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Humanities Core 27042

06/08/14

Tolkien and the Great Wars: the First World War and the War of the Ring

Since its publication in 1954, *The Lord of the Ring*s by J.R.R. Tolkien has been lauded by readers and critics alike as one of the greatest works of fiction of all time, with its universal themes of undying friendship and loyalty, the perseverance of goodness over evil, and mankind's struggle with the gruesome reality of war and death. Its ability to resonate with readers of any age, background, and generation is a direct product of Tolkien's careful transformation of his military service during WWI into a comprehensive commentary on man's obsession with war and its burdens on the natural world. Instead of crafting a direct parallel to WWI or any other of the modern wars of his time, Tolkien creates the ultimate 'meta-war' that describes how war imposes itself upon every aspect of life, from its belligerents, to civilians, and to the environment. While not drawing a direct comparison between the War of the Ring and WWI, Tolkien acknowledges the influence of WWI upon his later writings, as he recounts, "An author cannot remain wholly unaffected by his experience, but the ways in which a story-germ uses the soil of experience are extremely complex.. 1914 was no less hideous an experience than to be involved in 1939." (Tolkien, Preface) The impact of Tolkien's service at the Battle of the Somme persisted throughout his entire lifetime, as he had been a witness to the demise of his dear friends and comrades amongst the hundreds of thousands who had perished in the war's bloodiest battle. Though Tolkien had survived and saw the war draw to a close, the memory of

the First World War became a permanent influence on his thoughts and opinions on the realm of war and its consequences, and in turn shaped his detailed crafting of *The Lord of the Rings,* with WWI appearing in the landscapes, characters, and events of Middle Earth. Through this reinterpretation of war, Tolkien offers a symbolic transformation of the First World War that argues against the destructive sentiments of war, stating that they only encourage violence against humanity and nature and only leave the welfare of the world in jeopardy.

Tolkien's description of the Dead Marshes harken to the muddy and barren battlegrounds of the Battle of the Somme through its depiction of corpses lying in the waters created by earth-shattering war. *The Passage of the Marshes* is a pivotal chapter in *The Ring Goes East*, in which Sam, Frodo, and Gollum wander through the Dead Marshes en route to the Black Gate of Mordor in their quest to destroy the One Ring. The Dead Marshes was once the site of an ancient battle between Men, Orcs, and Elves, and had since developed into a boggy swamp overridden by weeds, thick mists, and murky pools of dark water. Tolkien himself acknowledged the influence of the First World War upon his crafting of landscapes, stating that "the Dead Marshes and the approaches to Morannon owe something to Northern France after the Battle of the Somme." (Tolkien, 226) He describes the Marshes as an "endless network of pools and winding half-strangled water-courses.. It was dreary and wearisome. Cold clammy winter still held sway in this forsaken country. The only green was the scum of livid weed on the dark greasy surfaces of the sullen waters." (612) The imagery of the festering marshes owes to the physical state of the battlegrounds on the Somme, where the heavy summer rains would create shallow puddles of mud in the blasted craters and flood the labyrinth of trenches. (Ball, Dickson) The haunted nature of the Dead Marshes, with its thick fogs and heavy stench of the rotting dead, is not

attributed to its organic environment, but to the horrors of wars past, much like the chemical mists of WWI veiled the battlegrounds on the Western Front. The Dead Marshes are riddled with dead corpses in its waters, "[lying] in all the pools, pale faces, deep deep under the dark water. Grim faces and evil, and noble faces and sad. Many faces proud and fair, and weeds in their silver hair. But all foul, all rotting, all dead. A fell light is in them." (614) With over one million casualties suffered in the Battle of the Somme, Tolkien was a witness to the indiscriminate brutality of war and its unforgiving nature to deprive the existence of men and instead grant them with eternal death in the cold mud and barbed wire. Corpses would litter the battlegrounds, soaking in the shallow puddles of water and the barren dirt amongst their departed comrades and enemies alike. Fellow soldier at the Somme Captain Dickinson retells, "There in that nightmare of mud and wire, by the deathly light of occasional star-shells from over the way, we learned the landmarks to guide us: 'Left by the coil of wire, right by French legs.'"(Dickson) The only visible memory of the soldiers left in the war were their dead bodies, mutilated and stripped of their dignities as enemy and patriot both succumbed to their harsh fates. Tolkien describes the dead warriors as "candles of corpses" (613) and "only shapes to see, perhaps, not to touch," (614) casting eerie lights over the marsh. He argues that the dead are only distant remnants of what they once were, like faint glowing candles that replace the once-roaring fires of the human spirit. We can never reclaim the memory of the dead, nor restore them to their former glory. War leaves only the limp bodies of the fallen and the guilt of their untimely departures, whilst infecting the earth below the rotting corpses and spreading the fell sentiments of battle into the environment. The earth cannot recover from such violation against nature and consequently bears a lasting visible mark in memory of the fallen.

Tolkien's illustration of the desolation of Mordor before the Black Gate is another reinterpretation of the Battle of the Somme, with its resemblance to the broken and chalky terrain of No Man's Land between the belligerents' trenches. As the trio walk beside the edges of Mordor, Tolkien describes,

"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 upon the lands about. High mounds of crushed and powdered rock, great cones of earth fire-blasted and poison-stained stood like an obscene graveyard in endless rows." (617)

The jagged imagery of Mordor owes to the artillery bombardments upon No Man's Land that smote the ground and revealed the chalk bedrock beneath, turning the battlefields white and grey with ash. The ash can still be seen in white bands amongst the green fields surrounding the river, imprinting a permanent mark of the war upon the environment. (Farrar-Hockley) His illustration inspires notions of violent destruction of land, slowly dying and suffering, deprived of air as it is smothered by the contamination of Mordor. The earth becomes itself a body and a character of Middle Earth, a literal place of death in the face of battle, choking on the ashes and corpses of war. Through the earth's wavering resistance to the besmirching of warmongering, Tolkien argues that the practices of war are unnatural treasons against the environment and all living things. It deprives the natural world the opportunity of recovery and growth and in turn leaves a permanent physical mark for years to come, as the chalk of the Somme did in Northern France. The war burdens the lands with pollution and desecration, killing them just as it killed the thousands of soldiers that were executing its evils.

Tolkien's reflection of the mechanical weapons of WWI is demonstrated through his

portrayal of Saruman's incessant utilization of technology in an effort to garner influence and power over the free peoples of Middle Earth, and in turn conveys strong technophobic sentiments as a tool of malicious evil. WWI is known as the War of Invention, as it was the last war that utilized the strength of horses and the first to introduce the modern innovations of mass destruction; integrating airplanes, tanks, flame throwers, chemical toxins, and the machine gun into the realm of warfare. Technology was a physical manifestation of power, with both the German and British sides racing to acquire the strongest of arms in order to secure their victories. *The Lord of the Rings* features this same attitude in the forces of Saruman, whose relentless desire for victory results in monstrous innovations that mechanize the administration of death on a large scale. Saruman sees technology as the key to power and begins to tamper with metal and fire in order to forge forceful weapons. Saruman is a mere reflection of the conventional opinion concerning the acquisition of power through technology during WWI, as "the war was an insatiable client, never satisfied.. The orders were to succeed at all costs.. [The war] mobilized invention, intelligence, and daring: imagination and cold reason," (Le Corbusier) with industrialization as the key effort taken in order to rise to prominence as a true and commanding power. Saruman himself was not corrupted for the majority of his time in Isengard, but was eager to obtain strength and control through any method possible, and his morality in turn gave way to purely mechanical reason and logistics. The Tower of Orthanc itself bears the meaning, 'cunning mind', and eventually becomes the stronghold of vigilant mechanization in the West. Saruman's drastic change is coined "The Treason of Isengard," as Saruman betrays his duty as a Wizard and defiled the ancient trees of Fangorn in order to succeed in his efforts. Both belligerents of WWI suffered the same fate as Saruman, tempted by the spoils of war and glory

to be garnered, and were driven to industrialize at incredible rates in order to realize their war goals. Treebeard, Tolkien's representative of the environment and chief shepherd of trees, recounts Saruman's meddling with the unnatural, stating, "[Saruman] is plotting to become a power. He has a mind of metal and wheels and does not care for growing things, except as far as they serve him at the moment." This description of Saruman's intentions to desolate Fangorn Forest is reminiscent of the destruction Tolkien saw in his trials at the battlegrounds of the Somme, which had once been dominated by lush fields of grass and tree-lined avenues. (Farrar-Hockley) Two million acres of forest had been violated by the presence of war, torn apart by bullets and bombs or leveled in order to fuel the war effort. (Lanier-Graham) Through his juxtaposition of industry being incongruous with the earth, Tolkien argues that technology, the language in which war is spoken, is the manifestation of the treason against the existence of all living things.

The theme of technology as an instrument of malicious destruction is continued throughout the novel and ultimately manifests itself in the character of Sauron, the true Lord of the Rings, as he harnesses technology and innovation as his sources of power and aims his war machines at the last stronghold of Men, Minas Tirith. Tolkien artfully assigns Sauron's forces as those who build deep trenches of fire and introduce massive iron weapons. At the Siege of Gondor, Sauron's "orcs [dig], digging lines of deep trenches in a huge ring.. and as the trenches were made each was filled with fire, though how it was kindled or fed, by art or devilry, none could see." (95) The trenches are synonymous with the dark craft of evil, physical manifestations of corrupted reason and the impending doom of all men, trapped behind enclosing walls of dirt and flame. Flamethrowers were used in the trenches by both German and

British forces during the Battle of the Somme, creating terror and panic in the hearts of running men in the smokey and suffocated ground. (Hartcup) The fires in the trenches create a tangible inferno amongst the realm of the living; a literal hell dominated by vice and evil intention with the aims to administer the extinction of the enemy. The fires of Mordor persist in their rampage as bombardments set the walls of Minas Tirith blazing, destroying the last remnant of human strength as they spread throughout the lower circle of the city. The flames threaten the existence of men in Gondor as they did in the First World War, burning the body and the memory of the trapped individuals, doomed to die in the midst of utter despair. Tolkien also presents a reinterpretation of the tanks of WWI at the Siege of Gondor through his description of Grond, Mordor's imposing battering ram that penetrates through the stalwart gates of Minas Tirith. Tolkien illustrates Grond with a looming tone, as Grond's impending destruction arrives menacingly at a sluggard yet assured pace, recounting,

> Great engines crawled across the field; and in the midst was a huge ram, swinging on its
> mighty chains. Long had it been forging in the dark smithies of Mordor, and its hideous
> head, founded of black steel, was shaped in the likeness of a ravening wolf; on it spells
> of ruin lay. Grond they named it, in memory of the Hammer of the Underworld of old.
> Great beasts drew it, orcs surrounded it, and behind walked mountain-trolls to wield
> it." (102)

Grond is the tool of Mordor that pierces the fortification and sanctity of Gondor, penetrating through the noble wills of men as it secures the undoing of hope, culture, and history integral to the human existence. Tanks brought upon the same malicious destruction upon the forces in the First World War, terrific in their capacity to extinguish the defenses and fronts of the enemy as

they obliterated thousands of men in a swift second. Tolkien was no stranger to the sight of the

monstrous tanks, as they roamed the grounds of the Somme in efforts to penetrate the enemy

trenches. They were hulking, dense masses that dwarfed horses and men alike, and grumbled

noisily on their slow approach to the battle lines. They were the representative of the innovation

of modern warfare, harnessing the desire to destroy and to smite through the prowess of one's

ability. Tolkien uses violent imagery to describe Grond, conjuring notions of pounded metal and

forged atrocities, in order to assert the savage nature of technology, only capable of

administering harm and suffering instead of encouraging peaceful progress.

Tolkien's depiction of the hobbits' return to a corrupted Shire is a reflection of WWI's

grasp upon the home front, unable to escape the realities of war and ultimately suffers the loss of

its cultural and environmental identity. The Scouring of the Shire is the penultimate chapter of

The Lord of the Rings, detailing the hobbits' bittersweet homecoming after the defilement of the

Shire by Saruman, who had set his sights on conquering the Shire after being ousted from

Isengard as a result of its liberation by the Ents. He had spread the same methods of

industrialization used in Isengard to the Shire, felling and burning the bountiful trees and

constructing grotesque and gloomy buildings, depriving the Shire of its true character and

identity. Saruman had spoiled the Shire with his aims of fueling the war whilst the hobbits set

out to protect it from Sauron's domineering regime. The soldiers of WWI that had fought and

survived the war were met with the same fate, returning to a warped home that had endured its

own struggles. Tolkien argues that there are various manifestations of evil that are not simply

limited to the body of the enemy, singular in purpose and form. Instead, the war itself is the true

foe, with its insatiable demands for resources from the domestic sphere. Tolkien argues that this

form of war is the most detrimental of all, being far "worse than Mordor... [coming] home to you; because it is home, and you remember it before it was ruined." (294) The war is fought on behalf of the country's welfare and interest, and thus it must pay the price by sacrificing its own sanctity and stability. Britain had suffered similarly during the war; with its citizens partaking in any opportunity to assist their country in the war effort; instituting energy-saving blackouts, working in munitions factories, suffering shortages of food, and sacrificing half of the country's forests. (Cooksley, Lanier-Graham) This world experienced a different kind of war away from the battle lines, but was hindered by the incalculable needs required to support the British Armed Forces. They saw no Germans set foot on their soil or thousands of men lying dead in the battlefields. They instead saw the hidden face of the war that stripped the country of its men, material, and freedoms. Nothing was taken for granted in the society of WWI, with a new mentality of "frugality, economy and thrift" (Spooner) taking shape in the midst of the scarcity of resource and opportunity. Like the British, the Hobbits of the Shire are not impervious to the conflicts of Middle Earth, unable to sustain their pre-war culture and environment in the face of the war's demands. Driven by the war, industrialization quickly sweeps the Shire and dominates the once lush lands filled with trees, replacing them with smoke and metal, as Tolkien recounts;

> "[The Hobbits] saw the new mill in all its frowning and dirty ugliness: a great brick building straddling the stream, which it fouled.. The Old Grange on the west side had been knocked down, and its place taken by rows of tarred sheds. All the chestnuts were gone. The banks and hedgerows were broken." (296)

Despite Saruman's eventual downfall, his actions leave a lasting mark on the land and the people of the Shire, adversely affected by the introduction of technology into their peaceful society.

Tolkien argues that war, with its monstrous and polluting machines, is an all-encapsulating entity that is only capable of fostering the destruction of the values and wealth of every community ensnared in its grasp. The encompassing damage left by war does not easily fade, requiring a considerable amount of time and effort for the land to rid itself of "the scars of war, felled woods, and bulldozed fields," cleared of the memories of strife and suffering. (81) Sam and the other hobbits begin to rebuild the Shire by planting young saplings and reconstructing hobbit holes in an attempt to restore it to its former glory, but the signs of industrialization survive in the slow growth in the trees and the defiled waters for many generations to come. The society's transition into a post-war world demands a reevaluation of reality from the people, needing to realize the incongruity of their past and future after witnessing such violations of their liberties and abilities.

Frodo's incapability to readjust into a post-war society and his eventual departure to the Undying Lands serve as Tolkien's transformation of his personal losses that he had suffered and burdened during the Battle of the Somme, describing the deep and lasting effect that war imprints on every individual it involves. After succeeding in his quest to destroy the One Ring, Frodo ultimately returns to the Shire as a deeply changed person as a result of witnessing the repercussions of war and the struggle for power, wounded physically and psychologically after suffering through ceaseless hunger, the death of his dear comrades, and crippling pain. After being pierced by the Morgul-blade of the Witchking of Angmar early in his journey to Mordor, Frodo is left with a palpable mark of the war, serving as a constant reminder of the personal loss that he was doomed to endure. The pain left by the blade persists throughout Frodo's entire life and forces him to shy away from the rest of his uncomprehending society. Frodo cannot readjust

to the peaceful life he had once had after bearing the burden of war around his neck, becoming

"a hobbit broken by a burden of fear and horror" (151) as a result of not only suffering his own

personal loss, but realizing the extent of all wars and their malice, denying the earth and its

inhabitants of its prosperity and peace. Frodo's anguish is a transformation of Tolkien's own

burden of the memory of his fallen friends Rob Gilson and G.B. Smith in the Battle of the

Somme; their untimely deaths depriving of their intelligence, agency, and opportunity. Despite

escaping the horrors of war relatively unscathed, save for his temporary trench fever, Tolkien

now had to continue his journey in life in a post-war society with the lasting images of the sheer

destruction of war that stole the lives of one million men on the desolate battlefield of the

Somme. He could never truly 'win' the war after witnessing such devastating loss, despite his

country's eventual triumph over its foes, as he was left with the permanent memory of the deep

suffering of men, admitting in one of his letters, "I think that 'Victors' can never enjoy 'victory' -

not in the terms that they envisaged; and in so far as they fought for something *to be enjoyed by*

themselves (whether acquisition or mere preservation) the less satisfactory will 'victory'

seem." (181) No sense triumph can console the hearts of men of their despair nor repair the

physical and psychological damages of gruesome war after gazing upon the tangible

manifestation of death before their eyes. At least eighty thousand Britons suffered from

psychological trauma after the war, subjected to chronic mental breakdowns without any

guaranteed cure. (Heck) Frodo and Tolkien both find themselves in a liminal state after their

experiences in war, away from the chaos of the battlefield but unable to assimilate into a world

of calm. There is no reconciliation between the domains of war and peace, leaving those

belonging to neither with no sense of respite from the memories of war nor the capability to

reclaim their former lives. Frodo must depart for the Undying Lands, for it is the only realm that can exist without the troubles of death and the strife that accompanies it. Death is what haunts Frodo to his end, tormenting him of the harsh memories of war until his permanent departure from his world, just as it had done to Tolkien. Tolkien had stated that the "real theme" of *The Lord of the Rings* is "about something permanent and difficult: Death and Immortality." (186) The nature of death and our denial of immortality is the crux to all of war's strife; it is not so much the actions we partake in war that truly haunt us, but the memory of the destruction and death that follow them. We cannot forget the lives of those who had fallen, and are thus burdened with the memory of the dead and the guilt of receiving the gift of life.

By reflecting upon his experiences in the First World War, from witnessing the atrocities at the Somme and readjusting into a post-war society, Tolkien is able to create a symbolic reinterpretation of the war in an other-worldly setting, implementing the universal themes of all wars into an parallel reality of humanity. At its core, *The Lord of the Rings* is a work of truth, detailing the human experience of war despite its fantastical genre, with its debates of good versus evil, technology versus nature, and whether the consequences of war can be justified. As Tolkien states, "All legends and myths are largely made of truth," (131) crafted in an attempt to provide a meaning behind the intricate workings of war, and Tolkien's works are no different. Tolkien transforms the horrors of his time into tangible elements like characters and landscapes in *The Lord of the Rings* in order to present the realities of death and strife in an understandable setting for each reader to comprehend and digest. War itself is the true enemy of the people and their societies; robbing the lives of thousands, destroying the natural world, and creating a reality in which liberties are sacrificed in order to satisfy its demands.

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Acknowledgements

I would first and foremost like to acknowledge Dr. Fogli for her tremendous support over the course of this year in Humcore. She gave me the courage to harness my passion for writing and taught me how to articulate an argument in my own words. Without her relentless dedication, I would not have become the writer or the person that I am today.

I would also like to thank J.R.R. Tolkien for creating the most beautiful world that I have ever experienced.