The Races of the Rings: Cultural Values Exhibited in the Poetry of Middle-earth

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This article is a linguistic analysis of poetry found in J. R. R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings. *The author analyses one poem from each of the four main Middle-earth races: Hobbits, Dwarves, Elves, and Men. Tolkien was highly educated in the field of linguistics, and was particularly knowledgeable about Old English and Middle English. These languages had a significant impact upon his novels, including the poetry found therein. Beyond the linguistic content of these poems, Tolkien was able to subtly structure his poetry so as to highlight distinct societal values of each race. In this article the author guides the reader through a linguistic reading of each poem, and, following Fabb's suggestion that emphasis reflects cultural importance, makes several claims about the values of each race, based on the poems' content.*

J.R.R. Tolkien began playing with language as early as 1914 when he read the Old English Poem "Crist" and seemed to dwell on the word "Earendil," the name of a fisherman from that legend (Noel, p 4). Fifteen years later, this word appeared in an unfinished poem he wrote, and it was not long before that seedling turned into an entire world with four main races and fourteen languages. That world became the setting for his books, most notably The Lord of the Rings, which was originally published in 1954.

Tolkien loved language. He loved to play with word meanings and to create new words (Downing). He understood that language is tied to culture, and it would be impossible for him to create languages without creating cultures and people that coincide with them. Tolkien also wrote poems about the history and legends of these peoples, in which he exhibited a wide range of styles and features.

To date, much criticism–both good and bad—has been written about Tolkien's works generally and his poems specifically. Scholars have discussed how the poems make the world of Middle-earth more "real" (Downing), how they help the characters accept their situations and express their roles in it (Kokot), and even how they play an almost religious role in helping the characters overcome darkness (Agan). So far though, no one has done a linguistic analysis of these poems.

In the book *Linguistics and Literature*, Nigel Fabb discusses various forms of parallelism used in literature (structural, semantic, phonological, lexical, and canonical). He explains that the using or flouting of parallelisms draws attention to important aspects of literature. Based on this, I believe it is possible to identify cultural values by analyzing the parallelisms of that culture's literature.

In order to better understand the cultures of The Lord of the Rings, and to better appreciate Tolkien, I will analyze one poem or one stanza of one poem from each of the four main races that inhabit Middle-earth (Elves, Dwarves, Hobbits, and Men), looking particularly for types of parallelisms to see what these features reveal about the cultures. Each of the poems I chose tells us about a hero. I do this both for thematic consistency between poems, and because the things each culture chooses to remember about the subjects of their poetry will add to our understanding of that

culture's values. I expect to find that Tolkien understood what he was doing when he wrote the poems, and to discover subtle clues in their structure and word choice that indicate cultural identity.

While there are many ways to organize this discussion, I have chosen to fully examine one poem at a time. I do this for two main reasons. First, every culture is unique and cannot be fairly compared. Looking at one feature from all four poems might give the impression that one culture is "better" than another. Second, it might be confusing to keep track of which culture has which features if all four poems are examined together. I will begin with the Elves—the first race to appear on Middle-earth according to Tolkien's creation myth—then I will look at the Dwarves, followed by the Hobbits, and I will conclude with Men, the last race to appear in Middle-earth (see appendix).

Elves

"Tintallë" (Galadriel's lament)

9 An sí Tintallë Verda Oilossëo

10 ve fanyar máryat Elentári ortanë

11 ar ilyë tier undulávë lumbulë;

12 ar sindanóriello caita mornië

13 i falmalinnar imbë met, ar hísië

14 untúpa Calaciryo míri oialë.

15 Sí vanwa ná, Rómello vanwa, Valimar!

(Tolkien, *Fellowship*, 424; translation in appendix)

Elvish is the most complete of Tolkien's languages. Between the poems and the phrases in the books, there is enough of the grammar discernible that people actually learn to speak the language—though the vocabulary is too small to be functional (Noel, 70). Elvish is the only language family (there are two main languages and a few smaller dialects) that is not Indo-European. It was based on Finnish, of the Finno-Ugric family. Because of this, I studied a Finnish-English dictionary for possible cognates. (The result of this research is in the Appendix.)

This poem may seem vague at first, so let me clarify a few things: Tintallë (also called Elbereth) is a member of the Valar, an ancient race that preceded the Elves. She created the stars so the Elves would have light, and she lives on Mount Everwhite.

The structure of this poem is less obvious than the other three. There is not quite a rhyme pattern, though most of the lines have a final or penultimate "ë". Most of the lines have twelve syllables in an iambic rhythm (based on the word stresses). I could not find any pattern of internal rhymes, alliteration, or assonance. I also could not find any structural parallelisms. It is possible that there is some binding feature other than the narration. Perhaps, the language itself binds the lines.

Tolkien meant the Elvish language to be beautiful. It "takes on poetic, incantatory quality which evokes a sense of timeless-ness and remoteness" (Downing, 29). The sounds of Elvish flow like water over pebbles; its very nature draws attention to its form, suggesting that the use of literary forms to draw attention to the language is unnecessary.

Since it appears that beauty and poetry are innate to the Elves and their language, we will consider the semantic features of the poem. Every line mentions light or shadow, white or gray. Emotion is expressed as a matter of light versus dark, as the Star-Kindler seems to express her grief by covering the stars with clouds. This suggests that the stars are important to the Elves. Joy comes from starlight, while grief dwells in shadow. This hero is remembered by her influence on the stars because stars are the only things as long-lived as Elves.

Dwarves

"Durin and Khazad-dum"

17 A king he was on carven throne

18 In many-pillared halls of stone

19 With golden roof and silver floor,

20 And runes of power upon the door.

21 The light of sun and star and moon

22 The shining lamps of crystal hewn

23 Undimmed by cloud or shade of night

24 There shone for ever fair and bright (Tolkien, *Fellowship*, 355).

We know very little about the Dwarvish tongue because Tolkien provided only a few words. Even many of the names are "use-names" taken from the tongues of Men (Noel, 31). The Dwarvish tongue is part of the Rhovannion family (containing several languages, mostly spoken east of Mirkwood), which is similar to Old English, Gothic, Old Norse, and other Scandinavian languages.

The stanza above is only one verse of a longer poem. Because Gimli (a dwarf) performs this song, and because it speaks of his people, we can assume that it would have been written in Dwarvish, but all we have is Tolkien's translation. We do not know the extent to which each language influenced Dwarvish, which would help us infer the original form. This makes it more difficult to know what structural patterns would have existed.

However, there are a few things we can note. The whole poem has an iambic structure with an AABBCC rhyme scheme. Every line has an adjective phrase that only describes Dwarf-made objects: carven throne (17), golden roof (19), runes of power (20), and so on. There seems to be some kind of conflict between the natural and artificial. The stone has been made into halls, the lamps are "undimmed" by clouds or night (23)—unlike the sun, moon, and stars (21)—and even silver and gold have been turned into some kind of plating (19). The creations are described with detail, but little thought has gone into the creation of the poem itself.

Looking at this stanza, it is easy to see that dwarves are craftsmen. They focus on their works of art and only mention in passing things of nature, and most of these are things they have crafted or altered in some way. They compare their works to nature almost as though they are trying to become creators, yet all of their creations are described with adjectives, as though they know that nothing they make can ever compare with the world around them. It also may be significant that there is little poetic structure to the poem. This may indicate that the Dwarves place little value on something as ephemeral as music and words. This is a race that

values skill, craftsmanship, and artisanry. Things should be built to last and to be beautiful. A Dwarf is only as important as his creations, and the memory of him is only as eternal as what he has made.

Hobbits

"Aragorn"

1 All that is gold does not glitter,

2 Not all those who wander are lost;

3 The old that is strong does not wither,

4 Deep roots are not reached by the frost.

5 From the ashes a fire shall be woken,

6 A light from the shadow shall spring;

7 Renewed shall be blade that was broken,

8 The crownless again shall be king (Tolkien, *Fellowship*, 193).

The Hobbit language is a dialect of Westron, which is very similar Old English. We only have a couple words from Hobbitish, so we will look at this poem in English and trust that language change and Tolkien's translation have provided us with an accurate rendition.

 The rhyme scheme is a simple ABABCDCD. There is some structural parallelism, but not to the extent we will see in the poem of Men (Appendix). What stand out are the many semantic groupings. For example, gold relates with glitter (1); it makes us think of light (6), crowns (8), and is a sign of kingship (8). There are also antonyms like the frost (4) of winter against spring (6), the strong (3) versus the broken (7), and being woken (5) rather than withered (3). (A full list of semantic parallels and contrasts is included in the appendix.) It is also interesting that everything refers either directly or indirectly to nature: the deep roots (4) of ancient trees, the withering (3) of sickly plants, the frost (4) of winter, and the renewal (7) of spring (6).

 The Hobbits claim to be a simple folk, but their poem is the most complex. There are layers of meaning in each line, and

connections between and across the lines. This is a race at one with nature, so in tune with it that they compare their heroes to it almost subconsciously. Hobbits have deep roots (not only in the sense of solidity of character, but also in strong family ties). Hobbits do not wander, but Aragorn is not a Hobbit, so this is an exception (the poem almost demands he not be held to Hobbit standards). Strength is more important than age, and something does not have to glitter to be of great worth. The Hobbits also value the turning of the seasons, the constant pattern of life and death. An individual exists only in passing, but they are part of an eternal pattern. Nothing is permanent; everything changes, but just like nature, it changes slowly and comfortably.

Men

"Riders of the Mark"

1 Where now the horse and the rider? Where is the horn that was blowing?

2 Where is the helm and the hauberk, and the light hair flowing?

3 Where is the hand on the harpstring, and the red fire glowing?

4 Where is the spring and the harvest and the tall corn growing?

5 They have passed like rain on the mountain, like wind in the meadow;

6 The days have gone down in the West behind the hills into shadow.

7 Who shall gather the smoke of the dead wood burning,

8 Or behold the flowing years from the Sea returning? (Tolkien, *Towers*, 112)

This poem was written by and about the Rohirrim of the race of Men. Tolkien did not give us much about this language, but the words we do have indicate that their language was closely related to Old English—and all these words relate to their distinction as "Masters of Horses," the meaning of Elvish Rohirrim or "Horse-folk," Éothéod, as they call themselves (Noel, 22). Because of this

closeness, we will look at the poem as though it were written in English and trust Tolkien's translation as being fairly true to the original.

First, notice the rhyme pattern: lines 1–4 rhyme, lines 5 and 6 rhyme, and lines 7 and 8 rhyme. You may also notice the question-answer form, and that almost every line consists of two phrases. Only after careful study will one see the two features that reveal the most about this people—syntactic parallelism and alliteration.

Looking at line 1, we find that the two halves are completely parallel. Then lines 2–4 can be seen as being nearly as parallel (the only difference is that line 3 has a prepositional phrase, where lines 2 and 4 have coordinating conjunctions). The interesting part, though, is that this parallelism breaks down after line 4. Lines 5 and 6 have some internal parallelism (for example, 5 reads, "They have passed like rain on the mountain, like wind in the meadow," and line 6 has three unifying prepositional phrases), and lines 7 and 8 are basically parallel, but not as completely as the first 4.

This may seem incidental, but if we look at the alliterations, we find a similar pattern. Nouns beginning with "h" appear in each of the first 4 lines, but nowhere in lines 5–8. There is also some alliteration between these lines that is not found later on. There is structure and line binding when speaking of Men, but only basic form when speaking of the world they have left behind.

This structure reveals something about the people who wrote it. They viewed their existence based on their influence and control of the world around them, particularly nature. What is a horse without a rider? What is a horn unless it is blowing? What are harpstings without a hand to play them? And what is the spring without corn for the harvest? Without Men to shape and give purpose to nature, it becomes chaotic and unstructured. If nature becomes unstructured, then Men become forgotten.

Conclusion

By looking at the literary and linguistic features of several poems from The Lord of the Rings, I was able to identify some defining characteristics of the cultures of Tolkien's races. Elves are im-

mortal, or nearly so, and value things which are as permanent and constant as they themselves are. They love starlight because it does not live and die like the earth around them, but persists, and is constant and predictable. This can be seen in the analogy of Tintallë, the Star-Kindler, who in her grief, hides rather than ignites the stars.

Dwarves are craftsmen who value skill and the quality of finished works. This is evident from the poem's focus on Durin's creations. They also seem to aim to become like the Creator, comparing their works to nature and its endlessness.

Hobbits are solid and practical, like the holes they live in. They prize the simplicity and consistency of the turning of the seasons, as can be seen in the analogies in their description of Aragorn.

Men value structure and the influence they have on the world around them. This is seen not only in the word choice and alterations, but also in the syntactic parallelisms within the lines of the poem.

By his word choice and structure, Tolkien manages to create poetry that subtly expresses the cultural differences of his races. He artfully weaves poetic features, understanding what these features reveal about the cultures they describe. From the layers of structural parallelism for Men to the bare-boned structure of the Dwarves, the literary forms of these four poems add another layer to our understanding of these cultures. I imagine if we examined the poems of the other Middle-earth races, we would find this same degree of mastery.

It may seem frivolous to look for clues about the cultures of races that Tolkien invented, but there are two important reasons for doing it. First, it proves that Tolkien really did know what he was doing because he was able to encode cultural information into the literature of the races. Second, if this analysis can be done and proven accurate with a fictional culture, the same would be true of an actual culture. In my research, I discovered that Tolkien truly was a genius, and this is partially shown through the detail of his poetry and the way it reflects the important differences in cultural values and expectations that each of the races within his world have.

Appendix

Elves

Elvish => Finnish:

Tintalle (from tinta, cause to sparkle) = probably: syty-(to light, ignite, kindle) + tähti (star)

Oio (eternal, everlastingly) = ikui- (eternal, everlasting, perpetual) {particularly 'ui'?}

Lossoë (white, snow) =possibly lumi (snow)

Fanyar = none

Ma- (hand) = possibly mää- (finnish root that seems to imply control, order, direction, determination, etc.)

Elentari (star-queen)=none (Finnish royalty words appear to come from Germanic künig.)

Ortanë (lift up) = kohotaa (raise, lift)

Tier (roads) = tie (road, way)

Undu-lavë = none (idiomatic?)

Lumbulë = hämärä (no structural connection, but both equate dusk and shadow)

Sinda (gray) = synkkä (dreary, gloomy) or sini (blue)

Caita (lies) = sijaita (be situated, lie)

Met (us two) = meidät (us) or meitä (us)

Hísië (mist) = usva? (Mist)

Túpa (roof) {un-túpa: down-roof, idiomatic for "cover") = tupa (main room of a house, cottage)

Míri (jewels) = helmiellä (sparkle), mieliala (mood, spirits, morale)

Oialë (everlastingly) = ikuinen (eternal, everlasting, perpetual)

A Gloss: a morpheme-for-morpheme approximate literal translation

An sí Tintallë Verda Oilossë-o

For now (Star-)Kindler Everwhite-from

ve fanyar már-ya-t Elen-tári ortanë

Like (white)-clouds hands-her-two Star-Queen lifted up

ar ilyë tier undu-lávë lumbulë;

And all roads down-licked (heavy) shadow

ar sindanóriello caita mornië

And grey-country-from lies darkness

i falma-li-nnar imbë met, ar hísië

The foaming-waves-many-upon between us.two and mist

un-túpa Calaciryo míri oialë.

Down-roofs Calacirya's jewels everlastingly

Sí vanwa ná, Rómello vanwa, Valimar!

Now lost is (to one) from the East

Tolkien's translation:

For now the Kindler, Varda, the Queen of the Stars, from Mount Everwhite has lifted up her hands like clouds, and all paths are drowned deep in shadow; and out of a grey country darkness lies on the foaming waves between us, and the mist covers the jewels of Calacirya for ever. Now lost, lost to those from the East is Valimar!

Dwarves

Semantic:

King, throne, hall, gold, silver, runes of power, crystal

Hall, throne, roof, floor, door, lamp

Carven, (pillared), hewn

Light, sun, star, moon, lamps (crystal)

Sun, star, moon, cloud, shadow, night

Hobbits

Parallels:

Gold: glitter

Gold: light

Gold: crown

Gold: King

Wander: lost

Lost: wither

Old: wither

Old: deep roots

Old: ashes?

Wither: frost

Wither: ashes?

Fire: light

Fire: renewed (Phoenix)

Woken: renewed

Woken: spring (season)

Renewed: spring

Broken blade: crown less king

Opposites:

Wander: lost

Strong: broken

Wither: woken

Frost: fire

Frost: spring

Ashes: fire

(Fire: shadow)

Light: shadow

Renewed: broken

Crownless: king

Nature:

Old, strong, deep roots =tree

Wither like plants

Frost of winter

Woken, spring = season: life from death, renewal, rebirth,

Light from shadow = dawn, spring

Blade … Like grass?

PIE roots:

Gold= (ghel-) to shine

Glitter= "

Wander= (wendh-) to turn, weave, wind

Lost= (leu-) to loosen, divide, cut apart

Old= (al-) to grow, nourish

Strong= (strenk) tight, narrow

Wither= [through weather?] (wē-) to blow

(Deep= dheub: deep)

(Root= wrād-: branch, root)

(Reach= reig-: reach, stretch out)

Frost= (preus-) to freeze, burn

Ashes= (as-) to burn, glow

(Fire= pa^wr: fire)

Waken= (weg-) to be strong, be lively

(Light= leuk-: light, brightness)

Shadow= (skot-) dark, shade

Spring= (spergh-) to move, hasten, spring

Renew= (re-) backwards + (newo-) new

Blade= (bhel-) to thrive, bloom

(Break= bhreg-: to break)

Crown= ({s}ker-) to turn, bend

King= (gen^) to give birth, beget

Syntactic parallels:

1	All	that is gold	does not glitter
2	Not all	those who wander are	lost
3	The old	that is strong	does not wither
		Deep roots	are not reached by the frost

4	From the ashes	a fire	shall be woken
5	A light from	the shadow	shall spring

6	Renewed shall be	blade that was broken
7	The crownless	again shall be king.

Men

Today's world sees this term as sexist when referring to human beings. Tolkien, however, used it as a proper noun (much like an ethnic or religious distinction). It also refers to a fictional species that could be considered human, not the human inhabitants of earth. I will, therefore, use this word without apology throughout my paper.

Alliteration/assonance:

hORse, hORn,

helm, hauberk, hair,

hand, hARpstring,

hARvest

have (unstressed), behind, hills,

who,

behold

Rhyme:

blowing, flowing, glowing, growing

meadow, shadow (pseudo rhyme)

burning, returning

Syntactic Parallelism:

1 Where   now the horse   and the rider?

  Where is   the horn
that was blowing?

2 Where is   the helm   and the hauberk, and the
light hair   flowing?

3 Where is   the hand on the harpstring,   and the
red fire   glowing?

4 Where is   the spring   and the harvest   and the
tall corn   growing?

5 They have passed like rain on the mountain,
                 like wind in the meadow;

6 The days have gone down in the West

        behind the hills

        into shadow.

7 Who shall   gather the   smoke of the   dead wood
burning,

8   Or behold the flowing years from the   Sea
returning?

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