Tolkien and the Forging of Middle-Earth

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"In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit."[1] This was the line that started one of the most famous fantasy series ever written and forever changed the genre. J.R.R. Tolkien constructed the world of Middle-Earth based on his experiences before, during, and after the Great War. Through the utilization of medievalism, Tolkien weaves together characters and world-building as a way to express his many beliefs on the war. Tolkien's life and writing process have been examined extensively in a number of different biographies, books, journal articles, and other mediums. One specific example is Humphrey Carpenter's *Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*: a massive collection of letters provided by J.R.R. Tolkien's son, Christopher Tolkien. These letters span over almost his entire life and are directed towards family, editors, and fans.[2] Most importantly, Tolkien's letters cover a vast array of topics, ranging from his creative processes to his thoughts on contemporary world politics as expressed through his ongoing worries over the events of World War Two. In this paper, I will analyze how these experiences and beliefs influenced the creation of his stories. Doing so will help future readers and scholars understand Tolkien's medievalism and how his stories were constructed.

Historiography

Numerous sources have explored the relationship between the World Wars and their influence on Tolkien as an author. However, to address and analyze every single source would be a needlessly arduous task; I, therefore, will focus on just two scholars that I feel best represent some of the most significant conclusions made about his work.

Scholars like Janet Croft argue that while World War I had a profound effect on Tolkien's life and creative process, World War II had little impact. According to Croft, Tolkien used his experiences from the Great War to create certain characters like Sam Gamgee or locations like the Dead Marshes, which reflected Tolkien's emphasis on themes like heroism and the natural world in his works.[3] World War II, Croft argues, did not have as much of an effect on the creation process of *The Lord of the Rings*—beyond a few character attitudes reflecting similar pessimisms about the futility of war—because Tolkien started planning the book during World War I and began writing in 1936.[4] Even after the book's release in the 1950s, she noted how many of the

[1] J.R.R Tolkien, *The Hobbit* (Great Britain: George Allen & Unwin, 1937), 3.
[2] Humphrey Carpenter, *Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1981), 1.
[3] Janet Croft, "The Great War and Tolkien's Memory: An Examination of World War I Themes in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*" *Mythlore* 23, no. 4 (Fall-Winter 2002): 6.
[4] Janet Croft, "'The young perish and the old linger, withering': J.R.R. Tolkien on World War Two," *Mythlore* 24, no. 2 (Fall 2004): 59.

themes in *The Lord of the Rings* did not align with common themes of World War Two literature, such as cynicism in human nature seen in books like *Animal Farm* and *The Lord of the Flies.*[5] Croft argues, in contrast, that his works actually celebrate humanity's capacity for greatness with themes like courage.[6]

While Croft argues that Tolkien engages more with the Great War, she also notes that Tolkien did not necessarily come out of it like other authors who served. For example, authors like Graves obsessed over modernity coming out of the war as a way to grapple with their experiences.[7] In contrast, Croft finds that Tolkien embraces the past, describing it as a "nostalgic longing" or "an escape." She writes, "At once reactionary and avant-garde, turning [his back] on the modernism that had turned its back on the past,"[8] Croft, therefore, argues that Tolkien's beliefs, stemming from his experiences with both World Wars, stand in contrast to the beliefs of both generations of post-war authors. Croft ultimately concludes that this unique perspective derives itself from Tolkien's life prior to the Great War, where he developed his firm belief in humanity's capacity for good through Catholicism and his mother.

Where some scholars like Croft rely on his literature as a way to understand Tolkien, other scholars like Theresa Nicolay in her book *Tolkien and the Modernists* rely more on direct accounts of Tolkien's life, such as his letters and biographies, to understand him. Despite this different approach, Nicolay comes to a similar conclusion that Tolkien as a writer was different from other authors in both post-war times because of his unique perspective on the world. She writes, "Modernists' thinking rejects traditional morality, and so we find in its literature a number of amoral characters. Many modernist writers depict characters that cannot or will not choose…Tolkien, on the other hand, created characters for whom choice is crucial and ongoing."[9] From this, Nicolay finds that Tolkien adheres to the positive belief of humanity's capacity for good and ability to change the world for the better. Like Croft, Nicolay concludes that these optimistic beliefs about humanity must stem from his deep connection to the beliefs he developed prior to the Great War.

With Croft's and Nicolay's arguments in mind, there is an overall consensus that World War I profoundly impacted Tolkien and his beliefs. However, unlike other post-war authors who abandoned the past to make sense of what happened, he embraced it to understand his experiences. Those experiences and beliefs then, in turn, heavily influenced the creation of his books. Yet, what truly defines Tolkien is that these values he drew upon after the Great War carried over even in the face of a Second World War. Where other authors saw only darkness in

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[5] Janet Croft, "'The young perish and the old linger, withering': J.R.R. Tolkien on World War Two," 60.
[6] Janet Croft, "'The young perish and the old linger, withering': J.R.R. Tolkien on World War Two," 62.
[7] Janet Croft, "The Great War and Tolkien's Memory: An Examination of World War I Themes in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings,*" 8.
[8] Janet Croft, "The Great War and Tolkien's Memory: An Examination of World War I Themes in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings,*" 8.
[9] Theresa Nicolay, *Tolkien and the Modernists* (North Carolina: Mcfarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2014), 21.

human nature, Tolkien remained faithful to his romantic beliefs in the human capacity for courage, hope, and friendship.

Looking ahead, I want to meld these two approaches of analyzing both his literature and his life to provide more evidence to Nicolay's and Croft's claim that Tolkien remained unwavering to the beliefs he developed from the Great War. In terms of evidence, I believe that using his World War Two letters in Carpenter's *Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien* provides a valuable historical framework; however, I also believe that there is one glaring flaw in both of their claims. Their claims are limited by their heavy focus on *The Lord of the Rings* and barely touch upon his earlier work, *The Hobbit*. While *The Lord of the Rings* is his most popular book, I think there is a missed opportunity to understand Tolkien more by looking at where he started in his values and themes in his first book. Identifying the values that built his first book and showing readers how persistent these ideas were between then and World War II will help future scholars better understand what was important to Tolkien throughout his life. Going forward, I will achieve this by analyzing the historical context of four key letters written during World War II and exploring the connections his responses have to different themes found throughout *The Hobbit*. By comparing and understanding what Tolkien's beliefs were between these two points in time, this new approach will add to the already well-explored scholarship of J.R.R. Tolkien's medievalism.

Main Evidence—Preface

One of the longest and most fascinating sections of the *Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien* is the collection of World War II letters Tolkien wrote. As explained by Humphrey Carpenter's book *J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biography*, World War II ushered in a period of great anxiety for Tolkien. This was due to him being both a veteran of the Great War and a father of two sons, Christopher and Michael, who were both volunteering to serve the British military. Whilst serving as an air raid warden in Oxford, Tolkien was also deep into writing *The Lord of the Rings* and rewriting *The Hobbit*.[10] These letters were a way for Tolkien to voice his many thoughts about his children and his books, offering readers a unique chance to understand the core beliefs of J.R.R. Tolkien.

This main evidence section will be split into two major subsections. The first subsection will be focused on placing two of his letters within the larger historical context of major events in World War II that he directly refers to in his letters. As for the other subsection, these letters will be connected to smaller events that were happening in his daily life during these times. That does not mean these two letters are duller in any way; in fact, they are rich with Tolkien's values and deeply rooted in key moments throughout his life.

[10] Humphrey Carpenter, *J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biography* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000), 197.

The First Letter—Tolkien on War

The first letter that I will analyze is Tolkien's letter on December 9, 1943, to his son Christopher. In this letter, he directly refers to the Tehran Conference, as seen in the line, "Nothing to read—and even the papers with nothing but Teheran Ballyhoo."[11] Connecting this letter to history, the Tehran Conference in Iran was a meeting between Stalin, Roosevelt, and Churchill to discuss both current and post-war plans.[12] However, Tolkien did not hear about these plans during the war because they would be classified for civilians. Based on the *Daily Mirror's* archived newspapers, what Tolkien likely did hear on December 4th, 1943, was, "At the conference, questions on the conduct of the war against Germany were discussed, as well as a number of political questions."[13] This was followed by, "Granting air bases in Russia to the RAF and the American Air Force is expected to be one of the first results of the conference…."[14] Based on this newspaper, it can be assumed that what Tolkien read regarding the Tehran Conference was an escalation of violence and the promise to force Germany to surrender, and this news of violence concerned Tolkien greatly.

Throughout the letter, Tolkien expressed his concern about the Tehran Conference because of his worries about what kind of future would follow once the war ended. These concerns were most apparent in his letter when he discussed the issue of America's role in the war, stating that, "I do find this Americo-cosmopolitanism very terrifying. Quâ mind and spirit, neglecting the piddling fears of timid flesh…I am not really sure that its victory is going to be so much better for the world as a whole in the long run than the victory of——."[15] Through this quote, Tolkien equated the victory of the Allies as no better than the victory of Nazi Germany for two main reasons: the means of achieving that victory and the promises for the future to come by those in power.

For the means of victory, Tolkien believed that the Allies' eagerness, especially America's, to blindly send soldiers to invade Germany would only bring about grotesque levels of violence and destruction for both sides. To Tolkien, victory was meaningless if it was accomplished through answering violence with even more violence, as it would not bring the world to a safer future. Regarding future promises, at the beginning of the letter, Tolkien pointed out the irony of the Tehran conference's promises to abolish tyranny while the conference was being led by two tyrants, Stalin and Roosevelt.[16] In the case of Stalin, the irony there is self-explanatory, but in Tolkien's eyes, Roosevelt's promises of freedom for the future were no

[11] Humphrey Carpenter, *Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, 65.
[12] "The Tehran Conference, 1943." *U.S. Department of State*, U.S. Department of State, accessed 12 Apr. 2024.
[13]Archive, The British Newspaper. "Daily Mirror- Saturday 04 December 1943." Register | British Newspaper Archive. Accessed April 13, 2024.
[14]Archive, The British Newspaper. "Daily Mirror- Saturday 04 December 1943." Register | British Newspaper Archive. Accessed April 13, 2024.
[15] Humphrey Carpenter, *Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien,* 65.
[16] Humphrey Carpenter, *Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien,* 65.

better. He believed that Roosevelt would bring his own kind of cultural tyranny through the globalization of American systems like mass production, suburbs, and the universal English language.[17] With these issues in mind, Tolkien held no hope that World War II would change anything for the better. However, this was not to say that Tolkien believed that America should not have gotten involved or that he hoped that Germany would win the war. As he clarified at the end of the letter, he still loved Britain and hoped for the Allies' victory; however, before his love for his nation, his morals came first, and he stood against the existence of war, for it was both pointless and self-perpetuating.

This was not the only time that Tolkien expressed these beliefs. Years before this letter, Tolkien had expressed a similar viewpoint on the meaninglessness of war during the climactic final battle of his first book, *The Hobbit.* In the final battle dubbed the "Battle of Five Armies," the races of men, dwarves, and elves put aside their differences to fend off a horde of goblins. Despite their efforts and the rallying cry of a reawakened King Thorin, the goblins slowly gain the upper hand and threaten the annihilation of all life in the lands. It was in this moment of desperation that the main character, Bilbo, commented, "Misery me! I have heard songs of many battles, and I have always understood that defeat may be glorious. It seems very uncomfortable, not to say distressing. I wish I was well out of it."[18] Prior to this moment, the story often compared Bilbo's unheroic traits to the classic heroism represented by Thorin. For example, Bilbo is described as meek, cowardly, and a thief. In contrast, Thorin is courageous, honorable, and a natural leader, all features of the traditional hero. Coming into the final battle with Thorin leading the charge, Tolkien flips this narrative comparison of looking down on Bilbo's unheroic traits. While Bilbo was hiding in fear of his demise, Thorin died unceremoniously off-page, and it took several pages later for Bilbo to find his body left out in the battlefield. By highlighting Bilbo's cowardly survival and Thorin's unceremonious death, Tolkien criticizes the idea of the righteous war, as it is a classic fantasy trope for the hero to die in a glorious last stand for the greater good. In comparison, Bilbo's direct rejection of this trope by calling it "uncomfortable" and "distressing" allowed him to stay alive and return home. Through this contrasting image of Bilbo and Thorin, Tolkien questions the meaning of war and dispels the illusion that there is glory and honor in participating in it.

Like the Tehran Conference's promises to bring down tyranny and restore everything good in the world, this idea of a glorious last stand in *The Hobbit* evokes the idea of a righteous war. A war of pure good versus pure evil. However, like Bilbo, Tolkien knew the truth about war and how that promise of glory was nothing but a sham. This desensitization to the righteousness of war comes from his experiences in World War I. He experienced firsthand the absolute devastation war brought to all sides, recognizing in his letters that mishandling of peace after the first World War led to continued bloodshed now. That is why he expressed such great concern upon hearing the news about the Tehran Conference, as the same promises were being made again. No matter the justification, to Tolkien, there was nothing more appalling and meaningless

[17] Humphrey Carpenter, *Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien,* 65.
[18] J.R.R Tolkien, *The Hobbit,* 266.

than war. It is this belief that aided in the construction of the narrative of *The Hobbit* and the main fear he expressed to his son a few years later. To quote a later letter from Tolkien, "The utter stupid waste of war, not only material but moral and spiritual, is so staggering to those who have to endure it. And always was, and always be."[19]

The Second Letter—Tolkien on Technology

Tolkien's letter, written on August 9th, 1945, which is addressed to his son, Christopher, refers to the dropping of the atomic bombs on Nagasaki and Hiroshima. He writes, "The news today about 'atomic bombs' is so horrifying one is stunned."[20] Focusing on the news Tolkien heard, the details of the bombing were limited, as the exact death toll would not have been determined at this time, nor did Japan directly surrender till a month later. Based on what was known at the time, the *Daily Mirror's* archived newspaper reads, "Japan trembles under shock of another atomic bomb."[21] Followed by, "American airmen have dropped their second atomic bomb, this time on the Japanese port of Nagasaki. No further details will be available until the mission returns."[22] From the newspaper article, it can be determined that the true devastation of the atomic bombs was not made clear to the public beyond the fact that it was a powerful new weapon detonated in a largely populated city.

Even with this limited information, it was enough to horrify Tolkien, as he expressed in the rest of the letter that "Such explosives in men's hands, while their moral and intellectual status is declining, is about as useful as giving out firearms to all inmates of a gaol and then saying that you hope this will 'this will ensure peace'."[23] While the overarching message is clear that Tolkien disliked the use of atomic bombs, what is more interesting to note is how he directly blamed physicists for creating such technology. For Tolkien, as terrible as the technology of the atomic bomb itself was, what truly horrified him was that it was given so easily to corruptible hands.

To understand Tolkien's viewpoint on technology, it is best to refer to other letters he wrote to Christopher during the war. Addressing Christopher's letter on April 18th, 1944, about his experiences in the war so far, Tolkien wrote, "How it reminds me of my own experience! Only in one way I was better off: wireless was not invented. I daresay it had some potential for good, but it has in fact in the main become a weapon for the fool, the savage, and the villain."[24] As for the other letter, written on December 18th, 1944, Tolkien once again wrote about his son's experiences in the war, but this time on the use of airplane warfare. He wrote, "As long as war is

[19] Humphrey Carpenter, *Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien,* 75.
[20] Humphrey Carpenter, *Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien,* 116.
[21]Archive, The British Newspaper. "Hull Daily Mail- Thursday 09 August 1945." Register | British Newspaper Archive. Accessed April 15, 2024.
[22]Archive, The British Newspaper. "Hull Daily Mail- Thursday 09 August 1945." Register | British Newspaper Archive. Accessed April 15, 2024.
[23] Humphrey Carpenter, *Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien,* 116.
[24] Humphrey Carpenter, *Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien,* 71.

fought with such weapons, and one accepts any profits that may accure (such as preservation of one's skin and even 'victory') it is merely shirking the issue to hold war aircraft in special horror."[25] What is shown in all three of these letters is that Tolkien understood the capacity for good that technology has in the right hands, as seen with the wireless. However, he also understood the dangers technology poses with the destructive power it grants humans in ever-increasing levels, as seen with the airplane and the atomic bomb. The underlying theme that connects these letters is human nature. Essentially, Tolkien believed that human nature, when tempted with power to achieve their goals, is what ultimately turns technology cruel. Putting together a weapon like the atomic bomb under the pretext of peace is why Tolkien is both enraged and horrified by the physicists.

This pessimistic viewpoint on the relationship between human nature and the power technology offers stems from Tolkien's experiences in World War I. In Carpenter's *J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biography*, he described Tolkien's experiences in World War I, which Tolkien simply explained as "animal horror."[26] In Carpenter's account, Tolkien was deployed in June 1916, and over the next couple of months, he would face total carnage. Whether it be former fields and villages turned into barren wastelands, the news of friends passing in a battle, or the sight of his battalions being slaughtered by machine gun fire, Tolkien was constantly faced with the destruction caused by technology.[27] Based on this account of Tolkien's experiences, Tolkien has seen technology at its absolute worst during this war. He saw the destruction it can wreak on nature and humans alike. So coming into World War II, Tolkien understood the dangers that technology poses, and the war only reaffirmed his distrust in technology. The persistence of this belief stretching from World War One to World War Two is further demonstrated by how he expressed this viewpoint earlier in *The Hobbit.*

In *The Hobbit,* Tolkien best exemplified his viewpoint on the corrupting nature of technology with the Arkenstone. The Arkenstone is described as a beautiful white gem that was dug up by dwarves and, since then, became a symbol of birthright for the dwarf kings to rule the kingdom of Erebor.[28] While it is not technology, it is this promise of power and control that echoes similarities to the temptations of technology that Tolkien refers to in his World War Two letters. Furthermore, like how technology can be twisted and can divide people, the beauty and power of the Arkenstone push the dwarves, elves, and humans closer to war with one another as the climactic final battle approaches.[29] With this war, the once-beloved gem has transformed into a source of corruption and evil. While there isn't a one-to-one allegorical connection between the Arkenstone and the technology Tolkien saw in World War One, there is a considerable similarity in the beliefs that Tolkien has around both. This idea is that technology cannot be trusted because of the corrupting nature that stems from the power it offers.

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[25] Humphrey Carpenter, *Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien,* 105.
[26] Humphrey Carpenter, *J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biography*, 91.
[27] Humphrey Carpenter, *J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biography*, 91-93.
[28] J.R.R Tolkien, *The Hobbit,* 218.
[29] J.R.R Tolkien, *The Hobbit,* 257.

The Third Letter—Tolkien and Anti-Modernity

Tolkien's third letter, written on April 3rd, 1944, which he addressed to his son Christopher, recounts his trip to Birmingham to meet the headmaster of a school. In the letter, he takes particular issue with the architecture. He wrote, "Except for one patch of ghastly wreckage (opp. My old school's site), it does not look much damaged, not by the enemy. The chief damage has been the growth of the great flat featureless modern buildings. The worst of all is the ghastly multiple-store erection on the old site."[30] There is an emphasis placed on his dislike for these modern buildings, equating them to an enemy attack. The strong negative connotations he used to describe the buildings (such as ghastly, damaged, and featureless) highlight another important value to Tolkien: his anti-modernism.

Tolkien's anti-modern viewpoint can be traced back to his childhood. According to Carpenter in *J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biography*, Tolkien's childhood was difficult, as his mom struggled to care for Tolkien and his brother after the passing of Tolkien's father when he was very young. These financial struggles pushed his mother to move to Sarehole, in the Birmingham countryside.[31] Here, where he would spend much of his early childhood, Tolkien would be homeschooled by his mother and go on adventures with his brother. From these experiences, he formed a deep connection with the countryside and his mother. Carpenter further explained that Tolkien, from a young age, understood the many sacrifices his mother made to give him and his brother a normal life.[32] It is this love for his mother, the sacrifices she made, and the pleasant childhood memories of the countryside that greatly influenced Tolkien throughout his life.

Thus, when he returned to Birmingham, he could express nothing but disdain for the town. The cold and uniform buildings that filled Birmingham's streets stood in complete contrast to the lively and warm countryside fields that Tolkien saw in his childhood. To Tolkien, the modernization of Birmingham was a sign that the ever-expanding industrial movements around the world would rob it of all its natural beauty and diversity of life. This sentiment is echoed in other letters he wrote during the war. For example, in his earlier letter on November 29, 1943, to Christopher, he wrote, "Even the unlucky little Samoyedes, I suspect, have tinned food and the village loudspeaker telling Stalin's bed-time stories about Democracy and the wicked Fascists… there is only one bright spot and that is the growing habit of disgruntled men dynamiting factories and power stations."[33] Through this letter, Tolkien clearly expresses his disdain towards industrialization; however, looking past his disgust, there are also traces of nostalgia within it. In his wish for the destruction of factories and power stations, there is a level of longing he expresses for the natural world he used to live in. It is this wish to return to that childhood home that works its way into his book *The Hobbit*.

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[30] Humphrey Carpenter, *Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien,* 70.
[31] Humphrey Carpenter, *J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biography*, 27.
[32] Humphrey Carpenter, *J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biography*, 25-38.
[33] Humphrey Carpenter, *Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien,* 64.

Tolkien's nostalgia for his childhood is best found in the opening setting of the story: the town of Hobbiton. The town (Figure 1 in the appendix) bears many similarities to the Birmingham countryside as described by Carpenter's description of Tolkien's childhood. Similar to Hobbiton, Sarehole had a singular dividing river, an accompanying watermill, and cottages scattered about. Most importantly, like Hobbiton, there was a notable hill that Tolkien and his brothers used to play on, revealing further the physical similarities between Sarehole and Hobbiton.[34] However, looking beyond the visual similarities, the town also holds a symbolic value in two ways. The first is a symbol of natural purity as seen with the vast open fields, the lack of factories, and the coexistence between homes and nature. All of these features are ways that Tolkien's anti-modernity influences the story, as the town of Hobbiton is for the most part untouched by the conflicts and changes of the outside world.

The other symbolic value of Hobbiton is nostalgia. Similar to how Tolkien expressed longing to return to the simpler times in his letters to Christopher, Bilbo experiences homesickness throughout his adventure. One such example is when the narrator states, "…and just at that moment [Biblo] felt more tired than he ever remembered feeling before. He was thinking once again of his comfortable chair before the fire in his favorite sitting-room in his hobbit hole."[35] At this moment, Bilbo is struggling to adapt to the rough life of an adventurer, for moments prior to this scene, Bilbo narrowly survived being eaten by trolls and traveled through mountain passes. Dangerous experiences and landscapes do not exist in Hobbiton, since it is a fairly isolated region from the rest of the world. Thus, Bilbo uses these memories of Hobbiton to cope with these experiences and frame his understanding of the world. Likewise, Tolkien's childhood memories laid the foundation for his values and his engagement with the ever-changing world around him. This love and longing for his life in Sarehole led Tolkien to reject the modernized world as a whole.

The Fourth Letter—Tolkien and Self-Denial

Finally, Tolkien's letter on March 6th, 1941, to his son Michael discusses marriage and the relationship between genders. The exact context behind this letter is unclear because Michael's initial letter is not shared anywhere. The contents of this letter are nonetheless deeply fascinating since Tolkien mentions the idea of a "fallen world" and its antidote is self-denial. Regarding the first idea, Tolkien believed that the world has fallen into dark times because of rampant lust. He wrote, "This is a fallen world. The dislocation of sex-instinct is one of the chief symptoms of the Fall. The world has been 'going to the bad' all down the ages."[36] Tolkien, then later in the letter, wrote, "The devil is endlessly ingenious and sex is his favourite subject."[37] This utilization of the devil as evil seems to draw inspiration from his Catholic upbringing. Humphrey Carpenter notes

[34] Humphrey Carpenter, *J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biography*, 28-29.
[35] J.R.R Tolkien, *The Hobbit,* 44-45.
[36] Humphrey Carpenter, *Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien,* 48.
[37] Humphrey Carpenter, *Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien,* 48.

in his biography that Tolkien became fully devoted to Catholicism soon after his mother died as a way to cope with losing her at such a young age. This continued to play a massive role for the rest of Tolkien's life, acting as a moral guide.[38]

With this in mind in regard to the idea of self-denial, this belief is not just a Christian doctrine, as it comes up in numerous other ideologies and religions. However, in the case of Tolkien, it does seem to play a large role in his adherence to it. As he states, "However, the essence of a *fallen* world is that the *best* cannot be attained by free enjoyment or by what is called 'self-realization'; but by denial, by suffering."[39] Similar to how Tolkien associates the issues of sex culture with his Catholic beliefs, his practice of self-denial is rooted in it as well. Looking beyond the topics of sex culture and Catholicism, I want to focus primarily on Tolkien's belief in self-denial, as it comes up as a crucial theme in the narrative of his book *The Hobbit* to contrast the theme of greed.

In *The Hobbit*, greed serves as the main source of conflict in the story, but it does not make its presence known until the climax of the story, following the death of the dragon Smaug. Although dubbed dragon sickness by the dwarves, it acts more like a mental illness than a biological one, with the victims experiencing a violent and uncontrollable lust for gold. This is evident in the case of Bilbo's group leader, Thorin, after he reclaims the dwarven castle Erebor. Driven mad, he refuses to give any gold to the refugees of Smaug's attack and threatens war with them and the elves.[40] Thorin only frees himself from the curse after having a sudden epiphany and being fatally wounded. Lying in the battlefield, Thorin says to Bilbo, "If more of us valued food and cheer and song above hoarded gold, it would be a merrier world."[41] Through this quote and Thorin's downfall, Tolkien directly tells readers the true danger of greed and the importance of resisting it. In contrast to Thorin's tragic end, Bilbo represents Tolkien's ideal practice of self-denial.

There are numerous instances in which Bilbo's choice of self-denial protects him from the dragon sickness in the final acts of the book. However, the best example is at the end of the book when he must decide his reward for reclaiming the dwarves' home. Despite the dwarves' pleas that he take one-fourteenth of the gold of Erebor, Bilbo refuses and requests only two small chests of silver and a pony for the journey home.[42] Despite all the hardship Bilbo went through on his adventure, he only wanted a small reward because he feared it would only cause more war and bloodshed, as he saw in the final battle. This foresight would save his life because when he finally returns to Hobbiton, he finds the whole town auctioning off his home and property since they presumed that he had died. Even worse, some of the hobbits seemed to have hoped he actually died, like his aunt, who wanted the deeds to his home.[43] Although unfortunate, Bilbo's decision to not bring more gold back prevented an even worse outcome. As Corey Olsen points

[38] Humphrey Carpenter, *Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien,* 39.
[39] Humphrey Carpenter, *Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien,* 51.
[40] J.R.R Tolkien, *The Hobbit,* 247-248.
[41] J.R.R Tolkien, *The Hobbit,* 269.
[42] J.R.R Tolkien, *The Hobbit,* 272.
[43] J.R.R Tolkien, *The Hobbit,* 281.

out in her book *Exploring J.R.R. Tolkien's The Hobbit*, if the hobbits are this cruel to Bilbo over some furniture and a house, one can only imagine the chaos that would envelop Hobbiton if Bilbo brought back his originally planned reward of one-fourteenth of Erebor's gold.[44] Bilbo's decision to reject riches to spare Hobbiton from dragon sickness is the embodiment of Tolkien's idea of self-denial. While the idea of self-denial is one of many examples of the influence Catholicism had on Tolkien's life, it stands out here as a crucial lesson he sought to impart, both to his readers and his children.

Conclusion

Humphrey Carpenter's *Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien* is a vast collection of hundreds of letters that Tolkien wrote throughout his life. Tolkien expressed four major beliefs in the selected sources: the pointlessness of war, the dangers of technology, the rejection of modernity, and the practice of self-denial. By tying these beliefs back to his first book, *The Hobbit,* and demonstrating their prevalence throughout his life, more evidence is available for scholars like Nicolay and Croft to support their claim that Tolkien remained unwavering in his beliefs, which only grew stronger following the Great War.

Furthermore, this research demonstrates the importance these letters have in understanding the life of J.R.R. Tolkien and the writing process of his books. I hope to inspire further discussion and analysis among scholars for the many other letters that are within this collection. Studies on Tolkien's life and creative process remain relevant today, as many of the details and themes Tolkien used lay the foundation for many other high fantasy medieval stories in all types of media. Whether it be games like *Dungeons and Dragons* or books like *Game of Thrones*, high fantasy stories adopt a lot of Tolkien's ideas and designs into their fictional world. These are not limited to the ones just discussed in the paper, either. There are many other details and themes, both big and small, that work their way into the writing of other high fantasy medieval media, like designs of different races, race relations, and ideas of biological determinism. This has especially become the case following the explosions in popularity that Tolkien's works have gained thanks to Peter Jackson's films. By further analyzing Tolkien's medievalism, its origins, and its influence on the creation of the fictional world of Middle-Earth, scholars will be able to better understand how similar stories were constructed and what themes and tropes continue to endure to this day.

[44] Corey Olsen, *Exploring J.R.R. Tolkien's The Hobbit* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012) 278-279.

Appendix

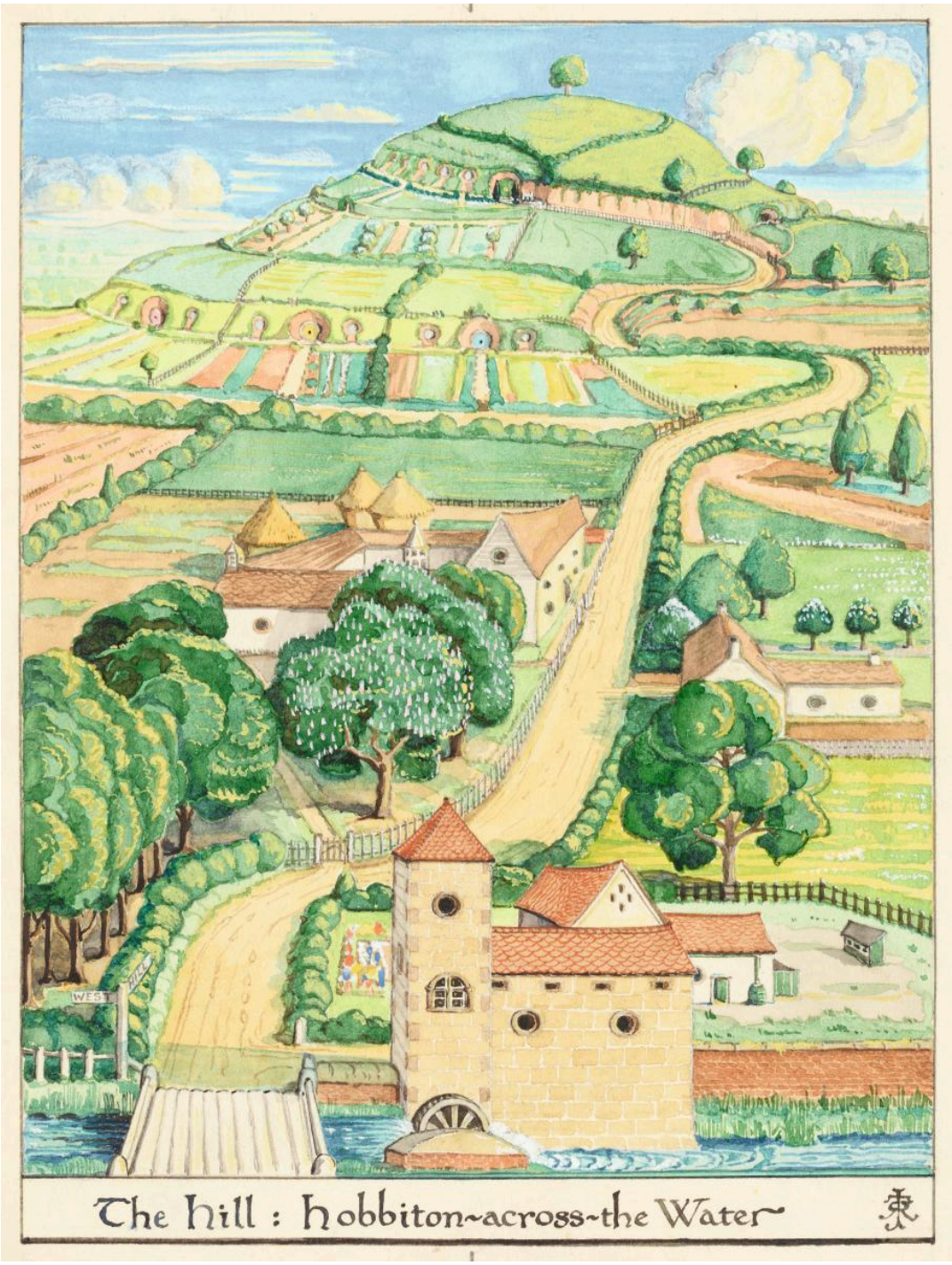

Figure 1: A colored drawing of Hobbiton provided by J.R.R. Tolkien on page 7 of *The Hobbit* and colored by MuseuoTeco, which was accessed April 22, 2024.

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