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5-7-2021

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### Recommended Citation

Pyter, Frederick T., "Celestial and Chthonic Imagery in The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings" (2021). *4610 English: Individual Authors: J.R.R. Tolkien*. 20.

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ENGL 4612

5/7/21

### Celestial and Chthonic Imagery in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*

“...stars were already shining in lakes between shores of cloud.”- J.R.R. Tolkien

Tolkien’s works have not lost any power to amaze and entertain since their original publications. The dramatis personae, heroic action, and dire conflict against one of literature’s most notorious villains all take the front stage for our reader, and their exploits are now world famous when once few had heard the words “epic trilogy” used together. But given all the hurly-burly and fanfare, the enormity of scope in distance of the quests of Bilbo and, in time, the Fellowship, Tolkien still wished to instill a sense of cosmic gravitas at times that made even Middle-Earth seem small. He did that by using imagery placed in the expressive skies and deep underworld settings that he evoked with such skill and natural feeling to the language that Peter Jackson had a great challenge in bringing these images and backdrops to the screen. In this paper I will address the expert use of this imagery and its ability to accent and foreshadow events in the novels as well as bringing much of the beautiful language thus used to the fore. I believe Tolkien was more influenced by the Weird Tradition in fantasy fiction than he realized, and more than many have come to know even with decades of research and publishing. This important and unrecognized aspect is found, not in the characters, but in the backgrounds. Grimmer things than Fell Beasts lurk, dark and deep in both Tolkien’s fiction and personal experiences. It seems many

of these experiences contravene the doctrine that teaches, “God is all Good” and he osmotically pulls tropes and imagery from the Weird Tradition, His use of them is clear upon seeking with an intent to find them. His friction within between his sincere belief in a Catholic God of “All Good” and the World Wars and other firsthand experiences of his caused him to internalize the shocking realities of war. I aim to show that use of these tropes and images both to show how far the reach of the Weird Tradition carried, however subconsciously within Tolkien, and his usage of it as fodder for imagery and as personal purgative for traumatic experience.

Tolkien was a pastoralist, and his love of nature is reflected clearly in Middle-Earth's heavenly features. His chthonic images are an analogue of certain elements of the American Weird literary tradition, his view of Roman Catholic ideas of Hell, and the unbelievable suffering he witnessed at Le Somme and at other postings in World Wars I and II. As a trench soldier in a signal division of the Lancashire Fusiliers, I am also sure that life in the dugouts beneath the trenches molded some of his underworld depictions.

For simplicity's sake I have arranged the greater portion of this document into four discrete sections: Chthonic Imagery, The Sun, The Moon, and Other Heavenly Bodies. I will examine each in turn through the chronological order of their important and often striking appearance in the texts. We will ascend from the deeps to the heavens with our lens toward the tools and implements used with each set of images and techniques, just as Tolkien sought his own personal ascension as a soul.

## Chthonic Imagery

“Other things living unbeknown to them that have sneaked in from the outside to lie up in the dark.”

- J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit*

It all begins with a hole in the ground, namely the residence of one soon to be burglar, Bilbo Baggins. It is a comfortable place, and this is one of the very few times Tolkien sets anything underground as appealing. Naturally, to throw our protagonist into discomfort meaningfully on the Hero's Journey one must show him being comfortable first. The smells and images used are all tidy and orderly until guests arrive, the ensuing chaos a simple foreshadowing of the churning conflicts to come.

Tolkien's more typical use of the world below is much more to unsettle or outright scare the audience. My look at his imagery there showed strong echoes of many of the tropes found in the Weird literary tradition that began in America with Poe and was carried in turn by Blackwood, Lovecraft and his famous circle composed of authors corresponding and borrowing each other's creations playfully and out to the world; first exploding through the table-top roleplaying world and then the internet. The Weird Tradition was and is a literary movement, beginning with Lovecraft, C.A. Smith, Robert Bloch, noted and esteemed Wisconsin author August Derleth, and several other American contemporary speculative fiction authors of the 1920's. It sought to emphasize “cosmicism” in horror, eschewing Gothic and other conventions, seeking fright in the emptiness of space and the vastness of the ocean; and the possibilities that ANYTHING could be down or out there as opposed to werewolves and vrkolaks and other traditional Western European fright fare. Science and its unknown realms were its key, and a grand and influencing new form of horror, “Cosmic Horror”, was brought to our world through the gates of these authors' works; buttressed by decades of continuing contributions from superpowers such as Stephen King, Fritz Leiber, Neil Gaiman and hundreds of others.

**Commented [A1]:** Makes me think of the dwarves' love of tunnels, which the elves cannot understand; I think most readers are probably on the elves' side of this just because Tolkien himself was

**Commented [A2]:** Are you referring to the Cthulhu mythos here or to the writers influenced by Lovecraft? Both?

Once considered the realm of pulp magazines and strange young men with plastic pocket protectors, the Weird Tradition has undergone a legitimization in recent decades as the works have influenced countless creators. HBO's *Lovecraft Country* represents the current pinnacle of fame for the Weird Tradition, and it is sure that more fame and recognition of this unique branch of world horror literature will be along.

Come, then, let us trip the dark fantastic down into the imagination of Tolkien and how his underworlds both terrify and awe the reader. Our uninvited guests in Bilbo's parlor sing late into the night, of "dungeons deep and caverns old," and we will see many together.

I have a strong feeling that Tolkien's war experiences were both in mind and active subconsciously from the beginning of crafting Middle-Earth. Our first true underground place of import is the cave unlocked by the last ray of sun on Durin's Day. Goblins emerge from a crack at the back of the cave," and when goblins came to grab him, there was a terrible flash like lightning in the cave, a smell like gunpowder, and several of them fell dead." This is the only use of the word "gunpowder" in the quartet of novels, and it was a word that stood out to my eye. Thoughts of Tolkien deep in a dugout with the smell and flashes of gunpowder and bombardment came to mind immediately. This being the first chthonic image after leaving Bilbo's home, it sets a tone like nothing else for his use and feel of being underground for the rest of the quartet. The tunnels are described as "passages, crossed and tangled in all directions" were also described as "terribly stuffy." I would think a dugout sealed against gas would get quite stuffy, indeed. Throughout the rest of the quartet, tunnels are bad places to be, full of despairing feelings and depressing, Weird, or demonic imagery.

**Commented [A3]:** A really interesting moment! Reminds me of the famous comparison of Smaug to a train

Chapter 5 of *The Hobbit* is a trove of chthonic imagery. The Weirdness raises its head with the passage quoted at the beginning of this section, and its follow-up, “the original owners are still there in odd corners, slinking and nosing about.” is a one-two punch of set-up for all the nastiness Tolkien puts underground later. This trope is a rock solid basic of the Weird, following Lovecraft’s, “The Old Ones are, the Old Ones were, the Old Ones shall be” from the *Necronomicon* in *The Dunwich Horror* in perfect rhythm and harmony. His tunnel fixation continues, with “horrible, horrible tunnels,” “abominable tunnels.” The area Gollum dwells in is well described, with the splashing of water and the slow drip from stalactites there to provide the reader with a subconscious sense of vast, echoing space they cannot perceive visually in the near impenetrable blackness Gollum’s eyes shine telescopically through. The sheen of water in the low light of Sting, the sense of directionlessness, and the threat of Gollum as underground predator loom large in the reader’s mind in this chapter. All of these, however, are only a taste of what Tolkien has ready for us in the next 3 novels.

“There are older and fouler things than orcs in the deep places of the world.” -Gandalf,  
*The Fellowship of the Ring* – J.R.R.Tolkien

In a deep place dwelt The Watcher in the Water, that tentacular spectacular that serves as a Threshold Guardian for our Fellowship on their Journeys. From its cephalopodic form to its The (Noun) (Preposition) the (Noun) “Weird” name as used by H.P. Lovecraft in so many of his stories as titles such as “The Thing at the Doorstep” and “The Shadow out of Time,” it is undeniably Weird and its challenge is mighty. I consider this a prime piece of evidence for Tolkien having either consciously or osmotically having absorbed many of the Weird tropes and exercised them so strongly in the quartet that cosmic horror became a recurrent under-flavor to

the threats posed by arch-villains of high-fantasy from there on. The classic Lovecraft description by omission of something “indescribable” is present as well, providing us with an incontrovertible example of Weird influence and a nice turn of having us use our own mind as the special effects department to create our own visual of “The Watcher.”

His use of moving air, the interplay of smells, and again the sound of moving water returns as the heroes enter the underworld having defeated The Watcher. Hellish cracks and dangerous fissures are abundant, and Balin’s tomb and its upward shaft gives us our only view of clean blue sky during the passage through Moria. The tomb is an abattoir in a miasmatic nightmare, and Weird themes are evident. The Lovecraft circle’s often chided trope of a writer holed up writing while either the threat is coming to kill them or even more laughably writing all the way to the point where the threat has obviously overpowered them shows up undiluted in the text of ‘Maybe Oin’ concerning the massacre there. Gandalf takes the Book of Mazarbul, and after the horror sinks in, alludes to travelling another seven levels down to the twenty-first hall. This again reinforces the sense of overwhelming enormity and unfathomability, literally and figuratively.

Afterward journeying down the heat increases, a Hellish and geological allusion, along with a heartbeat in the tunnels written as “Doom Doom.” (Wonderful place to visit, but I would not want to die there.) As the Fellowship moves downward, the intensity of heat and sound becomes nigh unbearable after the fight with the Uruk-Hai and something with a green scaled arm which descriptively may or may NOT be one of Sauron’s shock troops. Weird or not, it unsettles through its unknowability. As we descend, the sense of enormity and timelessness increases. Upon reaching the Hall, Gandalf and the Fellowship are awed by its barely perceivable

majesty, with Gandalf risking little light there even so as not to attract threats. As our descent continues, we encounter foul cave trolls and a foe beyond any of them, the Balrog, that Judeo-Christian demon-stand-in in a non-religious realm. The imagery is intensely hellish and the tenuousness of the bridge and the never ceasing throb of, "Doom" accentuate the thrill and suspense of the scene and those leading up. The wingspan of the Balrog, described as "wall to wall" works so well because Tolkien has already made us envision this titanic space, then uses it to make the Balrog titanic.

We exit the underworld for the rest of Fellowship after losing their mightiest and best member to the reeking pit. We go a long way without delving downward until Sam and Frodo encounter Shelob's Lair. We can tell this will be bad, as Gollum foreshadows his betrayal with "O no! They cannot find the way themselves, can they? O no indeed. There is the tunnel coming. Smeagol must go on. No rest. No food. Not yet." The smell of Torech Ungol, described as, "a stench, not the sickly odour of decay in the meads of Morgul, but a foul reek, as if filth unnamable were piled and hoarded in the dark within." As we go in, we cannot see as the audience due to the pitchy dark. Tolkien pulls out the moving air and sense of vastness imperceptible trick again. The side passages, twisted and filled with foul air offer more resistance than just stuffiness. The whole place "eats" sound, and "The breathlessness of the air was growing as they climbed; and now they seemed often in the blind dark to sense some resistance thicker than the foul air. As they thrust forward, they felt things brush against their heads, or against their hands, long tentacles, or hanging growths perhaps: they could not tell what they were. And still the stench grew." The suggestion here of growths or tentacles in the dark, if I did not know the author, would lead me to think this had been published in *Weird Tales* in its prime. What could be tentacles, underground. Lovecraft would be proud.

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We even get a reference to spidery chthonic awfulness concerning Sting's creation, as Tolkien writes, "There were webs of horror in the dark ravines of Beleriand where it was forged." Webs of horror indeed. Sounds like a Pulp magazine. "Webs of Horror Issue #22."

Tracing on in the plot, the next and final set of chthonic images are those of Mount Doom. Tolkien's personal depiction of the fires of unmaking in a crack inside a volcano beyond the door of Sammath Naur, a huge fissure that is accompanied by pulsating red light and sound "as if great engines were throbbing and labouring." How industrial. As the Frodo vs. Gollum fight ensues, the "fires below woke in anger, the red light blazed, and all the cavern was filled with a great glare and heat.," immediately before Gollum bites off Frodo's finger. The climactic burst of the destruction of the mountain and its waves, crashes, and roaring rumbles from the earth hail the destruction of the Ring and Gollum with it with a convulsive spasm in the terrain and smokes and steam from below spouting all about. In these images I find reflections of both a Catholic Hell and the battlefields of WWI, a purgation on paper by Tolkien through a Hell of his own design.

Throughout the underground imagery, the toll the wars and life took on Tolkien is clear. His use of Weird imagery allowed him to express his dark, persistent wartime trauma without resorting to using conventional imagery of Christian Hell; and preserved the existence of Middle Earth as a non-religious set of cultures. The images and ideas found in the Weird authors' works gave him quite a palette to pick from of Outsider awfulness and pervasive fear to heighten tension and fill the recesses of Middle-Earth as backdrop for his drama.

**Commented [A4]:** My inclination is to tighten up some of these asides and link them more closely to what you're saying elsewhere, but that's probably a decision best made by you! I just want to make sure the piece feels unified as opposed to scattershot.

“The Sun’s limb was lifted, an arc of fire above the margin of the world.”- *The Two Towers* - J.R.R. Tolkien

### Solar Imagery

Solar imagery is abundant in the Quartet, and especially so in the Return of the King. Tolkien paints his sun in three shades primarily, white, yellow, and red, each with distinct connotations symbolically. We shall examine these in time. Tolkien uses the sun imagery well within the bounds of Western Literary symbolism, unsurprisingly, as his pastoral, conservative nature would have it no other way.

The first solar imagery of significance is found in the pre-threshold stage of Bilbo’s Hero’s Journey, shining warmly at the edge of the Shire before he crosses the bounds to lands he has never been.

Of greater significance is the Durin’s Day rune letters and the Sun. The letters are to be read, “in with the early sun on midsummer morning.” Dwarves, being an underground race, are not great astronomers and have difficulty calculating Durin’s Day until they see the sun and moon together in the sky. The thrush knocking at sunset and the sun blazing an orange ray at the keyhole is wholesome and hopeful after travelling there, as is tradition in Western Literature. The part that struck me was that, like Easter in our world, Dwarves have a challenging time with the math of reckoning Durin’s Day.

Tom Bombadil speaks unusually when he says, “The sun won’t show her face much today.” Tolkien’s characterization of the sun as female and later the moon as male is quite unusual in Western Literature and adds to the sense of Middle-Earth as a distinctly different world than

ours. The Sun is the enemy of the Nazgul, and the noon sun is referred to as capable of their destruction.

The Two Towers solar imagery is sullen, and the passage, “The sun was up, walking among clouds and log flags of smoke, but even the sunlight was defiled” sums up his use of solar imagery in this volume. The light is wan, as hope wanes and darkness closes in. Even outside Mordor, the sun is not Sam and Frodo’s friend as they “had no welcome for that light, unfriendly it seemed revealing them in their helplessness.” The sun as spotlight during a prison break comes to mind here. Foreshadowing (forelightening?) the rise of Gondor, the sun shines broadly on the Kings of Argonath, precursor to the main uses of solar imagery in the quartet.

The Return of the King is where the sun has its true home symbolically in the quartet. Solar depictions are abundant, and the red in Tolkien’s color palette comes out often to paint scenes of violence or signal the end of an event with sundown. Like Tom Bombadil, Ghan of the Wild Men refers to the sun as “she.” The sun’s rays forelighten Denethor’s pyre, and “went down like blood” after. Eowyn’s locks are bathed in golden light in the sunrise, a saintly depiction after the defeat of the Witch-King, like an iconic halo.

Altogether added up the solar cycle of the quartet, with the Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings as separate entities, follow the same cycle. Sunny at the beginning, dark and scary without sun in the middle, and the sun returns for victory and in magnificence at the end. This motif in plot movement and pathetic fallacy to follow has now become a subconscious standard for audiences and a well-worn tool in the storyteller’s toolbox. If we made it sunny in the middle and dark at the beginning and end audiences would, without understanding why, find the tale unsatisfactory

except in the horror genre where it would be viewed as the inversion of trope it is. But following tradition, the sun rises, goes away, and comes back again. The Kings of Numenor rise, have fallen away, and now rise again through Aragorn.

“The waxing moon was riding in the West, and the shadows of the rocks were black.”

*The Two Towers* - J.R.R. Tolkien

#### Lunar Imagery

Tolkien’s moon is filled with secrets and is depicted on the as waxing much more often than on the wane. The numbers on this are a little staggering. Tolkien’s love and use of the waxing moon is strong. The word waxing is used nine times through the quartet, and waning is absent. Crescent moons appear four times, and the moon is full twice. Moon-letters in the Hobbit hold ancient secret directions, the moon is used to determine Durin’s Day on which to read them, and as in ancient Egypt, is associated with hidden knowledge. Gandalf’s statement to the Eagles in ritual response contains the beautiful, “where the sun sails and the moon walks,” as shibboleth in parting.

The moon and shapeshifting are long partners in storytelling, it is no surprise the dwarves sing of the moon at his house, and it peers in through his home’s smoke hole. We see a “sickle moon,” the “white rind of the new moon,” and the moon’s passage leads the protagonists to determine time works differently in Elvish holds in *The Fellowship of the Ring*.

The moon's light is used for effect by making other things seem eerie or alien, such as "in the moonlight the Ring of Isengard looked like a graveyard of unquiet dead," makes strange and dark shadows among the rocks and stones of the landscape.

Tolkien's use of the moon as the frame the Nazgul visually is striking but is used repeatedly. We see one silhouetted in front of the moon commonly just before attacks, and its eldritch light serves to offer a high-contrast background for the Evil of the Riders. It is an old trope, but an evocative one and it works well in Tolkien's hands, deftly used. Its light is seldom a comfort, and often cold and menacing.

Sam uses "he" for the moon's gendered pronoun, reinforcing the unusual diversion away from a Western male/female Sun/Moon dichotomy. The multiple uses of this choice still to me is not clear, except to serve as a distancer from our world.

Overall, in this quartet if you see the moon, it is not friendly. If you see something move across the moon, run immediately and hide quickly.

"Then by some shift of airs all the mist was drawn away like a veil, and there leaned up, as he climbed over the rim of the world, the Swordsman of the Sky, Menelvagor with his shining belt."- *The Fellowship of the Ring* - J.R.R. Tolkien

#### Imagery of Other Heavenly Bodies

The stars shine brightly over Middle-Earth, and a sense of sameness of the sky is at play with our world's astronomy and Middle-Earth's deliberately. Stars are eternal in literature except science fiction, and they are a source of light and beauty in Tolkien's work. The first major

stellar reference we find is that when Thorin and company camp out under the stars, safely onward to travel with the midsummer sun the next day. The sameness of the sky is made plain when Tolkien says in the Hobbit, “The stars of the Wain were already twinkling” the Wain or wagon; another picture the asterism known also as the Big Dipper has been imagined as. We have one moon, a similar circumpolar asterism, and north is north. So far comparable to our Earth. Another asterism, Remnirath, seems to answer to the Pleiades, and “Red Borgil” at the shoulder of “Menelvagor the Giant.” matches Betelgeuse at the shoulder of Orion. Menelvagor’s belt is the cincher here on knowing the skies of Middle-Earth are conspicuously like ours. We even find one pulsing red variable star in the same placement as our own Algol or “Al-Ghul,” the Demon Star.

As the Fellowship sets out, a black sky dotted with stars grows thicker and brighter as they move away from civilization. Tom Bombadil sings out to the stars, and at his house, “the stars shone through the window and the silence of heavens seemed to be round him.”

Continuing the search for the Weird in the quartet, we find that Tom, “knew the dark under the stars when it was fearless-before the Dark Lord came from Outside.” Great shades of Yog-Sothoth, we have a match. The Dark Lord is not only Not of this Middle-Earth, but he is also an Outsider dimensionally. Weird indeed. This trope has been the single most defining piece of the Mid-20<sup>th</sup> C Weird Tradition, things from Outside that want inside our dimension. It is not used flashily like HPL and his circle, but it is undeniably right there as he wrote it. The Wight’s chant is also quite Weird with “when Sun fails and Moon are dead, in the black wind stars shall die.” That is one cosmically influenced wight, and if you watch Game of Thrones, an influential one to boot.

**Commented [A5]:** That’s a fascinating moment and not exactly compatible with the Satanic imagery around Morgoth in The Silmarillion.

Stars return to their former serene beauty after this, though with beautiful phrases such as,” as he sang the white stars opened in the hard black vault above,” and Sam’s exclamation of, “Stars and Glory!” The morning star, Earendil is a sure ringer for Venus, and the motif of all things heavenly being out of man’s reach is writ large with, “the twinkle of minute stars beyond the edge of mortal sight.”

Not all is completely well in the stellar realms though. Mordor is depicted as “eating the faint blurred stars” with the rising evil and all coming from it in the Two Towers. The motif recurs in *The Return of the King* as well with Mordor’s stink-cloud “eating” the stars again. Industrial pollution blotting out the stars was very real for the English then, with the killer smog episode of London very much in the national consciousness then. Tolkien casting Mordor as an emitter of smokes and vapor that obfuscate the stars is a direct slap toward industrialization and its pitfalls.

Even killing earns stars here in Middle-Earth. Sting going into the beastly orc Shagrat is described as, “like the glitter of cruel stars in the terrible elf-countries.”

The stars are a beautiful and beneficial adjunct to the setting of Middle-Earth, used like the jewel box they are to decorate his plot and world. *The Return of the King* is sunny and fair, the middle of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* are dark and dank. The Weird tradition, while not necessarily a direct influence on the quartet, certainly crawled up from below and in from Outside to its place in the stories. Found ubiquitously though the stories, chthonic imagery is consistent with both Weird and Christian tradition, and the moon still holds his secrets in letters even Thoth may not read except by the right phase of the moon. These images work in the

background with quiet but profound effect for the audience, and as a story crafter myself, I am surely impressed at the skill with which Tolkien handles them.

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