

FORGING GREED, HOPE, AND THE ONE GREAT WORK IN MIDDLE-EARTH

Megan Abrahamson

“Even for those who are mightiest under Ilúvatar there is some work that they may accomplish once, and once only,” Yavanna declares in *The Silmarillion*, voicing one of the most imperceptibly important motifs within the realm of J.R.R. Tolkien’s Middle-earth (*Silmarillion* 83).^{*} The theme of creation is important enough on its own, and is occasionally magnified by the *singleness* of such an act, which invariably yields a creation so profound it shapes the history of the world. Three times in Middle-earth, a created artifact (or set of artifacts) is so significant that it drains a part of its creator’s power and exists as something which cannot be duplicated. The singleness of these creations serves to highlight crucial objects, creators, and running themes which guide and propel the action of Middle-earth. These creations are vessels that bear, channel, and evoke varying measures of two contrasting themes: greed and hope. Yavanna’s growing of the Trees of Valinor, Fëanor’s crafting of the Silmarils, and Sauron’s forging of the One Ring of Power all possess many thematic similarities. Each is vital to the history of Middle-earth and important to exploring Tolkien personally and ideologically. They are also fundamental in analyzing the dichotomous relationship of greed and hope in *The Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings*, which (interestingly, but characteristic of Tolkien) does not easily lend itself to a clear-cut division of good and evil.

The ease with which Tolkien calls attention to these monumental creations is masterfully simple. In all cases, the fashioned object is the paramount work of the creator and cannot be made again. The pinnacle of the maker’s craftsmanship, and even his own fate, is captured in his or her creation. The Two Trees, the three *Silmarilli*, and the One Ring are each supreme creations which, if lost, broken, or unmade, *cannot* be re-made. This trait is in contrast to other important objects in Middle-earth, such as the sword Narsil, which is re-forged as Andúril. Once the light of the Trees has been devoured by Ungoliant, Yavanna proclaims that, though she had created the Trees, “within Eä I can do so never again” (83). In early drafts of this story, the themes of which carry through to the final narrative, the Trees are claimed to be so central that “of all the things which the Gods made most renown have they, and about their fate all the stories of the world are woven” (*Shaping* 97). Similarly, just as the history of the world is tied to the fate of the Trees, the fate of Fëanor is bound to the Silmarils. Fëanor’s personal attachment to his creation is so strong that the unmaking of the Silmarils would simultaneously end his very life. When faced with the prospect of destroying the gems, Fëanor explains, “It may be that I can unlock my jewels, but never again shall I make their like; and if I must break them, I shall break my heart, and I shall be slain” (84). In addition, Tolkien’s draft notes suggest that not only Fëanor but also “the fate of the Elves is locked herein [the Silmarils], and the fate of many things besides” (*Shaping* 106). In the same way, Sauron’s fate is coupled with the fate of the Ring, for so “much of the strength and will of Sauron passed into that One Ring” that its unmaking forever prevents him from recovering any of his former power (344). The bond linking the fates of maker and creation, and the singularity of such creations, are important concepts used *only* in these instances in Middle-earth, proving their importance within Tolkien’s realm.

^{*} All subsequent page references are from *The Silmarillion* unless otherwise noted.

All of these created items serve a larger purpose as vessels which Tolkien uses to objectify the themes of hope and greed in *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion*. These themes are not constant or definite, but vacillate between representing greed and hope according to their power, through the passage of time, and from individual to individual (quite like the waxing and waning of Telperion and Laurelin, when sometimes the light of one or the other, or both, or neither, is visible). The greed-hope fluctuation is most apparent in the Silmarils, created by Fëanor with the most unselfish of motives—to ensure that the Light of the Trees is “preserved imperishable” (69). This selflessness is arguable, however, for in Tolkien’s early drafts of *The Silmarillion* he hints that Fëanor’s drive to create the Silmarils is not so pure, “for he purposed to make a thing more fair than any of the Eldar yet had made, that should last beyond the end of all” (*Shaping* 106). Yet in the final draft, for a while, at least, the Silmarils are a symbol of hope in which the Light of the Trees can always live. Even so, their beauty, combined with the malevolent whisperings of Melkor, awake in Fëanor a “greedy love” for the Silmarils which is not there before (71). After this, the Silmarils remain objects of greed from which only one of the jewels escapes, passing to Eärendil where it becomes “Gil-Estel, the Star of High Hope” (301).

The Trees and the One Ring are hard to see embodying anything *but* hope and greed, respectively, but their symbolism is in fact not so clear-cut. Note that the Trees fall prey to Ungoliant, the “mistress of her own lust,” whose greedy and insatiable hunger devours and poisons them (78). In their death, the Trees are the subject of lust. Yet Yavanna is able to use their last fruits to create the sun and the moon, so the Trees still triumph in final hope. Even the One Ring forged by Sauron is a source of hope, just as it is greed embodied. Though its power is so great it is overpoweringly coveted by otherwise good characters, the One Ring is also indirectly a symbol of hope. It is the *destruction* of the One Ring wherein lies the hope of the free peoples of Middle-earth throughout *The Lord of the Rings*, enabling the One Ring to be, in fact, the only hope for the preservation of Middle-earth. A great deal of faith is placed in taking the Ring on “a hard road, a road unforeseen,” Elrond explains at the Council of Elrond. “There lies our hope, if hope it be. To walk into peril—to Mordor. We must send the Ring to the fire” (*Fellowship* 320). At the same time, of course, the Ring remains a focus of greed throughout the novel as many otherwise good characters (Bilbo, Boromir, even Frodo) are tempted by its power, as “desire corrupts their heart” (*Fellowship* 321). So Sauron’s Ring of Power serves as a source of greed and of hope simultaneously. These two themes, hope and greed, are active in all three of the monumental creations here explored.

The overwhelming significance of these items and the themes which surround them may perhaps shed some light on understanding Tolkien himself. The singular object, created once without hope of repetition, is greatly in opposition to modern industrial notions of mass production. Tolkien’s “low opinion of the twentieth century,” described by Clyde S. Kilby, supports this motif in which the really important inventions are those which cannot be reproduced (30). Imagine Tolkien’s dismay if Silmarils could be mass-produced on a conveyor belt and marketed as great wedding gifts! The idea of creating an absolutely perfect work must also have held some appeal to Tolkien, who, as an incurable perfectionist, was *never* satisfied with *The Silmarillion*, and who went so far as to describe *The Lord of the Rings* (even after spending years polishing it before its publication) as having “many defects” (Kilby 31). However, the significance of this repeated theme (namely, the importance of the singular, perfect and unique creation) is chiefly key to a study of Tolkien’s literature and mere guesswork when applied to his life.

The concepts of greed and hope are truly universal and pervade all aspects of Tolkien’s literature; the creations explored above are only convenient vessels to carry the plot along a particular theme. Tolkien has been criticized for the “moral simplicity” of his works, which appear too easily to “slip into a . . . Goodies vs. Baddies story,” laments Marjorie Burns in “J.R.R. Tolkien: The British and the Norse in Tension” (49). But this, Burns claims, is a statement made by critics

who have probably not closely studied Tolkien's literature. She defends Tolkien's familiar dichotomies (west vs. east, ugly vs. fair, unadorned vs. ornate) as in fact *not* consistently falling into an umbrella "good vs. bad" category (and the same applies to greed vs. hope). Burns cites Kilby's clever coinage, "contrasistency," as a means of describing Tolkien's unique way of polarizing good and evil and determining where other dichotomies lie in relation (Burns 49). Aragorn's poem best illustrates this notion that things are not always as they seem, and that traditional dichotomies have no place in attempting to differentiate between good and evil:

All that is gold does not glitter,
Not all those who wander are lost;
The old that is strong does not wither,
Deep roots are not reached by the frost.
From the ashes a fire shall be woken,
A light from the shadows shall spring;
Renewed shall be blade that was broken,
The crownless again shall be king. (*Fellowship* 212)

As this example demonstrates, Tolkien's dichotomies rarely align themselves appropriately to traditional labels of good or bad, if they align themselves at all. Aragorn's admission later in the scene that "I look foul and feel fair" is a warning against over-simplifying a subject's alignment based on arbitrary dichotomies (*Fellowship* 214). Even aligning dark with evil and light with good is problematic in Middle-earth: Saruman's symbol is a white hand, while Aragorn is often placed in shadows and described as dark, especially in his introductory scene.

This idea of contrasistency, and Tolkien's complexity when dealing with concepts of good and evil, can be applied to greed and hope as presented by the Ring, the Silmarils and the Trees; the Silmarils are created by Fëanor, who is eager for personal glory even though at the same time his hope is to preserve the Light of the Trees for the benefit of all. The One Ring is a symbol of concentrated greed while its destruction is the only symbol of hope. The Trees are created unselfishly, as a sign of a hopeful new age, but such is their power they are coveted by Ungoliant and devoured. With these instances in mind, one may conclude that Tolkien uses both the consistently good and the irredeemably evil in his exploration of greed and hope. The good king Thingol's powerful desire for a Silmaril brings evil on his daughter and eventually on himself and all of Doriath. Frodo ultimately succumbs to greed and claims the One Ring as his own on Mount Doom. Conversely, Sauron, by forging the One Ring, actually *creates* the possibility of his own destruction and therefore gives birth to hope. And we must never forget that it is not wise and good Frodo but the despicable and evil Gollum who, *acting in greed*, ultimately fulfills the hope of Middle-earth by destroying the Ring. Tolkien's use of greed and hope in such a "contrasistent" manner, where neither motif is purely good or totally evil, is indicative of the complexity of his works.

The power of greed over the good and the strength of hope even in evil are important to an understanding of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings*. These two epic tales consider the importance of singular creations as highlighted thematic elements important to the history of Middle-earth. Tolkien uses the Two Trees, the three Silmarils, and the One Ring to call attention to such weighty themes as greed and hope within his realm. These nearly opposite motifs in turn explore their own place in the ever-present good vs. evil dichotomy, according to Tolkien's especially unique and intentionally imprecise style. In evaluation of the importance of the single creation theme, one must note, ominously, that the titles of the "great works" of Tolkien himself (*The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion*) do not fail to reference the fictional "great works" that his characters create and around which the stories themselves revolve.

Works Cited

- Burns, Marjorie. "J.R.R. Tolkien: The British and the Norse in Tension." *Pacific Coast Philology*. 25 (1990): 49-59. JSTOR. University of New Mexico Library System. 21 Feb 2007. <<http://www.jstor.org>>.
- Kilby, Clyde S. *Tolkien & The Silmarillion*. Wheaton: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1976.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Fellowship of the Ring*. New York: Ballantine, 1965.
- . *The Shaping of Middle-earth*. New York: Ballantine, 1995.
- . *The Silmarillion*. 2nd ed. New York: Ballantine, 2002.