



The Hope of The Hobbit: Tolkien's Rejection and Criticism of Modernism

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In recent memory, Hollywood came out with "The Lord of The Rings Trilogy". These movies were hugely popular. Despite the films' enormous success with the public, very few people are aware that J.R.R. Tolkien's books elicited a similar response. What made Tolkien's books so fascinating and compelling was their rejection of modernism. An artistic movement that was sweeping the scene during Tolkien's generation, modernism celebrated incoherence, rejected history, and denied the existence of hope or faith. Antonymous to the essentials of modernism, The Hobbit expressed Tolkien's extreme distaste and rejection of modernism in terms of narrative coherence, regard for history, and undying hope.

Firstly, modernism broke away from the concept of narrative coherence and traditional syntax. The modernist movement was an attempt to avoid all manner of previous expression, to completely separate current art and writing from the constraints and polite conventions of the literary styles of the past. This was a result of the general disillusionment of the post-war days; artists and writers were experimenting with a myriad of techniques by which they hoped to liberate themselves from the dead and decadent past. The new forms, styles, and psychologies questioned what was necessary about traditional styles. Modernism was typified by a disintegration of the continuity of language. One of the ways of doing this was to diverge at the most fundamental level--- that of traditional syntax. Nowhere is this clearer than in Tristan Tzara's purposefully nonsensical word order choices in his poem, "Proclamation Without Pretension:"

Art goes to sleep for the birth of a new world
"ART"---a parrot word--- replaced by DADA
PLESIAUSAURUS, or handkerchief
The talent WHICH YOU CAN LEARN
makes the poet a druggist
TODAY criticism balances no longer launches
resemblances
**Hypertrophic painters hyperestheticized and
hypnotized by the hyacinths of muezzins of
hypocritical appearance**

The last line in the same work: "It is not for the runts who are still worshipping their navel," cryptically alludes to Tzara's twofold purpose: to do something in a new way and to simultaneously flout the old way. The fragmented syntax is Tzara's manifest expression of the contraries, contradictions, defiances and nonsequiturs that are to him life.

On a more thematic level, there is the modernist divorce of the present from the past. The future is not worth mentioning because it is an even more detestable apparition than the putrefying past. The cynicism so typical of modernism was marked by a disdainful and irreverent sloughing off of symbolism and all that was meaningful and sacred. Modernism did not allow for significance or identity to be found in previous times or previous ideologies; the modernist disavowed himself of history, of memory, of past. Although this served the modernists by distinguishing them from their predecessors, it also robbed previous events of any meaning, and any possible purpose. In this selection from "Hugh Selwyn Mauberly," Ezra Pound derides the war in particular by invalidating the deaths of those who fought there:

IV
These fought in any case,
And some believing,
 Pro domo, in any case...
Some quick to arm,
some for adventure,
some from fear of weakness,
some from fear of censure,
some for love of slaughter, in imagination,
learning later...
some in fear, learning love of slaughter;

Died some, pro patria,
 non "dulce" non "et décor"...
walked eye-deep in hell
believing in old men's lies, then unbelieving

came home, home to a lie
home to many deceits,
home to old lies and new infamy;
usury age-old and age-thick
and liars in public places...

There died a myriad,
And of the best, among them,
For an old bitch gone in the teeth,
For a botched civilization,

Charm, smiling at the good mouth,
Quick eyes gone under earth's lid
For two gross of broken statues
For a few thousand battered books.

This selection from Hugh Selwyn Mauberly exposes a crucial aspect of modernism: the severing of ties with history and old regimes. The lines "believing in old men's lies, then unbelieving ... usury age-old and age-thick and liars in public places" indicate a certain distrust of tradition and public figures. When Pound writes that the "best of these" died "for an old bitch gone in the teeth, for a botched civilization... for a few thousand battered books," one perceives the modernist's disillusionment with and rejection of the past. The break of relationship with history and unimportance of the role of the past leads right into the third schism: the value of an undying hope despite one's circumstances.

Instead of tenacious optimism, modernism was pervaded by an undeniable despair, a complete loss of hope. This wasn't merely a loss of hope in the previous forms of expression; it was a total annihilation of any glimmer of hope in humanity or in the concept of good overcoming evil. Despair and desolation led to the impotent characters and gloomy scenery upon which modernism was played out. T.S. Eliot's "The Wasteland" describes the landscape of modernism in terms of death and dying, thirst, agony, crying out with no response:

After the torchlight red on sweaty faces
After the frosty silence in the gardens
After the agony in stony places
The shouting and the crying
Prison and palace and reverberation
Of thunder of spring over distant mountains
He who was living is now dead
We who were living are now dying
With a little patience
Here is no water but only rock
Rock and no water and the sandy road
The road winding above among the mountains
Which are mountains of rock without water
If there were water we should stop and drink

Amongst the rock one cannot stop or think
Sweat is dry and feet are in the sand
If there were only water amongst the rock
Dead mountain mouth of carious teeth that can
not spit

Here one can neither stand nor lie nor sit
There is not even silence in the mountains
But dry sterile thunder without rain
There is not even solitude in the mountains
But red sullen faces sneer and snarl
From doors of mudcracked houses

Eliot's words paint a picture of impotence, despair and hopelessness. Phrases such as "after the agony in stony places" and "here there is no water but only rock" create a backdrop of barren lands devoid of hope. Eliot's frequent references to death speak of spiritual failing, of a people without faith or hope: "He who was living is now dead/ we who were living are now dying/ ... dead mountain mouth of carious teeth..." The impotence characteristic of modernism is heard in lines like "Sweat is dry... Here one can neither stand nor lie nor sit... But dry sterile thunder without rain."

Having established these tenets of modernism makes it much easier to see how Tolkien's epic novel, The Hobbit, is a rejection and distinct criticism of modernism. Looking closely at how The Hobbit deals with narrative coherence, regard for history, and the concept of hope reveals it to be a resolute rejection of modernism.

The story begins... like a traditional story. "In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit..." (15). Tolkien's opening line introduces the reader to the narrative style in which The Hobbit is written. The line reads much like that of a well-known fable or myth, recalling to our minds the stories of childhood in their melodious "Once upon a time..." rhythms. This harkening back to myth and fable are not accidental. A purposeful quest, attainable gold, a dangerous dragon, and an unlikely hero are all intricate parts of a masterpiece woven by Tolkien to subtly and elegantly defy modernism. These stanzas from the dwarves' songs are excellent examples of the same narrative cohesion:

Far over the misty mountains cold
To dungeons deep and caverns old
We must away, ere break of day
To claim our long-forgotten gold.

The dwarves of yore made mighty spells,
While hammers fell like ringing bells
In places deep, where dark things sleep,
In hollow halls beneath the fells (27).

This song is a good example of narrative cohesion because each line builds on the one before it. The words are written within the paradigm of traditional syntax and grammar, and the song itself follows a consistent through-line.

The next decay against modernism is the way in which the characters in Tolkien's Middle Earth revere their histories. The hobbit Bilbo Baggins, for example, is introduced to the reader in terms of his family: "The Bagginses had lived in the neighborhood of The Hill for time out of mind, and most people considered them very respectable..."(15). Later the reader learns more of 'our' hobbit's ancestry: "The mother of our particular hobbit...was the fabulous Belladonna Took, one of the three remarkable daughters of the Old Took, head of the hobbits who lived across The Water...It was often said (in other families) that long ago one of the Took ancestors must have taken a fairy wife..."(16). The dwarves, of course, are also very sentimental about their predecessors, the entire purpose of their quest established by past events. The dwarves, like others in Middle Earth, look back upon days gone by as "the good old days":

[the dwarves]... built the merry town of Dale there in those days. Kings used to send for our smiths, and reward even the least skilful most richly. Fathers would beg us to take their sons as apprentices, and pay us handsomely, especially in food-supplies, which we never bothered to grow or find for ourselves. Altogether those were good days for us, and the poorest of us had money to spend and to lend..."(35)

Clearly, we do not find the casual disregard for history in the characters Tolkien creates. The histories so cherished in Middle Earth are not merely relics and albums to incite nostalgia; they are revered and celebrated because they are directly tied to the hope for the future.

Even the commerce-minded Lake Men, upon the surprise arrival of Thrór dwarf and company, take up the singing of old songs concerning the return of the King under the Mountain:

The King beneath the mountains,
The King of carven stone,
The lord of silver fountains,
Shall come into his own!
His crown shall be uphelden,
His harp shall be restrung,
His halls shall echo golden
To songs of yore re-sung.

The woods shall wave on mountains
And grass beneath the sun;

His wealth shall flow in fountains
And the rivers golden run

The streams shall run in gladness,
The lakes shall shine and burn,
And sorrow fail and sadness
At the Mountain-king's return (190-191)!

The last two stanzas of the Lake-Men's song resound with hopeful prophecies and glorious visions for the future. This tie between the past and the future brings us to the third and most important rebuttal of modernism upon which The Hobbit rests: the anchor of an undying hope in the midst of contrary circumstances.

There are many passages in The Hobbit that exemplify this hope. One is when Gandalf departs the company and they enter Mirkwood. Mirkwood forest is the perfect description of Tolkien's view of modernism. Instructed by Gandalf "DON'T LEAVE THE PATH," the adventurers nonetheless stray (139). In the midst of near hopelessness, loss and desperation, Bilbo is instructed to climb a nearby tree to see what he can see. When his head breaks through the roof of the leaves, he gets a glimpse that changes his perspective:

Bilbo's eyes were nearly blinded by the light. He could hear the dwarves shouting up at him from far below, but he could not answer, only hold on and blink. The sun was shining brilliantly, and it was a long while before he could bear it. When he could, he saw all around him a sea of dark green, ruffled here and there by the breeze; and there were everywhere hundreds of butterflies. I expect they were a kind of 'purple emperor,' a butterfly that loves the tops of oak-woods, but these were not purple at all, they were a dark velvety black without any markings to be seen.

He looked at the 'black emperors' for a long time, and enjoyed the feel of the breeze in his hair and on his face; but at length the cries of the dwarves...reminded him of his real business...(148).

Even as Bilbo is getting a much-needed glimpse of light and hope, the company is severely feeling the perils of Mirkwood. Balin, the largest of the dwarves, has fallen in the water of Mirkwood and is taken for some time by a dream-filled sleep. When he finally awakens from his induced slumber, he can only weep in lament of his beautiful, feast-filled dreams. So powerful were his impotent dreams of feasts and beauty, he prefers them to waking (149). The empty

dreams symbolize the spell that Tolkien thought modernists were under, preferring 'the dream' over the trials and realities of life. Thorin's word to Balin is telling: "...if you can't talk about something else, you had better be silent. We are quite annoyed enough with you as it is. If you hadn't waked up, we should have left you to your idiotic dreams in the forest; you are no joke to carry even after weeks of short commons"(149).

In another profound instance of undying hope expressed through personal fortitude, Bilbo's own inner resolve is cemented in the moments before he enters the dragon's lair. We know already that Bilbo is not the same hobbit he was when he left the happy Shire, but it is not until Bilbo goes into Smaug's cave that the reader catches a glimpse of just how brave and determined the little hobbit has become:

As he went forward it grew and grew, till there was no doubt about it. It was a red light getting steadily redder and redder...It was at this point that Bilbo stopped. Going on from there was the bravest thing he ever did. The tremendous things that happened afterward were as nothing compared to it. He fought the real battle in the tunnel alone, before he ever saw the vast danger that lay in wait (205).

The key in this passage is that Bilbo moved forward *in spite* of his fear, and we read that it is the "bravest thing he ever did." Fighting his own battle, Bilbo's moment in Smaug's tunnel alludes to a test of faith. Bilbo is faced with a great challenge, and against all odds, he perseveres. This passage reveals the underlying faith that is central to the main character of The Hobbit.

Modernism has proven itself to be a passing movement born of disillusionment. When he wrote The Hobbit, Tolkien offered his readers something completely different, something that exercised narrative coherence, expressed reverence for history, and held to hope and faith. By rejecting the incoherence, disregard for history, and hopelessness that so characterized the popular thinking of his time, Tolkien gave his readers an enduring gift that has outlasted the modernism movement.

Editor's Note: This paper was written for English 498.

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