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# THE IMAGE OF THE ENEMY

An issue of Race and Class in the Works of  
J. R. R. Tolkien.



Orcs by Ian Miller. *Tolkien – The Illustrated Encyclopedia*, David Day

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Orc and wolf by the author.

# 1. INTRODUCTION

J. R. R. Tolkien's great tale about the One Ring has recently enjoyed a revival, thanks to the blockbuster movies directed by Peter Jackson and released 2001-2003. Ever since it was published, *The Lord of the Rings* has attracted faithful followers, and since the breakthrough in popularity in the late 1960's, the book has become part of the canon of worldwide popular culture.

*The Lord of the Rings* has been denounced as carrying a black-and-white fairytale moral, with forces of Good (light, freedom, beauty) fighting Forces of Evil (darkness, tyranny, ugliness). Many writers argue that the battle between the forces of Good and Evil is a reflection of Tolkien's strong Christian beliefs. Others see in the battle between Light and Darkness a reflection of the never-ending struggle between order and chaos in Old Norse mythology. The problem of the seeming dualistic struggle in Tolkien's works has been studied to a great extent. My intention in this study is to show the origins and purpose of the "other" races, primarily the incurably evil Orcs, in Tolkien's mythology, both within a hermeneutic study of his texts, and within a wider scope including previous mythological and literary references and sources of inspiration.

The dualistic contrast between light and darkness, or black and white, are frequently utilized symbols not only in fantasy literature. The contributors to the anthology *Into Darkness Peering – Race and colour in the Fantastic* bring up a plethora of issues not only concerning race, difference and the Other in fantasy, science fiction and horror literature, but also the writer's struggle to overcome the conventional pairing of good & light, right & white versus evil & darkness, wrong & black. These *binary oppositions* range from the general (good vs. evil) to the more culturally bound (white vs. black). In the poststructuralist school of literary criticism, one of the terms in such a pair always functions as the privileged one – it stands for positive, desirable values. Jacques Derrida coined the term deconstruction for the way of reading a text with the purpose of exposing seemingly "natural" binary oppositions. Just as some preferences of privileged terms seem reasonable (for example, preferring truth before falsehood), other binary oppositions have had harmful repercussions in history (for example, preferring white over black, or preferring the masculine over the feminine).<sup>1</sup> And yet, the binary oppositions are vital tools in our language. Without them, we would have severe difficulties in communicating abstract ideas. The world of language is in Jacques Lacan's term *symbolic* – the psychological stage we enter as we grow up and learn to communicate with fellow humans. In this process, our identity is constructed in an ongoing mirroring process with others. To know who "we" are, we must learn who the "Others" are. Because society is in a constant historical

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<sup>1</sup> Bertens p. 128-130

and cultural change, the mirror images of ourselves that we perceive are constantly altered, and we need to redefine ourselves perpetually. Lacan's thesis has been utilized in post-colonial studies to bring light on the mechanics of the relationship between coloniser and colonised – both the Other of each other.<sup>2</sup>

The image of the other has been explored at length in late 20<sup>th</sup> century literary criticism. The schools of post-colonialism and post-structuralism have exposed aspects of literature that earlier critics have been unwilling or unmotivated to explore. However, the main focus has rested on the so-called mainstream literature, although certain genres such as the vampire myth or the orientalist novel have been in the spotlight. What about fantasy literature, then? As a genre with boundaries only defined by the human imagination, it should have been the first scene for literary attempts to break away from conventions in fiction. The depiction of race and colour in fantasy literature (including science fiction and horror) is therefore of much interest for a literature critic with post-colonialist or post-structuralist ambitions. What images does the writer create to shape a world that is assumed to be different from ours? In what ways do issues of race serve as narrative elements, either as points of identification or as the contrasted “Other”?

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<sup>2</sup> Bertens p. 160-163

## 2. PURPOSE AND THEORY

### *2.1 Disposition and Hypothesis*

This paper is divided into two chapters of analysis and a concluding chapter of summary. The first analytical chapter, *The Creation of the Orc (3.1)*, deals with Tolkien's creative work and the history of the enemy images in his texts. I will look for sources of inspiration in myth and literature, and trace the development of the Orcs from the first concept of soulless automatons to corrupted Elves and eventually Men. In this chapter, the concept of the Other will be touched upon as I look for the reasons behind the narrative purposes of enemy characters such as the Orcs. Tolkien's subcreation has been commonly compared with Norse and Celtic mythology, and critics have usually looked for his source of inspiration in the Edda and in the Anglo-Saxon texts that he studied. However, the image of the faceless and subhuman armies of an ultimate evil leans on historical sources rather than mythological, I argue.

For early 20<sup>th</sup> century intellectuals, both writers and academic scholars, the notion of the uncultured masses forcing their standards and base ideals on a new democratic society was a scarecrow of the near future. Even the most progressive of the intelligentsia despaired at the thought of the degeneration of taste and education that would follow such a takeover of values. It was bad enough for an idealistic modernist to realize that the so-called masses rarely measured up to his or her image of the average man; consider the continuous cultural collisions that a late Romantic, Catholic and conservative Oxford professor had to go through every single day. If the self-image is of a distinguished individual, the contrast to the Other – a polar opposite – must be the greater. The opposite of an individual is the faceless mob. Not only is this faceless mob associated to other ethnic groups encountered abroad under influence of colonialism, it is also an Other by social class. An Other might furthermore be someone who crosses borders between “safe” categories, such as human-animal, male-female, or good-evil. The subhuman is neither fully human nor a complete animal, and because it cannot be categorised as either, the sum becomes less than the parts; it is a grotesque.

Furthermore, the image of the inimical Other as subhuman and degenerated is an important clue to the fact that this image is borrowed rather from the mythology of 19<sup>th</sup> century nationalism than from ancient Norse mythology. Many critics have overlooked the fact that Tolkien's original intent was to create a mythology for England, and have instead concentrated on analyzing Middle-earth as a self-contained secondary creation (using Tolkien's own terminology). The vision of great threatening

armies suddenly appearing from the East was very vivid to the Victorian eye, but was hardly part of the ancient Norse mythology. As a child of Victorian times, Tolkien was undoubtedly influenced by these images from an early age, especially due to his early interest in philology and culture. This was of course not his only source of literary inspiration. Although he claimed to be less interested in modern literature, he certainly knew his contemporary writers as well as the classics that he had been brought up with.<sup>3</sup>

Simultaneously, the Orcs play an important role in Tolkien's own mythology, which should not be overlooked. It is oversimplifying to say that they exist in *The Lord of the Rings* because Tolkien was influenced by the all-permeating pattern of racism and social hierarchies that were taken for granted in his day and age. Tolkien had his own well-developed theory about the pre-Christian Norse mythology and the role of the evil Other therein. The monsters are necessary in the hero's struggle, and the less human those monsters appear, the more their symbolical value increases. The battle against the monster is nothing short of a parable of Man's existence, Tolkien argued in his own famous article about Beowulf and the purpose of the monsters. I will analyze this further in the second analytical chapter, *The Purpose of the Orc*.

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<sup>3</sup> *Letters* pp. 172, 377

## 2.2 *The Other in Fantastic Literature*

For millions of readers, Tolkien's work has provided a welcome escape to another world, a realm full of adventure, magic and heroic deeds. There is an obvious streak of longing in *The Lord of the Rings*, which echoes the reader's longing for the fellowship's company. The characters within the novel yearn for faraway places (Sam, for example, who wishes to see an oliphant, or Legolas, who is touched by the sound of the seagulls and begins to long for the open sea<sup>4</sup>). The novel depicts an age of miracle, incarnated in the Elves and Wizards, which will soon pass – the Elves are leaving Middle-earth, and the Wizards will either perish in the battles, or leave the world of the living as well. And even in that age of wonders, the protagonists long for the olden days of greater glory. Thus the myth contains the notion that escape is ultimately impossible, and that each time must meet its due end.

What is the reader longing to escape from? What has Tolkien chosen to symbolise the things that his characters wish to escape within the myth? This, too, is contained within the novel. The changes that the evil forces bring to Middle-earth are damaging to nature and disrupting the peace and order in the existing societies. Evil is expressed through characteristics that are easy to recognise and to loathe, such as abuse of power, cruelty, greed and so on. These qualities have no connection to any particular colour or look in real life; in the world of mythology, however, such external symbols play a central role in conveying the message of the story. Evil needs visual characteristics as well, as Elisabeth Anne Leonard, editor of *Into Darkness Peering*, writes:

While the fantastic would not at first seem to be part of and could even be considered an escape from either the “real world” or history and tradition, such is not the case. What we do for pleasure is very much a part of our existence, and our means of escape reveal much about what we escape from.<sup>5</sup>

To be fair, Tolkien's work is not strictly dualistic with the super-good fighting the super-evil. Saruman the *White* becomes a traitor. Boromir, technically one of the good characters, tries to take the One Ring from Frodo, thus putting the whole expedition in peril. Sam spares a thought for a dead enemy soldier of the dark-skinned Haradrim, thus briefly realising the universality of human suffering. However, Elisabeth Anne Leonard points out that “it is a moment easily lost amid images of Gandalf in white on Shadowfax and the dark shapes of the Nazgûl; dark-skinned Orcs are part of Tolkien's legacy”.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> *The Return of the King* 935

<sup>5</sup> *Into Darkness Peering – Race and Color in the Fantastic*. Ed. Elisabeth Anne Leonard, Greenwood Press, London 1997, 3

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* p. 9-10

One main point of interest in my analysis of the Other in *The Lord of the Rings* is how this depiction of the Other is accomplished by Tolkien. There are a few basic qualities that can be deemed as “other”. The process of *othering* in fantasy literature often takes “the easy way out” by deploying tropes that we already know from the “real world”. The barbaric but luxurious Calormenes in C. S. Lewis's Narnia books are the spitting image of the Saracens of Victorian historical novels. If the reader is a white English child in the 1950's, the dark-skinned, heathen Calormene, who treats animals badly and sells children as slaves, could be assumed to excite the imagination of the child as a complete *Other*. In Tolkien's world, the other is similarly created by utilising tropes and formulas well known from European history.<sup>7</sup> I have chosen three categories above others as examples of how othering is accomplished in Tolkien's writing.

1. **Gender.** This is only partially applicable to *The Lord of the Rings*, since the narrative is male-dominated. However, as we shall see, there is a distinction between “good” masculinity and “bad” masculinity.

2. **Race.** The emphasizing of the most visually noticeable characteristics of a human being, the skin colour and other physical features, are an age-old tool of Othering. The Devil has been depicted or described as red, white or black, depending on which culture's mythology he has appeared in. Many cultures have nourished the assumption that inner qualities are reflected in physical features. Therefore, beauty has not surprisingly become a sign of goodness, and ugliness the logical opposite. Combine these two – the racial other and the physically unappealing – and the negative Other begins to take shape. The physically imperfect is in effect spiritually imperfect as well. Many story villains have been crippled or maimed in some way, to mark their lack of morales or ethics (for example some famous pirates such as Captain Hook from J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* and Long John Silver from R. L. Stevenson's *Treasure Island*). It is important to remember that the modern definition of the word “race” refers exclusively to the biological differences that might be found in different human populations, and has become largely obsolete. However, during the 19<sup>th</sup> and the earlier half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, race was also used to explain cultural difference – what we today might call “ethnicity”.<sup>8</sup>

3. **Language/Culture.** As a sign of difference where no physical Othering can be made, language is a way of establishing borders – or levelling them. It separates classes in society, and the dominant ethnic group from another. But if someone makes the right language his own, he also gets access to

<sup>7</sup> *Into Darkness Peering* pp. 8-9

<sup>8</sup> Halmesvirta 7-8



the privileges that come with the mastery of a particular language. It is not as rigid a signifier as gender or race. For example, in George Bernard Shaw's play *Pygmalion* the heroine Eliza manages to learn perfect upper-class English, thus shedding her native dialect and entering a “world of social harmony based on proper phonetics”, that is “filling up the deepest gulf that separates class from class and soul from soul”, in the words of her mentor Henry Higgins.<sup>9</sup>

I will apply these examples of Othering to the example of the enemy creatures called Orcs in *The Lord of the Rings*.



Orc and wolf by the author.

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<sup>9</sup> North p. 3

### 3. THE IMAGE OF THE ENEMY

J. R. R. Tolkien was very much aware of his role as a “Sub-Creator” and strove to create something more than a colourful and exciting background for a heroic tale. Long before writing the book that was to become his most famous work, his ambition was to devise a mythology “ranging from the large and cosmogonic, to the level of romantic fairy-story [...] which I could dedicate simply to: to England; to my country.”<sup>10</sup> He took good care of creating a sense of consistency throughout every aspect of his mythology, even those parts that were to remain unpublished until after his death. Therefore it is useful to consider the theoretical outlines for a fairy-tale or a mythology that he presented in two of his most famous essays, namely “Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics” and “On Fairy-Stories”, which have both been published in the essay collection *The Monsters & the Critics*, edited by Christopher Tolkien. “On Fairy-Stories” deals with subjects and terms such as “Sub-Creation”, a term that Tolkien coined for the creative process that takes place within the “Primary World”, and the “eucatastrophe”, the essential happy ending in a fairy-tale. His vigorous and convincing defence of Fantasy (not yet as a literary genre, rather as a literary device) has inspired many literary critics to utilise the ideas expressed in this essay in their analyses of *The Lord of the Rings*.

However, *The Lord of the Rings* is not a fairy-story, not even in Tolkien's sense of the word, although there are common elements in it. *The Hobbit* with its true “eucatastrophe” ending fits into the definition as expressed in this quote: “Tragedy is the true form of drama, its highest function; but the opposite is true of Fairy-story”. In the earlier criticism of Tolkien's works, this was generally assumed to be the case, as for example by Robert J. Reilly in his essay “Tolkien and the Fairy Story” from 1963<sup>11</sup>. The enemy gallery is rich and varied in its shades, with the morally ambivalent but susceptible Gollum to the well-meaning but weak Boromir weighing over to the benevolent side.

There are several distinguishable types of enemies in *The Lord of the Rings*, which I will present briefly in order to outline their different characteristics.

#### **-The Dark Lord Sauron (the metaphysical evil)**

The Dark Lord is a Maia, the closest thing to a fallen angel in Middle-earth. He is worshipped as a living god by his servants, and his power is enough to make his realm expand although he lacks a physical body. His willpower is concentrated in the One Ring that the hobbit Frodo must bring to the fires where it was forged, the only fires that will destroy it. That heat can only be found in the

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<sup>10</sup> *Letters* 131 p. 144

<sup>11</sup> *Tolkien and the Critics*

crater of Mount Doom, in the heart of Mordor, Sauron's realm. His only visual shape mentioned is a gigantic, all-seeing eye, although it is hinted that he has other guises.

#### **-Saruman the traitor**

Saruman is a wizard, one of five powerful beings that arrived on Middle-earth to guide its inhabitants in the struggle against Sauron. Faith in the future has abandoned him, however, and he hopes to gain something from cooperating with Sauron instead. As an entity of similar powers, it would be technically possible for him to challenge Sauron, if he could get hold of the One Ring. Saruman is aided by Gríma Wormtongue, a corrupted mortal man. Saruman's otherness is emphasised by the duels with Gandalf, his former colleague and good counterpart.

#### **-The Ringwraiths and other beings of the supernatural kind**

The Ringwraiths and the Barrow-wights are undead servants of Sauron. They are practically immaterial, and although hideous, they are able to shift their shape. Their degree of otherness is a disruption of the binary opposition between life and death.

#### **-Beasts**

There are also some animal species in Sauron's and Saruman's service, such as wolves and wargs (giant wolves that serve as mounts for Orcs), crows and the mysterious squid-like Guardian of the Lake. It is unclear whether the big black flies of Mordor with Sauron's red eye upon their backs are his servants or just a by-product of his evil influence. Shelob, the great spider guarding one entrance to Mordor, is an independent creature of chaos that merely happens to be serving Sauron's purpose. All animals that serve Sauron or other evil causes are distinguished through the instinctive fear and loathing that their appearance or sounds evoke in the Fellowship. Their color is usually dark or black.

#### **-Orcs**

Elves and/or human beings corrupted either by Melkor, the first Dark Lord, or by Sauron, originally a mere servant of the first one. The Orcs are slaves of Sauron's will, but they technically have the ability to survive on their own and use their reason independently. However, they are consumed by hate towards every living thing, including each other; only the fear of Sauron keeps them together for long. The Orcs are the only mortal people that is perceived as incurably evil.

#### **-Easterlings and Southrons**

These human peoples serve Sauron either by free will, because of tradition, or by force. The dark-skinned Southrons are also called Haradrim. They come from the southern lands and ride enormous elephants – oliphaunts – into battle. The reader might be reminded of Hannibal and the Carthaginians attacking Rome with their battle elephants, or Maasai warriors with red plait; the Haradrim carry the colours red and gold and plait their hair in many braids. After the war, those Easterlings that gave themselves up are pardoned, and peace is made with the people of Harad.

The Orcs stand out among the enemy types listed above. They have reasoning capacity and speech akin to the humans and Elves; thus, they are not animals. They are material and mortal, thus fundamentally different from the wraiths. However, they are treated differently from the human allies of Sauron; they are not granted mercy because they seek none, and their mortal remains are burned because they are perceived as a pollution of the land. They are perceived as irredeemable and there are conflicting theories about their origin. As a species in Tolkien's mythology, they are shrouded in mystery.

As an example of the ultimate Other, the Orcs measure up well. They are portrayed not only as physically ugly but also barbaric, violent and sadistic. In comparison, any other race seems sympathetic. They are described as physically and racially different, not only because of their appearance, but also because of their biological origin. But why create an entire new race for this purpose? Why not simply pit good human against evil human, good elf against evil wraith, good hobbit against wicked beast? In the next chapters, I will present and analyse the origins of the Orcs, the evil mass of cannonfodder in the battles of Middle-earth.

### 3.1. *The Creation of the Orc*

Tolkien's creation has had some impact on the English language. Quite a few words popularised by him are to be found in the Oxford English Dictionary, among others, the hobbit. The word "Orc" already existed in the dictionary before *The Lord of the Rings'* popularity. However, Tolkien's success has added another definition to the word.

1. A cetacean of the genus *Orca*, family *Delphinidae*; esp. the killer (*Orca gladiator* Gray, *Delphinus Orca*, Linn.). By earlier authors applied, after the mediæval L[atin] writers, to more than one vaguely identified ferocious sea-monster.
2. Sometimes more vaguely (perh. derived from or influenced by L. *Orcus*, Romanic *orco*: see *OGRE*, and cf. OE. *orþcyras oððe heldeofol* 'orc-giant or hell-devil', also *orcneas* in *Beowulf*: see *ORKEN*) A devouring monster, an ogre. Used by J. R. R. Tolkien (1892-1973) in his tales: one of an imaginary warlike people in whom are combined human and ogreish characteristics. ...

In Tolkien's first published work in the fantastic genre, *The Hobbit*, the Orcs are mentioned briefly. The most numerous enemy creatures are the Goblins, but it is unclear whether the Orcs are synonymous to them or a subspecies of greater stature. Keeping in line with the more whimsical fairy-tale character of the book, the Goblins are threatening but also slightly ridiculous creatures living in the depths of the Misty Mountains. They are described as ugly and disfigured, but also burlesque, singing a wild song as they carry off Bilbo and the dwarves down to "Goblin Town".<sup>12</sup> Later they appear as leering wolf riders.<sup>13</sup> Finally in the climax at "The Battle of Five Armies", the jocular tone fades away as the horrors of war take over.<sup>14</sup> Although the ending is happy for Bilbo and Gandalf, the story grows increasingly earnest and takes up subjects such as treachery for a good cause and loss of friends in battle. Gradually during the course of the story, the mischievous Goblins from a folkloric tradition evolve into a bloodthirsty army of fierce warriors – the Orcs. The last chapters of *The Hobbit* are a premonition of the apocalyptic battles in *The Lord of the Rings*. The role of the Goblins/Orcs is to cause the quarreling Men, Elves and Dwarves to unite in the face of a greater danger.

Analyzing the mythological background of the creatures and peoples in *The Lord of the Rings*, Thomas J. Gasque has tried to prove how the fantastical elements convince the reader precisely

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<sup>12</sup> *The Hobbit* p. 59

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* p. 91

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* p. 237

because they are rooted in long traditions of myth and folklore – with the obvious exception of the hobbits, Tolkien's own invention. “We are unable to believe in the Balrog because we have no foundation either outside the work or in it. Dwarfs, orcs, and elves are familiar enough to most readers to stimulate a response.”<sup>15</sup> Thus, Gasque claims that the reader – in pre-roleplaying and computer-gaming times – recognises an orc, a creature barely mentioned before, except for a brief mention in *Beowulf*. Dwarfs (or, in Tolkien's spelling, dwarves) and Elves are to be found in Norse mythology, as well as medieval folklore and Germanic mythology. Gasque has no problems in finding such examples to prove his case. However, the Orcs become his stumbling-block: “What they are is never really clear.” Still, he goes on in an attempt to explain why they seem familiar to the prospective reader:

[t]here is ample tradition to support the existence of such beasts; certain variants in dwarf lore were known as Cornish mine goblins – “miserable, little, withered, dried up creatures” with “big, ugly heads with red or grey locks, squintan [sic] eyes, hook noses, and mouths from ear to ear.” Another, more flexible, tradition is the generally later medieval concept of the Wild Man, which abounds in medieval art.... He is that same wild man whose character was ameliorated into the Noble Savage...<sup>16</sup>

Gasque goes on to prove that the wild man of medieval legend was quite something else than a slave soldier for an evil Enemy. The concept of the wild man is essentially connected to nature and the forests in a way that resembles the characters of Ghân-buri-Ghân, the Drúadan chieftain, or Treebeard the Ent, who guards the trees in Fangorn forest. Famous wild men include the crude Caliban in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, and the dehumanised Nebuchadnezzar of the Bible, but also the wise Merlin in Welsh legends, and Sir Lancelot, who maddened by love ran off into the woods and lived there like an animal. This undermines Gasque's Orc theory and rather proves that the true origins of the creature lie in quite a different place than wild nature (which Tolkien himself loved). Ogres, of course, do appear in fearsome shapes in fairy-tales and folklore, but never in such organized and servile fashion as Tolkien's Orcs, who resemble the vast and faceless enemy armies of the Bible (Ezekiel, Book of Revelations, etc.) far more than any folktale goblins.

In *The Hobbit*, the storyteller makes the interesting claim that it was the Goblins that 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...”. They are also described as accomplished miners, able to “tunnel and mine as well as any but the most skilled dwarves, when they take the trouble”. This echoes the Goblins' origin in folklore as a

<sup>15</sup> Thomas J. Gasque: “Tolkien: The Monsters and the Critters”. *Tolkien and the Critics*, p. 157

<sup>16</sup> Gasque 160-161

subterranean people, spirits that haunt mines and disturb the workers by strange knocks in the darkness. These creatures are known in German-speaking parts of Europe as "Kobold" and in Francophone countries as "gobelin", from which the English word was borrowed. Tolkien is said to have been antagonistic towards borrowed words, especially from French. This might be the main reason why Tolkien abandoned the word and sought ultimately to replace it with "Orc". The origins of the latter word lie in Anglo-Saxon. However, the Anglo-Saxon word "orcneas" is ultimately derived from the Latin "orcus", which means depth of Hell.<sup>17</sup> Beowulf's *orcneas*, 'demon-spirits', are the most apparent source for Tolkien's Orcs.

In Tolkien's chief work, *The Lord of the Rings*, the Orcs play a vital role in the background, with only a few lines of dialogue on occasion. The first close encounter happens well into the second book of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, in the mines of Moria; until then, more spectacular villains such as the Ringwraiths and the Barrow-Wights have stolen the scene and raised the expectations. It is not until chapter III (*The Uruk-hai*) in *The Two Towers* that the reader gains an insight into some of the Orcs' habits and dialogue, as Merry and Pippin are taken captive by an Orc horde. Finally Sam and Frodo run into some close encounters with Orcs in the very depths of Mordor. After the destruction of the Ring, the Orcs are scattered in all directions, aimless and lost without their Master. It remains a mystery whether all of them perish, or if some manage to survive on their own. Tolkien gives some hints that evil cannot ever be wholly driven out of the world; in Middle-earth, it will probably just be diluted and harder to distinguish from good.

Three terms are used of the Orcs in *The Lord of the Rings*. Firstly, the old word "goblin" appears a few times as a remnant from *The Hobbit*, apparently derisively used by Legolas the Elf. Secondly, the word "Orc" is used in a general sense, including all subspecies. Thirdly, the word "Uruk-hai" denotes a subspecies of Orcs, bred with unclear methods by the traitor wizard Saruman to be his private army. The Uruk-hai are stronger and less sensitive to sunlight than normal orcs. Apart from the Uruk-hai, there is also another breed of Orcs stronger than average, which is referred to as "black Uruks from Mordor". Uruk is simply the word for Orc in the Black Speech, the artificial lingua franca devised by Sauron to keep order among his troops. The distinctions between Orc races is a sidetrack that we will leave for now; enough to say that Tolkien never states clearly what the differences between various kinds of Orcs are, and that they must be deduced from the fragmentary descriptions in the novel. So great are the differences, however, that the Black Speech that Sauron had invented to facilitate communication between his underlings has evolved into several dialects, mutually unintelligible, and the Orcs have to use the Common tongue as every other race in order to

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<sup>17</sup> The Germans have a phrase: "etwas in den Orkus werfen" - to dispose of, to reject completely

communicate.

Tolkien describes his Orcs in varying degrees of detail, and the descriptions allow for great flexibility. Their anatomy and general appearance must be inferred from hints that Tolkien drops. It is made clear that they have "hideous orc-faces" and "hideous arms" and speak in an "abominable tongue" - but what exactly does this mean?<sup>18</sup> They have yellow fangs and clawlike hands, they only laugh with malicious intentions, and their sounds are described as hissing, muttering, snarling and growling.<sup>19</sup> In chapter III in *The Two Towers*, Merry and Pippin witness the quarreling and infighting that is typical for the Orcs regardless of race. Uglúk, a large black Uruk-hai leader, faces a minor rebellion instigated by the common Orc Grishnákh, who is a "short crook-legged creature, very broad and with long arms that hung almost to the ground".<sup>20</sup> The hobbit captives are treated roughly but as the Orcs have to obey orders the leaders try to restrain the others from hurting them. Uglúk even force-feeds them some orc medicine, a "burning liquid", to make them endure the running. He also treats a wound on Merry's forehead with a smeary brown substance: "He was healing Merry in orc-fashion; and his treatment worked swiftly".<sup>21</sup>

While the Orcs are strong and scary-looking creatures, they are also disorderly soldiers and always ready to quarrel over the slightest issue. Uglúk's and Grishnákh's disagreement stems from the fact that they are serving two leaders; the Uruk-hai follow Saruman's orders, while Grishnákh seeks to please Sauron. Others in the party, Orcs from the Moria mines, have no other interest in the matter than avenging their people who were killed during the Fellowship's passage through Moria, and then returning home as swiftly as possible. The Orcs that Sam and Frodo encounter in Mordor also fail because of their internal arguments and power struggles. Even a scene where Sam and Frodo merely observe two Orcs tracking them ineffectively, the one turns upon the other. "If this nice friendliness would spread about in Mordor, half our trouble would be over", Sam comments.<sup>22</sup>

The Orcs' language issues have been touched upon previously. Besides the notion that language is "corrupted" when developing into different dialects, Tolkien also utilises language as a symbol of corruption in other ways. The Orcs speak vulgarly and with no regard for the beauty of words (using contractions such as "d'you think" or "let 'em laugh"), they call each other "swine" and "maggots" and curse at their leaders – even Sauron is half reverently, half jokingly referred to as "Number

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<sup>18</sup> *The Two Towers* 434-435

<sup>19</sup> In *The Dialect of Modernism*, Michael North points out how the speech of non-Europeans is constantly objectified as "murmur, rumor, mutter or tumult", sounds that carry no meaning, in Joseph Conrad's works. p. 42

<sup>20</sup> *The Two Towers* 437

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* 438

<sup>22</sup> *The Return of the King* 904-905



One".<sup>23</sup> Knowing Tolkien's delight in languages and strong opinions about their proper use, one is probably not mistaken in assuming that the Orcs' crude and impolite English in *The Lord of the Rings* aims to mirror their spiritual qualities. They do not seem to enjoy anything except causing pain and discomfort to others – except for the secret and longing plans of two Orcs in Mordor of slipping off and setting up "somewhere on our own with a few trusty lads, somewhere where there's good loot nice and handy, and no big bosses".<sup>24</sup> Sadly, not long after, the two of them kill each other in a fight over dominance and some shiny chainmail.

It is hard to overlook the fact that the Orcs' physical appearance is described from a eurocentric perspective in terms of a racial other. They are dark-skinned with slanted eyes. Their blackness is clearly a visual touch to emphasize their character as not only Other in terms of race but also Other in terms of spiritual qualities. They have been corrupted spiritually as well as physically, and their physical corruption is easily described with features that the readers either will recognise from the animal world (long arms like an ape, non-human movements and sounds, eye colour yellow or red) or as a contrast to a prevailing beauty ideal. The latter is, of course, culturally determined. Pale skin has traditionally been viewed as more desirable than a dark complexion, partly due to the fact that paleness signifies a high social class (no need for heavy work outdoors) but also due to European colonialism that established a pecking order of colour in wide parts of the world.

The animal characteristics mingling with the human traits make the Orcs seem like grotesque hybrids. The conscious attempt of turning a human into a non-human being, objectifying a person, and the resulting borderland grotesque, are characteristic of race discourse and literature dealing with race, as Leonard Cassuto shows in his work *The Inhuman Race*. An interesting point he makes is that "the tense and ultimately incomplete attempt to turn a human into something not-human, is not isolated in one particular moment in time. Indeed, it happens almost everywhere we look".<sup>25</sup>

As we see, the fantasy world of Middle-earth is not free from the patterns of culture and the methods of discourse that reign in the "real" world. One might pose oneself a few questions: Is objectifying and dehumanising less harmful if it is done to a fictitious race? Why do we as readers of fantasy find comfort in such a world order? Issues of colour and race are maybe hidden under a veil of political correctness in today's Western societies, while in the relative "freedom" of the fantastic, the old and proven codes of dark = ugly = evil and fair = pretty = good can prevail.<sup>26</sup> Thus, the outward appearance of the Orcs mirrors some interesting issues of class and race.

<sup>23</sup> *The Return of the King*. 904

<sup>24</sup> *The Two Towers* 721

<sup>25</sup> Cassuto: *The Inhuman Race*. XVIII

<sup>26</sup> *Into Darkness Peering* 1-2, 9-10

*The Lord of the Rings* is a book about warriors. In Middle-earth, a "normal" pre-modern society with its majority of farmers and craftsmen seems almost invisible – the world is viewed from the perspective of a warrior caste. Aragorn, Legolas and Gimli the dwarf are a well-tuned trio of warriors living according to a heroic ideal, each complementing the other with Aragorn shining as a leading example. Nevertheless, a warrior's duty is to kill, and killing is a dirty task. This is something that the heroes of *The Lord of the Rings* have in common with the basest of villains, the Orcs. And this is also a field where the Orcs, surprisingly, can display the few positive qualities that they possess. For example, the Moria Orcs joining the Uruk-hai in chapter III, *The Two Towers*, have come down on the plains to seek revenge for their kin. Thus, they must harbour some feelings towards their own kin, otherwise they simply would not care and only go to fight if there was a Balrog breathing sulphur at their backsides.

The Orcs are not allowed the same respite as the human enemies, the Southrons and the Easterlings. The Rohirrim burn the corpses of fallen Orcs as a warning for others and to prevent pollution of the earth. Prisoners are clearly not taken, and the Orcs seem not to offer themselves as such. Legolas' and Gimli's Orc-killing contest would sound macabre enough, but in the context of the tale, it is only grimly logical; the Orcs have to be defeated, because they will not stop fighting as long as there is a will that is strong enough to drive them forward. After the battle at Helm's Deep, the Dunlendings, the human enemies, are offered a chance to redeem themselves through helping out with the cleansing of the Deep after the battle – the clemency surprises them, who were indoctrinated by Saruman to expect torture from the Rohirrim. The Orcs, on the other hand, are swallowed by the forest that hates them because they cut down a great many trees for Saruman's weapons industries. When Sauron falls, the Orcs scatter "like dust in the wind" in similar fashion. In their feeble flight the Orcs are compared to ants scurrying around a destroyed anthill.

But the Men of Rhûn and of Harad, Easterling and Southron, saw the ruin of their war and the great majesty and glory of the Captains of the West. And those that were deepest and longest in servitude, hating the West, and yet were men proud and bold, in their turn now gathered themselves for a last stand of desperate battle. But the most part fled eastward as they could; and some cast their weapons down and sued for mercy.<sup>27</sup>

Fifteen months before his death, Tolkien wrote to a friend about his tinkering with a sequel to *The Lord of the Rings*. He had, however, given up the attempt, as the time after the downfall of Sauron did not offer any "tales worth recounting".<sup>28</sup> The suspense in the preserved manuscript is provided by

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<sup>27</sup> *The Return of the King* 928

<sup>28</sup> *Letters* 338, p. 419

a rise of a secret Sauron cult and Gondorian youngsters playing Orcs and ruining peoples' orchards.<sup>29</sup> However, the lack of Elves and of a great story to tell depressed Tolkien, and he discontinued this story after some half-hearted tries.

What was the origin of the Orcs, if they were incurably evil? In a letter written in response to a Catholic reader, Tolkien clarifies that according to his mythology, the Orcs were not "created" by the Dark Lord. The reader had acknowledged the fact that according to Tolkien's basic metaphysics, evil cannot create anything on its own. How then explain the existence of seemingly irredeemable creatures such as the Orcs? According to Tolkien, they are "fundamentally a race of 'rational incarnate' creatures, though horribly corrupted, if no more so than many Men to be met today".<sup>30</sup> However, he would only hint at a supposed origin for his Orcs, true to the spirit of his mock-historical narration techniques. "In the legends of the Elder Days it is suggested that the Diabolus subjugated and corrupted some of the earliest Elves, before they had ever heard of the 'gods', let alone of God".<sup>31</sup> These "legends of the Elder Days" were later compiled by his son Christopher Tolkien in the posthumously published *Silmarillion*, *The Unfinished Tales*, and *The History of Middle-earth*, the twelve-part collection of his preceding work.

... all those of the Quendi [Elves of the First Age] who came into the hands of Melkor, ere Utumno was broken, were put there in prison, and by slow arts of cruelty were corrupted and enslaved; and thus did Melkor breed the hideous race of the Orcs in envy and mockery of the Elves, of whom they were afterwards the bitterest foes. For the Orcs had life and multiplied after the manner of the Children of Ilúvatar; and naught that had life of its own, nor the semblance of life, could ever Melkor make since his rebellion... And deep in their dark hearts the Orcs loathed the Master whom they served in fear, the maker only of their misery.<sup>32</sup>

This passage in the *Silmarillion* is the most widely accepted source to the origins of the Orcs, mainly because of its relative popularity. Herein the Orcs are stated to be "incarnates" in their own right, that is, mortal, sentient beings with a soul. However, Tolkien's extensive notes often contradict each other. In many sources, he changes the origin of the corrupted Orcs from Elves to humans. This, on the other hand, does not fit in his detailed chronology of the creation and history of Middle-earth. There simply was not enough time for Melkor to breed the armies he needed for the battles against the Elves, if the raw material for his cannonfodder appeared amongst Middle-earth's "late-comers", the Men. "But though Men may take comfort in this, the theory remains nonetheless the most probable. It accords with all that is known of Melkor, and of the nature and behaviour of Orcs – and

<sup>29</sup> *Peoples of Middle-earth* p. 410-412

<sup>30</sup> *Letters* 153, p. 190

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 191

<sup>32</sup> *Silmarillion* p. 47

of Men.”<sup>33</sup> If the Orcs had been automatons, as the first drafts suggested, they would have been useless without Morgoth's consciousness guiding them. Orcs were capable of acting on their own, although they were enslaved to their totalitarian Master by fear and hate. Another interesting idea that Tolkien developed in his notes was the answer to the question whether the “half-Orcs” mentioned in *The Lord of the Rings* were truly half-breeds between Orc and human being; or whether they were just a new breed of Orcs, “enhanced” by Saruman. “It became clear in time that undoubted Men could under the domination of Morgoth or his agents in a few generations be reduced almost to the Orc-level of mind and habits; and then they would or could be made to mate with Orcs, producing new breeds, often larger and more cunning”.<sup>34</sup>

It seems that Tolkien ultimately preferred not to settle for any exact idea, but to leave the final answer to the puzzle in the mists of his fictitious mythology. The link between Orcs and humans remains interesting as we proceed towards the final analysis.

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<sup>33</sup> *Morgoth's Ring* p. 417

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* p. 418

### 3.2 *The Other in Tolkien's Mythology*

Tolkien had a complex system of moral and metaphysical ideas supporting his vision of Middle-earth. His notions of the nature of evil, of religion, and of the purpose of mythology played a vital role in the conception of the Orcs. For example, in spite of his Christian faith he did not shrink back from the thought that a sentient being could be “bad to the bone” without the possibility to make an independent choice. The Orcs were born and brought up as the slaves of the Dark Lords, and their influence had corrupted them so far that the thought of salvation seemed impossible.

I nearly wrote 'irredeemably bad'; but that would be going too far. Because by accepting or tolerating their making – necessary to their actual existence – even Orcs would become part of the World, which is God's and ultimately good.)... That God would 'tolerate' that, seems no worse theology than the toleration of the calculated dehumanizing of Men by tyrants that goes on today. [written in 1954]<sup>35</sup>

W. H. Auden, one of Tolkien's most ardent defenders, asked in 1965 whether the idea that an entire race was irredeemable was not, in fact, heretical. In his answer this time, Tolkien made clear that he didn't feel

any obligation to make my story fit with formalized Christian theology, though I actually intended it to be consonant with Christian thought and belief, which is asserted somewhere ... where Frodo asserts that the orcs are not evil in origin. We believe that, I suppose, of all human kinds and sorts of breeds, though some appear, both as individuals and groups to be, by us at any rate, unredeemable.<sup>36</sup>

Christian readers of *The Lord of the Rings* turned to him on occasion and pinpointed problems in the work in a Christian context. Tolkien himself took care to make it clear that the Ring trilogy was not a Christian story per se, although he acknowledged the diffusion of aspects of his own beliefs into the moral of the tale. As seen in the passage above, one assumption that never changes is the incapacity of evil (as incarnated in Melkor/Morgoth) to create anything on its own.

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<sup>35</sup> *Letters* 195

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* 355

Applying the system of Christian morals and ideals to *The Lord of the Rings* might at a glance seem an obvious choice, considering the author's own strong religious convictions. However, Tolkien was a scholar and a researcher. It was not impossible for him to consciously keep his personal faith apart from the subject matter brought up in the novel. After all, *The Lord of the Rings* is set in a pre-Christian world and written by a learned Christian author – not unlike the one literary work that helped Tolkien earn a long-lasting reputation as a scholar: *Beowulf*.

In his famous essay “The Monsters and the Critics”, Tolkien made a major breakthrough in the history of *Beowulf* commentary. Until his time, the epic poem had been half dismissed, half praised by scholars, because its more fantastic parts bewildered critics in a more realism-focused era. Tolkien showed in his essay that the monsters play a vital role in the narrative of the *Beowulf*-saga. What is more, their presence is a powerful sign of a philosophy of a time that was slowly changing, a bridge between two ages.

*Beowulf* was written down by an anonymous but clearly very learned Anglo-Saxon after the advent of Christianity but before the pagan times were fully forgotten. The author or compiler of *Beowulf* clearly wanted to recreate the sense of an age before Christianity. Except for some minor slips, the poem has been purged from every Christian notion. When *Beowulf* dies, he dies without prayers – except for a wish for a good reputation amongst the living, the highest goal for a pre-Christian Norseman.

Tolkien interprets the pagan worldview as depicted in *Beowulf* as a struggle of man (on the side of the nordic gods) against darkness and chaos (the monsters). Yet, this struggle is inherently a hopeless one. “The monsters had been the foes of the gods, the captains of men, and within Time the monsters would win.”<sup>37</sup> In *Beowulf*, the gods are absent, because of their problematic role after Christianisation. The author may have striven to create the feeling of a pre-Christian, heroic society, but the inclusion of pre-Christian gods would have been reverting to paganism. The old gods had been left behind. Yet, Man's struggle remains the same.

For the monsters do not depart, whether the gods go or come. A Christian was (and is) still like his forefathers a mortal hemmed in a hostile world. The monsters remained the enemies of mankind, the infantry of the old war... Even so the vision of the war changes... The tragedy of the great temporal defeat remains for a while poignant, but ceases to be finally important... Beyond there appears a possibility of eternal victory...<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup>“*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*” 22

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.* 22

Grendel is the offspring of Cain. Cain is also the forefather of the Anglo-Saxon *eotenas* and *ylfe* (in Norse *jöttnar* ("jättar") and *álfar* ("alver")).<sup>39</sup> Thus, Grendel's origins are human, which sets him apart from the wholly mythical dragon. A monster with a human shape is, on the other hand dangerously crossing the border between man and beast and therefore neither of them. Tolkien explains Grendel as the image of Man estranged from God – thence his quasi-human shape. The curse that God placed on Cain (actually a seal of protection, but due to errors in translation and distorted in folklore to a curse) also rests upon Grendel and makes him unclean and sinful for mortals.

Monsters of human shape in *Beowulf* were not unaffected by Christian notions of evil, sin, and punishment of the soul. Their parody of human form became symbolical, explicitly, of sin. The mark of Cain shows that Grendel is irredeemably a man estranged from his Creator. Similarly, the Orcs – whether of human or Elvish origin – were bred from innocent creatures that had never met the God of Middle-earth or his “archangels”. They have been estranged from God through the relentless torture and twisting of their minds by the fallen Melkor/Morgoth. In *The Silmarillion*, it is said to have been Melkor's greatest crime – maybe because the damage to the Orcs was too great to be undone in the mortal realm of Middle-earth. “This it may be was the vilest deed of Melkor, and the most hateful to Ilúvatar”.<sup>40</sup>

Grendel's monstrous qualities approach the daemonic, thus pointing to definite Christian roots. “Because of his ceaseless hostility to men, and hatred of their joy, his super-human size and strength, and his love of the dark, he approaches to a devil, though he is not yet a true devil in purpose”.<sup>41</sup> *Not a true devil* means that he is not concerned with the seduction and ruin of mortal souls, but he is a fleshly inhabitant of this world. However, the darkness that surrounds him is according to Tolkien identical to the darkness as imagined in Hell or the valley of Death. Grendel's main purpose is to be hostile towards mankind and its creations. In the poem, he is referred to as simply “the enemy” or “the foe”. As a monster with a soul, he is doomed after death.

The Orcs, too, have a soul or a spirit similar to the humans and Elves, according to Tolkien's mythology. They even have a faint idea of an afterlife. One Orc called Gorbag speaks about the terrible Ringwraiths in *The Two Towers*: “... they skin the body off you as soon as look at you, and

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<sup>39</sup>“Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics” 26

<sup>40</sup> *Silmarillion* 47

<sup>41</sup>“Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics. Appendix (a) 34-36”

leave you all cold in the dark on the other side".<sup>42</sup>

Grendel's half-human shape signifies another important thing, according to Tolkien. The eternal enemy is always "both within and without; the fortress must fall through treachery as well as assault".<sup>43</sup> The giants or jötnar of Norse mythology are parodies of the human-divine form, too. The trickster god Loki dwells in Asgarðr, though he is the cause of never-ending mischief and the father of many a disastrous monster.

The balancing of Grendel in the first half of *Beowulf* with the dragon in the second half makes the point that "Triumph over the lesser and more nearly human is cancelled by defeat before the older and more elemental".<sup>44</sup> Critics that have complained about the improbability of the monsters and deplored the lack of political intrigue, normally a forte of the Norse saga tellers, have not understood this significance. "It is just because the main foes in *Beowulf* are inhuman that the story is larger and more significant than this imaginary poem of a great king's fall".<sup>45</sup> *Beowulf* is, in fact, battling the eternal foes within every human being.

Similarly, the Orcs can be read as a dreadful possibility for human beings. In the next chapter, I will proceed to the occasions when Orcs crop up in the real world – in Tolkien's own time. What will they look like, and where can they be found?



*Ogre* by Frank Frazetta

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<sup>42</sup> *The Two Towers* 720. The question remains, what will the God of Middle-earth do with the souls of the Orcs that have had no choice in life but to toil for the Dark Lord?

<sup>43</sup>("Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics" Footnote 23)

<sup>44</sup>Ibid. 32

<sup>45</sup>Ibid. 33



### 3.3 *The Purpose of the Orc*

Before I continue with my analysis of Tolkien's works, it is necessary to take a closer look on the discourse of "race" and "otherness" that permeated the British society both before, during, and after his lifetime. In many ways, Tolkien was living in a time full of cultural clashes. As a self-confessed Romantic and devout Catholic, Tolkien liked to place himself outside mainstream society and its fashionable ideas and contemporary whims. However, as a British citizen and an academic he could not avoid being influenced by the great questions of his time. He was born in the British colony of South Africa, and during his lifetime he experienced several wars and crises dealing with the results of ideologies born in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, such as liberalism, nationalism, socialism, and imperialism.

Already in the original preface to *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien is warning the reader for hastily analyzing the book as an allegory of the contemporary world. To prevent any attempts to link *The Lord of the Rings* to the Second World War, Tolkien presented an alternative version of it in the aforementioned preface. He tried to make it clear that if he had written a truthful allegory on the events between 1939-1945, the "good" side would have used the Ring to defeat Sauron (with obviously disastrous consequences).<sup>46</sup> The temptation has been impossible to resist for many critics looking for reasons behind the work's immense popularity. Knowing that Tolkien himself served in the trenches during the First World War, it is difficult not to see the obvious parallels especially to Frodo's and Sam's struggle for survival on the road to Mordor. Tolkien mentions this in a letter to a certain Professor L. W. Forster, in an attempt to answer to what degree the World Wars had influenced his writing: "Perhaps in landscape. The Dead Marshes and the approaches to the Morannon owe something to Northern France after the Battle of the Somme".<sup>47</sup> The Orcs may have been inspired by images of the rampaging Turkish, Mongol, and Persian armies that assailed Europe during the Middle Ages. They may also have been inspired by archetypal figures of evil and destruction: the Huns of Allied propaganda in both World Wars. This image of the pitiless Hun was seized upon by Allied propagandists and used to demonize the Germans. Indeed, in the same letter to Professor Forster, Tolkien mentions the Huns as an inspiration – but these Huns are the literary creations of William Morris, the late Victorian, early art nouveau writer and founder of a famous school of artisans.<sup>48</sup> In Morris's novel *The House of the Wolfings*, a Germanic people unites to face the destructive might of the Romans in a victorious battle, defending their homeland, the Mark. In *The Roots of the Mountains*, another novel, another Germanic people - "the Dale-folk" - is

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<sup>46</sup>*Tolkiens Arv*, Göran Hägg – Världens litteraturhistoria

<sup>47</sup> *Letters* 226 p. 303

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.* P. 303

threatened by the appearance of “the Dusky Men”, a Hun-like people. The names and phrases in these mock-archaic stories echo in Tolkien's own works.<sup>49</sup>

'What beast is afield then?' said Gold-mane.

Said Folk-might: 'The beasts that beset our lives, the Dusky Men. In these days we have learned how to find companies of them; and forsooth every week they draw nigher to this Dale; and some day they should happen upon us if we were not to look to it, and then would there be a murder great and grim.... Whatsoever is fair there have they defiled and deflowered, and they wallow in our fair halls as swine strayed from the dunghill. No delight in life, no sweet days do they have for themselves, and they begrudge the delight of others therein. .... [W]hen a Dusky Carle mingles with a woman of the Dale, the child which she beareth shall oftenest favour his race and not hers; or else shall it be witless, a fool natural.'<sup>50</sup>

The national romanticism that fed the imaginations of William Morris and other writers, poets and artists of the 19<sup>th</sup> century thus made an obvious impact on Tolkien's works. The national romantic idea was to define the national character of England and the “English race”, and the imperialist ambitions made “English” and “British” interchangeable terms. Tolkien, as a philologist with the private ambition of creating a genuinely “English” mythology, was a part of this ongoing attempt at identity building for a nation with roots too diverse to trace in the mists of history. For, of course, there never existed an English mythology, because the concept of one single English nation did not exist before the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The English nation had to be created through the active efforts of many an artist and intellectual, just as the British Empire needed its own ideologues to create an imperial identity to justify its existence. Yet, Tolkien had very detailed ideas about this fictitious “Englishness” than he wanted to convey through a mythology – using adjectives such as “cool and clear” and “high, purged of the gross”, as he explained in a wordy letter to his friend and potential publisher Milton Waldman in 1951.<sup>51</sup> “For I love England (not Great Britain and certainly not the British Commonwealth (grr!))...”<sup>52</sup>

Although “true Englishness” was as fictitious as any other national identity created during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, its advocates viewed it as primordial. Tolkien conveniently left out the Celts, the Romans, the Danish and the Normans from his imagined primordial England. Although Tolkien was well aware of what he wanted to choose as a true English heritage, there were other British intellectuals who compromised with the terms “British” and “English” and conjured up a “British nationality by

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<sup>49</sup> For example, the country of the Rohirrim, a people of warlike horsemen with distinctly Anglo-Saxon names (Eomer, Theoden), is called Mark in their own language.

<sup>50</sup> <http://onlinebooks.library.upenn.edu/webbin/gutbook/lookup?num=6050>

<sup>51</sup> *Letters* 131 p. 143

<sup>52</sup> *Letters* 53 p. 65 (to Christopher Tolkien)

blood”, with its roots set deeply in the Anglo-Saxon past.<sup>53</sup> The independent nature of this nationality was seen as more natural than suddenly upcoming races such as the Irish.<sup>54</sup> The Anglo-Saxon race was by heritage determined to be “higher” than the races that it had come to rule. However, as the popularised “darwinist” idea of “survival of the fittest” came to be used of cultures and nations, there also arose the fear that an alien race might some day threaten the position of the Anglo-Saxon, or that the Anglo-Saxon race itself was susceptible to degeneration. As other states with colonial ambitions rose to compete with Britain, imperial nationalism took a more aggressive, chauvinistic form in the late 1800s – the word “jingoism” was coined in the 1870's.<sup>55</sup> In the 1880-90s, the fear of degeneration intermingled with fears of cultural decline. The aggressive nationalism of this period culminated in the First World War, but found no solace in the victorious outcome. Mirror images in the form of Irish and Indian nationalism, among many other movements, threatened the “natural” order of British nationalism.<sup>56</sup> The Second World War came to be the curtain call of racist chauvinism. After the macabre excesses of the national socialist regime in Germany, it became more and more difficult to justify thinking in terms of “superior” and “inferior” races.

As a linguist, Tolkien had chosen the one field that had lent a few words to world history, which came to be some of the most contaminated words in the last 200 years of European history – Indo-European, Aryan, and Semitic. Originally mere linguistic terms, these words caught the imagination of nationalist and racist thinkers during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The British scholar Sir William Jones discovered similarities between the Indian and the European languages in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>57</sup> The term Indo-European was coined to signify this wide-spread family of languages, but it soon also came to mean the hypothetical original ancestor of all peoples that spoke those languages. Any evidence of the existence of such a people or the original proto-Indoeuropean tongue were never found, but this did not deter scholars such as philologist Friedrich Max Müller, Joseph Arthur de Gobineau, Ernest Renan, Jacob Grimm and Georges Dumézil.<sup>58</sup> The notion of the Indo-European race (and among British racials, the Anglo-Saxon as its most highly developed type) as the peak of human development was built on anthropological “evidence”, produced for this very purpose.

The expansion of the British Empire during the 19<sup>th</sup> century meant dealing with power relations in the colonies and social questions at home, while the development of science provided answers that only lead to further questions. A famous example of a clash of ideologies is the argument between John Stuart Mill, liberal political theorist, and Thomas Carlyle, conservative defender of imperial

<sup>53</sup> Absurdly, because “British” originally refers to the Celtic tribes inhabiting the islands.

<sup>54</sup> Halmesvirta p. 154-155

<sup>55</sup> *Europe – the Return of History* p. 121

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.* p. 139

<sup>57</sup> Arvidsson p. 31

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.* p. 14-17

rule, after a rebellion of the black population of Jamaica in 1865. Anssi Halmesvirta, historian of ideas, has shown how Carlyle's images of "the savage Negro" that had to be kept in "divinely ordained servitude" made a stonger impact on the public mind than Mill's altruistic defence of "natural" civil rights.<sup>59</sup> What was formerly "divinely ordained" became later "the law of nature", as ideas borrowed from natural sciences gained popularity among advocates of imperial rule. One writer who has been most closely associated with romanticising support of the British Empire is Rudyard Kipling. But Kipling's works in most cases depict a mixed gang of nationalities, colours and creeds working together for the good cause of the Empire; even his historical narratives focused on the co-operation between Saxon and Norman rather than appointing one race above others.<sup>60</sup> Nevertheless, notions of fundamental racial inequality were so commonly accepted in Britain that a Mrs Wilson writing in India during the 1880s could use the same vocabulary of race as a Miss Travers corresponding from Finland in the 1910s.<sup>61</sup> Mrs Wilson, the wife of an official working for the Raj, tried to teach herself Hindi and to communicate with the locals, but lamented repeatedly of the impossibility of peering into the heart of the Indians – it seemed that they were as far from her as East from West. The same idea of racial difference made the socialist intellectual Miss Travers ponder if she would ever be able to get to know her Finnish friends closely – the imagined Mongol ancestry of the Finns made her suspect that the psychological "race-barrier" was too high to conquer. During the Finnish civil war, Miss Travers expressed her shock through the only language that seemed to provide an answer to the atrocities committed by both sides – through discourse of race. The war had caused the Finns to return to their roots of "Mongol savagery".<sup>62</sup> The mass soul of the "Mongol" was not capable of independent rational reasoning. As word reached out to the British press, it echoed the same song in unison. Only four years later, the image had changed completely.

During the decades around the turn of the century, many intellectuals in Europe had been occupied with worries and fears for the future. The crucial questions were what impact the complex issues of democracy, socialism and nationalism would make on the future of the world. Intellectuals such as the German Oswald Spengler sought to explain the past in order to predict the future. Spengler's great work *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* ("The Decline of the West") mirrors in details the fears of his time. Spengler was not the first to claim the existence of a "Volkseele", a nation's soul, but he also saw the mobs and masses gathering spontaneously during the French Revolution or other crises as beset with a "mass soul", albeit an easily disparaged and shortlived one.<sup>63</sup> The Spanish philosopher

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<sup>59</sup> Halmesvirta p. 196

<sup>60</sup> Michalson p. 253

<sup>61</sup> Halmesvirta pp. 135, 154

<sup>62</sup> Halmesvirta p. 158

<sup>63</sup> Spengler II p. 22

José Ortega y Gasset warned of this phenomenon of the masses in his famous book *The Revolt of the Masses*, published in 1930, in which he raises alarm for the danger that the free and unbridled masses pose for society in general and cultural life in particular – overcrowding, ordinary people taking over positions previously reserved for the elite, dictatorship of the masses, to name but a few of the crucial issues.<sup>64</sup> These European intellectuals obviously perceived their own status as “elite” as threatened through the “vulgarisation” of society through the explosion of popular culture and the demands for further equal rights – and they were not alone.

John Carey, professor at Merton College, Oxford, has shown how the literary intelligentsia in the Anglo-Saxon world perceived the unruly masses in a way that can certainly be expressed as proto-fascist.<sup>65</sup> For the privileged few, the seemingly sudden elevation of a majority of the population to materially acceptable levels, enabling the mass-production and -consumption of culture as well as other products for the first time in European history, certainly looked like preferring quantity above quality with disastrous effects. Many worried about declining cultural standards, about the lack of morals of the modern man, and the harmful impact that a superficial education might have on individuals with no sense of their proper place. These individuals were defined as inferior according to their social standing, but notions of race also mingled with these ideas. Eugenics was a new and promising branch of science that evoked the interests of many intellectuals; W. B. Yeats joined the Eugenics Education Society, and George Bernard Shaw and Aldous Huxley (of all people!) were supportive.<sup>66</sup> T. S. Eliot even wrote in 1932 that the “population should be homogenous... reasons of race and religion combine to make any large number of free-thinking Jews undesirable...”<sup>67</sup> Education should remain an exclusive right of the few and privileged, many of these intellectuals agreed with Friedrich Nietzsche. Curiously, the intellectuals who expressed these views often saw themselves as progressive or modernist idealists, such as D. H. Lawrence, G. B. Shaw and Virginia Woolf. Many had been influenced by a Nietzschean image of the “superman”. However, similar to the fate of the nationalist chauvinists, the intellectual “supermen’s” voices were subdued after the discovery of the realities of the concentration camps. Still, the ambition to protect the purity of culture (as if it were a rare dog breed’s gene pool) from popular culture survived for a very long time. Unfortunately, 1945 did neither mark the sudden ending of eugenic experiments carried out by Western nations.

One might hardly come up with an ideologue further away from Tolkien’s compassionate Catholicism than Nietzsche. However, Tolkien was very aware of his own position on one hand as

<sup>64</sup> Ortega y Gasset p. 8

<sup>65</sup> Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses*

<sup>66</sup> Ibid. p. 13

<sup>67</sup> Quoted in Michalson 253

one of the privileged intellectuals, on the other hand an outsider in the fashionable atheist-modernist scene as a Catholic and Romantic. Doubly different, it is small wonder that he cultivated a certain separatist attitude and preferred to mark a clear distance to any "mass mania" that might become fashionable, even nationalism and triumphant glee in the wake of the Second World War.

When they have introduced American sanitation, morale-pep, feminism, and mass production throughout the Near east, Middle East, Far East, U.S.S.R., the Pampas, el Gran Chaco, the Danubian basin, Equatorial Africa, Hither Further and Inner Mumbo-land, Gondhwanaland, Lhasa, and the villages of darkest Berkshire, how happy we shall be. ... But seriously, I do find this Americo-cosmopolitanism very terrifying. ... I'm not really sure that this victory is going to be so much for the better of the world as a whole and in the long run than the victory of \_\_\_\_ [sic!].<sup>68</sup>

Writing in the last year of the Second World War, Tolkien did not spare his fire when he sneered at American popular culture.

O God! O Montreal! O Minnesota! O Michigan! What kind of mass manias the Soviets can produce remains for peace and prosperity and the removal of war-hypnotism to show. Not quite as dismal as the Western ones, perhaps (I hope).<sup>69</sup>

However, Tolkien suggests that the "mass manias" that he is referring to are also a means of power politics and not merely the whims of some hypothetical blind mass. His conservatist nature was to protest against a too violent upheaval of age-old norms and values, and his prejudiced stance towards everything American was as much sullen defensiveness than a touch of old-school snobbery. When meeting "a very nice young American Officer" on a train in 1944, he found himself provoked to lecture him about English class distinctions upon the "Yank's" allegations of "Feudalism".<sup>70</sup> The tone of the letter is rather jocular and should not be taken as serious evidence of an anti-American attitude. Tolkien's anxiety to preserve certain elements of culture, primarily language, in a state unsullied by any kind of "mass" use. He did not approve of the world language status of English and he did not approve of mass production (such as pocket books!) and modern technological innovations (although he enjoyed driving a car when he was younger). But as far as his own works went, he did not abhor the idea of commercialisation, even by Americans, as long as it was done true to his artistic ambitions. And he certainly never went as far as to toy with ideas such as expressed by Eliot above; Tolkien's personal convictions would have hindered him from that step. "Not that I'm a democrat in any of its current uses; except that I suppose, to speak in literary terms, we are all equal

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<sup>68</sup> *Letters* 53 p. 65 Empty lines in the original.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.* 77 p. 89

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.* 58 p. 69

before the Great Author [...]”<sup>71</sup>

To return to Carey's thesis about the intellectuals and the masses: his point is forcefully made with great amounts of “incriminating evidence”. However, the elitist stance of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century intellectuals makes many of the aforementioned authors guilty by association. Because D. H. Lawrence suggests “a lethal chamber” as the solution to the crippled and suffering masses of the world, it is difficult not to think about the gas chambers of the Third Reich. Fantasies about euthanasia (as in this peacefully described example) and mass destruction on the other hand as a device for self-annihilation are not unusual among people who style themselves the misunderstood elite of a period.<sup>72</sup> Not all intellectuals were as dismissive of the “mass man” consuming everything mass-produced. James Joyce writes in *Ulysses* about a “mass person”, Leopold Bloom, he tries to redeem the individual from the mass to a certain degree – but Carey claims that Joyce's storytelling techniques are precisely what excludes a hypothetical Mr Bloom from reading the very same book.<sup>73</sup> This example is part of Carey's hypothesis that the modernist intellectuals fear of the masses culminated in a removal of the masses' humanity by denying them their individuality (by treating them as a mass), their education, and their capacity of reasoning. The poets and artists actively attempted to alienate the masses by making their works more and more obscure and esoteric to understand. Indeed, the whole culture of modernism is pictured by Carey as invented with the purpose of excluding the masses, and he extends his attack to include not only modern art and literature, but also literature criticism – the entire school of post-structuralism.<sup>74</sup> Now, it might be justified to question the obscure language used by Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes and their colleagues, and to critically examine their theories, but to claim that their sole purpose is to exclude the public from cultural discourse is rather strong meat by John Carey. This is, however, not the place to discuss his hypothesis, and I will turn my attention back to Tolkien and his Orcs.

I have presented several possible sources of inspiration and background information that in all likelihood played a vital role in shaping Tolkien's worldviews. Tolkien made some forceful suggestions that Orcs were to be found in real life. He wrote to his son Christopher in the Royal Air Force in May 1944, reminding him of the consequences of a victory obtained through using the Ring of Power:

But the penalty is, as you will 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

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid. 163 p. 215 (to W. H. Auden)

<sup>72</sup> Carey p. 12

<sup>73</sup> Ibid. p. 20

<sup>74</sup> Ibid. p. 214-216

many Orcs on our side.... Well, there you are: a hobbit amongst the Uruk-hai.<sup>75</sup>

Are the Orcs German or British soldiers? They certainly are equally grotesque caricatures of humanity as “the Huns” created by the early wartime propaganda. Tolkien himself vehemently denied that the Orcs were caricatures of any particular human nation. His own family had some German heritage on his father's side, which Tolkien always downplayed to the advantage of his mother's side – a West-Midlander from the counties on the Welsh borderlands. Tolkien detested Adolf Hitler and the National Socialists for abusing the Germanic mythology for their criminal purposes. The Norse sagas and the closely related Germanic mythologies were a great and very dear source of inspiration for Tolkien. That Hitler took these traditions and adapted them to suit his totalitarian ideology, was near-equal to blasphemy: “Ruining, perverting, misapplying, and making for ever accursed, that noble northern spirit, a supreme contribution to Europe, which I have ever loved, and tried to present in its true light.”<sup>76</sup> Despite this, his sympathy went out to the German people towards the end of the war. In January 1945 he wrote to his son:

The appalling destruction and misery of this war mount hourly: destruction of what should be (indeed is) the common wealth of Europe... Yet people gloat to hear of the endless lines, 40 miles long, of miserable refugees, women and children pouring West, dying on the way... But why gloat! We were supposed to have reached a stage in civilization in which it might be still necessary to execute a criminal, but not to gloat, or to hang his wife and child by him while the orc-crowd hooted.<sup>77</sup>

Here, the orc-crowd is clearly not the German enemy; it is the British media and public at home, gleefully enjoying the news from the front. Tolkien was well aware of the fact that romance and reality have one fundamental difference; in real life, the Orcs come on both sides. Especially military life seemed to bring out the Orc in certain people. As he pointed out to Christopher in one of his letters to the base in South Africa, May 1944:

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 its wars are still derived from the 'inner war' of allegory in which good is on one side and various modes of badness on another. ... But it does make some difference who are your captains and whether they are orc-like per se!<sup>78</sup>

Unless accused of allegory, Tolkien quite generously applied the term Orc to uncultured and brutal

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<sup>75</sup> *Letters* 66 p. 78

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.* 46 p. 56

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.* 111

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.* 82



people. Orcishness knew no national, ideological or ethnic limits. Orcish is as Orcish does. In the real world, unbound by allegory and not embellished by romance, the “Orcs” look just like ourselves. We have to study their behaviour in order to recognise them.

According to Ortega y Gasset's analysis of “the mass person”, the vulgar person can be distinguished from the noble individual because the former does not strive for a higher goal, does not try to elevate herself to a better level. The noble individual serves a higher cause and does not see it as a burden. She tries to live a disciplined life and to control his urges. The mass person only obeys the commands of her basal urges and whims, unless someone forces her to understand that she is “an individual of secondary caste, subjected to many limitations, unable to create or to sustain the organisation that provides her existence with the freedom of movement and satisfaction that is the foundation of her self-affirmation.”<sup>79</sup> Like the Orcs, the masses are chaotic and undisciplined when not led by a powerful will. But while the Orcs are dispersed when Sauron's willpower slackens, the modern masses are more difficult to lead, and are in possession of their own ideas, although – still according to Ortega y Gasset – they do not realise their intellectual limitations. The masses strive to force everyone down to their level. “They nourish a deadly hatred towards anyone that is not of their kind”.<sup>80</sup>

When Tolkien uses his Orcs as a metaphor for some phenomenon in real life, it becomes clear that the usefulness of these creatures is not bound by any particular race or nation. Tolkien's image of the Orc is strikingly similar to the modernist scarecrow, the vulgar masses. This shows especially clearly in cases when race and class are fused together to one compromising answer to complicated questions in society and history. However, Tolkien seemed to fear the masses less than the whims of the superpowers. The man in the mob who lets himself go with the crowd loses self-control and becomes a puppet. It is precisely this that the Orcs lack, and which does not elevate them to the level of noteworthy villains, either: *Self-control*. They merely follow their destructive instincts to whatever end – usually their own, untimely one. Contrary to Ortega y Gasset's aggressive and chaotic masses, impossible to control by anything else than their own urges, Tolkien's image of the “Orc” as a Man is a mass person as a puppet in the hand of some greater and destructive power. He perceived quite clearly that the eagerness for people to be led around was also their greatest danger. As an academic, he had the intellectual chutzpah to admire himself in the relatively exclusive position of affording to cultivate critical thinking. And as a Catholic, he saw himself as an outsider among Christians, a humble believer, but also an elitist out of necessity. Therefore, Tolkien could neither ungrudgingly

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<sup>79</sup> Ortega y Gasset p. 58 (my translation)

<sup>80</sup> Ibid. p. 72

sympathise with the masses, nor distance himself fully from them, due to his Christian ideals of agapé. The “Orcs” of the real world are not a danger per se; they are simply a fact of life, an obstacle to be encountered, a minor point of struggle. The true danger lies in the seductive words of a Saruman or a Wormtongue of this world, or in the crushing power of a ruthless Sauron. Judging from Tolkien's letters, he could find more than enough of those in the world, as well.



Propaganda film of the Third Reich – “*Degenerate Art*”

## 4. CONCLUSIONS

The following three points of interest summarise the results of this paper.

### **1. The otherness of the inimical creatures in Tolkien's works is visualised largely through visual and verbal characteristics. (Chapter 3.1)**

The Orcs are the monstrous Other in Tolkien's works – but not monstrous enough to be completely inhuman. Their looks signify a racial Other, just as their way of speech set them apart as a race. Moreover, their behaviour is patterned in order to connect them with beasts (the Other is dehumanised) and ruthless brutality (the Other is demoralised). But they remain within the group of sentient beings, which is emphasised through a few poignant comments in the works of Tolkien. However, this Othering process only creates the appropriate response within the framework of a certain culture.

### **2. Their otherness is motivated philosophically in Tolkien's extensive commentary to his own work. (Chapter 3.2)**

By comparing what Tolkien himself writes about *Beowulf*, the Anglo-Saxon poetic masterpiece, with his own storytelling techniques in *The Lord of the Rings*, I have reached the conclusion that the purpose of the Orcs (similarly to *Beowulf's* Grendel) is to provide a mirror image of the fallen human. This is one of Tolkien's conscious aims. The fact that the Orcs are irredeemable and therefore an Unchristian feature of *The Lord of the Rings*, is no hinder to their existence. Primarily, just as *Beowulf*, *The Lord of the Rings* takes place in a pre-Christian setting, although written or compiled by a Christian author. Therefore, all-too-obvious Christian notions would upset the illusion of authenticity. Secondly, Tolkien has no difficulties in fathoming the idea that some souls might, indeed, be irredeemable after their fall. Hell must have been created for a purpose.

### **3. By comparing how Tolkien uses the words he coined for his "Others" as applied to the real world, we gain insight into another meaning of the Orcs – the general fear and loathing among intellectuals in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century of the so-called "masses". (Chapter 3.3)**

Compared with this fellow intellectuals in Britain in his time, Tolkien stood apart as a stubborn late Romantic with no modernist ambitions whatsoever. His esthetic ideals were quite conservative and humble, and politically he cheerfully declared himself an anarchist or an old-fashioned monarchist when it suited his moods. His values and ideals were conservative, certainly partly due to his Catholic beliefs, but also because of a lack of interest in the world outside university. However, he not only rejected industrialism because it polluted nature, but also because it created a type of people

that he could not feel any affinity to. This particular notion is echoed among many authors of the time, both in the field of fiction and most blatantly in the field of non-fiction, where the image of a West corrupted by the rise of mass culture and democracy mixed with the notion of a threat of foreign masses flocking to the borders. The Other becomes an amalgamation of the differences perceived in race, culture and social class. Interestingly, Tolkien's views are modified by the fact that he perceived himself also as a kind of Other in the context of religion and social class. Therefore he actively spoke out against racism and anti-semitism when he happened to encounter such sentiments, and he utterly disliked nationalism of the “vulgar”, chauvinist kind. That was Orc behaviour.

With his ambition to create a mythology for England, Tolkien proved himself to be a child of the age of nationalism. However, he succeeded in creating a mythology that in spite of its obvious traces of Norse and Anglo-Saxon mythology (and the more hidden Finnish elements, as well as the Celtic nuances that some might perceive) has become close to universal. In fact, *The Lord of the Rings* has set a standard for many fantasy writers to follow, and it is almost disturbing to notice how many of them set their own “secondary creations” in a world so similar to Middle-earth.<sup>81</sup> In this perspective, Tolkien's humble words to Milton Waldman about his creative ambitions become almost moving:

I would draw some of the great tales in fullness, and leave many only placed in the scheme, and sketched. The cycles should be linked to a majestic whole, and yet leave scope for other minds and hands, wielding paint and music and drama. Absurd.<sup>82</sup>

Today, we can only state the facts – Tolkien's “absurd” ambition was a devastating success. However, one reason for the undying popularity of his mythology might be that all the great nationalist romantic myths that once flourished in Europe are dying out. Immigration influx, youth cultures and globalisation have forced most nation-states to view themselves from an outside perspective and to question old self-images. The intellectuals have had to come to terms with the “mass society”, and new generations have grown that take their rights for self-expression for granted in ways that would bring Ortega y Gasset to the brink of despair. There are, undoubtedly, more Orcs than ever in the world – but we tend to see the Orcs somewhere else than in ourselves, as always.

The modernist intellectuals had difficulties accepting deficiencies in the society or in their fellow humans. Partly this was due to a Nietzschean ideal of the superhuman – but this is only a fragment of the explanation. Another, more serious reason lies in the liberal humanist's idealistic ambition to

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<sup>81</sup> For example, the successful authors Guy Gavriel Kay (*The Fionavar Tapestry, Sailing to Sarantium*), Tad Williams (*The Dragonbone Chair*), and David Eddings (*The Belgariad, The Malloreon*) all write about worlds that are more than just topographically similar to medieval Europe and Middle-earth. Kay even includes some creatures called Svart Alfar and Urganachs that are remarkably similar to Orcs and Uruk-hai.

<sup>82</sup> *Letters* 131 p. 145

reform humanity – and their bitter disappointment as humanity fails to produce Utopia. The response of the liberal humanist – as Ortega y Gasset declared himself to be – is to look for other answers. The idea cannot be faulty – the problem has to be humanity's nature. And thus the modernist evolves to a racist, a fascist, or a nihilist. Ultimately, the modernist intellectuals' fate is ironic, as John Carey stages them as the intellectual “Orcs” of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.



Orc by the author.

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