

IMAGES OF PEACE IN TOLKIEN'S WORKS

Reflective essay by Albert Suriñach I Campos

The aim of this reflective essay is to discuss the need for the study of images of fantasy and study the visual artwork created by Tolkien. This essay should serve as a starting point for further study of the reception history of Tolkien's works in the visual arts, by studying the illustrations, artwork and media adaptations of Middle-Earth and how they shift and alter Tolkien's vision of pacifism and militarism.

The importance of images of fantasy to foster imagination for peace

Peace as an act of poiesis

Understanding the role that images play in our perception of peace is necessary in order to analyse its presence in the different pieces of artwork we will examine. It is first important to point out that peace is not merely the absence of war, and it goes well beyond that. As the UNESCO Constitution states¹: 'Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed.' Peace is thus imagined in the human mind with the same process as war. We can define it as an act of *poiesis*. In semiotics, *poiesis* refers to the emergence of a concept from a place where it did not exist.² In other words, it is a process of creation, derived from the Ancient Greek ποιεῖν, "to make", and from which the word "poetry" is derived. This word is made use of with peace to highlight the creative nature of the concept of peace. As an act of poiesis, thus, peace will be closely and inextricably linked with other acts of creation, such as art and imagination.

¹ Lehner, p.2

² Polkinghorne, p.115.

Imagination and poiesis are closely intertwined. Kaplan explains Bachelard's theory of the imagination as a poietic power that can manifest new images in the world,³. He defends that our affection and connection to reality is not derived from our knowledge of its real and tangible nature, but the feelings that we harbour for it, and that these emotional connection drives us to seek knowledge on the world of the real.⁴ However, imagination presents alternative, pocket-size worlds that can achieve the same connection with humans as with the real world if an emotional attachment is created between the imagined world and the human. Fumanti⁵ references Aristotle's definition of imagination as the "human ability to know the world through sense and reason"⁶ and takes it further by stating that imagination, by "re-imagining the world"⁷, is the tool by which humans^o develop new ideas and create concepts from nothingness that can then be applied and materialized in the real world.

These converging theories of imagination as a generative force present a strong argument for imagination as an effective way to engage in the poiesis, in the creation and development of a concept, such as is, in our case, peace and peace-building. Peace cannot be realized, cannot be materialized without an imagined idea of it, one that transcends the realm of the realist and engages with an imagined, fictitious and idealized world. In order to do so, Lehner believes that the process making of peace, the poiesis of peace, cannot just be realized with a practical imagining of a realist portrayal of the world, but by engaging with poetry and art, that can present possible fantastical worlds that can then be adapted into reality. She states how "in earlier times, for example in the fifth century, the poets and artists were the most important ethical teachers in the society."⁸ Appleby believes that "the ecstatic epiphany of the artist invites us to sense and "touch" the ineffable and, no small irony, it is that encounter with what

³ Kaplan, p.3

⁴ Kaplan, p.4

⁵ Fumanti, p.117

⁶ Lehner, p.6

⁷ Fumanti, p.120

⁸ Lehner, p.9

some describe as “the eternal” that sets us on the long journey back to our full humanity.”⁹ Imagination through art and poetry is a catalyst to understand new perspectives of peace that cannot be achieved in another way.

Fantasy and the imagery of fantasy

Fantasy is a genre born in the 20th century with a shifting definition that has, by now, separated into many different categories.¹⁰ An amalgam of many of its changing definitions might be described as an escapist storytelling medium into a fictitious world with mythologically-inspired elements that differ from the natural laws and conventions found in the real world. It has been traditionally undervalued in academic circles and dismissed as a sub-par literary genre¹¹, despite its massive popularity and quick growth amongst reader around the world. Its heavy inspiration on earlier mythologies invites us to link it genealogically with mythological traditions, with the crucial difference that the stories and characters found in fantasy stories are not actually believed to be true. If its authenticity as existing in the real world is dismissed from the beginning, the act of reading and writing fantasy becomes a pure theoretical exercise of the imagination. This interests us because of our previously found links between imagination, the creative process for the human mind and the role of peace as a concept that must be created through an act of poiesis. There is an argument to be made that fantasy can act as a successful canvas on which to explore, in a theoretical and poetical framework, concepts of peace and their resonance with humans’ emotions. Studying our response to these imagined images of peace in fantasy can be useful to infer their success and feasibility in the real world, as well as to shift and veer our understanding of peace toward uncharted perceptions of it.

⁹ Appleby, p.443.

¹⁰ Ryzhchenko, p.1

¹¹ Ryzhchenko, p.4

In a world primarily born in literature, primarily with J.R.R. Tolkien's works, the importance of the visual arts and imagery in our understanding of fantasy might seem secondary or less important, but it has slowly become a bigger part of the genre. According to Sisakht, there are two modes of understanding of imagining fantasy: a primary perception comes from the description of the poet, who distils theoretical concepts and ideas into words which are then filtered by the reader's mind into their own interpretation of said words. Meanwhile, the illustration of fantasy stories creates a secondary perception, which erases the reader's interpretation of the words by showing already the finished image through a visual medium.¹² This secondary perception is useful in that it overcomes the barrier that is imposed on the poet, which is the imagination of the reader. For as good and illustrative as a written description can be, the imagination of the reader to imagine something by piecing together elements known to him will have a limit, beyond which they will be unable to discern. However, the presence of images directed at the eyes opens the mind to observe and consider concepts that they could not have imagined on their own, serving thus as an enormously powerful tool to allow them to engage in an imaginative process. In other words, images of fantasy can inspire the observer to take their imagination further and consider new worlds and figures, and in that lies part of their usefulness and attractiveness.

We will now will consider the images that have been produced to represent by Tolkien from "The Lord of the Rings", "The Hobbit" and "The Silmarillion" and examine how their style, content and context can interact with concepts of inner peace, peace-building and militarism in order to complement the original perception found in Tolkien's stories.

SECOND PART: IMAGES OF MIDDLE-EARTH

¹² Sisakht, p.1.

We are lucky, in this study, to have many of Tolkien's own drawings and illustrations of his own works, which provide us with a unique insight into the actual intention behind his works. No author, illustrator or painter can infuse in his depictions of Middle-Earth the same authenticity as Tolkien did for the simple reason of him being the author and creator of that world.

Tolkien used a range of mediums to illustrate snippets of Middle-Earth. Most of these sketches are unfinished, merely drafts for personal enjoyment, that have nevertheless a noteworthy artistic prowess. Upon a first overview of the drawings, the first impression is that is a clear lack of any militaristic scenes or imagery. Not a single one of his drawings portrays any kind of war or armed character, and the only one of his extant drawings that portrays any sort of conflict is Smaug burning Lake Town (Fig.1). This realization comes immediately followed by the lack of any actual characters or people in most of his drawings. Tolkien's images focus on the landscapes, especially on nature. Most of them only present forests and valleys, with some including a small figure present in the background. Instead of being the background of the illustrations, the landscapes are presented as the focus of the scene.

The choice of medium and its use is also telling of the intention of the author. The two main mediums used are coloured pencils and watercolours, both painting techniques that generate soft, pastel-like colours that transmit a sense of peace and uniformity. Fig.2. and Fig.3. are good examples of this technique: the landscape is the protagonist of the painting, with soft colours that accentuate the inner peace and calm that Tolkien found in trees¹³. Other sketches, such as this pencil-coloured depiction of Rivendell (Fig.4.) also show a muted, soft landscape that evokes a sense of peace and calm. It should be noted how, despite it being a depiction of Rivendell, as written in the bottom, the buildings and towers of the elven refuge are barely

¹³ BBC.

shown, and the emphasis is again put in the valley, mountains and trees. The connection between inner peace and the natural world is very palpable in all of his drawings, as well as a clue towards recognizing the importance of nature in his works as an agent of peace and stability. Out of all the elements present in his work, Tolkien chooses to focus on the good, not the bad, to devote his efforts in depicting. He chooses to devote his creative process, his poiesis, in the portrayal of peaceful environments instead of the violent ones, the ones that he associated with peace. His drawings teach us about the possibility of building an imaginary world focused on peace not by imagining a world without conflict or evil, but by focusing our creative efforts in constructing the peaceful and beautiful aspects of said world.

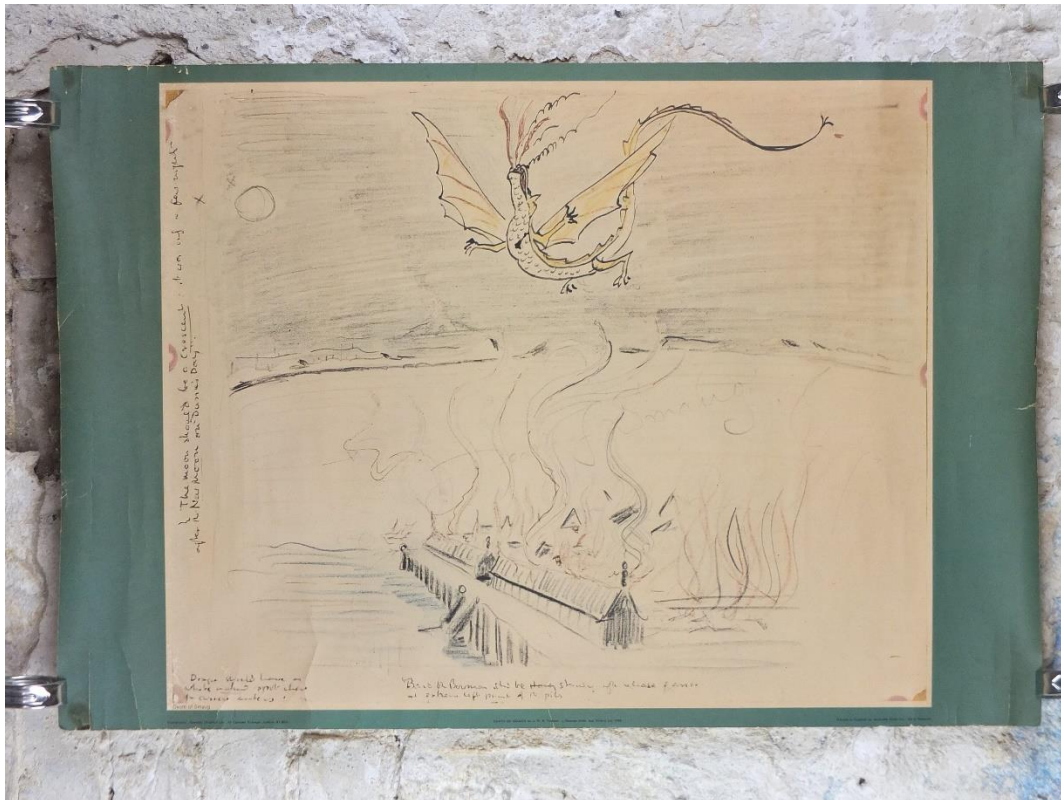


Fig.1. Death of Smaug, "Pictures by J.R.R. Tolkien", C. Tolkien, 1992



Fig.2.: Elvenking's Gate (II), "Pictures by J.R.R. Tolkien", C. Tolkien, 1992



Fig. 3. Forest of Lothlórien in Spring, "Pictures by J.R.R. Tolkien", C. Tolkien, 1992

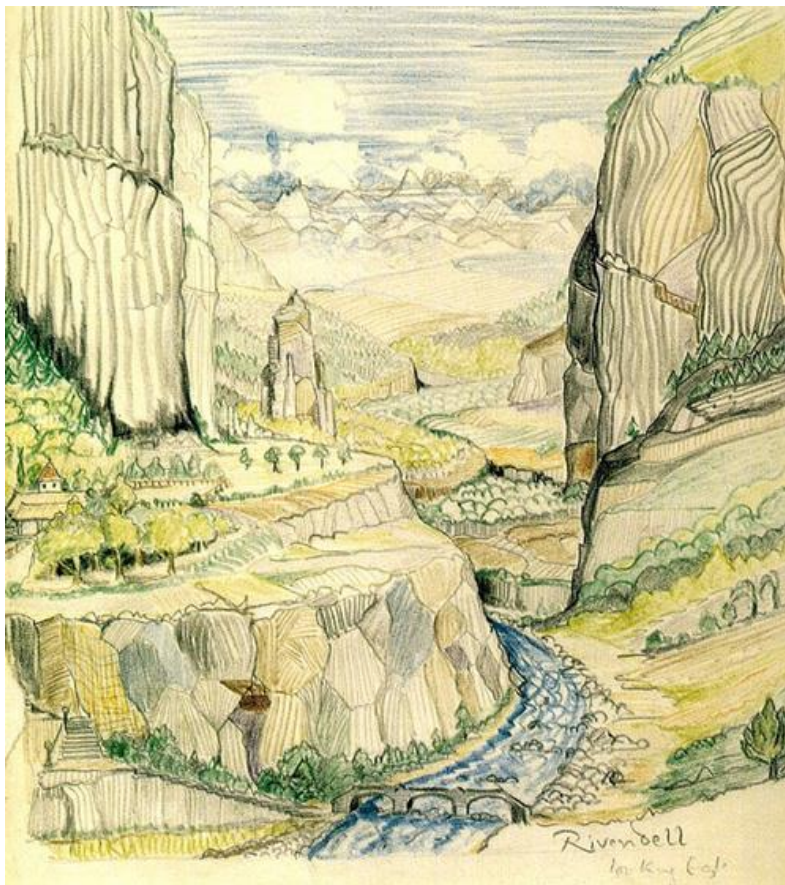


Fig. 4. Rivendell (II), "Pictures by J.R.R. Tolkien", C. Tolkien, 1992

Conclusion

There is a very clear style that permeates all of Tolkien's drawings and illustrations of Middle-Earth, and helps in establishing and making clear how much Tolkien found inner peace in the natural landscapes and descriptions of Middle-Earth, instead of with people, especially omitting any depiction of war or conflict. Given that most of these illustrations are for the author's personal enjoyment, they are especially telling of the natural instinct of the author to want to depict these specific images, with these mediums, which highlight the emotions of calmness, natural pastoral landscapes and prosper environments, and in doing so focusing on the positive peaceful elements of his work instead of the negative war-like ones.

Looking ahead

It is important to remember that Tolkien himself did not disagree with his work being expanded and depicted by other authors.¹⁴ He understood the nature of stories as something that, once created, one did not have full control over, and that eventually others, such as his son, would have to take up and infuse their own personal talent and personality into in order to depict it in their own way. This is where reception history of the stories of J.R.R. Tolkien begins, and, in our case, reception history of the images of J.R.R. Tolkien. In further research, different traditions of reception history of Tolkien's world in the visual arts will be examined, namely the artwork of Mary Fairburn (Fig.5.) , Margareth of Denmark (Fig.6., Fig.7.), John Howe, Alan Lee... And the media adaptations that have been inspired by them, concentrating in their perceptions of peace and how the imagery changes can represent the shifting in values and meaning of the stories told.

¹⁴ Tolkien, Letters, 202.



Fig.5. Rivendell, by Mary Fairburn



Fig.6. Gandalf and the dwarves, by Margareth II of Denmark



Fig. 7. Legions of Orcs by Margareth II of Denmark

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