p. 149), or the Changing of the World, when due to the Númenórean plans to attack Valinor, the Earth changed shape from a flat disc into a sphere and Valinor itself separated into another plane of existence ("The Silmarillion," p. 348).

Also unlike God, Ilúvatar is not worshipped by any characters within the story. The Valar are praised and revered by the elves and dwarves, but no organised rituals or churches (both as institutions and as places of worship) dedicated to them are depicted within the Legendarium. In fact, religion is only ever depicted as evil. When Sauron turns Ar-Pharazôn against the Valar, Pharazôn starts worshipping Melkor and has a great Temple built for him.

*"Thereafter the fire and smoke went up without ceasing; for the power of Sauron daily increased, and in that temple, with spilling of blood and torment and great wickedness, men made sacrifice to Melkor that he should release them from Death. And most often from among the Faithful they chose their victims; yet never openly on the charge that they would not worship Melkor, the Giver of Freedom, rather was cause sought against them that they hated*

*the King and were his rebels, or that they plotted against their kin, devising lies and poisons.*” (“The Silmarillion,” p. 342)

Adaptations of the Legendarium have been even more sparse with their representations of the divine. Bakshi’s animated movie makes no mention of the Valar, Maiar or Ilúvatar, presumably for the sake of brevity. It already is a very short movie, combining the plot of both *Fellowship of the Ring* and *The Two Towers* into mere two hours of runtime, and as such there was no time for worldbuilding. Likewise, Gandalf’s resurrection is somewhat glossed over, and it is not apparent from the movie whether he truly perished or was only presumed dead.

Jackson’s movies do not mention the Ainur or Ilúvatar in any significant capacity either. Despite their combined length of four to six times that of Bakshi’s film (depending on the version), they still omitted numerous elements of Tolkien’s story, such as the notoriously absent Tom Bombadil or the Scouring of the Shire, and a thorough exposition on the cosmology of the world would have taken up a notable amount of screen time. Although Gandalf describes his death, he makes no mention of Valinor or Ilúvatar, and the only Vala mentioned by name is present only in the Extended Edition, when Legolas tells Galadriel about “A Balrog of Morgoth.”

The only adaptation of Tolkien making any significant mention of the theology of the world is then *The Rings of Power*, since its events are more closely connected to those of the Silmarillion, where the Valar had a more significant role. As of the writing of this thesis, only one season of the show has been released, and the Valar have not yet been physically depicted by any actors. Instead the only angels present

are Sauron, portrayed by Charlie Vickers, and a member of the Istari presumed to be Gandalf, portrayed by Daniel Weyman. It can however be presumed that when the show does depict the Drowning of Númenor, the Valar may be present on screen.

According to Tolkien, the absence of faith in the *Legendarium* is deliberate. In a letter to Robert Murray, he states that the religious element is part of every aspect of the work, founded in his appreciation of God's Grace and beauty of all aspects of His created world, both the majestic and the simple (Letter #142). Therefore the adaptations may be described as faithful to both the source material and Tolkien's vision for it.

Some scholars and theologians have found other Christian themes in *The Lord of the Rings*. Among them is Edward McKenzie of Belfast Bible College, who likens multiple characters to Jesus Christ. As he explains, Gandalf is Christ-like, as he was a "prophet" sent by God (or rather the high angels, the Valar), and as mentioned, he was resurrected by Ilúvatar.

Another character who according to McKenzie can be seen as a Jesus parallel is Frodo Baggins, who through his sacrifice rid the world of ancient sin (the One Ring). He also compares Aragorn to Jesus, as he too is a promised king of noble parentage but relatively humble origin (Christ was a carpenter, Aragorn was a ranger) who arrived to unite all people in peace and prosperity. Lastly, McKenzie even compares Samwise Gamgee to Christ, as he is a loving servant devoted to doing good for others regardless of himself.

McKenzie is not alone in this interpretation, as it is common in Christian websites, tweets or Youtube videos. As he and others argue, Tolkien's Catholic views present themselves through the work. This view was prevalent even during Tolkien's life. In a letter to Sir

Stanley Unwin, Tolkien talks of another letter from America asking for an authoritative explanation of the allegory in *The Hobbit* (Letter #34).

Tolkien however did not write Christian allegory. As he explains in many of his letters, his stories are meant to contain not allegory, but a moral (Letter #109). As mentioned, Tolkien has in fact on numerous occasions proclaimed his hatred of (intentional, purposeful) allegory as a literary device, but has also admitted that “[...] any attempt to explain the purport of myth or fairytale must use allegorical language” (Letter #131). Meaning, that symbols and meaning may be present without the presence of allegory.

In this, Tolkien is akin to his friend and fellow Inkling, Clive Staples Lewis. C. S. Lewis’s *Chronicles of Narnia* are much more easily interpreted as Christian allegory, with the godly lion Aslan being a clear symbol of Jesus Christ. Like Tolkien however, Lewis opposed calling the work allegorical, instead proposing the term “supposal.” Aslan is not an allegory for Jesus, but instead an answer to the question “Suppose there were a world like Narnia and it needed rescuing and the Son of God (or the ‘Great Emperor oversea’) went to redeem *it*, as He came to redeem ours, what might it, in that world, all have been like?” (Lewis 92)

Neither *Lord of the Rings* nor *Chronicles of Narnia* are allegorical works. Claiming so is a case of Berek’s allegoresis. Nevertheless, in an attempt to deduce Tolkien’s authorial intent, critics and analysts have engaged in this allegoresis, regardless of Tolkien’s own opinions on the matter. This constitutes a rather paradoxical death of the Author while searching for the Author in the work.

True Death of the Author in regards to religious themes means acknowledging them, but not attempting to connect the themes to Tolkien’s beliefs. Returning to Tolkien’s quote on



allegory and applicability, a Christian reader is allowed to read *The Silmarillion* as a representation of the Bible, but so is a Muslim reader allowed to see the Quran in it, and an atheist to perceive it as merely a fictional mythology.

### **3.1.5 Tolkien, war and politics**

The first World War had a significant effect on the life of J. R. R. Tolkien. As mentioned, he was part of the Somme Offensive, one of the deadliest and most gruesome battles in the history of humankind. All but one of his friends from the T.C.B.S. perished during the War. As such, many scholars including Tolkien's grandson and current head of his Estate, Simon Tolkien, believe that the War is reflected within his work.

In his article for the BBC, Simon Tolkien talks of his experience writing about the Great War, as well as his perception of his grandfather's experience actually engaging in the fights. Like others, he notes that Evil in his grandfather's work is heavily dependent on industry, akin to the newly developed machines of war of World War I. Mordor is a desolate wasteland, not dissimilar to the no man's land between the trenches of the Somme.

Simon Tolkien also mentions the fate of Frodo Baggins, who returns to the Shire a changed hobbit traumatised by his experiences with the One Ring, and its similarity to the fate of shell-shocked soldiers returning from the War.

The Great War is not the only conflict or political element to have been interpreted as inspiration for *The Lord of the Rings*. Swedish author and translator Åke Ohlmarks in an introduction to his translation of the novel famously compared Mordor to the Soviet Union, and Sauron to Stalin (qtd. in Letter #229). Similarly (as can be assumed from Tolkien's

response in Letter #226), professor L. W. Forster asked Tolkien whether the atomic bombs used on Japan were an inspiration for the One Ring.

Tolkien himself was staunchly against interpretations of his work as allegory for contemporary politics. He was angered by Ohlmarks' interpretation, claiming that his mythology was conceived of long before the October Revolution, and that the placement of Mordor in the east was done purely out of narrative and geographical necessity (Letter #229). Likewise in his response to Forster, he declares that neither World War had an influence on his writing, perhaps only in landscape, the Dead Marshes or the surroundings of the Black Gate being similar to Northern France after the Somme offensive (Letter #226).

The adaptations of Tolkien do not engage much with political interpretations. Bakshi's animated movie heavily condenses the plot and can not delve into politics, be it Tolkien's fictional politics or the real world. As a movie, it prioritised the spectacle of battle (though limited by the technology of the time and the film's budget) over the philosophical and the political.

Jackson's trilogy, thanks to its much greater runtime, could examine the anti-war themes of *The Lord of the Rings*. Éomer's conversation with his sister Éowyn on the horrors of battle before their departure to Gondor's aid, is an example of such. The trilogy however made one notable omission. The Scouring of the Shire by Saruman's forces is only depicted as Frodo's vision in the Mirror of Galadriel. In the novel, this event concluded the journey of the four Hobbits of the Fellowship, and demonstrated the ever-present nature of war. Its absence in the movies, though primarily motivated by an already long runtime and a desire for a more concise final act, instead makes the return of Sam, Frodo, Merry and Pippin even more akin

to that of the soldiers of the Great War, who too came home to a seemingly unchanged and peaceful place, but themselves were changed by horrifying experiences.

Christopher Tolkien was heavily critical of the two adaptations published within his lifetime. He regarded both Bakshi's movie and Jackson's trilogy as a travesty, specifically chastising the trilogy for having "[...] eviscerated the book by making it an action movie for young people aged 15 to 25" (qtd. in Jagernauth). This sentiment echoes that of his father, who in Letter #210 criticised the inclusion of too many battles in a film treatment of his novel. He specifically decried the inclusion of the battle of Helm's Deep over the last March of the Ents, a criticism similarly levied by Christopher Tolkien against Jackson.

Amazon's *The Rings of Power* does not depict much war in its first (and as of now only) season. Though the Númenóreans come to the Southlands and aid the locals in their fight against Adar's orcs, this conflict is relatively small in its scale. The show does however examine the sociopolitical situation of Númenor shortly before its fall. In its fourth episode, a crowd of angry Númenóreans, incited by a craftsman's speech, decry Tar-Míriel's faithfulness to the elves and the presence of Galadriel on their island, fearing the elves' superiority in craft. This scene has been broadly criticised, for instance by Lindsay Ellis in her video essay *How They Adapted The Lord of the Rings (the good one)* (01:25-01:55), for being too reminiscent of modern day politics, specifically of American anti-immigration protests, and removing the plot of the show too far from Tolkien's timeless writing.

As is evident, most interpretations of Tolkien regarding war and politics engage heavily in conjecture. Tolkien did not write a story representing the Great War, or the Soviet Union, or the nuclear bomb, yet critics and audience members read this meaning into the work. This

can be considered an application of the Death of the Author. However, as is the case with the application of feminist theory, using this analysis to deduce any personal views or influences of Tolkien is intentional fallacy. The work may contain political and war themes regardless of Tolkien's intention; but within a Barthesian purview, it is the analyst's task to identify and analyse them, not the Author's to declare.

## **3.2 The death of Tolkien**

Thus far, this thesis has discussed whether various interpretations of J.R.R. Tolkien's work constitute an application of the theory of the Death of the Author. However, it has not yet fully examined the effects of doing so. The Death of the Author is an approach and of its own is value neutral, however the individual methods of applying this approach can vary drastically in their efficacy.

### **3.2.1 What is gained**

Barthes demonstrated the benefits of his approach in his essay. If the Author is removed from their work, the critic is free to interpret the work without being tied to a singular "true" meaning. In the case of Tolkien, the reader or critic is no longer bound by Tolkien's background as a philologist, soldier or professor.

This reader-centric approach opens the metaphorical door to a wide variety of interpretations, some of which have been examined in this essay. And although many arrive at the same or similar conclusions and readings depending on which literary theory they apply, critics are nonetheless allowed and encouraged to seek new meaning in the works. Reading *The Lord of the Rings* as a Christian allegory, though not endorsed by Tolkien, is a valid approach, provided the reader finds sufficient evidence within the body of the text.

Likewise, one can claim the novel to be a queer love story between Frodo and Sam, and utilise their mutual affection and Sam's devotion as textual evidence.

Killing Tolkien as the Author-God also allows the readers to lay bare the overall themes present within the text, which were intended by him, but are uncondusive to the traditional approach of finding his authorial intent. The themes of friendship and camaraderie between the members of the Fellowship, or the ever-present decay in *The Silmarillion* may not reveal much of Tolkien's life or intentions as the writer, yet they are present nonetheless, and as such deserving of examination.

Another positive effect of viewing Tolkien through a Barthesian lens is a chance to, as described by Morton W. Bloomfield, give a new life to a work decades after its release. A parallel can then be drawn between the events and characters of a work, and events which happen long after its publication, or even the author's death. Adam Rosman in his article for *Mallorn: The Journal of the Tolkien Society*, compared Gandalf's torture of Gollum to FBI agents torturing terrorists after the attacks on September 11, 2001. Tolkien obviously could not have written this even as a parallel, yet it can be retrospectively interpreted as analogous.

Ultimately, the application of the Death of the Author allows for Tolkien's work to be examined in novel ways, thus enduring for a longer time. Tolkien's life and opinions are well documented through his preserved letters (as well as Carpenter's interviews with Tolkien's family and friends), and as such his authorial intent is essentially "solved." John Ronald Reuel Tolkien wrote his Legendarium as a mythology for his invented languages, inspired by his faith, his love for Nordic mythology, love for rural England and its nature,

and love for his wife Edith. Had critics solely utilised literary analysis to discover and decode Tolkien, their work would have been finished decades ago.

### **3.2.2 What is lost**

The benefits of applying a Barthesian approach to Tolkien are numerous. However, this approach also has a chance of being detrimental if misapplied. Death of the Author is not an all-powerful approach, and is required to be used in conjunction with another form of literary theory. It is not sufficient to simply declare a theme (or another literary element) to be present within the work and claim it is a subjective interpretation. A reader must utilise textual evidence, as well as conventions of literary criticism, to arrive at their conclusions.

However, even when applied properly, the death of the Author may reduce the scope of literary analysis. A prime example can be given in Tolkien's tale of Beren and Lúthien. In it, a Man and an Elven princess fall in love, and to marry her, Beren is tasked by her father to retrieve a Silmaril from the crown of Morgoth, a seemingly impossible task. With her help (and that of Huán, a mighty talking hound) he succeeds, but succumbs to his injuries, and Lúthien dies of grief not long after. So great was their love however that the Valar took pity on them and granted them a second life, with Lúthien becoming mortal, to live out together.

If the authorial intent and life story of J. R. R. Tolkien is ignored, this tale loses an element of depth. It remains a beautiful tale of a love stronger than death, incredible heroism in the face of an insurmountable evil and female empowerment. As Tolkien says, an Orpheus-legend in reverse, a story of Pity, not of Inexorability (Letter #153). What it loses however is the connection to Tolkien's life.

As mentioned, Tolkien and his wife Edith have the names of Beren and Lúthien written on their grave, under their respective names. Tolkien was open with his inspiration. In a letter to his son Christopher, soon after Edith's death, he discussed the matter of the gravestone, as well as the origins of Lúthien:

*"I never called Edith Lúthien – but she was the source of the story that in time became the chief part of the Silmarillion. It was first conceived in a small woodland glade filled with hemlocks at Roos in Yorkshire (where I was for a brief time in command of an outpost of the Humber Garrison in 1917, and she was able to live with me for a while). In those days her hair was raven, her skin clear, her eyes brighter than you have seen them, and she could sing – and dance. But the story has gone crooked, & I am left, and I cannot plead before the inexorable Mandos."* (Letter #340)

Tolkien's love for Edith is evidently deeply intertwined with the story, with his love for her echoing in Beren's love for Lúthien. Although the story is not an allegory for their love and life, there is a clear analogy. Separating the art from the artist in this context removes a layer of meaning from the work.

In fact, it can be argued that the total removal of Tolkien as the Author from the work, which may be referred to as "Barthesian absolutism," is overall detrimental to the analysis of the text. The tale of Beren and Lúthien is only one part of the Legendarium where Tolkien's life and values are apparent.

The cosmology of Arda is another instance of such. If the Author is killed, the *Ainulindalë* (the first chapter of *The Silmarillion*) remains a well written piece detailing the origins of

Tolkien's universe, and it can be compared to the Genesis or other mythological or religious creation stories. Acknowledging Tolkien's intent however allows for a different type of analysis. Although the interpretation is trivial (since Tolkien was very clear with his intentions), the critic is now able to examine the success of Tolkien's endeavour. They can analyse the influences of Tolkien's Catholicism on the world of Arda, whether it be the similarities of Ilúvatar and the God of the Bible, the aforementioned characters analogous to Jesus, or other theological matters present within the text.

Using a Barthesian approach, a critic is able to recontextualise a work of art and give it new meaning based on the insights and events of their time. The critic however does not exist in a vacuum. They are influenced by the biases and trends of their era. It is then not unreasonable to examine, which biases and trends were followed by the author when creating their art.

The topics of racism and sexism in Tolkien's work can then serve as an examination of the societal trends of 20<sup>th</sup> century England. Under an absolutely Barthesian purview, a critic can study the lack of women in Middle-Earth, however the only conclusions they arrive at are subjective interpretations and feelings. But returning to the quote by Frederick and McBride on Middle-Earth being "very Inklings-like," a critic not bound by the Author being killed may discuss the influence of an unequal society on all its people, including highly educated writers.

The same is true with the presence of racially insensitive elements in Tolkien's writing. A critic not applying the Death of the Author concept too rigorously is able to not only observe the presence of these elements and themes, but also to examine their origin. Tolkien lived at



a time when the British Empire was at its territorial peak, and highly racially unequal. If this influence is not acknowledged, the themes are still present, but they lose some of their potential significance.

### **3.2.3 The importance of Christopher Tolkien**

A peculiar factor in the interpretation of the works of Tolkien is the presence of his son, Christopher John Reuel Tolkien (henceforth “Christopher” for the sake of brevity). Only four of Tolkien’s Middle-Earth books were published during his lifetime, those being *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings* and two poetry books. The vast majority of his writings were published posthumously, edited by Christopher, and later by Carl F. Hostetter and Brian Sibley.

Christopher Tolkien aided his father extensively even before his death, commenting on and editing drafts of *The Lord of the Rings* during his military service during World War II (Seelye and Yuhas). He exerted an effort to publish the writings of his father in as faithful a state as possible, with minimal editorial intervention. As he however admits in the foreword to *The Silmarillion*:

*“It became clear to me that to attempt to present, within the covers of a single book, the diversity of the materials – to show *The Silmarillion* as in truth a continuing and evolving creation extending over more than half a century - would in fact lead only to confusion and the submerging of what is essential.”* (p. 6)

Christopher’s editorial interventions are even more apparent in the book of *Unfinished Tales*, a collection of drafts of the tales of *The Silmarillion*, first published in 1980. In its introduction, he specifically singles out the tale of Galadriel and Celeborn, which was not

merely a narrative without an ending, but a “[..] primary strand in the history of Middle-Earth that never received a settled definition, let alone a final written form.” (p. 9)

Though Christopher attempted to be as faithful to his father’s work as possible, his editorial interventions regardless affect the available interpretations of the work. The most notable example is the origin of the Orcs. J. R. R. Tolkien himself struggled with this story element, given that depicting them as wholly evil would contradict his worldview that nothing was created evil. This was examined by David Tneh in his *Mallorn* article *Orcs and Tolkien’s treatment of evil*, where he describes a dichotomy between a Manichaeian and Boethian perspective of evil, claiming respectively “the world is in a constant battle between Good and Evil and being aligned with one is a matter of luck” and “there is no such thing as evil, there is only an absence of good” (39).

In the final published version of *The Silmarillion*, the Orcs are depicted as corrupted elves (119). Had Christopher Tolkien decided to include a different draft within this publication, the theological implications and available analyses of the work would have been widely different. The authorial intent interpreted from this alternate version of the book would likewise have been different, and critics would apply the Death of the Author in a different way.

## **5 Conclusion**

A Barthesian approach to literary criticism has numerous positive and widely applicable aspects, such as the aforementioned broadening of the scope of critique. However, a cultivated neglect of the authorial intent may paradoxically reduce the scope and limit a

critic's ability to assess a work. No critic exists in a vacuum, and neither was any work of art created in one.

The theory of the Death of the Author is undoubtedly a useful approach, allowing for all works to be re-examined by new critics with new outlooks. J. R. R. Tolkien did not write a queer story, yet his writing may be interpreted as such. His villains are not based on Soviet Russia, yet a politically minded critic may see the similarities. And though Tolkien's tales are not allegorical, they contain more than enough elements steeped in his Catholic faith and philosophy.

Christianity is not the only element of Tolkien's life to have had an apparent influence on his works. The Great War had a role in his writing, as did his childhood in the English countryside. His writing does have a context, that being his life.

If one engages in Barthesian absolutism, this context is completely removed from the work. Instead, a synergy of analysis must be reached. While it is certainly beneficial to discuss meanings unintended by the author, an authorial intent is present regardless, and as such is worthy of consideration. Likewise however, the Author is not the sole arbiter of meaning in their work, and new interpretations can be deduced from it.

Is Tolkien's work intentionally allegorical? No, he specifically denied the presence of any allegory in *The Lord of the Rings* or *The Hobbit*. Under the purview of the Death of the Author, however, it is not any more correct to claim that allegory is present than to deny any allegorical resonance whatsoever. The author's intention for the work is also an interpretation, and if one is able to provide textual evidence, their analysis is valid.

Ultimately though, absolutist application of the Death of the Author to the works of J. R. R. Tolkien seems detrimental to the discourse. The influence of Tolkien's life on his works is well documented and has been thoroughly discussed, and ignoring it does not advance the debate. On the contrary, it removes depth from the discourse. The story of Beren and Lúthien is a beautiful story, arguably made more beautiful by the knowledge of its inspiration, as are all other parts of the Legendarium.

If Tolkien as the author gets killed, this connection is gone, along with its associative resonance. Without Edith, there would be no Lúthien. Without Sarehole, there would be no Shire. Without the Kalevala, there would be no Silmarillion, and without Tolkien, there would be no Middle-Earth.

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