

TOLKIEN'S ART OF PEACE

J.R.R. Tolkien's "The Lord of the Rings", "The Hobbit", "The Silmarillion" and his other many tales and poems from his fictional world of Middle-Earth have garnered world-wide acclaim in the 20th and 21st century, cementing him as one of the fathers of modern fantasy. However, despite the many militaristic and conflict-oriented narratives that permeate his stories, there is a general understanding by his readers of Middle-Earth and his fantasy worlds as a space of inner peace and solace. The objective of our research for the past year has been to uncover the aspects of peace intertwined in his narrative through an exploration of the visual arts adaptations of his stories.

An analysis of Tolkien's art

In the previous paper, we discussed the act of poiesis, of creation out of nothingness, and how imagination is closely connected to that power of manifesting new images into the world. ¹ We also explored Tolkien's own illustrations of his stories as a keystone from where to compare later versions and iterations of his work. Tolkien's art based on Middle-Earth was found to be calm and pastoral, with a clear lack of characters and humans and a focus on natural landscapes unscathed from the evils of war and conflict that permeate his world.

¹ Kaplan, p.3

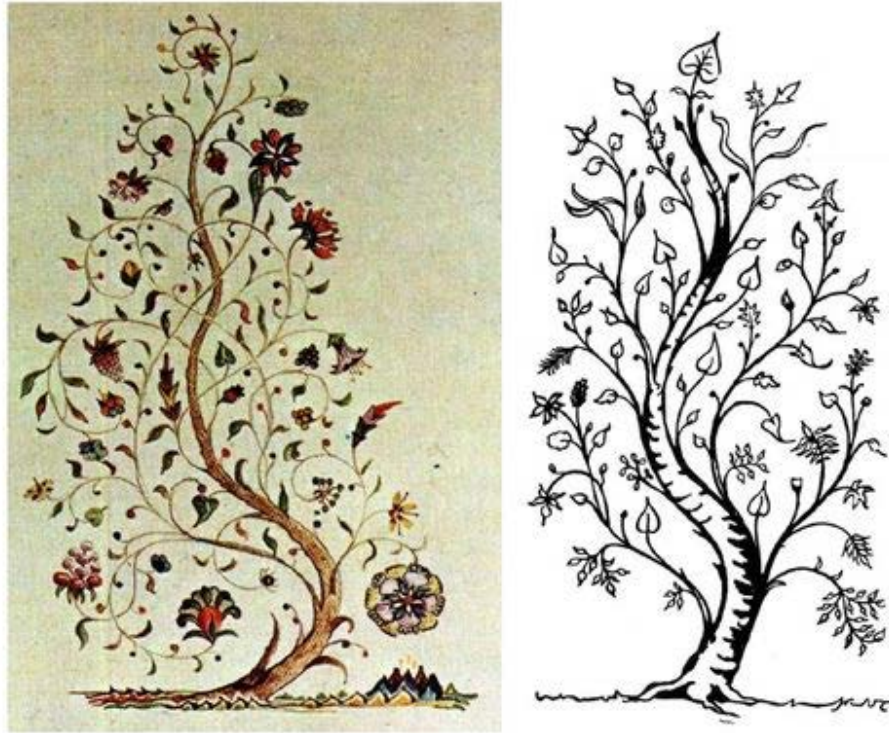


Figure 1: Tolkien's two versions of the Tree of Amalion

We find thus many paintings and drawings of forest, with a heavy focus on depictions of trees, mountains and valleys². More specifically, he has two patterns of drawing trees, as can be clearly exemplified in Fig.1. Tolkien, in Letter 342, states that “I have among my ‘papers’ more than one version of a mythical ‘tree’, which crops up regularly at those times when I feel driven to pattern-designing.”³ This is an example of a technique that he uses repeatedly in his art: repetition. In Fig.2., we can see a repeated use of pointillism and cross-hatching, which require careful devotion to the piece in repeating the same patterns. This reflects his larger philosophy on the creative act, his way of understanding the poesis involved in the imaginative process, which shall be useful to understand his creation of themes of peace. Regarding this creation act, he stated in a letter:

² Finseth, p.39

³ MacLeod, p.109

“One writes such a story not out of the leaves of trees still to be observed, nor by means of botany and soil-science; but it grows like a seed in the dark out of the leaf-mold of the mind: out of all that has been seen or thought or read, that has long ago been forgotten, descending into the deeps. No doubt there is much personal selection, as with a gardener: what one throws on one's personal compost-heap; and my mold is evidently made largely of linguistic matter.”⁴



Figure 2: Tolkien's use of pointillism

⁴ Shippey, p.95

As a devout Catholic, Tolkien understood the act of creation as a pale imitation of God's own act of creation, and nevertheless one of the pure ways in which, by imitation, man can be closer to God. Therefore, the act of creation comes about as a careful picking and choosing of certain elements of God's creation, of the natural world, and intertwining them in a specific way up to an extent where it has become something new. A series of small instances of inspirations "grows" into a new entity. More specifically, on the plane of visual arts, he also believes so to be true, as he says in his speech "On fairy-stories" (*"We do not, or need not, despair of drawing because all lines must be either curved or straight, nor of painting because there are only three 'primary' colours"*)⁵. We also know that, throughout his life, the figurative element, more naturalistic, such as the artwork found earlier on from "The Silmarillion" of Tol Sirion (Fig.3), become more stylized, decorative and textural, with it eventually overtaking any figurative attempt.⁶ I believe this evolution in his understanding of art to be as well a development of his ability to extract his own imagined world separated from the inspiration, which is, in this case, the natural world. Therefore, we understand now the importance of the process of creation to Tolkien and how it is portrayed both in his painting technique and his artistic evolution.

⁵ OFS, Tolkien, p.66

⁶ p.24.



Figure 3: Tol Sirion drawn by Tolkien

Tolkien's understanding of peace as a creative act

My search for that elusive idea of peace found in Tolkien's works resulted unsuccessful at first. There are different approaches that can be taken at elucidating how peace appears in a story, at different metanarrative levels. Firstly, I studied the relationships between parties and races in Middle-Earth, thinking about how Tolkien directly writes in accounts of peace-making between characters. One such example is the peace treaty that Théoden makes with the Ents⁷, promising them not to interfere in their affairs and to respect the forest of Fangorn. Another one is to observe the bonds of friendship found in the fellowship and how peace is promoted through the positive and emotionally vulnerable bonds that binds the characters together (Frodo and Sam, Legolas and Gimli...). However, I found these arguments too general, and most stories involving different

⁷ The Two Towers, p.123

parties, kingdoms and characters display these themes at some level or another. Therefore, I discarded finding in this analysis the reasons behind the peace-generating perception of Tolkien's works.

However, a more narratological study of his works provides a different outlook. In the *Two Towers*, we have the following quote by Frodo:

"The Shadow that bred them can only mock, it cannot make: not real new things of its own. I don't think it gave life to the orcs, it only ruined them and twisted them; and if they are to live at all, they have to live like other living creatures."

Later trends of internet culture have appropriated this quote as a way to ridicule attempts by large companies with controversial records to adapt *The Lord of the Rings* into the screen, but its original meaning stands: Tolkien views the creative force as directly antagonistic to the destructive force, which might seem obvious semantically, but, by analogy, it appoints the act of creation as the one most far removed from that of destruction, of which war is part of. Therefore, the framing of the creative act as a force analogous of peace-making is the artistic way to articulate the hypothesis and research that we have conducted over the past years at the Visualizing Peace research project⁸: that peace is not the lack of another entity, such as war, but a generative force and a generated concept, that is, an act of creation. This philosophy permeates Tolkien's world: in the *Silmarillion*, already in the *Ainulindäle*, the creation of the world, we see the righteous, good-spirited gods create everything with song, and all the evil and destructive forces of the world only come about when one of the gods, the corrupted one, Melkor, starts singing out of tune and corrupts the harmony of the melody.⁹

⁸ VIP website

⁹ *Silmarillion*, p. 5

Deviation from poesis in later adaptations of Middle-Earth

Having theorized that the quintessential Tolkenian idea of peace is interwoven in his idea of creation, later interpretations of his work must be examined to see how they might have strayed.

Earlier this year, I interviewed Dr. Beppe Pezzini, a Classics professor at Oxford University and a Tolkien scholar who has studied him extensively. Upon asking about militarization in later depictions of *The Lord of the Rings*, he expressed a very negative view of the Peter Jackson movie adaptations in respect to the representation of peace, stating that they would routinely elide many of the moments in which Tolkien questions the morality of war or generates empathy for the antagonist side, demonizing war as a concept instead of a specific enemy.¹⁰ This tendency was already perceived by Tolkien in early adaptations of his work while he was alive, even though he did not disagree with his work being expanded and depicted by other authors. On the contrary, akin to the earlier point about the mutability and evolution of concepts through imagination, he viewed the nature of stories as something that, once created, one did not have full control over, and that eventually others would have to take up and infuse their own personal talent and personality into to depict it in their own way.¹¹ For instance, Mary Fairburn or Queen Margareth II of Denmark are two instances of painters from his time that he praised in his letters and admired for their portrayals of the exuberant, peaceful and wondrous Middle Earth (seen in Fig.4 and Fig.5).

¹⁰ Bezzini, min.43:20

¹¹ Tolkien, Letters, 202.



Fig.4. Rivendell, by Mary Fairburn



Fig.5. Gandalf and the dwarves, by Margareth II of Denmark

However, this tradition of depicting a more militarized and less reflexive and nuanced version of his tales, due in part to the marketability of war stories and the influence of

Hollywood-like archetype unto popular culture¹², has spread widely. Videogames such as “Shadow of Mordor” or “Battle for Middle-Earth”, borrowing from the Tolkien creative IP, have twisted and completely changed the context and roles of characters in order to create battle scenarios and good videogame villains, with departures from the books as strong as militarizing the elves as a playable faction (with them not having any sort of active military role in the books) or turning abstract characters meant to represent mythical archetypes such as Sauron or Celebrimbor into “final bosses”.¹³ Movie adaptations, such as Peter Jackson’s or Amazon Prime’s loose adaptation of “Rings of Power”, have followed in their footsteps. The classical trilogy sees ignored episodes such as the Scouring of the Shire, which exemplifies the reach and complexity of war, or the humanization of the Easterlings and humans swayed under the banner of Sauron, (“*It was Sam's first view of a battle of Men against Men, and he did not like it much. He was glad that he could not see the dead face. He wondered what the man's name was and where he came from; and if he was really evil of heart, or what lies or threats had led him on the long march from his home;*”) or the peace-making process of Théoden and the Mountain Men tricked by Sauron. Meanwhile, Rings of Power creates an inexistant military structure of elves colonizing the rest of the world and depicts exacerbated tensions between races to generate conflict for the show, in an anachronistic attempt to discuss modern political and social issues but, in the process, lose the whimsy and wonder of the creation of Middle-Earth that transmits those notions of environmental and inner peace. Therefore, a counterpoint is needed and stronger traditions of depicting the peaceful and whimsical, almost fairy-story like, as stated by Tolkien himself in his own speech¹⁴, should be encouraged to return.

¹² Bezzini, min.43:50

¹⁴ OFS, Tolkien, p.32

An artistic conclusion

After seeing all the artistic traditions of illustrating Tolkien, as well as searching for where peace is found on his stories, I came to the conclusion that the only way that I would be able to express that peace would be through the same medium that we have been researching: visual art. Therefore, I designed and created two paintings as an artistic response to the traditions that I have explored that would best encapsulate peace within the world of Middle-Earth. I developed two from his two most influential works: The Lord of the Rings and the Silmarillion, highlighting with each different aspects of the peace we have discussed. In both paintings, I decided to use oil paints for a series of reasons: firstly, Tolkien never painting with such a medium, which would stop me from being tempted to copy and imitate his art style and would force me to create one out of my own perception of the work; secondly, the ‘wet-on-wet’ technique that oil can do more effectively than other mediums, such as acrylic, lends itself to painting more dream-like, hazy scenarios with less defined shapes that can represent better the fantasy atmosphere intended; finally, the versatility of oil paint in terms of colour would be able to represent accurately the very descriptive writing style of the author and portray his “creation” in its full form.

The shores of Tol Eressea

This painting explores the narratological element of peace, and how it is found through the story and not so much in the setting. The description of the peace reads:

“When Frodo returns to the Shire after his odyssey to throw the ring in Mordor, he finds himself unable to find peace, haunted by the shadow of the Morgul blade that pierced his shoulder. Many have compared Frodo’s struggle to enjoy his peaceful home again after coming back from war as an allegory of the PTSD of soldiers returning from war, as Tolkien would have seen during World War I. As a solution, Gandalf and the Elves offer him the chance to sail with them beyond the lands of mortals into the Undying Lands, where the gods and all the elves reside in eternal harmony. This last journey can be interpreted in a more religious or spiritual way, viewing the Undying Lands as a metaphysical heaven, or as fantasy, understanding the lands of Aman as a paradisiac fantasy version of a deathless utopia. The only certain interpretation is that the journey into the Undying lands stands for Frodo finally finding peace. I was always awe-struck by the imagination of a physical space that literally represents peace, and tried my best to portray it in this artwork. We know that Frodo would have arrived first to Tol Eressëa, a small island that acts as a kind of “purgatory” for mortals that would arrive to Aman, so it was on descriptions of said island that I based my painting.”

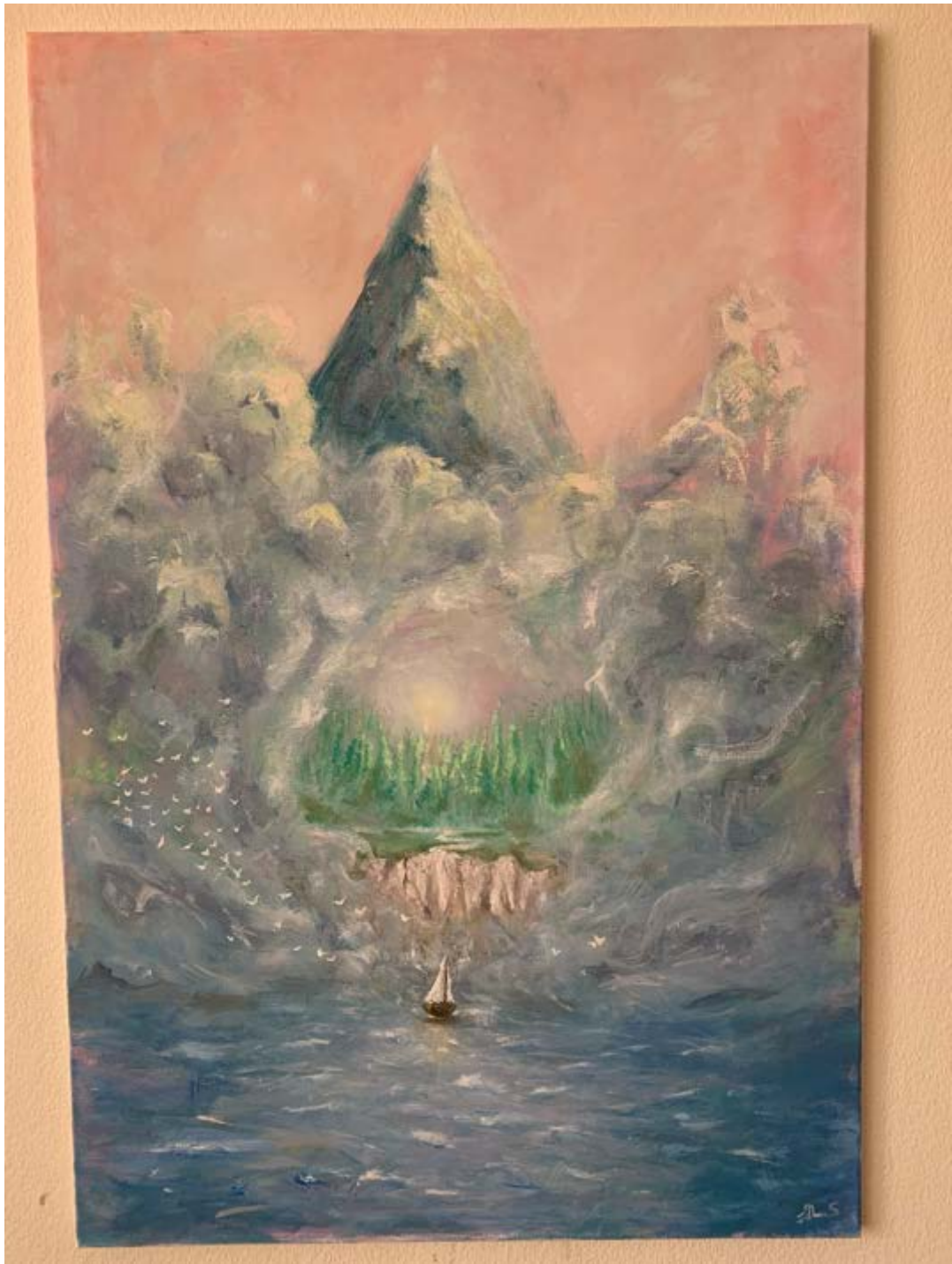


Fig.6. "Tol Eressea", painted with oil paints

The mere of Cuiviénen

This painting, which focuses on a scene of “The Silmarillion”, presents a more scenic moment of peace that more accurately echoes the general themes of the book. Posthumously published after his death, The Silmarillion was Tolkien’s lifelong project, painstakingly detailing the history of Middle-Earth since its inception. In it, Ilúvatar, Father of the gods, devises unknown plans for the arrival of the different mortals (elves, humans) to the physical world, Middle-Earth. The description of the piece reads:

“Before the First Age of Middle Earth, far before even the Sun had been born, the first elves sprung from existence in the shores of the lakes of the Cuiviénen, unbeknownst to the gods themselves, as the first step in Eru Ilúvatar’s creation plan. Upon finding them, the gods gave the race of the elves their name – the Eldar, the “ones concerned with the stars”, for that is everything they saw, in the sky and in the lakes.¹⁵ The stars, that minor light, less blaring than the Sun, is a poetic simile of a more nuanced and subtle light. They remind us of hope in times of darkness, of the light that needs to be carefully observed to be noticed, of the mystery and beauty in the Universe. This scene has always appeared particularly peaceful to me, a pure moment of creation that springs in silence, spontaneously, unconcerned by the schemes and conflicts that were shaking the primordial gods at the time. “

¹⁵ Silmarillion, p.34



Fig.7. "Cuiviénen", painted with oil paints

Conclusion

There is a clear relationship between Tolkien's conception of peace, both inner and environmental, and his own act of imaginative poesis in respect to this fantasy world. Ultimately, this philosophy offers a helpful solace from the many times discouraging failures of the peace-making process: the act of creation is more tenacious and long-lasting than that of destruction, both in nature and in the human world. The stories of Tolkien, despite the many instances of conflict and of hopelessness in the face of evil or uncertainty, offer ultimately a message with hope in its forefront and with a reassurance of the strength of peace as creation. It is that light, unwavering, restorative of any destruction and that shall always prevail for its very nature that best illustrates the message that the reader takes away after having experienced his stories. It gives them the inner peace to hope for a better future and, in turn, the chance to dream it as well. Tolkien does not need to illustrate a utopia to force them to dream, just to show good overcoming evil with great effort and perseverance.

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