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Literary and Contextual Influences in JRR Tolkien's Works

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the history of English Literature, there have been many renowned figures, from William Shakespeare to Charles Dickens, to others such as Wordsworth and Coleridge. All of these figures have eventually become part of one literary tendency, such as the Renaissance, Romanticism, or Victorian literature. There are other writers, though, who cannot be easily classified as belonging to a specific literary tendency or movement, but whose work fits a determined genre. Such is the case of John Ronald Reuel Tolkien, worldwide known for his masterpiece, the thrilogy *The Lord of the Rings*, whose first part was published in 1954 and for some scholars, the most popular author of the 20th century (Chance, 2005). *The Lord of the Rings* is an epic fantasy narrating the facts occurred in the fantastic world known as Middle Earth, and is the culminant sequel to the previous events narrated in *The Hobbit* (1937). *The Lord of the Rings* is a trilogy composed of the volumes *The Fellowship of the Ring* (1954), *The Two towers* (1954) and *The Return of the King* (1955); each volume is subdivided in two books, giving a total of six books narrating the facts concerning the War of the Ring: the hobbit Frodo Baggins has to carry out the mission of throwing the ring into the fires of Mount Doom, in the dark country of Mordor, in order to destroy the menace of Evil upon the Middle Earth, epitomized in the figure of Sauron, the enemy of the Free Folks –and, to a lesser extent, in the wizard Saruman. During his journey, Frodo is helped, advised and accompanied by several characters such as Aragorn, Gandalf or Samwise Gamgee, who will use as many skills as they have (warfare, witchcraft, or wisdom) in order to complete the mission, put an end to the War of the Ring against the forces of Evil, and restore peace in the Middle Earth.

The purpose of this essay is to analyze the literary and contextual influences in Tolkien's work by studying several critical moments in his life, such as his stay at Oxford or his participation in the Great War (1914-1918), which would be essential for the development of his secondary world, the Middle Earth. I will also analyze several features of his main works which could have been directly related to these influences, either literary or contextual.

1.-LITERARY INFLUENES

John Ronald Reuel Tolkien was born in Bloemfontein -South Africa- in 1892, between the Boer Wars (1880-1881, 1899-1902), one of the most relevant armed conflicts in the 19th Century colonization of Africa. Due to this fact, and after the fatal death of his father, Arthur Tolkien, in 1896 from rheumatic fever, his mother Mabel decided to leave the African continent and settle in the British Midlands, "in a modest cottage in the village of Sarehole, outside Birmingham" (Garth, 2004:11). Notwithstanding the fact that the Midlands is quite an industrial and crowded region in the United Kingdom, in terms of population density, young Tolkien found outside the urban nucleus of Birmingham the touch of nature and the love he claimed for the "countryside, […] good water, stones and elm trees, and small quiet rivers and […] rustic people" (Garth 2004:12). In addition, his residence in the cottage during these formative years of youth meant a starting point for his infinite imagination, which would develop sooner than later through his multiple writings. Around the year 1910, he not only began his undergraduate studies in Classics at Oxford, but also started a period of his life of full development in academic terms. At Oxford he met a group of students with similar interests and concerns, who assembled together during tea time and discussed themes related to literature and languages, specially the classic ones (Latin and Greek, and also Germanic literature). This group called itself "the TCBS" (Tea Club Barrow Store's) (Carpenter, 1977: 44-45). Tolkien showed versatility in Latin and Greek and a peculiar interest in English linguistics, besides his concerns for Northern mythology (the *Eddas* texts[1]). He had a deep knowledge of Scandinavian myths, especially of the book of *Kalevala* (1835), an epic poem dealing with Finish traditions, folklore and legends. For this reason it is not surprising that the reader should find similarities between Tolkien's works and the Scandinavian tradition, as well as with Gaelic folklore. For instance, in

[1] Eddas: Collection of mythological Old Norse poems made in the 12th Century (TheFreeDictionary.com, 2014)

the prologue of: *The Lord of the Rings* (1986)[2], 'Concerning Hobbits', Tolkien names the public authority within the Hobbit society with the title of "Thain". This title is by no means chosen accidentally, as it has a clear relationship with the title "Thane", "a man, often the chief of a clan, who held land from a Scottish king and ranked with an earl's son" (Oxford Dictionary, 2014). Besides, he even confesses in one of his letters to an editor that *"*the dwarf-names, and the wizard's, are from the elder Edda" (Carpenter, 1977: 25). This means that names such as Thorin, Thrain or Durin -which are relevant names in the dwarf tradition-, already existed in Scandinavian literature (*The Poetic Edda:* stanzas 11-16) and are not an invention of the British author.

Tolkien showed an interest in and deep knowledge of classic Anglo-Saxon literature, which would culminate in one of his best critical works: *Beowulf: the Monsters and the Critics* (1936). Besides, he wrote some other works such as the unfinished work *The Fall of Arthur* (2014) recently edited and published by his son Christopher Tolkien. Here we find a Tolkien dealing with classical myths and legends, which would eventually serve as an inspiration for both *The Hobbit* (1966)[3] and *The Lord of the Rings*. For example, the motif of the dragon in *The Hobbit*, is similar to the facts narrated in the third battle of the epic poem *Beowulf* (Project Gutenberg, 2005. The events narrated in *The Hobbit* deal with the destruction of the dwarven kingdom of Erebor (17-19), and its final restoration after the killing of the dragon (Smaug) by a hero (the Human Bard) (156-157), also includes the presence of a burglar (the hobbit, Bilbo Baggins) and the importance of the treasure. Not only Anglo-Saxon tradition but also figures of the Romance tradition, such as King Arthur and Merlin, seem to have their representation in Tolkien's literary world: the figure of Aragorn, a mighty king whose rightfulness to the throne is epitomized in the possession of a sword. In the case of Aragorn, the sword is Andúril, and in the case of King Arthur, it is Excalibur. For both kings the possession of the sword means that they have the right to the throne. Furthermore, both kings are as well advised by a wizard, a

[2] Further references to *The Lord of the Rings* will be to the 1986 Unwin 3rd edition.
[3] Further references to *The Hobbit* will be to the 1966 Houghton Mifflin edition

wise man who always controls difficult circumstances: these are on the one hand Merlin, and in Tolkien's world, Gandalf.

Tolkien is the creat[4]or of his own epic mythology, and his work is, according to scholars like Eduardo Segura, one of the best manifestations of the epic genre since its birth by the hands of Homer (Segura, 2008: XXV). *The Silmarillion* (1977), a very thorough compilation of Tolkien's writings made by his son Christopher, is the cornerstone and basis for all the myths and legends from which the Middle Earth takes its historical shape. From a beginning that reminds the reader of the *Genesis*[5], to myths which would lead to the final development of his main works: *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings.* In fact, it is not strange to find similarities between *The Silmarillion* and the *Bible.* Having in mind the Christian background that influenced Tolkien during his education, and his confessed devotion to religion, it does not seem strange how close the cornerstone of Tolkien's epic world is to the Bible, as well as the fact that only one God is in charge of the creation of the whole world (Eru-Ilúvatar) (*The Silmarillion*:1). Further similarities can be found in the eternal struggle between good and evil in *The Silmarillion*, and also with the weapon of temptation used by the forces of Evil. For instance, Eve's temptation by Satan in the *Genesis*, or Jesus's in the desert –narrated in the Gospel according to Saint Luke (4:1)- have also correspondence in the literary works of J.R.R. Tolkien. For instance, the moment in which Isildur has the opportunity to destroy the One Ring in Orodruin (Mount Doom) in the Second Age, but instead, he is tempted by the ring and eventually fails to throw it into the fire. Frodo Baggins will experiment the same temptation years later (981). Another example of the similarities with the Bible in *The Silmarillion* are the events narrated in the chapter 'The Downfall of Númenor', which show a clear resemblance with the facts occurred to Noah in the book of *Genesis* (6:1). 'The Downfall of Númenor'

[4] Further references to *The Silmarillion* will be to the 1977 Houghton Mifflin edition

[5] In fact, the first lines in both books are similar. In the *Genesis*, we can read: "*In the beginning when God created the Heavens and the Earth […]"* (Genesis, 1:1). Similarly, *The Silmarillion* starts: "*There was Eru, the One […]*. (Tolkien, 1977: 1)

narrates the myth of an island which is corrupted by the forces of evil, epitomized in the figure of Sauron, who tricks Númenórean people into venerating Melkor (the corrupt God, similar to Satan) instead of Eru Ilúvatar (the first god, the god of light). As a punishment for their loss of faith and the corruption of their people's souls, the island of Númenor is flooded. All perish, except for Elendil and his sons, Isildur and Anárion, who sail westwards to save their lives: "you should prepare yourselves other ships, and put aboard all such things as your hearts cannot bear to part with*"* (306). These words by Amandil (Elendil's father) do remind the reader of God's commands to Noah in the *Genesis*: "and the Lord said unto Noah, Come thou and all thy house into the ark, for thee have I seen righteous before me in this generation […]" (*Genesis*, 6:3).

According to the scholar Eduardo Segura, in his book *Mitopoeia y Mitología*, "Tolkien dota de verosimilitud a los mundos posibles elaborando al detalle su pasado." (2008:61). Therefore, we can say that the historical process was really important for Tolkien. Thus, for the creation of the secondary world[6] of Middle Earth, Tolkien creates different races: Elves, Men, Dwarves, Orcs, Gods and semi-gods which these races venerate, either good or evil. Every race, in fact, has its own culture, history and behaviours. Besides, Tolkien invented a reliable language for each race, such as Elvish[7], or the Black speech of Mordor, as well as written system as the dwarf runes, probably derived from the Scandinavian tradition and Old English -fields in which Tolkien was well versed-. Below, there are examples of Black speech characters, appearing in "The One Ring" (63) (Figure 1), Dwarf Runes from the map of Thorin Oakenshield (1) (Figure 2)[8], and Elvish characters from the door of Moria (323) (Figure 3)

1

[6] Secondary World: It is a creation by the story maker which our mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is "true": it accords with the laws of that world and therefore, you believe it while you are inside. (Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf,* 1964: 20).

[7] Indeed, there are two varieties of Tolkien's elvish: Sindarin and Quenya. Quenya was actually influenced by Finnish (Carpenter, 1977: 59).

[8] Regarding the Dwarf runes, it has to be said that they are quite similar to Old English runes, another example of Tolkien's sources for the creation of his world.

Figure 1: The engravings in the One Ring –Black Speech inscription in Tengwar.

2

Figure 2: Dwarf Runes in Thorin Oakenshield map – inscription in Argenthas Erebor.

3

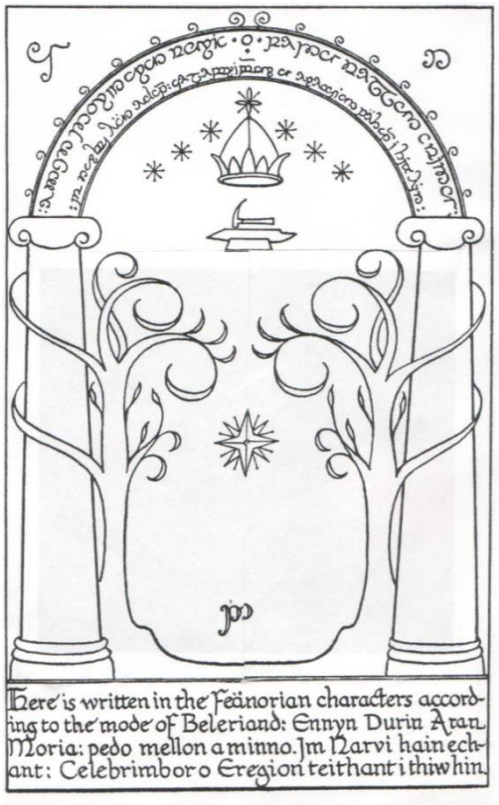

Figure 3: The Gates of Moria – inscriptions in Tengwar.

As mentioned before, Tolkien was above all a philologist and he never abandoned his love for languages and linguistics. This fact in combination with his privileged imagination, led to the construction of these different languages. Therefore, the races use varied languages to refer to common terms: for instance, the wizard Gandalf is referred to as Mithrandir by the elves, Tharkun by the dwarves, Olórin, by the people from Aman (the Undiying Lands, a region of the Middle Earth), or simply the Grey Pilgrim. Besides the variety of languages, all the races use and are familiar with what is called "Westron", or "Common Speech" in the Middle Earth. Thus, Tolkien, by creating this network of cultures and races in addition to languages, gives authenticity to the world he has invented. Yet the use of Common Speech also provides unity.

Tolkien has been many times the object of criticism, due to the fact that his literary style seems to be addressed to children. For instance, in his work *The Hobbit*, there are many references to the reader, and the tone in which it is written is kind and soft. Besides, the appearance of supernatural powers, beasts and mythological beings, seems to suggest to scholars the idea that the Tolkienian world was built upon the genre of the fairy tales dedicated to children rather than upon the epic genre. However, a contemporary writer and a very close friend of Tolkien's, C.S. Lewis[9], stated the following in his defense:

> "Debe tenerse en cuenta que éste es un libro para niños en el sentido de que la primera de muchas lecturas puede hacerse en la escuela […] *El Hobbit* resultará muy gracioso para los lectores más pequeños, y sólo años más tarde, en la décima o vigésima lectura, empezarán a darse cuenta del diestro conocimiento y la profunda reflexión que fueron necesarios para que todo en él pareciera tan maduro, tan amable, y a su modo, tan veraz […] La verdad es que en este libro se unen un buen número de cosas nunca unidas antes: riqueza de humor, comprensión de lo niños, y una feliz fusión del erudito y el poeta en el entendimiento de la mitología". (Segura, 2008:161).

Therefore, C.S. Lewis attempts to question all the theories from scholars who believe that *The Hobbit* is addressed to children only. In order to appreciate the work of Tolkien and all its

[9] C.S. Lewis (1898-1963) was an author of fantasy novels too, such as *The Chronicles of Narnia* (1950-1956)

possibilities, the reader should adopt the willing suspension of disbelief that Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1824) proposed in his *Biographia Literaria* (1817), chapter XIV:

> "to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural, by awakening the mind's attention to the lethargy of custom, and directing it to the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us; an inexhaustible treasure, but for which, in consequence of the film of familiarity and the selfish solicitude, we have eyes, yet see not, ears that hear not, and hearts that neither feel nor understand" (Coleridge, 1817).

In other words, to let ourselves be delighted by the reading, regardless of its reliability.[10]

2-CONTEXTUAL INFLUENCES

Since 1896, JRR Tolkien and his family had been living in touch with Nature, in the Sarehole cottage, Birmingham. The place was a paradigm of a countryside landscape in the British Midlands: savage nature, green trees and abundant vegetation, interspersed with ponds, lakes and channels, as well as solitary factories. Hall Green, where Sarehole Mill is located, was then an area rich in water and vegetation, with small manifestations of human action, such as its mill (see Appendix A), so Tolkien grew up keeping in touch directly with nature. In addition, the years he spent in the cottage were those of youth, in which personal development is predominant, and in which the imagination is really active. Then, it is not surprising that these years and his contact with nature were really influential and this is reflected in his main works.

As has been exposed previously, Tolkien's fiction is highly indebted to the epic genre, but also to the fairy tale genre. Both of them imply a kind of "escapism", which Tolkien explains in the essay 'On Fairy Stories' (*Tree and Leaf,* 1964: 7-59), arguing that the reading of fantastic genres supposes an evasion of the reader's mind to secondary worlds and claiming that "escapism is one of the functions of fairy stories" (20). Tolkien considers escapist literature as a vehicle which can provide a critical view on modernity:

[10] However, JRR Tolkien asserts in his essay *On Fairy Stories* (*Tree and Leaf,* 1964: 12) that "the willing suspension of disbelief" doesn't sound good to him, as far as he is convinced that the story maker is a "sub creator" of a Secondary World (vid. page 4) Thus the reader is immersed in this magical world, and "when disbelief arises, the magic or art has failed" and now we are out in the Primary World again.

> "For it is after all possible for a rational man […] to arrive at the condemnation, implicit at least in the mere silence of "escapist" literature, of progressive things like factories, or the machineguns and bombs that appear to be their most natural and inevitable […] products. The rawness and ugliness of modern European life […] is the sign of a biological inferiority, of an insufficient or false reaction to environment". (Tolkien, 1964: 20)

Tolkien is in these lines rejecting the atrocity of unlimited industrial and technological development, forces of progress which profoundly marked the development of the English Midlands, where Birmingham is situated –which is also referred as the "Black Country"- during the 18th and 19th centuries. Indeed, the depiction of the place in which Tolkien grew up might also be seen as "shabby, materialist and industrialized" (Chance, 2005: 94) notwithstanding the fact that there could be certain idyllic and peaceful places, as mentioned on the previous page.

Segura) goes beyond the topic of escapism and asserts this: "la evasión sólo es liberadora si va unida a la *recuperación* de lo que se ve todos los días, con ojos distintos. Si no, se queda en artificio"(2008: 18). This statement would lead to a critical perception of the Tolkienian work, since the reader has to escape his quotidian world to see it in reflection, and then, as he returns, would have recovered it and would be able to condemn all its negative aspects – which in this case are the unlimited industrial and technological progress, which go together with the destruction of Nature. The argument exposed by Segura in these lines cab ne related to Coleridge's "willing suspension of disbelief" by Coleridge, as both arguments demand the reader's adoption of an unusual point of view that may help him see reality more clearly.

Having in mind these statements about Tolkien and his rejection of unlimited technological processes, we could also point out that the author had a great sensibility towards Nature, as an antagonistic view and a repudiation of the industrial world. Therefore, this sensibility can be also put in relationship with the Romantic ideal of Nature, the Romantic poets' devotion to it and Nature's insightful power as source of knowledge. For the 19th century poets, such as William Wordsworth, Samuel Coleridge or John Keats, it was in nature that beauty should be found, far away from the crowded and corrupted cities of the English

Industrial Revolution. Nature is the setting where also Mystery is found, where the unknown lies, where the Sublime[11] is best represented. Their love for nature and belief in nature as source of knowledge is summarized in the following verse by William Wordsworth: "let Nature be your teacher", from his poem *The Tables Turned* (1798). As a consequence of this devotional respect to Nature, the Romantic poets criticized the society in which they lived, because the contrast between natural spaces and cities during the Industrial Revolution was huge. The French philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau asserted in his *Discourse of Inequality* that "man is naturally good" but it is in society where he is corrupted: "human society […] seems, at first, to show us only the violence of the powerful and the oppression of the weak" (Rousseau, 1754:8).

In order to relate these considerations with Tolkien's works, it is indispensable to analyze the essay entitled 'Concerning Hobbits', which appears in the preface to *The Lord of the Rings.* As its name suggests, Tolkien describes here the most relevant peculiarities of such an interesting (and very relevant indeed) folk of the Middle Earth. Here is the first general description of the Hobbits:

> "Hobbits are an unobtrusive but very ancient people […]. They love peace and quiet and good tilled earth: a well-ordered and well-farmed countryside was their favorite haunt. They do not and did not understand or like machines more complicated than a forge-bellows, a water-mill, or a hand-loom" (9)

In this first approach to the Hobbits, Tolkien highlights the importance of their attitude towards peace, and the simplicity of their machinery, preferring simple tools to more developed ones. Obviously this reminds us of the rejection of machinery and the consequent industrialization of rural Britain mentioned above, as well as of the Romantic-like devotion to nature, which is reinforced onwards in the essay: "Hobbits have a close friendship with the earth" (9). The detailed exposition of the Hobbit's cultural values by Tolkien arrives at a point in which even their dressing style is described: "They were a merry folk. They dressed in bright colors, being

[11] The idea of the Sublime comes from Kantian philosophy, and implies the existence of a superior term, also known as the Absolute Spirit, which enacts itself in everything, and at the same time everything is enacted in the Sublime (Ferguson, 1992).

notably fond of yellow and green; but they seldom wore shoes" (10). Here we find an insightful habit by the hobbits: in their clothes they portray those colours proper of nature: the green of vegetation and the yellow of the sun or the wheat fields in summer time; furthermore, they wear no shoes, which is in my opinion a clear symbol of not only their love but also their profound "contact" with nature. Whereas the contact between Men, Elves, Dwarves and Orcs with nature is not direct due to their footwear, the Hobbits' is direct. Besides the detail of the shoes, another important detail is "their ancestral habit of living in tunnels and holes […] and in such dwellings they still felt most at home" (12). The daily activities of the Hobbits have also to do with nature, as they "for the most part managed their own affairs. Growing food and eating it occupied most of their time"(16). It was then a rural society centered on agriculture, not only of vegetables, but also of smoking herbs, made up of people "generous and not greedy" (16), leading a tranquil life in the idyllic Shire, described by Tolkien himself as a "pleasant corner of the world" (16) where they plied their "well-ordered business of living, and they heeded less and less the world outside where dark things moved." (16) Ignorant and ignored, and far from wars and adventures (which were for the hobbits issues for the Big Folk), Hobbits rejected any kind of warfare, for this reason the only weapons they had were used for hunting or exhibited as trophies: "At no time had Hobbits of any kind been warlike, and they had never fought among themselves […] there was still some store of weapons in the Shire, these were used mostly as trophies, hanging above hearths or on walls" (1954:18). In spite of this, Hobbits were brave enough to fight if it was required.

Having in mind the analysis of the Shire in this essay, it is not strange then that some scholars have put it in relation with the classical Arcadian motif[12]. The following statements by Scottville (in Chance, 2005: 96-97), reinforce this analysis of 'Concerning Hobbits':

> "Tolkien's portrait of the Shire reveals the use that he made of quasi-medieval Arcadian imagery and traditions. […] I am attempting not to demonstrate direct influence but to

[12]Arcadia: mountainous region of ancient Greece, traditionally known for the contented pastoral innocence of its people (Oxford Dictionary, 2014). It was used by Renaissance and Romantic writers as a motif for a bucolic paradise where happiness, simplicity and peace reign, with a deep love and respect towards Nature.

> show that an Arcadian pastoral tradition was strong in Tolkien, and it was a direct reaction against industrial modernism".

In addition, Scottville sees in the hobbits a rejection of all kind of war, "another flaw in the Shire and its pastoral system of life", as hobbits are "unable to defend themselves without being railed by Merry and his magical Rohirrim horn" (96-97).[13]

If there is one character in *The Lord of the Rings* that embodies the hobbit values to the highest point, this is Samwise Gamgee. He is a modest hobbit who works as a gardener for the Baggins, Bilbo and Frodo; though he may not have a bright mind, in his simplicity he has a clear understanding of his duties and tasks within Middle Earth. Sam, from his humility, is the one who does not dare to touch the One Ring, because he has been told that it is evil and corrupting; he obeys and thus he is never corrupted by it. He is a simple hobbit, who decidedly knows what he loves and what he despises: for instance, when he previews the destruction of the Shire by Saruman's ruffians, in the chapter 'The Mirror of Galadriel' he is not indifferent to what he sees:

> "He saw the trees again. But this time they were not waving in the wind, they were falling, crashing to the ground. `Hi!' cried Sam in an outraged voice. 'There's that Ted Sandyman a-cutting down trees as he shouldn't. […] 'There's some devilry at work in the Shire,' then suddenly Sam gave a cry and sprang away. 'I can't stay here,' he said wildly `I must go home" (382).

Sam Wise Gamgee, -a name that perfectly fits the characteristics of this hobbit- knows at every moment in the novel which his place is, and how he should act. Defending the Shire is a big concern for Sam, since he saw its destruction in his vision in the mirror, and so he feels sad and impotent for not being able to do anything while he is carrying out the mission of the One Ring; still, he gets angry when he hears the terrible news of the destruction or devastation of his idyllic home.

The tone in which the essay 'Concerning Hobbits' is written is quite relevant for the idea the reader can grasp from its lines. Thus -such as happens in *The Hobbit*- Tolkien employs

[13] Scottville here refers to the facts occurred in *The Return of The King* (1035-1058), where the Hobbits return to the Shire and find that the place has been invaded by ruffians under the commands of Saruman.

a friendly mood and kind tone in his descriptions of the Shire and its folks, maybe as an attempt to open the affective filter of the reader and promote his identification with this love towards nature that the Hobbits convey. In general, the tone in which the novels by Tolkien are written, is quite relevant to catch the reader's attention and, therefore, to manipulate his mood. The kind tone of the essay may make the reader feel sensitive towards nature, as the Shire is portrayed as an idyllic place where Nature governs. On the other hand, Tolkien's novels also use a sadder and nostalgic tone in the description of places which are devastated, or where there is a lack of vegetation.

Through the analysis of some lines belonging to the chapters 'Farewell to Lórien' (*The Fellowship of the Ring* 387-399) and 'The Great River' (400-414), we will see how deeply the characteristics of the landscape -and consequently, of nature- affect the members of the Fellowship. First of all, the characters are leaving the magic forest of Lórien, which is the home of Lady Galadriel and the elves. The Fellowship finds rest within the safety of the forest, after their bad experience in the mines of Moria. After leaving this fantastic country, they all feel nostalgia and sadness because Lórien was a place where they were comfortable and safe -by being in contact with Nature-. These extract of a conversation between Legolas and Gimli reveals the melancholy of the fellows, especially in the dwarf's case: "Torment in the dark was the danger that I feared, and it did not hold me back. But I would not have come, had I known the danger of light and joy. Now I have taken my worst wound in this parting." (399) Just after leaving Lórien, Gimli laments their departure, and longs to return, because, as they go down the river Anduin, the landscape changes and the beauty of the trees and vegetation disappears: "They had come to the Brown Lands that lay, vast and desolate […] What pestilence or war or evil deed of the Enemy had so blasted that entire region even Aragorn could not tell" (400). Tolkien seems to be attributing the devastation of these wastelands to the action of negative entities such as war, pestilence, or evil. So, this reveals also the consequences that war may bring, particularly the devastation of natural spaces. Here Tolkien might be conveying a moral

teaching. The following insightful comment by Frodo, as well as his thoughts about this place might also create aversion or bad feelings in the reader against war:

> "`How wide and empty and mournful all this country looks! 'said Frodo. `I always imagined that as one journeyed south it got warmer and merrier, until winter was left behind forever.' […] the trees had seemed hostile before, as if they harboured secret eyes and lurking dangers; now he wished that the trees were still there`[…] He felt naked in the middle of these shelterless lands" (401).

Forests and natural spaces give cover to the Fellowship, because as they are moving south down the Brown Lands, "this feeling of insecurity grew on all the Company. […] There was little speech and no laughter in any of the boats" (513). Again, we see how the existence -or the absence- of a fertile nature can affect the mood of the characters, and by extension, of the readers.

The Lord of the Rings is a novel in which characters -especially hobbits- experiment a significant growth in personality, wisdom and courage. When the War of the Ring is over, the four hobbits, Frodo, Sam, Merry and Pippin, return to the Shire, but what they found is something that they had not expected: as is told in the chapter 'The Scouring of the Shire' (*The Return of the King,* 1035-1058), the hobbits find their home occupied and ruled by some ruffians under the command of Sharkey -which eventually results to be the corrupt wizard Saruman. His action and influence, as had happened before in Isengard, provokes in the Shire the devastation and destruction of the natural order that governed there. "Ruffians were felling trees and digging and building […] all the ruffians mostly hack, burn, and ruin; and now it has come to killing." (1046). These are two of the testimonies the hobbits hear just after their arrival. Here can be found again the melancholic mentioned above: "It was one of the saddest hours in their lives." (1054) However, this time, having in mind the personal development the hobbits have experimented in their heroic deeds, they are brave and mature enough not to be sad but to fight the ruffians and 'heal' the Shire, restoring the peace and harmony which characterize that corner of the Middle Earth. Not by chance, Tolkien first refers to the growth of the hobbits while they find themselves in a natural space: when Merry and Pippin drink the Ent-draught at the forest of Fangorn during their stay with Treebeard (*The Two Towers*, 482-508),

they are within a context in which nature predominates and therefore -and by no means accidentally- they experiment growth in size, but metaphorically, personal growth as well:

> "The effect of the draught began at the toes, and rose steadily through every limb, bringing refreshment and vigor as it coursed upwards, right to the tips of the hair. Indeed the hobbits felt that the hair on their heads was actually standing up, waving and curling and growing" (1955: 492)

The wandering of the hobbits through the forest of Fangorn is another revealing part of the novel, as it is in these chapters that "the last march of the Ents" (*The Two Towers:* 508) takes place as a response to the cutting down of the trees whose wood the corrupt Saruman uses for the development of his warfare industry. The Ents – "trees with spirit and their own will, which are able to speak. (Nebreda & Berrocal, 2001: 98)- go down in their last crusade for the Middle Earth, and destroy the fortress of Isengard. This is perhaps the greatest example o of Tolkien's respect and love for nature, as it is Nature itself that rises against the excesses of industrial warfare, since the Ents embody the very spirit of Nature. The symbol offered by the author is quite clear.

During the years corresponding to the Great War (1914-1918), Tolkien was in the middle of his undergraduate studies at Oxford, but, as a young British man, he would eventually join the army to fight for his country. Thus, he joined the 11th Lancashire Fusiliers battalion –of which he would become Second Lieutenant- on July 1916 to fight in France, where he would experience the way of living in the trenches, surrounded by cold, mud, and death. Tolkien grasped from both World War I and World War II –though he did not take part in the latter- the idea that war was the ultimate struggle between humanity and the Machine, with the hint that the first war was a struggle between the old and the new world that was coming, and the second one was the ultimate example of the triumph of the 'Machine' (Garth, 2004: 190-191). Here we find again the dichotomy mentioned before: the struggle between Nature and technological progress, epitomized in mechanization. The war experience might have influenced Tolkien notably in his reaction against industrialization and the consequent mechanization. Having in mind these facts, it is easier to understand how important natural spaces were in Tolkien's main

works. Although Tolkien himself denied that he began to write about the Middle Earth during his stay war experience, (Garth, 2004: 186) it will not be surprising to find the influence of these days in France, which, according to his own testimony, were not charming at all: "These grey days wasted in wearily going over, over and over again, the dreary topics, the dull back waters of the art of killing, are not enjoyable" (in Carpenter, 1977: 78). Therefore, World War I could have, if not directly, indirectly influenced the development of Tolkien's secondary world, concretely in the attitude of Saruman's army towards nature and his partial destruction of the forest of Fangorn. It is important to highlight also the condition of WWI as the first conflict that affected the whole world. Besides, another outstanding characteristic of the Great War is that it was the most destructive of wars -much more than the Napoleonic wars, the Seven Year War or the revolutionary wars of 18th Century- up to that date (*BBC History Magazine*, 2008). The historical causes of this already centenary conflict were the rise of imperialism in the "Northern" and most powerful countries, as well as to the growth of new industries, processes of urbanization, demographic expansion (García Almiñana, 1997). This period is commonly referred to as the Second Industrial Revolution (1850-1870), an age in which capitalism matured as an economic system.

The experience in the trenches could also have marked an indelible experience in Tolkien. The harshness he lived through could be represented in this quote: "By 1918, all but one of my close friends were dead" (Tolkien, 1965). By this year, Tolkien was only 26 years old, so he was still quite young to carry on burdened with such losses and brutalities. There is a poem from *The Fellowship of the Ring* in the chapter 'The Ring goes South' (289-311) recited by Bilbo Baggins in which the hobbit exposes with a melancholic tone his memories and experiences:

"I sit beside the fire and think
of all that I have seen,
of meadow-flowers and butterflies
in summers that have been;

Of yellow leaves and gossamer
in autumns that there were,
with morning mist and silver sun
and wind upon my hair.

I sit beside the fire and think
of how the world will be
when winter comes without a spring
that I shall ever see.

For still there are so many things
that I have never seen:
in every wood in every spring
there is a different green.

I sit beside the fire and think
of people long ago,
and people who will see a world
that I shall never know.

But all the while I sit and think
of times there were before,
I listen for returning feet
and voices at the door." (375)

This nostalgic poem, is, literally the testimony of the old hobbit Bilbo Baggins, but it can also be seen as the testimony of J.R.R. Tolkien, a man who lived the brutalities of two world wars, one of them through first-hand experience. A melancholic and longing tone for past times is predominant throughout the poem -*"*of meadow-flowers and butterflies / in summers that have been*"*- and the reality presented in these lines reveals a poetic speaker who has lived times in which the world has changed considerably –changes that might have their explanation in the consequences of two World Wars-: "and people who will see a world / that I shall never know". To sum up, this poem would portray all the ideas exposed previously: the weariness of Tolkien after his experience in World War I, together with a sort of loss of faith in humanity, being capable of committing such aberrations, as well as the longing for past times in which Nature and its creations (the "butterflies" in the poem) were the ones who reigned, instead of the dark smoke spilled by the English Midlands' factories, the direct cause of the Industrial Revolution and the consequent unlimited technological and mechanical progress.

CONCLUSION

This essay has dealt with the literary works of John Ronald Reuel Tolkien, having in mind the most relevant literal and contextual factors which influenced the creation of his main works: histories, legends and tales of the Middle Earth compiled in three main books: *The Silmarillion, The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings.* First of all, I have highlighted the importance of his education as a philologist in Oxford, where he met students with similar concerns as him, and where he could study the Classics and read the English literary tradition, as well as develop his skills regarding linguistics and literary criticism. Afterwards, and in relation with his condition of philologist, I have explained the different genres and literary influences that eventually led Tolkien to the creation of the Middle Earth, such as the epic, fantasy and fairy tales, and the influence of the Bible. Finally I have referred to the importance of natural spaces in his main works, by giving examples on the primary sources, importance that could have arisen as a response to Tolkien's own experiences during the Great War, years in which he witnessed firsthand the devastation of the nature, the loss of close friends and more generally, the brutalities and aberrations the human race is capable of.

Appendix A

Figure 1: Sarehole Mill, hall Green, Birmingham

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