



# Manchester Metropolitan University

**“One Ring to bring them all and in the darkness bind them” –  
Was rationalising his experience of war the unacknowledged  
purpose of Tolkien’s main works?**

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## Abstract

This dissertation examines to what extent Tolkien's wartime experiences may have influenced his later literary works, mainly focusing on *The Hobbit* and the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Many have regarded Tolkien's work as an allegory for the First and Second World Wars, an assumption that Tolkien himself fiercely denied throughout his life. This dissertation will analyse the various links between Tolkien's novels and the World Wars focusing on physical aspects such as landscape, plot and industrialisation and the more intimate links seen within various characters that are present throughout his series of novels.

To explore to what extent Tolkien's work was influenced by his experiences of war this dissertation will present information from various biographies, articles and novels that deal with a similar topic as well as sourcing direct quotations from the original books. Although Tolkien may have denied that any allegories for the World Wars were present in his novels the era in which he lived became Tolkien's unavoidable context. However, the real message portrayed throughout Tolkien's work is not that of war but, instead, of heroism and morality; of doing the right thing regardless of the situation in which you may find yourself.

## Introduction

To many the Hobbit and the Lord of the Rings is seen purely as an epic fantasy brimming with mystical creatures and resounding themes of friendship, love and hope. This is ultimately what the author wanted, a mythical land one could escape to entirely removed from real life. However, was Tolkien's Middle-Earth actually that different from our own? This body of work will evaluate the links between Tolkien's work and his experiences at war to see to what extent they may have influenced his novels through plot and characters. Since its publication many have regarded it, much to his own disgust, as an obvious allegory for the First and Second World Wars. Even his close friend and fellow novelist C.S.Lewis described the Lord of the Rings as having "the very quality of the war my generation knew. It is all here: the endless, unintelligible movement, the sinister quiet of the front, the lively vivid friendships, the background of something like despair and the merry foreground."<sup>1</sup> So how can Tolkien deny that his influences may have stemmed from his war time experiences?

Ultimately Tolkien's work provided a moral compass in a world that was left in chaos after the devastation of the World Wars. Millions were dead and Europe was left in complete ruins. For a world grasping to make sense of the turmoil of the 20<sup>th</sup> century people found resolution and comfort in this epic tale. For many, although it was marked with the same harrowing birth pangs of the modern world, they saw Tolkien's work as an escape. This story of hidden courage, friendship and love gave audiences a hope that, such as in the tales, this era of shadow was "only a passing thing... Even darkness must pass. A new day will come. And when the sun shines it will shine out the clearer."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Lewis, C.S. Garth, J. *Tolkien and the Great War*. Harper Collins. pbk (2004) p.311

<sup>2</sup> Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*. George Allen & Unwin (November 11, 1954)

## 1: War and Plot

### 1:1 World War One: Man Against Machine

World War One was the first war in which technology had developed enough to change the whole face of warfare. It quickly advanced into a war primarily focused upon the concept of man against machine. Amongst the array of new technologies, that included the flamethrower, poison gas and aircraft carriers, was probably the most devastating and terrifying development for the naive, unsuspecting soldier; the tank. One of the clearest references to the tank in Tolkien's work, is in one of his earlier stories of Middle-earth, *The Fall of Gondolin*. In the tale the dark lord Morgoth sets out to ruin the elven city of Gondolin utilising the power of huge creatures such as serpents and dragons that mercilessly destroy everything in their path as a tank does. Another apparent similarity between the machines of modern warfare and Tolkien's mythical creatures is reflected in the description of the cries of Tolkien's Nazgul, or Ringwraiths, which present an uncanny resemblance to the terrifying sounds of artillery shells as they fly through the air:

even the stout-hearted would fling themselves to the ground as the hidden menace passed over them, or they would stand, letting their weapons fall from nerveless hands while into their minds a blackness came and they thought no more of war, but only of hiding and of crawling and of death.<sup>3</sup>

Tolkien harboured immense distaste towards industrialisation which, in turn, quickened the technological development erupting into mechanised modern warfare. He first wrote of this in *The Hobbit* when describing Goblins, later known as Orcs in the *Lord of the Rings*:

now goblins are cruel, wicked, and bad hearted. They make no beautiful things, but they make many clever ones. It is not unlikely that they invented some of the machines that have since troubled the world, especially the ingenious devices for killing large numbers of people at once, for wheels and engines and explosions always delighted them, and also not working

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<sup>3</sup> Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*. George Allen & Unwin (October 20, 1955) p.97

with their own hands more than they could help; but in those days and those wild parts they had not advanced (as it is called) so far.<sup>4</sup>

Although many believe through the Orcs Tolkien was surely creating an allegory for the Germans, when one delves further into Tolkien on a more personal level, it is not the Kaiser which Tolkien is demonising but instead the power of the machine over the individual. In a letter written to his son, Christopher, while he was fighting in the Second World War, Tolkien expresses his mistrust for the advancement of technology from his war time experiences of 1914 to 1939:

your accounts, which were uncensored, distressed but did not surprise me. How it reminds me of my own experience! Only in one way was I better off: wireless was not invented. I daresay it had some potential for good, but it has in fact in the main become a weapon for the fool, the savage and the villain to afflict the minority with and to destroy thought.<sup>5</sup>

What were once exciting new technologies that were hoped to be used to improve people's everyday lives had slowly developed into deadly mechanisms perfected for the mass murder of millions. In another letter written to Christopher, Tolkien voices his disgust at the increasingly unnatural, modern world stating:

After all only the fatal weakness of all good natural things in a bad corrupt unnatural world- is that it works and has worked only when all the world is messing along in the same good old inefficient human way.<sup>6</sup>

Tolkien's distaste for industrialisation is also mirrored through his writing when the dark Lord Saruman predicts:

Together, my Lord Sauron, we shall rule this Middle-Earth. The old world will burn in the fires of industry. Forests will fall. A new order will rise. We will drive the machine of war with the

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<sup>4</sup> Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Hobbit*. George Allen & Unwin (September 21, 1937) Chapter 4, p233

<sup>5</sup> Carpenter, H. *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*. Houghton Mifflin Company Boston (1981) Letter 61, p.71/72

<sup>6</sup> Carpenter, H. *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*. Houghton Mifflin Company Boston (1981) Letter 52, p.63/64

sword and the spear and the iron fist of the orc. We have only to remove those who oppose us.<sup>7</sup>

This conflict between nature and industry is of paramount importance throughout the Hobbit and the Lord of the Rings. Through characters such as the High Elves, the Hobbits, Radagast the Brown and Treebeard, the natural world is preserved as they live at peace with nature, securing their tranquil coexistence taking only what they need to survive. This is then threatened by those who become too greedy and demand more resources requiring industry and machines to achieve this.

## 1:2 Passing of an Age

It is crucial to explore the events of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century when attempting to analyse Tolkien's work. One of the most important cultural shifts that this era was witness to was the passing of an age; similar to the passing of the age of the Elves that takes place in The Lord of the Rings which is set as the dominion of men begins. After the First World War, two new and enormously influential literary movements emerged: firstly, a style of war writing that has attained 'classic' status; secondly, modernism.<sup>8</sup> Many found it extremely difficult to come to terms with the staggering scale of destruction left behind by the war resulting in the reaction of moral chaos and unified depression. Modernist writers began emerging with dramatic and harrowing accounts of their wartime service. For the first time in history the horrors of war were not manipulated and filtered through the media but were instead represented in literary forms through bursts of raw and expressive personal experience. Of this collective revolutionary movement Tolkien appeared to play no obvious part, however, when analysing his work further it is clear he has subtly interposed his experiences within his texts that in turn allowed us to attempt to make sense of the chaos of the 20<sup>th</sup> century but also allowed us to escape from it.

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<sup>7</sup> Tolkien. J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*. George Allen & Unwin (November 11, 1954)

<sup>8</sup> Garth, J. *Tolkien and the Great War*. Harper Collins. pbk (2004) p.288

The theme 'passing of an age' may be analysed in two different ways. It can refer to the transition to adulthood which was tragically cut short for the millions of adolescent men who were slaughtered in the trenches, resulting in the untimely passing of the 'lost generation'. Alternatively, it may refer to the development of modernism and the cultural shift that took place after the First and Second World Wars as the world attempted to make sense of the carnage that had engulfed them for three decades.

Tolkien was a tremendous fan of J.M. Barrie's, 'Peter Pan.' After seeing a production he wrote, "Indescribable but shall never forget it as long as I live."<sup>9</sup> A tale of a young boy who refuses to grow up captures perfectly the theme of eternal youth, purity and innocence related to childhood which now had additional relevance for the boys on the threshold of manhood facing battle.<sup>10</sup> Of this Tolkien stated that his "taste for fairy stories was awakened by philology on the threshold of manhood and quickened to full life by war."<sup>11</sup>

Modernism saw a number of revolutionary authors, many of whom had seen active service, express their experiences through various literary forms. These included tremendously influential poets such as Robert Graves, T.S. Eliot, Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon. This more realist expression of the war meant people in Britain could fully understand what the soldiers had experienced while fighting overseas. War propaganda and its consumers were regularly demonised by soldiers of the Great War. This feeling arose from a combination of factors: knowledge that the propaganda was false, suspicion that those at home would never comprehend the reality of the trenches and bitterness that friends and heroes died while profiteers and their dupes sat in comfort and safety.<sup>12</sup> Tolkien also feared that future generations would never fully understand the horrors that soldiers experienced whilst fighting on the front line. In a letter to his son he wrote:

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<sup>9</sup> Garth, J. *Tolkien and the Great War*. Harper Collins. pbk (2004) p.75

<sup>10</sup> Garth, J. *Tolkien and the Great War*. Harper Collins. pbk (2004) p.77

<sup>11</sup> Garth, J. *Tolkien and the Great War*. Harper Collins. pbk (2004) p.38

<sup>12</sup> Garth, J. *Tolkien and the Great War*. Harper Collins. Pbk (2004) p.175



so short is human memory and so evanescent are its generations that in only about thirty years there will be few or no people with that direct experience which alone goes really to the heart. The burnt hand teaches the most about fire.<sup>13</sup>

Many shared Tolkien's desire to leave a lasting legacy of the war that could then be revisited by future generations. Poet, Rudyard Kipling composed a piece named, 'Tommy' relating to soldiers returning from war with little recognition for their efforts from the general public. He wrote:

Don't mess about the cook-room slops, but prove it to our face,  
The Widow's Uniform is not the soldier-man's disgrace.  
For it's Tommy this, an' Tommy that, an' 'Chuck him out, the brute!  
But it's 'Saviour of 'is country' when the guns begin to shoot.<sup>14</sup>

This verse emphasises the idea that in Britain people had little understanding of the dire situations in which soldiers found themselves whilst fighting overseas. Although written pre-war, in 1892, Tolkien would have been well aware of this feeling of contempt shown towards soldiers once they returned home. This feeling of isolation and insignificance may be shown directly through his own work as in *The Lord of the Rings*, Aragon says: "deeds will not be less valiant because they go unpraised..."<sup>15</sup>

A number of modernist writers during this period were more open about their personal influences when it came to the topic of war and went on to create works that have since marked a clear literary turning point resulting in the development of cultural materialism. Many regarded the real enemy during the war to be the reckless self-interest of national establishments determined to gain territory at any human cost. Of this, in his poem *Dulce et Decorum Est*, Wilfred Owen states:

If in some smothering dreams, you too could pace.  
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,  
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,..  
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest,  
To children ardent for some desperate glory, the old lie:  
*Dulce et decorum est, pro patria mori.*<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Carpenter, H. *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*. Houghton Mifflin Company Boston (1981) Letter 64, p.75/76

<sup>14</sup> Kipling, R. *Tommy* (1892)

<sup>15</sup> Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*. George Allen & Unwin (October 20, 1955) Chapter 2: The Passing of the Grey Company.

<sup>16</sup> Owen, W. Stallworthy, J. *Wilfred Owen: Poems*. Faber (2014)

Here Owen suggests that patriotism is an illusion blinding all those that believe to die in war is an honourable end. It is only when you are able to see the full extent of destruction and death which accompanies each offensive it is clear that the sacrifice of life is never worth any territorial gains. By passing on these lies to one's children one allows them to succumb to the same fate as this dead soldier. Little did Owen know when he was writing this piece that he would be dead within the year and two decades later Britain would find itself engulfed in a Second World War. This type of modernist work was in stark contrast to the public perception of war during this period as carefully constructed pro-war propaganda developed by the government was strictly enforced to keep morale within Britain high. One of Tolkien's close friends and member of the TCBS, Geoffrey Smith, wrote that he felt it was his duty to remain resilient in the face of immense adversity to ensure that future writers may get a chance to produce more inspiring works once the war had ended.

I don't care a damn if the Bosch drops half-a-dozen high explosives all around and on the top of this dugout I am writing in, so long as people go on making verses about 'Kortirion among the Trees' and such other topics – that indeed is why I am here, to keep them and preserve them...<sup>17</sup>

### 1:3 Landscape

Personally I do not think that either war... had any influence upon either plot or the manner of its unfolding. Perhaps in landscape. The Dead Marshes and the approaches to the Morannan owe something to Northern France after the Battle of the Somme.<sup>18</sup>

Landscape appears to be one aspect in which Tolkien admits his influences may have stemmed from his war time experiences. With his numerous detailed descriptions of the desolate landscape that surrounds Mordor, it is difficult to believe that one could compile such an environment entirely from imagination. Mordor is a barren wasteland, wholly uninhabitable as even the natural world has long abandoned its borders. Of its landscape Tolkien states:

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<sup>17</sup> Smith, G. Garth, J. *Tolkien and the Great War*. Harper Collins. Pbk (2004) p.117

<sup>18</sup> Tolkien, J.R.R. Garth, J. *Tolkien and the Great War*. Harper Collins. Pbk (2004) p.310

Dreadful as the Dead Marshes had been, and the arid moors of the Noman Lands, more loathsome by far was the country that the crawling day now slowly unveiled to his shrinking eyes... Here nothing lived, not even the leprous growths that feed on rottenness. The gasping pools were choked with ash and crawling muds, sickly white and grey, as if the mountains had vomited the filth of their entrails on the lands about.<sup>19</sup>

This 'white ash and crawling muds' Tolkien describes is similar to the underlying chalk bedrock which was churned up during artillery bombardment in the First World War. As the two mixed together it created a thick grey mud which made it almost impossible for soldiers to move from place to place and manoeuvre equipment let alone attempt to plan offensives on the German front.

Another striking similarity between the trenches of the Somme and the desolation of Mordor is that of the stars. Due to their positions in the trenches soldiers could often only observe the skies. In the Lord of the Rings Sam comments on the beauty of the stars:

far above the Ephel Duath in the West the night sky was still dim and pale. There, peeping among the cloud-wrack above a dark tor high in the mountains, Sam saw a white star twinkle for a while. The beauty of it smote his heart, as he looked up out of the forsaken land, and his courage returned to him. For like a shaft, clear and cold, the thought pierced him that in the end, the Shadow was only a small and passing thing: there was light and high beauty forever beyond its reach.<sup>20</sup>

This extract of Tolkien's work is poignantly similar to the account of an officer who wrote under the pseudonym Mark VII whilst fighting in the Somme:

The stars shine brilliantly and (these trenches facing North) I gaze at The Plough dipping towards High Wood. What joy it is to know that you in England and I out here at least can look upon the same beauty in the sky!.. They have become seers – images of divine stability – guardians of peace and order beyond the power of weak and petty madness... They, at least, will outlast the war and still be beautiful.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*. George Allen & Unwin (November 11, 1954) Chapter Two: 'The Passage of the Marshes.'

<sup>20</sup> Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*. George Allen & Unwin (October 20, 1955) Chapter Two: 'The Land of Shadows.'

<sup>21</sup> Mark VII, Marie Ott, N. 'Night in the Trenches,' *A Subaltern on the Somme. J.R.R. Tolkien and World War 1*. [http://www.greenbooks.theonering.net/guest/files/040102\\_02.html](http://www.greenbooks.theonering.net/guest/files/040102_02.html) (2000)

Another surprising feature of the natural world remaining resilient against the devastation of man, which has been documented in many accounts left behind by soldiers fighting on the front, is that of the sound of birdsong amongst the trenches. One of Tolkien's close friends and member of the TCBS, Rob Gilson, upon hearing the song of a nightingale wrote, "wonderful that shells and bullets shouldn't have banished them, when they are always so shy of everything human."<sup>22</sup> War poet Siegfried Sassoon also wrote that: "the perfect performance of a nightingale seemed miraculous after the desolation of the trenches."<sup>23</sup>

It is interesting to note the significance of the nightingale to bring hope to forlorn places. In Tolkien's other novel, *The Silmarillion*, the Elven princess Lúthien Tinúviel's guardian bird is the nightingale and her name 'Tinúviel' also translates as 'nightingale' or 'dusk-singer' from the Quendian *tindōmiselde*.<sup>24</sup> It may have been pure coincidence for Tolkien to have selected this bird as a sign of peace and guardianship in his work, however, it may have represented for him, as well as many other men fighting on the front grasping for any sign of normality and escape, a remaining fragment of his subconscious upon hearing the tranquil sound of birdsong amongst the chaos allowing him to forget for a moment the terrifying reality of the situation in which he found himself. This idea of the natural world remaining unfazed and outliving the chaos of men is a major theme within Tolkien's work and although he may have openly admitted that his war time experiences did have a part to play when he was creating the bleak landscapes of the Land of Shadows in the *Lord of the Rings*, it is clear to see that he was right when he stated, "an author cannot of course remain wholly unaffected by his experience."<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Gilson, R. Garth, J. *Tolkien and the Great War*. Harper Collins. Pbk (2004) p.265

<sup>23</sup> Sassoon, S. Garth, J. *Tolkien and the Great War*. Harper Collins. Pbk (2004) p.265

<sup>24</sup> Tolkien, J.R.R. Tolkien, Christopher. *The Lost Road and Other Writings (The History of Middle-Earth, Vol 5)* Mass Market Paperback (September 30, 1996)

<sup>25</sup> Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*. George Allen & Unwin (July 29, 1954) Foreward.

## 2: War and Characters

### 2:1 Samwise Gamgee: The British Soldier/Tommy

Another influence Tolkien was not shy in admitting originated from his experiences in active service, was that of the inspiration for his character Samwise Gamgee. He once wrote: "My 'Sam Gamgee' is indeed a reflection of the English soldier, of the privates and the batmen I knew in the 1914 war, and recognised as so far superior to myself."<sup>26</sup>

Tolkien was an officer in the First World War as he came from a middle class background, however, many of the enlisted men were normally from lower classes. Tolkien quickly realised he clashed with his fellow officers, relating to which he wrote, "gentleman are non-existent among the superiors and even human beings are rare indeed."<sup>27</sup> Because of this he spent much of his time with the batmen and the regular 'Tommies' for whom he quickly gained an immense admiration. He credited their loyal, optimistic personalities which kept the morale in the trenches high even in the direst of situations. Many of the traits one would now commonly recognise in relation to Hobbits owe much to the Tommies Tolkien met during his war time service. In a letter to his son, Christopher, Tolkien refers directly to this link between the soldiers and his beloved Hobbits:

Your service is, of course, as anybody with any intelligence and ears and eyes knows, a very bad one, living on the repute of a few gallant men and you are probably in a particularly bad corner of it. For we are attempting to conquer Sauron with the ring. And we shall (it seems) succeed. But the penalty is, as you know, to breed new Saurons, and slowly turn Men and Elves into Orcs. Not that in real life things are as clear cut as in a story, and we started out with a great many Orcs on our side... Well, there you are: a hobbit amongst the Urukhai. Keep up your hobbitry in heart and think that all stories feel like that when you are in them, You are inside a very great story!<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Carpenter, H. *Tolkien: A Biography*. New York: Ballantine Books (1977) p.89

<sup>27</sup> Tolkien, J.R.R. Garth, J. *Tolkien and the Great War*. Harper Collins. Pbk (2004) p.94

<sup>28</sup> Carpenter, H. *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*. Houghton Mifflin Company Boston (1981) Letter 66, p.78/79

It is interesting to analyse the relationship between Frodo and Sam because, although they have a very close friendship, it isn't entirely equal. Sam never forgets that he is there to serve and protect Frodo, which is apparent through the way he continuously addresses him as 'Mr Frodo.' This signifies that their relationship isn't particularly one of just friends but rather servant and master, or more accurately maybe, of officer and batman. Their relationship mirrors one of comrades that have been in battle together and have relied on one another for their lives. Although Sam does not fully understand Frodo and the burden of carrying the ring he remains stubbornly optimistic and takes all of Frodo's pain as his own. Sam's optimism is portrayed in *The Lord of the Rings* when he states:

I know. It's all wrong. By rights we shouldn't even be here. But we are. It's like in the great stories, Mr Frodo. The ones that really mattered. Full of darkness and danger they were. And sometimes you didn't want to know the end. Because how could the end be happy? How could the world go back to the way it was when so much bad had happened? But in the end, it's only a passing thing, this shadow. Even darkness must pass. A new day will come. And when the sun shines it will shine out the clearer. Those were the stories that stayed with you. That meant something, even if you were too small to understand why... Folk in those stories had lots of chances of turning back only they didn't. They kept goin'. Because they were holding onto something... That there's some good in the world, Mr Frodo. And it's worth fightin' for.<sup>29</sup>

It is hard to read Sam's monologue and not think of one soldier addressing another in his time of need. Tolkien writes of a similar topic regarding the struggle between good and evil in a letter to his son:

All we do know and that to large extent by direct experience, is that evil labours with vast power and perpetual success – in vain: preparing the soil for unexpected good to grow... But there is still hope that things may get better for us. And though we all need all our natural human courage and guts (the vast sum of human courage and guts is stupendous, isn't it?) and all our religious faith to face the evil that may befall us, still may we pray and hope. I do.<sup>30</sup>

Although throughout the novels Sam appears "beneath" Frodo it is also clear that Frodo doesn't regard himself as any more important and is fully aware that without Sam he would not have

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<sup>29</sup> Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*. George Allen & Unwin (November 11, 1954)

<sup>30</sup> Carpenter, H. *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*. Houghton Mifflin Company Boston (1981) Letter 64, p.75/76/77

succeeded in completing the quest. This may mirror how Tolkien felt for the batmen and Tommies he knew, the unsung heroes of the First and Second World War, whom may have not got the recognition they deserved upon returning home, however, they knew they didn't enlist for praise but instead for the comfort in knowing that their friends and colleagues didn't die in vain and that Britain would remain unspoiled for futures generations. So here we come to the basis of Tolkien's entire creation, the idea that the ordinary man can step out of an ordinary life to carry the fate of nations. That the great fight for the One Ring and the World Wars were not won by officers, or kings or even gods but instead the Hobbits, the regular Tommies. Seemingly weak and insignificant yet their loyalty and courage enabled to triumph over unthinkable evil adding truth to Lady Galadriel's phrase, "even the smallest person can change the course of history."<sup>31</sup>

## 2:2 Frodo Baggins: The Shell-shocked British Soldier

The soldiers returning from the First World War were the first to be diagnosed with a new medical condition named 'Shell-shock.' By the end of World War One the British army alone had dealt with over 80,000 cases including those of Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen.<sup>32</sup> Although this is still a staggering amount it is important to consider that this only includes the diagnosed cases, many men returned from the front appearing to show little symptoms but their condition then further developed over time. Many attempted to hide any signs of shell shock as it was regarded as utterly shameful to abandon the front line and your fellow soldiers for a condition that had no physical symptoms. Whilst recovering from shell shock in hospital Siegfried Sassoon wrote the poem 'Survivors.' It describes the feelings of shame, resentment and anger that many men felt after being met with such hostility once they had returned from the war harbouring this alien and unfamiliar condition:

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<sup>31</sup> Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*. George Allen & Unwin (July 29, 1954)

<sup>32</sup> Professor Bourke, J. *Shell Shock during World War One*.

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/wwone/shellshock\\_01.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/wwone/shellshock_01.shtml) (3/10/2011)

No doubt they'll soon get well; the shock and strain,  
Have caused their stammering, disconnected talk.  
Of course they're 'longing to go out again,'  
These boys with old, scared faces, learning to walk.  
They'll soon forget their haunted nights; their cowed,  
Subjection to the ghosts of their friends who died.  
Their dreams that drip with murder; and they'll be proud,  
Of glorious war that shatter'd their pride...  
Men who went out to battle, grim and glad;  
Children, with eyes that hate you, broken and mad.<sup>33</sup>

When analysing Tolkien's work it is clear to see that once the quest had ended, Frodo begins suffering from a variation of a similar condition. He has constant flashbacks of being wounded by Shelob's stinger, the Witch King of Agmar's blade and Gollum's teeth. He starts to shy away from the activities within the community and rarely leaves Bag End. These symptoms are eerily similar to those of soldiers returning from the First World War after being diagnosed with war neuroses. Many still harboured the pain of their own injuries or even began to get twitches and pains in muscles mirroring the injuries they had inflicted upon an enemy soldier in combat. In a letter written to Christopher, whilst he was fighting in the Second World War, Tolkien shows immense sympathy for him, as he, like many soldiers, was struggling to cope with life in active service:

I am glad that you are finding it (at times) easier to rub along. I shouldn't worry too much, if the process sometimes seems to be a declension from the highest standards (intellectual and aesthetic, at any rate, not moral)... I should say that you need a little thickening of the outer skin, if only as a protection for the more sensitive interior; and if you acquire it, it will be of permanent value in any walk of later life in this tough world (which shows no sign of softening.)<sup>34</sup>

Unlike Frodo, Merry and Pippin seem to settle back into life in the Shire with relative ease, however, they also did not experience the same terror and misfortune as Frodo and Sam because they did not directly bear the burden of the ring in the same way. Sam also finds it easier to adapt back to life in the Shire as he marries, starts a family and is elected mayor. Rather than have a negative effect, his

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<sup>33</sup> Sassoon, S. Jonson W. *The Complete War Poems of Siegfried Sassoon*. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform (June 5, 2013)

<sup>34</sup> Carpenter, H. *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*. Houghton Mifflin Company Boston (1981) Letter 78, p.90/91



experiences of the quest and the ring has enabled him to gain wisdom and further appreciation for the comforts of home. Sam's fate, in some ways, parallels that of Tolkien who returned from the war to his wife, started a family and embarked upon a successful academic and literary career. However, shown through the character of Frodo, Tolkien was not ignorant to the fact that many soldiers never fully recovered from their experiences of war and many, including two of his closest friends, did not return. In a rare direct response on being asked whether the Lord of the Rings was an allegory for the war against Nazi Germany Tolkien wrote:

One has indeed personally to come under the shadow of war to feel fully its oppression; but as the years go by it seems now often forgotten that to be caught in youth by 1914 was no less hideous an experience than to be involved in 1939 and the following years. By 1918 all but one of my close friends were dead.<sup>35</sup>

Although outside perception would suggest that Tolkien came away from the First World War seemingly unaffected, historian Hugh Brogan argues that the 'Lost Tales' and what followed were in fact "therapy for a mind wounded in war and before that by deep sorrow in childhood and young manhood."<sup>36</sup> His view is that Tolkien's work, including *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, were Tolkien's therapy for the terror of his war time experiences and in fact maybe some sorrows he experienced as a child, such as the death of his parents. Frodo takes a similar approach to deal with his harrowing experiences whilst on the quest as he continues Bilbo's book documenting his journey. Frodo's character may, in some ways, reflect Tolkien himself, returning from war and focusing on literature and writing in order for him to make sense of the horrors which he was exposed to. Frodo never fully recovers from his ordeal and his spirit is left somewhat broken by his experiences on the

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<sup>35</sup> Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring. Second Edition*. George Allen & Unwin (July 29, 1954) Forward.

<sup>36</sup> Brogan, H. Garth, J. *Tolkien and the Great War*. Harper Collins. Pbk (2004) p.293

quest. Of this he states: “there is no real going back. Though I may come to the Shire, it will not seem the same; for I shall not be the same. I am wounded with knife, sting and tooth and a long burden.”<sup>37</sup>

Of all the shell shock cases documented during the First World War only 20% of soldiers managed to return to military service.<sup>38</sup> It was an entirely debilitating condition which was not given the medical recognition it deserved during this period as many thought it was an excuse for cowardice. Unfortunately, many soldiers that survived the war and returned to Britain did not fully recover from their traumatic wartime experiences. Many had lost dear friends and comrades in battle and had coped with near starvation and squalor whilst living in the trenches. Like many soldiers who had offered their health and lives to protect Britain, Frodo had sacrificed himself in order to preserve the Shire for future generations to enjoy. In the final lines of the Lord of the Rings Frodo explains to Sam why he cannot stay and in the Shire and must leave with Gandalf to live out the rest of his days in the Grey Havens:

I have been too deeply hurt, Sam. It tried to save the Shire and it has been saved, but not for me. It must often be so, Sam, when things are in danger: someone has to give them up, lose them, so that others may keep them.<sup>39</sup>

## 2:3 Orcs: An Allegory for the Germans

It has been suggested that the Orcs and Urakhai of the Lord of the Rings and the Hobbit are symbolic of the German soldiers Tolkien encountered during his time at war. Although there are some similarities in that both the Germans and the Orcs were the aggressors in the War of the Ring and during World War One, Tolkien has often denied this claim that his Orcs represent any single race or nation. Of the Orcs he wrote in a letter to Christopher stating,

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<sup>37</sup> Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*. George Allen & Unwin (October 20, 1955) Chapter Nine: ‘The Grey Havens.’

<sup>38</sup> Professor Bourke, J. *Shell Shock during World War One*.

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/wwone/shellshock\\_01.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/wwone/shellshock_01.shtml) (3/10/2011)

<sup>39</sup> Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*. George Allen & Unwin (October 20, 1955) Chapter Nine: ‘The Grey Havens.’

Yes, I think the orcs as real a creation as anything in 'realistic' fiction: your vigorous words well describe the tribe; only in real life they are on both sides of course. For 'romance' has grown out of 'allegory' and it's wars are still yet derived from the 'inner war' of allegory in which good is on one side and various modes of badness on the other. In real (exterior) life men are on both sides: which means a motely alliance of orcs, beasts, demons, plain naturally honest men and angels. But it does make some difference who are your captains and whether they are orc-like per se!<sup>40</sup>

By analysing Tolkien's personal letters to his son it becomes clear that the Germans are not his enemy. In fact, throughout his time at university Tolkien deeply admired the Germanic culture and most of his works, including the Lord of the Rings and the Hobbit, owe much to German mythology which proved a major influence, especially, when it came to the ancient names and languages he uses. In another letter to his son, Tolkien shows great compassion and sympathy for the Germans as although they may have been misled he holds immense admiration for their ancient culture and doesn't agree with the national condemnation they face:

I can't see much distinction between our popular tone and the celebrated 'military idiots.' We knew Hitler was a vulgar and ignorant little cad, but there seem to be many cads who don't speak German and who given the same chance would show most of the same Hilterian characteristics. There was a solemn article in the local paper seriously advocating systematic exterminating the entire German nation as the only proper course after military victory: because they are rattlesnakes and don't know the difference between good and evil! (What of the writer?) The Germans have just as much right to declare the Poles and Jews exterminable vermin, subhuman, as we have to select the Germans: in other words, no right, whatever they have done, Of course there is still a difference here. The article was answered and the answer printed. The Vulgar and Ignorant Cad is not yet a boss with power; but he is a very great deal nearer to becoming one in this green and pleasant isle... You can't fight the enemy with his own ring, without turning into an enemy; but unfortunately Gandalf's wisdom seems long ago to have passed with him into the True West...<sup>41</sup>

Tolkien firmly believed there was genuine good and evil on both sides, a stance he adapted and portrayed through many of his characters and plots in his own mythological tales. This is shown in

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<sup>40</sup> Carpenter, H. *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*. Houghton Mifflin Company Boston (1981) Letter 71, p.82

<sup>41</sup> Carpenter, H. *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*. Houghton Mifflin Company Boston (1981) Letter 81, p.92/93/94

the Lord of the Rings when Sam witnesses the death of a Haradrim Solider. In a moment of reflection he contemplates:

he was glad he could not see the dead face. He wondered what the man's name was and where he came from; and if he was really evil of heart, or what lies or threats had led him on the long march from his home; and if he would not really rather have stayed there in peace. War will make corpses of us all.<sup>42</sup>

Rather than the Orcs, the Haradrim seem the most likely candidates of Tolkien's characters to have been influenced by the Germans and their global situation during the First World War. As citizens of a powerful and cultured nation they are misled and corrupted by Sauron who manipulates them into fighting for him reigniting an old feud between themselves and Gondor.

### 2:4 TCBS: The Precursor of the Fellowship

The bond of friendship, love and loyalty between the members of the Fellowship of the Ring is the central thread throughout the entire trilogy as their reliance on one another is crucial to completing the quest and determining the fate of the ring. As a band of unlikely counterparts bound together by an obligation to complete the crucial quest of defeating great evil, this may be seen as a reflection of the situation Tolkien faced in 1917 when he enlisted with men from all over Britain and from different classes to fight together in solidarity against the impending shadow of Fascism. Similarly to this fictional fellowship, Tolkien had his own through his childhood friends and fellow members of their "Tea Club, Barrovian Society"; Geoffrey Smith, Christopher Wiseman and Robert Gilson. After meeting at school, the TCBS regularly kept in touch arranging various meetings during their time at university. Like Tolkien, the members of the TCBS were all keen academics who greatly believed that among them they had the ability to change the world. As Smith stated in a letter to Tolkien, he

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<sup>42</sup> Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*. George Allen & Unwin (November 11, 1954) Chapter 4: 'Of Herbs and Stewed Rabbit.'

believed their role would be “to drive from life, letters, the stage and society that dabbling in and hankering after the unpleasant sides and incidents in tastes in Oxford, London and the world... to re-establish sanity, cleanliness and the love of real and true beauty in everyone’s breast.”<sup>43</sup> They were forced, however, to put their academic aspirations on hold as the outbreak of the First World War in 1917 required every able bodied man to enlist for service.

Although the fellowship portrayed throughout the Lord of the Rings consisted of nine members, rather than the four comrades of the TCBS, within that fellowship was the intimate friendship shown between the four Hobbits which may mirror Tolkien’s childhood friends. Expanding this theory, if the four Hobbits signified the TCBS then perhaps the rest of the fellowship could symbolise the other soldiers they fought alongside in their regiments during World War One.

The TCBS kept in touch constantly throughout the war. Within various letters written to one another they expressed their hopelessness, joy, optimism, anger, sorrow, distress but above all the fact they still knew they were members of the TCBS, which, gave them immense hope to continue so the ‘immortal four’ would have a chance to meet once again. This optimism is shown through a letter Rob Gilson wrote to Tolkien: “My whole endurance of the present is founded on the remembrance that I am a TCBSite... But another conclave would be the most perfect bliss imaginable.”<sup>44</sup> A similar range of emotions are shown throughout the Lord of the Rings with various members of the fellowship often feeling disheartened and hopeless at the prospect of the quest ahead of them. Only through the support of their companions in the fellowship and the knowledge that they are fighting for a worthy cause are they uplifted to continue on the quest.

Tolkien may have also learnt a great deal about grief and sorrow during this period as, despite their unwavering optimism, he lost two of his dear friends and fellow members of the TCBS, Geoffrey Smith and Robert Gilson during the war. His attitude towards loss may be mirrored in the death of

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<sup>43</sup> Smith, G.B. Garth, J. *Tolkien and the Great War*. Harper Collins. Pbk (2004) p.105

<sup>44</sup> Tolkien, J.R.R. Garth, J. *Tolkien and the Great War*. Harper Collins. Pbk (2004) p.180/181

various characters in his works and in the reactions of the other members of the fellowship that were left behind to continue the quest in their absence. Of the deaths of his two friends Tolkien wrote to the only other remaining TCBS member, Christopher Wiseman, stating: “the TCBS may have been all we dreamt – and its work in the end be done by three or two or one survivor. To this I now pin my hopes...”<sup>45</sup> Although the war claimed the lives of two of his dearest friends and the lives of millions of other men leaving Europe in a state of ruin, both Tolkien and the fellow members of the TCBS were aware that it also may trigger creative ideas that could inspire them in their future works. Of this Gilson wrote: “I have faith that the TCBS may for itself – never for the world – thank God for this war some day.”<sup>46</sup>

## 2:5 Elves and Eternal Youth: The Denial of Death

Amongst other things the war heightened Tolkien’s perception of mortality. This may be shown through characters such as the High Elves, magical beings that inhabit eternal youth and beauty. It is understandable why the theme of mortality and perpetual youth began to interest Tolkien during this period, therefore, making it such a significant motif throughout his later work. Two of his close friends died had in combat during the First World War and he had witnessed the loss of many more lives in his battalion. In a letter to his wife, Edith, Tolkien recalls his days in combat training as he states, “these grey days wasted in wearily going over, over and over again, the dreary topics, the dull backwaters of the art of killing are not enjoyable.”<sup>47</sup> As a soldier Tolkien was aware that death was part of his duty to his Queen and country, however, when the first of his close childhood friends died at war he and his fellow TCBS members were plunged into mourning. Of Rob Gilson’s death, Smith wrote to Tolkien;

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<sup>45</sup> Tolkien, J.R.R. Garth, J. *Tolkien and the Great War*. Harper Collins. Pbk (2004) p.137

<sup>46</sup> R, Gilson. Garth, J. *Tolkien and the Great War*. Harper Collins. Pbk (2004) p.137

<sup>47</sup> Tolkien, J.R.R. Garth, J. *Tolkien and the Great War*. Harper Collins. Pbk (2004) p.104

Such a life, even though it's accomplishment was nothing, even though it passed almost unseen, even though no guiding principle ruled it and marked it out, even though doubt and misgiving, storm and stress raged always in his developing mind, is in the sight of God and all men worthy of the name of a value inconceivably higher than those of the idle chatterers who fill the world with noise and leave it no emptier for their loss. Because the nobility of character and action once sent into the world does not return again empty.<sup>48</sup>

These experiences of sorrow and anguish whilst he was a soldier may have influenced many of his wise, reflective monologues concerning death in his works. One of the most significant of these is Gandalf's quote while addressing Frodo in which, he states;

Many that live deserve death. Some that die deserve life. Can you give it to them, Frodo? Do not be too eager to deal out death and judgement. Even the very wise cannot see all ends.<sup>49</sup>

Tolkien's Elves may recall the lost generation of young soldiers that fell in the fields of northern France, cheated of the chance to grow old and return to their families. This reflects a passage from *The Hobbit* that describes a battlefield after combat stating, "among the goblin dead lay many men and many dwarves, and many a fair elf that should have lived yet long ages merrily in the wood."<sup>50</sup> The theme of immortality was one often discussed between him and his fellow members of the TCBS. All knew of the precarious situation in which they found themselves but none accepted that death would bring an end to their friendship. Of this Smith wrote to Tolkien stating,

If I am scuppered tonight there will still be left a member of the great TCBS to voice what I dreamed and what we all agreed upon. For the death of one of its members cannot, I am determined, dissolve the TCBS. Death is so close to me now that I feel – and I am sure you feel and all three other heroes feel how impuissant it is. Death can make us loathsome and helpless as individuals but it cannot put an end to the immortal four!<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Smith, G.B. Garth, J. *Tolkien and the Great War*. Harper Collins. Pbk (2004) p.174

<sup>49</sup> Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring. Second Edition*. George Allen & Unwin (July 29, 1954) Chapter Two: 'The Shadow of the Past.'

<sup>50</sup> Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Hobbit*. George Allen & Unwin (September 21, 1937) p.192

<sup>51</sup> Smith, G.B. Garth, J. *Tolkien and the Great War*. Harper Collins. Pbk (2004) p.118/119

War memoirist, Charles Douie, saw the tale of Peter Pan as a kind of prophecy for the World War One soldiers. In his novel, *The Weary Road*, he asks:

Did no feeling of apprehension darken the mind of any mother in that audience which first heard, 'My sons shall die as gentlemen;' did no foreboding enter into the exultation with which those sons first heard youth's defiance of death – 'To die would be an awfully big adventure'?'<sup>52</sup>

Although wracked with sadness at his friends passing during the war Tolkien managed to honour their memories by creating a literary reality out of their TCBSian dreams. Tolkien's approach to his own deep sorrow may be mirrored in the *Lord of the Rings* when Gandalf lifts Frodo's hopes and reassures him of his part in the quest: "so do all who live to see such times, but that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given to us."<sup>53</sup> Tolkien used this appreciation of his own life, heightened by his experiences in war, by creating what is now considered one of the most popular trilogies of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, he never forgot the lives of the young soldiers that didn't come home, especially those of his childhood friends, Robert Gilson and Geoffrey Smith, and in the words of his children the loss of so many friends remained for him "a lifelong sadness."<sup>54</sup>

## 2:6 Hobbits: Unlikely Heroes

The ultimate tales of the anti-hero, the *Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* deliberately focus on the transition of the cautious from introverted to unlikely but epic heroes through the ongoing mythical quest to destroy the One Ring. Tolkien had a clear idea of what he wanted his protagonist to embody and although much of the story 'grew in the telling' one thing that did not differ was his

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<sup>52</sup> Garth, J. *Tolkien and the Great War*. Harper Collins. Pbk (2004) p.298

<sup>53</sup> Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring. Second Edition*. George Allen & Unwin (July 29, 1954)

<sup>54</sup> Garth, J. *Tolkien and the Great War*. Harper Collins. Pbk (2004) p.250



notion of the house proud and conservative Hobbits. This theme that the seemingly parochial and physically weak may exceed all expectation to become the saviour of many may owe its origins to the role of the common soldier during the World Wars. As Lord Elrond states in the Lord of the Rings: “such is oft the course of deeds that move the wheels of the world: small hands do them because they must, while the eyes of the great are elsewhere.”<sup>55</sup>

Little is expected of both Bilbo and Frodo throughout the trilogy and on many occasions their ability to successfully complete each quest is questioned. However, both defy these assumptions and succeed in becoming the saviours of Middle-Earth. Although Hobbits may seem weak it is their dependable loyalty and unwavering thirst for justice that ensures their success. These traits of a Hobbits character can be seen through a monologue between Frodo and Meriadoc Brandybuck in which Merry states:

you can trust us to stick to you through thick and thin – to the bitter end. And you can trust us to keep any secrets of yours – closer than you yourself keep it. But you cannot trust us to let you face trouble alone and go off without a word. We are your friends, Frodo. Anyway: there it is... We are horribly afraid but we are coming with you; or following you like hounds.<sup>56</sup>

Both Bilbo and Frodo were involuntarily pressured to embark on each quest under the influence of Gandalf. This may mirror the thousands of young men that were forced to enlist for war. In this situation it is a case of obligation to their friends and the greater good that is the driving force behind each quest. The Hobbits are not in control of their own destiny whilst fighting Smaug and Sauron; they are just carrying out their duty similar to that of the soldiers in trench warfare. The Hobbits ultimately participate in the quests to protect the things they love, above all else their home: The Shire. This appreciation for the little things is one of the only positive things Tolkien could take from war as he writes to his son Christopher,

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<sup>55</sup> Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring. Second Edition.* George Allen & Unwin (July 29, 1954) Chapter Three: ‘The Ring Goes South.’

<sup>56</sup> Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring. Second Edition.* George Allen & Unwin (July 29, 1954)

we were born in a dark age out of due time (for us.) But there is this comfort: otherwise we should not know, or so much love, what we do love. I imagine the fish out of water is the only fish to have an inkling of water. Also, we have still small swords to use.<sup>57</sup>

Tolkien was wary of self-appointed authoritarians as shown through a letter he wrote to Christopher: “anyway, the proper study of Man is anything but Man; and the most improper job of any man... is bossing other men. Not one in a million is fit for it, least of all those who seek the opportunity.”<sup>58</sup> This may mirror his relationships with his fellow officers whilst he was fighting on the Western. Although Hobbits are not natural leaders as they are humble and shy beings, Tolkien deliberately created his protagonists to inhabit these traits in order to show that success is not always measured through physical strength but instead through compassion for others and pure, honest motives.

## Conclusion

“Fantasy is escapist and that is its glory. If a soldier is imprisoned by the enemy, don’t we consider it his duty to escape?”<sup>59</sup> For Tolkien the creation of the Hobbit and the Lord of the Rings was very much a personal journey whether it directly related to his experiences at war or not. He had witnessed great loss and destruction on a harrowing scale. Like many who have been captivated by his novels since, he craved an escape from the “suffering all over the world with millions parted, fretting, wasting in unprofitable days – quite apart from torture, pain, death, bereavement, injustice.”<sup>60</sup> During this period, escapism and the genre of fantasy was not generally regarded as a noble, academic outlet. Tolkien entirely disagreed with this stating, “escape is evidently as a rule

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<sup>57</sup> Carpenter, H. *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*. Houghton Mifflin Company Boston (1981) Letter 52, p.63/64

<sup>58</sup> Carpenter, H. *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*. Houghton Mifflin Company Boston (1981) Letter 52, p.63/64

<sup>59</sup> Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Tolkien Reader*. Ballantine Books (1966)

<sup>60</sup> Carpenter, H. *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*. Houghton Mifflin Company Boston (1981) Letter 64, p.74/75

very practical and, may even be heroic.”<sup>61</sup> He saw it as an essential tool enabling us to tolerate the bleak and relentless onslaught of an ever-darkening world. By researching Tolkien’s life in conjunction with the themes portrayed in his novels it is clear to see why he so fiercely denied any accusations that the Lord of the Rings was an allegory for the either of the World Wars. Because of the era in which he lived the horror of modern warfare was Tolkien’s unavoidable context, but his works carry a much more universal message, that true heroism is simply doing the right thing regardless of the situation in which you may find yourself.

His work was not just a fantastical trilogy for him, it was his legacy: the legacy he envisioned with his fellow members of the TCBS when he was just a student at university. Therefore, it was desperately personal to him and, as promised many years before, it carried with it the hopes and dreams of the entire TCBS. For him, having his life’s work defined and tainted as merely a personal psychological exorcism of one of the most horrific periods of human history was undoubtedly insulting. Through *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* Tolkien is honouring his lost friends by creating an imaginary world in which all the positive traits of humanity are rewarded. Although this sadly may not have been the case for them, through his epic tale of the ring Tolkien managed to fulfil the wishes of Smith and the TCBS by creating a timeless trilogy that has since reached audiences of millions... “Yes publish – make haste, before you come out to this orgy of death and cruelty... May God bless you and may you say the things I have tried to say long after I am not there to say them.”<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Tolkien, J.R.R. *On Fairy-Stories*. Oxford University Press (1947)

<sup>62</sup> Smith, G.B. Garth, J. *Tolkien and the Great War*. Harper Collins. Pbk (2004) p.118/119

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