

Humour in and around
the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien

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A Fountain of Mirth: Laughter in Arda

pre-publication offprint**Abstract**

The relationship between laughter and critical thinking is an expanding area of investigation for the understanding of human behaviour. To this point, however, insufficient attention has been afforded to understanding laughter when reading texts as both a narrative event and a signifier. This paper will investigate how laughter informs both the construction of the “Fairy-Story” and the representation of its themes. In the works of J.R.R. Tolkien, including *The Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings*, despite differences of race, gender and moral standing, characters consistently laugh: humans and non-humans, heroes and villains, in joy and in contempt. With reference to Robert Provine’s scientific investigation into laughter as well as traditional laughter theories, this paper will examine how Tolkien uses laughter in his texts in relation to themes of morality, power and the inevitability of change. This paper will therefore argue that Tolkien takes a flexible approach to the role of laughter in the dynamics of morality and history and places them within his broader theodicy as explored in *Morgoth’s Ring*. The paper aims as such to provide a greater depth of understanding to the place of laughter in Tolkien’s work and how this deepens his understanding of the questions and themes which are so integral to the narratives of Arda as well as enhancing the appreciation of Tolkien’s work as a corpus of interconnected texts.

Characters in the narratives of J.R.R. Tolkien consistently laugh. This is one feature which occurs throughout the entire length of the history of Arda, Tolkien’s mythic, prehistoric Earth, despite this grand narrative featuring an enormous cast of characters of numerous “races” from Hobbits to angelic Ainur. It can be identified in examples from the beginning of Tolkien’s mythic history¹ to its end at the conclusion of *The Lord of the Rings*. If any activity in Tolkien’s works is universal among characters, it is certainly laughter. In *The Lord of the Rings* alone, forms of the verb “to laugh” including “laughed” and “laughter” are used on at least two hundred and forty-one occasions. It is similarly, if not equally,

¹ The term, if not the concept, of ‘mythic Prehistory’ goes back to John D. Rateliff (see his paper “And All the Days of Her Life Are Forgotten” *The Lord of the Rings* as Mythic Prehistory’)

proliferate in *The Silmarillion* and *The Hobbit*, and none of these instances account for further references to mockery, jest and mirth. Laughter is often a casual occurrence, commonly found in the facetious conversations of hobbits, but it is also dwelt upon at various times, such as when Sauron laughs three times in mockery of the deluded venture of Ar-Pharazôn from his throne in the Temple of Melkor in Armenelos. It is surprising, then, that so little attention, which is to say almost none, has been paid to the prominent status of laughter in the works of Tolkien.

This is not as surprising, however, when considering the fact that laughter has generally been overlooked in the study of human behaviour. In the fundamental work *Laughter: A Scientific Investigation*, Robert Provine (9) observes that laughter “has been overlooked because of the human tendency to neglect and undervalue the commonplace.” This phenomenon must, therefore, extend to Tolkien’s work, where laughter is widespread, yet it has thus far almost entirely gone unnoticed and unstudied. This chapter will therefore endeavour to establish a working understanding of what laughter actually is and its relevance to Tolkien’s theory of fantasy proposed in “On Fairy-Stories”, and then proceed to apply that understanding to a reading of Tolkien’s narratives of Arda. The main argument of this chapter, as a result, is that laughter fundamentally functions as a signifier in Tolkien’s narratives of his primary thematic concerns, these being spiritual or moral conflict, the limitations of worldly power and, most importantly, Tolkien’s central theme, the inevitability of change. It will be observed that laughter is an applicable response to these thematic concerns, but also that Tolkien does not necessarily use them in immediate or obvious ways. Tolkien’s characters certainly do react with laughter to certain situations with thematic relevance to his arguments, but laughter is also used to indicate the presence of a thematic concern. This is to say that characters do not always laugh because they themselves recognise, for instance, the inevitability of change, but rather that certain characters’ laughter also indicates on a more abstract level instances of thematic relevance.

Laughter can be understood on a fundamental level as a human instinct. Provine establishes it as related to the evolution of respiration and a psychological relationship between enjoyment and breath: “the sound of labored breathing came to symbolize the playful state that produced it” (97). Laughter is a primal action ingrained in the human psyche. In this way, its prevalence in Tolkien’s

narratives serves to humanise better the disparate peoples which cannot be classified, or wholly classified, as “Men”: Elves, Dwarves, Hobbits, Orcs and the Ainur. In that way alone laughter serves a valuable purpose in ensuring that the behaviour of Tolkien’s characters is credible and realistic and that his themes therefore have relevance through their supernatural and fantastic content. This of course has bearing to the concept of “Enchantment” in Fantasy as proposed by Tolkien in “On Fairy-Stories”. Is Enchantment “the hard recognition that things are so in the world as it appears under the sun” (OFS 144)? Laughter is a mechanism which portrays the function of the Secondary World, which is to say that there are behaviours which are consistent and identifiable despite the non-real setting and supernatural contents. That being said, laughter has a substantially greater role in the texts beyond humanising the characters. In this way laughter is not purely some instinct over which individuals have no conscious control or utter in simplistic circumstances.

In *Studies of Laughter in Interaction*, Alexa Hepburn and Scott Varney note that laughter is “something which is closely interactionally coordinated and used to accomplish specific interactional tasks” (26). In *The Linguistics of Laughter* Alan Partington (22) perceives similarly that “laughter can express aggression, ridicule and embarrassment but also courage and defiance and a sense of achievement.” In this way “laughter and humour, though connected, are not entirely one and the same” (Partington 22). Laughter cannot be understood simply as a response to humour and occurs in a variety of scenarios. This is of course fairly appropriate when dealing with Tolkien’s works, which vary in tone from the whimsical and humorous narration of *The Hobbit* to the lofty mode of *The Silmarillion*, in which probably the only instance of observable humour is the Vala Aulë’s blithe remark to his spouse Yavanna regarding how the existence of the Ents will not in any way eliminate the Dwarves’ need of wood. It is necessary, therefore, to consider laughter in a more complex fashion.

The traditional theories of laughter, which are discussed by both Provine in *Laughter: A Scientific Investigation* and Michael Billig in *Laughter and Ridicule*, are narrow and reductive in modern terms, although they may have elements of applicability to the occurrence of laughter in Tolkien’s work. These traditional theories are summarised by Billig (38) as such: “the superiority theories, the incongruity theories and the release theories.” The superiority theory argues

that “laughter results from disparaging or degrading others” (Billig 39). The incongruity theory is described by Provine as “the effect of the unexpected in triggering laughter” (14) while the relief theory can be understood from Partington’s (97) summary that its supporters traditionally believed that “laughter often accompanies a release from constraint.” Laughter is, of course, all of these things and more. Each of these theoretical understandings of laughter applies to certain characters and situations in Tolkien’s narratives. Just as people do not laugh for one reason alone, characters in the works of Tolkien laugh for a variety of reasons, and laughter in Tolkien’s works contributes to each of the aforementioned themes.

The first way in which laughter functions as a signifier of the thematic concerns of Tolkien’s narratives is in how it is uttered in moral conflict by Good and Evil characters. Tolkien’s antagonists utilise laughter as a weapon and as an instrument of deception, while their enemies utilise laughter as a way of acknowledging the inevitable victory of good. This can be observed at the earliest point in the history of Arda by contrasting the ancient foes Melkor and Tulkas. Tolkien states that when Tulkas arrives in Arda, “Melkor fled before his wrath and his laughter, and forsook Arda, and there was peace for a long age.” A connection is therefore formed here between laughter and confidence, strength and righteous anger. The anger of Tulkas “passes like a mighty wind” (S 35). Tulkas “laughs ever,” a characteristic which is contrasted to Oromë, who is “dreadful in anger” (S 29). It is the laughter of Tulkas, foremost, which represents his strength of personality and conviction: “even in the face of Melkor he laughed” (S 29). Here Tolkien uses laughter as an expression of the futility of evil, for though less mighty than Melkor, Tulkas has right on his side. As such the laughter of Tulkas is, ultimately, a more fitting response to evil than the “dreadful” anger of Oromë. In the essay “Melkor Morgoth” published in *Morgoth’s Ring* Tolkien observes that

Tulkas represents the good side of ‘violence’ in the war against evil. This is an absence of compromise which will even face apparent evils (such as war) rather than parley; and does not (in any kind of pride) think that any one less than Eru can redress this, or rewrite the tale of Arda. (MR 392)

Observable in Tulkas’ laughter are elements of both the superiority theory and the relief theory: relief from Melkor’s evil, and indulgence of the ultimate

superiority of Eru over Melkor. This is heavily associated with the concept of consolation proposed by Tolkien in “On Fairy-Stories” which perceives the final victory of good in the face of adversity: “it denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat and in so far is *evangelium*, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy” (OFS 153). Laughter in this way is presented by Tolkien as an act of repudiating the seeming might of evil and the inevitability of disaster. If Tulkas embodies the notion of openly confronting evil, and one of his primary characteristics, as observed, is laughter, then laughter can be seen to represent an act of consolation which defies the final victory of evil. This defiant quality of laughter can be observed through less demiurgic examples elsewhere. When Saruman is exerting his efforts of persuasion at their uttermost in the final interview in the ruins of Isengard, for instance, and the Men of Rohan are convinced, the narrative abruptly alters trajectory with the remark “[t]hen Gandalf laughed. The fantasy vanished like a puff of smoke” (*LotR* 568). Here again it can be observed that laughter is used as a form of public confrontation of deception and evil, and one with a particular propensity for changing perceptions. It is an act of “dispelling” which cuts through and eliminates plots and devices.

The role of laughter in moral conflict can also, however, be explored from the opposite side. Understanding Tolkien’s use of laughter is increased by seeing laughter as a signifier of evil and its relationship to good. This is the point at which laughter’s signifying quality emerges, in reference to the circumstances in which it is uttered by antagonists. To Tulkas must be opposed, of course, the laughter of Melkor, which embodies evil in despite, or perhaps in wilful ignorance, of its ultimate failure. Melkor’s laughter is associated with deception. Tolkien writes that in Valinor Melkor “laughed in secrecy” (*S* 68) as Fëanor begins to believe the lies he has been spreading. Melkor also “laughed in his heart” (*S* 74) upon convincing Ungoliant to assist his plan to destroy the Two Trees with the false promise of jewels to consume. In contrast Tolkien observes that Melkor “laughed aloud” as he “leapt swiftly down the mountain slopes” but it is essential to observe that “Ungoliant was at his side, and her darkness covered them” (*S* 74). Melkor’s laughter is again dissembled and hidden. Tolkien reiterates this theme when Melkor laughs a second time in *The Silmarillion* when, safe in Angband and now referred to as Morgoth, “seeing the division of

his foes he laughed” and he “caused vast smokes and vapours to be made [...] staining the bright airs in the first mornings of the world. A wind came out of the east, and bore them over Hithlum, darkening the new Sun” (S 109). Here Morgoth’s laughter is again associated with hiding, deception, confusion and the rendering of truth obscure. Morgoth next laughs when the increasing fame of Túrin brings him to his attention: “Then Morgoth laughed, for now by the Dragon-helm was Húrin’s son revealed to him again; and ere long Amon Rúdh was ringed with spies” (S 205). Here a failure of his enemy’s secrecy brings him mirth. Morgoth laughs a final time after the fall of Gondolin when the Elves are pressed to their last haven at the Sirion: “in his black thought he laughed, regretting not the one Silmaril that he had lost, for by it as he deemed the last shred of the people of the Eldar should vanish from Middle-earth and trouble it no more” (S 244). Careful examination of the language in this passage reveals the depth of Morgoth’s deceit, which here verges on self-deception. By this point in the narrative Tolkien has already revealed Morgoth’s “great wrath” at the loss of the Silmaril to Beren and Lúthien, given cataclysmic shape as “thunder rolled, lightnings leaped upward, and the mountains quaked. Fire and smoke belched forth from Thangorodrim, and flaming bolts were hurled far abroad, falling ruinous upon the lands; and the Noldor in Hithlum trembled” (S 182). Morgoth’s reaction belies his true regret for the absent Silmaril at the time. The narration of Morgoth’s thoughts presents his desire that “the Eldar should vanish from Middle-earth and trouble it no more.” This is to say that Morgoth perceives the Elves troubling Middle-earth, not troubling him. He portrays his enemies, as such, as the villains of the piece in the depths of his evil. Morgoth’s laughter in this way is consistently associated with deception: of his enemies, of his allies, and ultimately of himself. Morgoth never laughs again; in the succeeding chapter the Host of the West comes to the succour of the people of Beleriand and his power is destroyed.

Laughter is, however, utilised elsewhere in deceptive moments beyond the defeat of Morgoth. When the Mouth of Sauron is striving to convince the Captains of the West that their plan, the nature of which is actually still unknown to Sauron, has failed, the Mouth of Sauron “laughed” (*LotR* 870), “laughed aloud” and “laughed again” (*LotR* 871). The latter examples in particular occur when his enemies have failed to dissemble their intentions: first when Pippin springs

forward “with a cry of grief” from behind Imrahil, and later when the “faces grey with fear and the horror in their eyes” reveal to him that the captured hobbit, whom they know to be Frodo, is “dear” to them. All this laughter is, of course, in itself an elaborate deception. Frodo has escaped, the Ring has not been found, and Sauron is in fact ignorant both of Frodo’s identity and his purpose in Mordor. The Mouth of Sauron accidentally gives this away in his repeated mockery, having described Pippin as an “imp”: “What use you find in them I cannot guess; but to send them as spies into Mordor is beyond even your accustomed folly” (*LotR* 871). Sauron is, in fact, as blind as his enemies as to Frodo’s fate, and knows less still about the Ring. The laughter of his herald, therefore, is an act of bravado, and a signifier of deception. Sauron has “a mind first to play these mice cruelly” (*LotR* 870) with no better motive for his mockery. The deception is elaborated upon in the Mouth of Sauron’s effortlessly unreasonable terms for the surrender of the West. His brazen attitude is challenged by Gandalf, but after a brief struggle “swiftly he laughed again” (*LotR* 872). It might be said of the Mouth of Sauron that, in his deceptive habits, he cannot refrain from laughing, but this is plainly contradicted when Gandalf’s light shines forth and he condemns Sauron as “faithless and accursed.” As Provine (14) observes, “earnestness kills jesting.” After this it is noted that “the Messenger of Mordor laughed no more.” He immediately flees the scene. It is, of course, Gandalf who has the last laugh once the Ring is destroyed. The “white light” (*LotR* 872) of Gandalf, which reveals the truth, cuts through the laughter of lies, and thus the elimination of laughter here corresponds with the recognition of the necessity at times of forsaking laughter when it has become unnecessary. The time for laughter will be later, but the laughter of the Mouth of Sauron looks towards his master’s defeat. It is significant that antagonists so regularly laugh in acts of deception, only revealed through interpretation from later parts of the text, as it in fact places focus on the deception and directs attention towards its falsehood.

In the article “Paulo Freire’s Last Laugh” Tyson Lewis (642) argues that “[t]he laugh is a threshold between sound and signification, between animal *phone* and human *logos*.” This encapsulates the concept present in Tolkien of laughter as a signifier. It is an instinctive behaviour, but one which serves complex purposes. These purposes can be observed to exist on a level of the text removed from the

narrative action. Morgoth, the Mouth of Sauron, and other antagonists laugh in satisfaction at their deceptions and confidence of their enemy's failures, but these in fact signify to the reader ultimately that their confidence is misplaced. Tolkien uses laughter to indicate the folly and self-destructive capacity of evil.

Laughter is a prominent device for propounding the theme of moral conflict. Tulkas and Morgoth are the only two among the Valar whom Tolkien presents as laughing, yet their opposition is emphasised in their laughter. Tulkas, sent specifically as a threat to Melkor, laughs in confidence and open confrontation, while Melkor laughs in secrecy and deceit. The context of their laughter, in effect, summarises Tolkien's entire philosophy of good and evil. The laughter of evil is laughter in opposition to truth and the particular truth of the ultimate failure of evil. The laughter of good is open and exists in response to evil, taking it into itself and transforming that evil into a positive emotion. It can be associated closely with the concept of "Arda Healed" from the essay "Notes on motives in the Silmarillion" which is also to be found in *Morgoth's Ring*: "Arda Healed' is thus both the completion of the 'Tale of Arda' which has taken up all the deeds of Melkor, but must according to the promise of Ilúvatar be seen to be good; and also a state of redress and bliss beyond the 'circles of the world'" (MR 405). Tulkas' laughter takes the evil of Melkor and finds in it joy in the ultimate triumph of good, and so it presents Tolkien's entire theodicy. Jacqueline Bussie argues in *The Laughter of the Oppressed* that a "theology of laughter [...] asks us to take up [...] a position of antitheodicy that acknowledges the incomprehensibility of suffering yet encourages us to continue the fight of resistance" (192). Tolkien's theodicy, however, is quite clear: evil is comprehensible, but there exists consolation for evil. The consolation renders evil absurd, and as a result laughter signifies the failure of evil. When Morgoth laughs in deception the narrative foreshadows his own defeat. It can be observed from this analysis, therefore, that laughter functions as a signifier of Tolkien's main themes in addition to being an element of characterisation. This is consistent with the understanding of laughter as a social instrument with multiple functions.

In a manner which is consequent upon the ultimate victory of good, laughter similarly occurs in Tolkien's narratives as a means by which false forms of power are resisted and dismissed. It serves, as elsewhere, as a signifier of the failure of

oppressive power and totalitarian rule. Traditionally, laughter has been seen as an instrument of oppression, which is termed the “superiority theory of laughter” and described by Michael Billig in *Laughter and Ridicule* as such: “The superiority theory is basically a theory of mockery, for it suggests that laughter results from disparaging or degrading others” (39). In this manner laughter is used as a social tool which keeps potentially dangerous elements in their place by ridiculing and humiliating them. Morgoth, for instance, laughs upon chaining Húrin upon Thangorodrim (*UT* 86). However, the laughter of oppressors is similarly subverted by the laughter of those inferior in power. Imrahil “laughed aloud” when considering the attack on the Morannon, claiming it to be “the greatest jest in all the history of Gondor.” Aragorn responds that the occasion is “too bitter for laughter” (*LotR* 864) but nonetheless the expedition succeeds. Imrahil’s laughter on this occasion is a response to the seeming absurdity of their situation, but it functions as an acknowledgement in the text of the limitations of great power as represented by Sauron. Laughter functions as a form of resistance to the schemes and machinations of the powerful. Against Sauron, the Captains of the West are in themselves powerless, but Imrahil’s laughter, sardonically uttered as it is, signifies externally that absolute power in the scenario does not rest with Sauron. In this way laughter is used by Tolkien to indicate that there are limits to the power of worldly individuals and that there are other, greater powers beyond their control. During the Scouring of the Shire, the hobbits are “not quite sure whether laughing was allowed” (*LotR* 980) but this decree has already been subverted by the laughter of the protagonists. Frodo, Sam, Merry, and Pippin “roared with laughter” (*LotR* 978) when the Shirriffs try to coerce them into obedience of the new rules. Here the situation is reversed to that of the attack on the Morannon. The hobbits are experienced, well-equipped and confident compared to the oppressors of the Shire, but their laughter instead signifies the falsity of the power which the ruffians believe themselves to have.

Bussie (13) theorises this kind of laughter in the following fashion: “when the ‘weak’ and oppressed laugh, their laughter *also* affirms autonomy and power, and thereby struggles to be heard over the laughter of the hegemony. The competing laughter of the oppressed serves as counterpoint to the dominant laughter and destabilizes the oppressor’s assertion of dominance.” This can be understood in Tolkien’s narratives in reference to the laughter of people who

are not dominant or who do not represent the authority with the advantage. It is laughter which refuses to give respect or acknowledgement to totalitarian forces, even, as in the case of Imrahil, as a signifier. In any event it treats the schemes of the powerful as nothing more than frivolous games. Laughter attacks power. It reduces the seemingly serious affairs of the world to trivialities and minor absurdities which must simply be accepted with an amused resignation, as displayed by Frodo when the Shirriffs insist that he is under arrest. Laughter does not destroy power, but it questions how meaningful it is. This is observably connected to Tolkien's theodicy as it reflects the entire power structure of his narratives. In Tolkien's works, true power lies ultimately and singularly with god, Eru, alone. In any event, absolute power exists only externally to the narrative of the world, beyond the grasp of any individual, even very mighty beings like Morgoth and Sauron who are still nonetheless finite in their potency. Therefore the schemes of those seeking to usurp this power or perform acts of evil in general are tiny and insignificant in comparison. Laughter embodies this triviality. In the final lines of *The Hobbit*, Gandalf reminds Bilbo that he is "only quite a little fellow in the wide world after all", and he receives the reply, "Thank goodness!" said Bilbo laughing" (*H* 280). Bilbo's laughter of relief at being only "little" in respect to wider events is crucial to the notion that all individuals are only components in sequences of events and do not have the power or even the particular metaphysical or cosmic importance to exercise absolute control or influence over them. Even Morgoth cannot be said to wield so much might; each individual is ultimately only one of numerous players in the music. For Tolkien, the correct response can only be laughter which serves as a reminder of this fact.

As such laughter subverts power. It is in Tyson Lewis' (637) words "an experiential democracy of the flesh." This concept is best embodied in the character of Bombadil, who laughs regularly and is "his own master" (*LotR* 259). Bombadil "laughed" and "laughed again" (*LotR* 130) upon toying with the Ring, which according to Gandalf "has no power over him" (*LotR* 259). Frodo finds himself "perhaps a trifle annoyed with Tom for seeming to make so light of what even Gandalf thought so perilously important" (*LotR* 131). Frodo's resentment may derive from the Ring itself and its own corruptions. The Ring may insist that it is taken seriously. Bombadil's refusal to do so places him outside the power

structures embodied in the Ring. In *The Alchemy of Laughter* Glen Cavaliero argues that it “is tempting to see in [Tom Bombadil] a figure analogous to the celebratory function of comedy in a world riven by good and evil, whether these be accorded a metaphysical dimension or not,” that he is “outside the dualistic conflict which is the subject of Tolkien’s story” (Cavaliero 195-96). Yet Bombadil’s separation from the nature of the Ring does not necessarily separate him from the conflict. Bombadil is undeniably a good character, but also a passive character in a world which is almost entirely directed towards conflict. His laughter at the Ring in this way is a further signifier of the ultimately limited nature of the struggle. As Tolkien himself observes, “[t]he power of the Ring over all concerned, even the Wizards or Emissaries, is not a delusion – but it is not the whole picture, even of the then state and content of that part of the Universe” (*L* 192). This perspective on reality is one outlined in the Last Debate by Gandalf, who reminds that “Other evils there are that may come; for Sauron is himself but a servant or emissary” (*LotR* 861). As a laughing character, therefore, Bombadil signifies the concept of the breadth of the narrative of history, which cannot be reductively attributed to a handful of key incidents or participants. Bombadil perceives the Ring as only one part of a far greater whole, and indeed the narrative of *The Lord of the Rings* as only part of a greater whole. Tolkien represents him, perhaps, in an advantageous position of being undisputed Master of his own small country, but his laughter exemplifies why this is so: he is abstracted and distanced from immediate events into a more general perception of time and nature, a conception of reality embodied in his stories. Bombadil “knew the dark under the stars when it was fearless – before the Dark Lord came from Outside” (*LotR* 129). Judging by the description this is a reference, seemingly, to Morgoth rather than Sauron, and this indication of the vast scope of history and deep time embodied in the perception of Bombadil coupled with his laughter demands a sense of perspective. The powers and affairs of individuals, while individually important, simultaneously cannot be attributed too great a metaphysical weight or significance.

Laughter is the response to the seriousness of the world. Tolkien’s narratives deal, generally speaking, with serious themes. The recurrence of laughter exemplified in this way, however, emphasises that as serious as they are, there are limits to seriousness. Bombadil perceives the world beyond individual items of history

and for that reason he laughs. This relates to Tolkien's arguments regarding the Fairy-Story achievement of recovery, which is crucial for bringing the world into perspective. Recovery is the "regaining of a clear view [...] so that the things seen clearly may be freed from the drab blur of triteness or familiarity" (OFS 146). Laughter in this capacity maintains and promotes this sense of clarity, one which must particularly serve to prevent evil gaining the upper hand, being seen as inevitable or unalterable. This is clearly related also to the earlier example of Gandalf's laughter dissipating the persuasiveness of the voice of Saruman. Laughter alters the dynamics of power and as such transforms the perspective of those who laugh into fresh conceptions of reality and history. It can be observed that as a signifier, then, laughter has two functions: firstly to signify the absurdity of power structures, and secondly to recognise the vastness of history and reality. The conclusion to draw from these two representations of laughter is that laughter expresses the limitations of human power, even that which Tolkien embodies in non-human characters, and to take consolation in the nature of existence as outside individual control.

What is arguably the most essential characteristic of laughter in Tolkien, however, is its relationship to the overriding theme of all of his texts about the inevitability of change. If Tolkien's narratives have a central message, it is that change must be accepted, not resisted, and that new events will always come to pass. This of course can be observed through Tolkien's own account of *The Lord of the Rings* in particular: that "it is about Death and the desire for deathlessness" (L 203), and the "hideous peril of confusing true 'immortality' with limitless serial longevity" (L 267), when in actual fact "Death is not an enemy" (L 267). *The Lord of the Rings* is of course replete with examples of the corruptive nature of artificial eternity and endlessness embodied in Gollum, the Rings and the Nazgûl. *The Silmarillion* too represents this in the Jewels themselves, in which the light of the Trees of the Valar is "preserved imperishable" (S 67). The lust for these of course consequently motivates enormous bloodshed and disaster. Things must be allowed to change if disaster is to be averted. The desire for permanence is associated with terror and violence, while change is accounted for with laughter. Change can be characterised in the narratives, particularly *The Lord of the Rings*, as the unexpected and the unprecedented. This is consistently borne out in studies of laughter. Partington establishes a theory of laughter

which is highly effective at explaining the quality of laughter in Tolkien's narratives, observing that "much laughter-talk involves the sudden shift from one narrative to another" (57). Tolkien incorporates this concept within his narrative in situations where laughter signifies an unexpected change in narrative direction. This is an established concept with origins in the aforementioned "incongruity theory" of laughter, where laughter is caused by the unexpected. Provine (15) observes that "[o]ur success at incongruity detection is celebrated with laughter." Tolkien's narratives may be read as such. Incongruities and the unexpected represent the inevitability of change, and the response to this is laughter, and this is a reaction borne out in both simple and complex ways in Tolkien's narratives. More simply speaking, laughter is used as an expression of the achievement of new events. Upon finally giving up the One Ring, Bilbo Baggins' anger, evidence of the Ring's control over him, gives way to a "look of relief and a laugh" (*LotR* 34). Similarly, Pippin observes of Gandalf after the fall of Sauron that he "laughs now more than he talks" (*LotR* 934). In both cases these are related to major instances of change. The voluntary passing on of the Ring is unique to "Bilbo alone in history" (*LotR* 54). Gandalf himself acknowledges with the fall of Sauron, the source of his great mirth, that "though much has been saved, much must now pass away" (*LotR* 949). In each case laughter accompanies the release of a great burden through the mutability of the future. Laughter in this context embodies Tolkien's argument that nothing lasts forever. This argument furthers the notion that good will ultimately triumph. As stated in the "Ainulindalë", "in every age there come forth things that are new and have no foretelling, for they do not proceed from the past" (*S* 18). Laughter is crucial to understanding this notion. There can be no definite knowledge about the future, but there can be definite knowledge that elements of the future will be surprising and unexpected, and that good will occur out of evil.

Laughter here also clearly associates closely with "Arda Healed", as Arda Healed is the successful redemption of evil, specifically the evil of Melkor, into history such that the future will be "a third thing and a greater, and yet the same" (*MR* 318). Laughter anticipates this situation because in these instances it is associated with the idea of change and growth, and the expectation of the future. This is consistent with Partington's theory: "One interesting and effective type

of narrative shift is evaluation reversal, whereby something which is normally expected to be appraised as good or bad is suddenly re-presented as the opposite” (73). In Tolkien this is almost universally when an evil situation is revealed to contain hidden good. Laughter is an expressive act which occurs numerous times for this reason throughout *The Lord of the Rings*. Aragorn laughs when he discovers Frodo relatively unharmed by the orc-chieftain who attacks him in the tomb of Balin in Moria. Galadriel utters a “sudden clear laugh” (*LotR* 356) when Frodo offers her the One Ring, but she laughs again upon rejecting it. It is observed that Frodo “actually laughed” (*LotR* 397) when Sam refuses to let him continue the journey to Mordor alone. Quickbeam regularly laughs at the unexpected: “if the sun came out from behind a cloud [...] if they came upon a stream or spring [...] sometimes at some sound or whisper in the trees” (*LotR* 471). The recently-resurrected Gandalf laughs “long and softly” (*LotR* 483) when Aragorn, fearing him to be Saruman, asks him his name. Sam laughs “for heart’s ease, not for jest” upon the discovery of the “sweet odours” of Ithilien (*LotR* 636). Laughter is also associated with the good which can be maintained from the past. Eating lembas reminds Merry and Pippin “of fair faces, and laughter, and wholesome food in quiet days now far away” (*LotR* 447). One of the most powerful qualities of laughter in Tolkien’s work is that it reminds of the enduring nature of good in the presence of evil. Along the desolate pass of Cirith Ungol, Frodo’s laughter is unprecedented: “Such a sound had not been heard in those places since Sauron came to Middle-earth” (*LotR* 697). This occurs when Sam is relating their journey to that of the ancient heroes of *The Silmarillion* such as Beren and Eärendil and musing upon their narrative becoming such a tale. As such he is situating their lives in the past, but projecting a narrative into the future. Laughter is both an emblem of the inevitability of change and the survivability of good, and is itself in this case a new thing which brings a positive feeling to an evil place. Frodo’s laughter signifies in this way the continuation of good throughout time. It is both a new event and already signalling what is to come in the future as a reflection of the past. Tolkien as such emphasises that the foretelling of future evil is not absolute and that good is not purely the purview of the past. Laughter is motion and progresses forward, reminding that there will be good in the future also. In these cases, laughter is hope.

Tolkien also uses laughter, however, in a more complex fashion, where the laughter of characters in the supposed certainty of the future is subverted. Laughter is in this way a signifier of change even when the characters who are laughing are unaware. Denethor, for example, laughs three times in his despair. He argues that “against the Power that now arises there is no victory. [...] even now the wind of thy hope cheats thee and wafts up Anduin a fleet with black sails.” Gandalf’s response is that “Such counsels will make the Enemy’s victory certain indeed,” to which he receives the reply: “‘Hope on then!’ laughed Denethor” (*LotR* 835). Denethor’s laughter here is misplaced. His language is that of absolute conviction, as Gandalf observes. Denethor has no doubt that Sauron is on the very brink of an inevitable and unalterable victory. His laughter, however, belies this certainty. The black sails of the corsair fleet from Umbar of course in fact deliver Aragorn’s reinforcements and victory on the Pelennor. Denethor’s laughter does not foreshadow a certainty but in fact denotes the arrival of a change, one already known to the reader. As such, the laughter again comes after the surprise. Thus Gandalf observes to Denethor’s attendants: “so pass also the days of Gondor that you have known; for good or evil they are ended” (*LotR* 836-37). In this way laughter is regularly associated with change, and particularly the arrival of the unexpected and of hope in the face of apparent disaster, despite the character who laughs uttering laughter in hopelessness and despair.

As an expression, therefore, laughter does not need to be uttered in a particular mood. The character is not even always significant. It nonetheless signifies a sense of relief and the capacity of realising that evil is never absolute and that unexpected events, particularly good events, will occur in spite of evil. As Bussie (14) observes, “tragedy and oppression also involves incongruity, and therefore it too could evoke laughter.” Laughter is not just linked to the actions of characters. It functions as Tolkien’s device for placing focus upon and reflecting things unexpected, mutable, and surprising. Even in the most evil moments, laughter is attached to change. Sauron’s threefold laughter in the Temple of Melkor in Armenelos is ill-timed, as it correlates with the Changing of the World. This event signifies the spiritual estrangement of the Valar and the Eldar from Men, but it also heralds the great weakening of Sauron and the establishment of vital events in the Third Age which will bring about his eventual downfall. In

terms of the signification of laughter in Tolkien's narratives, Sauron is in fact giving voice to his own inevitable defeat when he laughs in the temple. This is comparable to the case of Denethor's laughter, as it occurs in an assumption of absolutes when in fact uncertainties exist. Sauron believes that he is "rid of the Edain for ever" (S 280) and in this delusion he is thwarted as Elendil and his sons escape. In this way, of course, Sauron is living up to his reputation as "a shadow of Morgoth and a ghost of his malice" (S 32) as this laughter is strongly evocative of Morgoth's aforementioned laughter in his erroneous conviction that the Eldar will trouble Middle-earth "no more." When characters perceive certainty, their laughter signifies that it is unjustified. Sauron's inheritance of Morgoth's behaviour establishes that those who deal in certainty will inevitably be proved wrong in time. It can be observed once again when the Lord of the Nazgûl enters the broken gate of Minas Tirith and declares that "This is my hour" following the utterance of "a deadly laughter" (*LotR* 811). Immediately afterwards his confidence is seen to be misplaced as the horns of Rohan signal the succour of Gondor. Each time a character uses laughter to revel in surety about the future, it in fact signals the opposite. When evil characters laugh the joke is, in fact, on them. To continue with the Lord of the Nazgûl, laughter is in fact fatal as an abolition of certainty: Éowyn laughs when revealing her true identity to the Ringwraith, in opposition to his prophetic delusions of invincibility. Her laughter is "of all sounds in that hour the strangest. It seemed that Dernhelm laughed, and the clear voice was like the ring of steel" (*LotR* 823). Indeed the laughter of Éowyn at this moment captures all three aspects of laughter: it openly exposes the weakness of evil, it negates its power and it obliterates certainty as a new, unexpected, incongruous thing. It is no wonder that in that moment the Lord of the Nazgûl is "silent, as if in sudden doubt" (*LotR* 823).

Laughter repeatedly subverts absolute language and absolute modes of thought, even in the case of the individuals using that language and having those thoughts. Laughter is linked to the unexpected. Tolkien's argument is that change itself is not evil but ultimately redemptive, and as such laughter represents this notion. Laughter in positive mood represents hope; in negative or evil mode it is self-deception about the assuredness of the future. In either case, laughter occurs when unforeseen events arise in the face of certainty or

lack of precedent, and functions as a signifier of change. This is evoked by the “theology of laughter” described by Bussie, who argues that “[f]aith and hope are paradoxical and proleptic” (183). In this way hope is associated with the laughter of incongruity, as a “theology or hope must be the counterpart of a theology of laughter” (184). In Tolkien’s work, laughter is even hope when it is being uttered by those in the business of destroying hope and propagating despair, although they themselves do not realise it.

There is no single theory of laughter which is sufficient to account for everything in Tolkien, or indeed anywhere else, especially in fiction. As Cavaliero (6) observes, “a novel tends to evade the solicitations of a monolithic point of view.” While Tolkien’s works, more correctly speaking, are romances rather than novels, the point is the same: the text functions as an assembly of complex signifiers. Nonetheless, it can be observed from the examples given above that laughter can serve an extremely valuable function in Tolkien’s work if it is given the attention and notice that laughter so rarely receives. Laughter has observable correlations to Tolkien’s own theories of “Fairy-Stories” and the themes he proposes most substantially in *The Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Laughter is an instrument by which the Secondary World is internally consistent and functional. Moreover, laughter is a signifier of those core arguments of the grand history of the narrative of Arda as a whole: that power is limited, that evil is subordinate to good despite appearances, and that in the fullness of time change will bring about the victory of good. Laughter does not have to be uttered by a good or even a powerful character to function in this way. Rather it has a textual significance which indicates the continuing relevance of hope and the nonexistence of absolutes and certainties in a changing world. Like almost everything in Arda, laughter is to some degree “fallen”, but evil cannot create. The utterance of laughter by the evil only serves as a reminder of its intrinsic grounding in goodness. The use of this signifier is emblematic of the need to interpret Tolkien on his choice of language and representation in addition to the narrative presentation of themes and ideas. As a textual operation on a level above or outside the narrative, the use of such signifiers contributes a layer of complexity to the interpretation of Tolkien’s work which is vital for understanding how his narratives express crucial thematic concerns. Tolkien himself has argued for the need for consistency in the “Fairy-Story”, but this

must be observed to go beyond the construction of an imaginary world or extraordinary characters. As a character action and a signifier laughter establishes a textual continuum of character, narrative, language and theme which provides a broader consistency to the texts. This concept is particularly important for considering the vast amount of posthumously published material contributing to the corpus of texts of Tolkien's work and how "finished" components like *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* correlate with the remainder. As can be observed when comparing the thematic content of both *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion* with reference to laughter, it is noteworthy that this consistency of theme can be identified. Laughter is commonly overlooked, but it is altogether useful for understanding human nature and behaviour. In the same way, laughter is proliferate throughout the works of Tolkien, and must be appreciated as a valuable thread of investigation for understanding and interpreting these texts and perceiving their themes, particularly the inevitability of change and the consequent irrationality of despair.

About the Author

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Abbreviations

L: *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*

LotR: *The Lord of the Rings*

OFS: "On Fairy-Stories"

S: *The Silmarillion*

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