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Sources of Tolkien: Influence of Myths and Legends on J.R.R. Tolkien in Shaping His Own Mythology

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Abstract

J.R.R. Tolkien is a prominent name among the writers of fantasy and children's literature. His works *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* stand among the most widely read novels. Tolkien was influenced by a number of myths and legends which made him a creative writer. Norse mythology, Arthurian Legends, Finnish mythology and the Epic poem *Beowulf* are the chief among Tolkien's sources. Tolkien was a philologist and was familiar with the ancient European languages and texts. With the help of all these myths and legends, Tolkien was able to create a mythology and fictional universe of his own. His fictional universe is named Middle-earth. This research paper focuses on analyzing the influence of the above mentioned myths and legends on Tolkien in creating his own mythology.

Keywords- *Tolkien, Myths, Legends, Sources*

Great works will always have a source of inspiration behind their production. The writers may be influenced by almost everything like other literary works, personalities, scientific discoveries, mythology and so on. Ancient and medieval writers believed that poetry is produced when they are inspired by Muse, the Goddess of literature and arts. William Shakespeare, who is being considered as the greatest of writers, borrowed the ideas for most of his plays from Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* and Holinshed's *Chronicles*. James Joyce was influenced by Greek mythology and Homer's *Odyssey* in writing his novels like *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Ulysses*. *The Waste Land* by T. S. Eliot was influenced by a great number of literary works and is particularly indebted to two anthropological works: *The Golden Bough* by Sir James Frazer and *From Ritual to Romance* by Jessie Weston. More than that, this poem loosely follows the legend of the Holy Grail.

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Like all these great writers, J. R. R. Tolkien was influenced by *Beowulf*, Arthurian legends Norse Mythology and Finnish mythology in writing the novels *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. My aim here is to analyse the influence of the above mentioned myths and legends on the works of Tolkien. As Charles A. Huttar (*Bloom's Modern Critical Views: J.R.R. Tolkien*) points out in "Tolkien, Epic Traditions, and Golden Age Myths":

Though written in prose, *The Lord of the Rings* is unquestionably heir to Western epic traditions, both classical and medieval-vernacular. The author explicitly thought of his work in terms of 'epic'. He loved Homer and a recent study of the work's affinities with Virgil (Morse) has sought to bring greater balance into a line of scholarship which had previously emphasized such Northern influences as *Beowulf* and the Eddas. I use the term 'influences', not 'sources': Tolkien's manner of working was not so much to imitate a model as to ladle his portion out of the great bubbling soup pot of mythopoeic motifs to which storytellers are always helping themselves (Bloom, 3).

As we concentrate on the influence of myths and legends on the works of Tolkien, let us first discuss what is meant by myths and legends. Myths were developed in the minds of our ancestors as the outcome of their effort to explain the unknown phenomena of the universe which had troubled them. The influence of myths has been evident ever since the ancient Greeks and Romans began telling stories about the gods. Myths contain such interesting and fundamental stories which make the mythology a rich source of inspiration for authors. A legend can be defined as a traditional story which is popularly regarded as historical but at the same time not authenticated. Legends resemble folktales in content; they may include supernatural beings, elements of mythology, or explanations of natural phenomena, but they are associated with a particular locality or person and are told as a matter of history. Famous legends include Odysseus, Robin Hood, Trojan War, Atlantis and El Dorado and so on. Tolkien was particularly influenced by the legends of King Arthur and *Beowulf*.

Norse mythology or Scandinavian mythology had influenced Tolkien in a great deal. It was the mythology of Scandinavia (shared in part by Britain and Germany) until the establishment of Christianity. Like many ancient mythologies, the Norse myths were handed down verbally for many generations. The Norse people considered two major classes of gods: the Æsir and the Vanir, as well as several other mythical beings, including giants. Norse Mythology centers largely on the approaching catastrophic doom of the gods, Ragnarok. All the Norse gods know that Ragnarok is coming. They know what will happen, that they (and their enemies) will die. Norse Mythology is somewhat unique in this respect — the gods' ultimate destiny on the battlefield is a tribute to the warrior's pride of the Vikings. This pride of the warriors can be perceived in the heroic characters of Tolkien's works. *The Eddas* are

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the documented versions of Norse mythology. A more interesting fact is that Vikings were also the ancestors of the present British people and *Beowulf* was a legend about a Swedish national hero. So, *Beowulf* was closely related to the myths of the Norsemen and Tolkien regarded both as his most valued sources.

Norse mythology was a little known tradition outside Scandinavia until the nineteenth century. References to the Norse gods and heroes spread into European literary culture with the widespread publication of Norse myths and legends at this time. By the late twentieth century, references to Norse mythology became common in science fiction, fantasy literature and in all forms of popular culture including movies. Several writers have been influenced by various aspects of Norse mythology. Henry Rider Haggard, author of *King Solomon's Mines*, wrote an epic adventure in the style of the Nordic sagas, *Eric Brighteyes* which has a setting of the tenth century Iceland. Various Norse gods are referenced in the book *The Ballad of the White Horse* by the famous writer and critic G. K. Chesterton. More than that, some of the characters from Norse mythology served as the source of inspiration for J. K. Rowling in the naming and characterization of those in her immensely popular *Harry Potter* series. The name of the werewolf Fenrir Greyback is a good example. Something more interesting is that J. K. Rowling was influenced by *The Lord of the Rings* itself. Among the several writers influenced by Norse mythology was Tolkien's friend Roger Lancelyn Green who published a book which had retold these stories for children with the name *Myths of the Norsemen*.

The early reviews and criticisms of *The Lord of the Rings* make a persistent and provocative suggestion that in some way the essence of his work derives from the world of the sagaman - Norse mythology, folklore and literature. In a review in the *New Statesman* and the *Nation*, Francis Huxley notes Tolkien's familiarity with epic saga and suggests that the outline was based on saga. In the *Spectator*, Elizabeth Leigh Pemberton calls *The Lord of the Rings* "the heroic saga of the imaginary world of Middle earth". The *Times Literary Supplement* reviewer also used the term "saga" in describing Tolkien's work (*Tolkien's Cauldron: Northern Literature and The Lord of the Rings*, Gloriana St. Clair 5).

It is a very clear fact that Tolkien knew Norse mythology and literature and he used these works as a source of inspiration for the matter of Middle-earth. But everything he used is changed and altered to meet the demands and needs of his original creation. Pieces of story, characters, descriptions of implements, themes and motifs, manners and customs are all borrowed, but nothing is left unaltered. In each instance, Tolkien changes materials to serve the needs of his own stories. He wrote, revised and rewrote everything he borrowed from other sources. He used the raw materials of Northern literature into the creation of Middle-earth with a level of craftsmanship that ranks him among the top writers of the world.

Tolkien's friend and colleague C. S. Lewis (Author of *The Chronicles of Narnia*) also comments on the Northern qualities of *The Lord of the Rings*:

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If we insist on asking for the moral of the story, that is its moral: a recall from facile optimism and wailing pessimism alike, to that hard, yet not quite desperate, insight into Man's unchanging predicament by which heroic ages have lived, It is here that the Norse affinity is strongest: hammerstrokes but with compassion (*Tolkien and the Critics*,15).

What C. S. Lewis meant here is that the hammerstrokes are a common motif in Northern literature. While the sagas contain compassionate incidents, the compassion in *The Lord of the Rings* is one of Tolkien's many changes.

Another great source of inspiration for Tolkien was the Old English Epic *Beowulf*. This epic poem is considered as one of the most important works of Anglo-Saxon literature because it is the oldest surviving epic poem in the English language and the earliest piece of vernacular European literature. *Beowulf* was written in Old English, the language of the Saxons. This work may have been composed as early as 700 A. D. by an anonymous poet and evolved through many retellings before it was written down. The poem was originally untitled and since the nineteenth century, it has begun to be called by the name of its Scandinavian hero, whose adventures are its primary focus. Historical elements are blended within the poem even though both the hero and the story are fictional.

Beowulf has exerted its influence on a number of modern poets and fiction-writers. Gerard Manley Hopkins adapted his "sprung rhythm" from the harsh rhythms of *Beowulf*; Ezra Pound was influenced deeply by the poem, and attempted a translation along with several other Anglo-Saxon poems. Seamus Heaney translated this poem into modern English preserving its verse form. The poem has also inspired fresh creative works, from Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* to Michael Crichton's *Eaters of the Dead*.

Tolkien was deeply influenced by the poem and adopted much of the material for his fantasy world from the world of *Beowulf*. He also wrote an essay titled *Beowulf: the Monsters and the Critics* while he was a professor of Anglo- Saxon language and literature at Oxford. This essay is a brilliant defense of *Beowulf* against those critics who think it a great but badly constructed poem:

In *Beowulf* we have, then, an historical poem about the pagan past, or an attempt at one—literal historical fidelity founded on modern research was, of course, not attempted. It is a poem by a learned man writing of old times, who looking back on the heroism and sorrow feels in them something permanent and something symbolical. So far from being a confused semi-pagan—historically unlikely for a man of this sort in the period—he brought probably *first* to his task a knowledge of Christian poetry, especially that of the Cædmon school, and especially *Genesis*. He makes his minstrel sing in Heorot of the Creation of the earth and the lights of Heaven. So excellent is this

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choice as the theme of the harp that maddened Grendel lurking joyless in the dark without that it matters little whether this is anachronistic or not. *Secondly*, to his task the poet brought a considerable learning in native lays and traditions: only by learning and training could such things be acquired, they were no more born naturally into an Englishman of the seventh or eighth centuries, by simple virtue of being an 'Anglo-Saxon', than ready-made knowledge of poetry and history is inherited at birth by modern children (*The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*, 26).

Tolkien also had worked on a translation of the poem, which the Tolkien Society has recently decided to publish. Many parallels can also be drawn between *Beowulf* and Tolkien's *The Hobbit*. In *The Road to Middle-earth*, T.A. Shippey says that the scenes in the Golden hall are straight-forwardly calqued on *Beowulf* (94-95). Certainly, a number of likenesses between *Beowulf* and *The Lord of the Rings* can be observed in weapons, customs, landscapes and personalities.

Tolkien was also influenced by the Arthurian legends on the creation of his fantasy world. These legends are the body of stories and medieval romances, known as the matter of Britain, centering on the legendary king Arthur. There are many different versions of the stories that make up the Arthurian legend. Still, they usually revolve around several main characters - King Arthur, Queen Guinevere, and the Knights of the Round Table. Other common elements of the stories are Arthur's fabled sword Excalibur, the magical island of Avalon, and the search for the Holy Grail.

Even though Tolkien denied the influence of Arthurian legends, several parallels can be observed between the legends and the works of Tolkien. The legends about King Arthur must have profoundly moved Tolkien that he began to compose a poem in alliterative verse entitled *The Fall of Arthur* a few years before he wrote *The Hobbit*.

Arthur eastward in arms purposed
his war to wage on the wild marches,
over seas sailing to Saxon lands... (1).

Tolkien was a great scholar of ancient and medieval literature and worked as a professor of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford University. So, it is very clear that he had read different versions of the Arthurian legends, especially *Le Morte d' Arthur* by Sir Thomas Malory and also *The Story of King Arthur and His Knights* by Howard Pyle which was published in 1903 when Tolkien was an eleven year old boy. So, these works have surely contributed in the shaping of Middle-earth, his fictional universe.

Tolkien acknowledged Finnish mythology or more specifically the Finnish national epic *Kalevala* as an influence on his works. In *Kalevala*, there is a magical item of great power "the Sampo". Like the One Ring, the Sampo is fought over by forces of good and evil,

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and is ultimately lost as it is destroyed towards the end of the story. Tolkien also based elements of his Elvish language Quenya on Finnish.

Tolkien also included ethnic elements of Old England into the characters. In the words of Hannah Brady, research scholar of Cedarville University, “Tolkien mixes some of the most important ethnic groups who created the language and legacy of Old England, maintaining history’s diversity while also recalling the bravado and epic characters of the past. The Hobbits are the primary and most basic “English” group within Tolkien’s world” (Brady, 22). She also quotes from Joseph Pearce: Tolkien calls the hobbits “rustic English people” who are “small in size because it reflects the generally small reach of their imagination – not the small reach of their courage or latent power.” Tolkien said in a letter that had he thought of it in the beginning, he would have given the Hobbits more English-sounding names in order to answer the very English-like Shire in which he placed them (Pearce, 153).

The term Hobbit itself is originated from Welsh roots. As Michael Flowers points out in his article “Hobbits?...And what may they be?” Research reveals that the word ‘hobbit’ was in common use in specific areas of Wales from at least the late eighteenth century right through the nineteenth century and into the early decades of the twentieth century (Flowers, 3).

Of course, Tolkien had created a mythology of his own under the influence of all these myths and legends. We can consider this as a mythology for England. According to Jared Lobdell’s article in *Bloom’s Modern Critical Interpretations of The Lord of the Rings* “That *The Lord of the Rings* is set in the Northwest of the Old World there is no doubt, and I have no doubt that the setting is important—for two reasons. First of all, this is Tolkien’s own country, the England for which he so earnestly desired to create (or sub-create) a mythology” (Bloom, 49).

Hayden Head writes in his article “Imitative desire in Tolkien's mythology: a Girardian perspective”: “Of course, J.R.R. Tolkien immediately comes to mind as a student of myth who is also a creator of myth. In creating Middle-earth, Tolkien is inside the myth; as a scholar, he is outside”.

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