‘Where many paths and errands meet’: A Close Reading of *The Lord of the Rings* (*RK*, V, iv, 1083-1085)

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> “Occasionally, of course, Tolkien manages a romantic evocation or two, passages which are admired by many contemporary readers who do not otherwise enjoy him.” (Michael Moorcock, “The Exotic Landscape”, 1988a, 61)

Michael Moorcock is famously not an admirer of Tolkien with the above back-handed criticism of Tolkien’s style being but one example of many barbs. Some years earlier the academic and critic Burton Raffel had also concluded that Tolkien was not a writer of “great range” (1968, 220), and to both of these we can add a long list of detractors (see Curry’s summary of 2014). It is notable though that even Moorcock begrudgingly accepted that Tolkien was capable of penning one or two enjoyable “passages”[1] and Raffel also admitted that Tolkien was “very competent”. Yet, with specific reference to Tokien’s style it is fair to say that at the very least opinion is divided, and at times it has been subject to intense criticism[2]. In this short essay I will provide a close reading of a single scene in *The Lord of the Rings* to consider Tolkien’s writing and in so doing illustrating how, at his best, he was a master of narrative, and in so doing use the scene as a primer for some of the many contemporary discussions of importance to Tolkien studies.

The passage chosen is the closing section from the chapter “The Siege of Gondor”[3]. In this scene Minas Tirith, besieged by Sauron’s forces, is finally breached. Its main gate is forced by the battering ram Grond and the Lord of the Nazgûl rides in to encounter Gandalf on Shadowfax. When all seems lost the horns of the relieving forces are heard, breaking the darkness, as the massed cavalry of the Rohirrim arrive.

An analysis of this scene was provided by Shippey (2005, 242-45) in which he described it as showing Tolkien “rising again from the edge of romance to what almost anyone might call ‘myth’” (242). The impact of the scene is undeniable, but the question is what is happening from stylistic and thematic perspectives that makes it so powerful?

Representation in Film and Art

Before moving to a closer analysis we must consider an issue important to any interpretation of *The Lord of the Rings* – and one not unique to Tolkien (as witnessed with *Game of Thrones*) – namely representations in other media. Whilst fine artists have tended

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[1] Tolkien did at least escape the criticism Moorcock levelled at C. S. Lewis: “awful syntax, full of tacked-on clauses, lame qualifications, vague adjectives and unconscious repetitions” (“Epic Pooh”, 189).

[2] For a good overview of this area see Turner (2014). For individual studies analysing Tolkien’s style see Curry (1998); Rosebury (2003); Lobdell (2004); Drout (2004); van Wyk (2008); Walker (2009); Agøy (2013); Drout Hitotsubashi, and Scavera (2014); and most recently Kullmann and Siepmann (2021).

[3] Specifically “Ever since the middle night …” to “…had come at last” – *RK*, V, iv (“The Siege of Gondor”), 1083-1085.

to keep closely to the original text[4] it is clear that for many the dominant depiction will be Peter Jackson's *The Return of the King* (released in 2003). The changes are considerable, most notably around the confrontation between Gandalf and the Nazgûl. First, in terms of setting, Jackson uses a deserted courtyard on the battlements, as opposed to just beyond the gate, with the Witch-king mounted on a winged beast (and not a horse). Second, in terms of characterisation, Gandalf is not alone (Pippin, though helpless, is clearly in the scene) and more importantly Gandalf is defeated in the confrontation: his staff is burnt, and he is thrown to the floor. Walter (2011, 207) observes that Gandalf is "at a loss", "frightened", "helpless" and thus the arrival of the Rohirrim not only swings the battle but also saves Gandalf personally. Whilst this may serve to accentuate the later triumph of Éowyn and Merry over the Nazgûl, these key changes vary considerably from the original and need to be excised. This analysis will concentrate solely on Tolkien's text.

Authorial Intent and Tolkien's Creative Writing Process

Any close reading raises the question of "authorial intent" – how much can be said with certainty to be by design (i.e. intended by the author)? On the one hand, if we were to follow the Barthesian argument our only focus of attention should be the effect the text has on the reader. However, a complete disassociation from any attempt to consider the author's intent opens up any study to being labelled as mere conjecture. The approach this essay will take will therefore be three-fold. First, we will consider evidence external to the published text: what Tolkien himself said about the passage, and what we can discern from Tolkien's creative writing process using primary source material. Second, we will present a stylistic analysis of the passage, concentrating on key features that appear repeatedly. Finally, as we move to a thematic analysis, we will consider further the reader's response, but also as indicated at the beginning, how it can offer a gateway to key areas of contemporary Tolkien scholarship.

To begin with in terms of a direct reference to this specific scene we can cite Tolkien's own comment from 1967:

> "the passages that move me the most – written so long ago that I read them now as if they had been written by someone else – are the end of the chapter Lothlórien … and the horns of the Rohirrim at cockcrow" (*Letters* 376).

Here he was placing himself as a reader, suggesting that after twenty years since composition he was now so distanced he could approach it as new and feel the emotional response as if for the first time. Whilst this may be partially true there surely must also be an element of "memory response" (as the author). When he reread the text he would have consciously or unconsciously focussed on the syntactic and semantic elements, and other devices that he himself had fashioned. This recognition may have further contributed to why the passage moved him – he was proud of his achievement.

When considering Tolkien's creative writing process we are indebted, as always, to the work of Christopher Tolkien and the detailed analysis presented in The History of Middle-earth series (HoME). The extract considered here is analysed in *The War of the Ring* (*War*), pages 323-342. *War* lists four manuscript variants (A, B, C, and D – in chronological

[4] E.g. see Angus McBride's depiction of the scene – available at http://tolkiengateway.net/wiki/File:Angus_McBride_-_Gandalf_facing_Witch-king.gif accessed 16 December 2020.

order of composition) that show the development of the text to publication. Manuscripts A, B, and C contain the prose up to the night of the siege (*RK* 1075-77) but do not, however, reach the the breaking of the gate and the entrance of the Nazgûl. This only occurs, according to *War*, in D. Whilst this is slightly inaccurate, as we shall see, what can one discern from the material published in *War*? To begin with they demonstrate the typical stages of Tolkien's writing process starting with an initial attempt to outline the overall plot at a high level (often containing elements which did not make it into the final version), followed by preliminary drafts in pen or pencil (or both), which are subsequently reworked in further drafts until reaching typescript[5].

This case is no exception and we can see in *War* Tolkien exploring ideas – some of which he retained, others he rejected. For example, Aragorn was originally meant to be in the battle from the outset, leading the main counter-attack at Pelennor (*War* 229, 256), before Tolkien decided to reroute him via the Paths of the Dead. Similarly Rohan's arrival was originally planned for after the city had fallen (*War* 231) though quite quickly the idea of the cavalry charge breaking the siege emerged (256). The date of the events also changed as Tolkien recalculated the timeline with the battle originally occurring in February but then moved to March (Rohan arrives on the 15th March). With specific reference to the extract in question some early brief plot outlines survive from 1944 in *War* (255, 260, 263) where, notably, there is no suggestion of any confrontation between Gandalf and the Witch-king. A first hint at something along these lines appears in an outline – "Then just as gate is giving way they hear the horns of Rohan!" – but even then we are told "the Nazgûl fly over the city" (*War* 274-5). This is picked up again (MS C – *War* 326) with Tolkien's note that "Last half of chapter must deal with situation after taking of Pelennor, the battle of Pelennor and the fall of the Gate".

Moving from the plot outlines to the drafting of the text itself (in A, B, C, and D) the most complete version containing the passage in question is in D (transcribed in *War*, 336-37). However, a further analysis of the manuscripts held at Marquette University reveal that other versions do exist. As stated earlier A, B, or C do not reach the conclusion of the chapter but in the folder containing C (3/7/16) there is an early treatment of the text in question (3/7/13/4a-4b – hereafter Ci). In addition, whilst the scene as presented in D is recorded in *War* (which equates to the material in Marquette in folder 3/7/14[6]), there is an additional variant not recorded by *War* (Marquette 3/7/11/17a and 17b – hereafter Di). Finally there are three typescripts of the chapter all of which contain the final scene (Marquette 3/7/12/20a-22a, 3/7/41/11a and 11b, and 3/7/54/21a and 22a – hereafter E, F, and G).

For completeness these new variants (in addition to *War*'s A, B, C, D) are:

- Ci: consisting of two sheets (4a and 4b). 4a is a barely legible condensed version of the action in *RK* 1083-1084, with substantial sections missing. 4b appears to be Tolkien experimenting with some key sentences scattered across *RK* 1084-5.

[5] Tolkien worked on this specific chapter over a few years beginning sometime in 1943/44 and running up to 1946.

[6] Looking at the manuscript pages for D they at first appear to be quite confusing. On further analysis it appears Tolkien was working on two sections of the chapter at once. By way of example, 3/7/14/5a is divided into three sections: on the top half of the page we have text related to *RK* 1078-79; this is then separated from the next section which contains c.17 lines of text from *RK* 1083-185 (presented in *War* 336); and at the bottom of the page are some further lines from *RK* 1078-79.

- Di: consisting of two sheets (17a and 17b), and overall a much more legible version in ink with only a few crossings out. 17a starts the scene with "The great assault went on…" but 17b ends with "…And from a mouth unseen there came a deadly laughter". No further pages survive.
- E, F, and G are all typescripts approaching the published version with a few minor corrections to E, even less in F, and then a final version in G.[7]

All of this material is invaluable. Collectively it shows us what Tolkien added, removed, altered, and in what order. Each alteration therefore is evidence we need towards understanding what he was trying to achieve.

Setting the scene

A standard approach to literary prose analysis is to consider *setting*, *characterisation*, and *style*. The setting, in terms of the plot, is the siege of Minas Tirith, the beginning of the greatest battle of the War of the Ring. By this stage the reader readily realises the importance of the events, as not only will it define the fate of Middle-earth, but also the fate of several of the main characters who we have emotionally invested in (eventually six of the Fellowship will be present). Tolkien builds up to the battle with a series of tense episodes: the fall of Osgiliath, Faramir's rescue, and Denethor's mental collapse. It is also notable that there has been a gap of around 300 pages since the last battle (Helm's Deep). Similarly, the first-time reader may also be asking "what is still to come?" as these events are only 100 pages in to what (by pagination at least) is a 600-page book.

However, if we were to purely analyse the extract in isolation what could one say about the setting? There are references to gates, walls, towers, and bastions at the opening of the section to signify a fortified city. The siege is taking place in a pre-industrial time (communication is by "drums", weapons used are a "ram" and "Shot and dart", and "siege-towers" are dragged to battle). The reference to "knights" (*RK* 1084) suggests medieval, something that will come as no surprise to readers of the genre who have come to accept that fantasy stories often take place in a medieval or pseudo-medieval period – usually drawn from Western Europe – a direct legacy, to a degree, of *The Lord of the Rings*[8].

The Four Characters

Moving to characterisation there are four individuals present in the scene – Gandalf, the Lord of the Nazgûl, and less obviously Shadowfax and Grond. Whilst Shadowfax is only described in one clause (*RK* 1085) in which his uniqueness is emphasised by the phrase "alone among …", a pervading sense of isolation is created that bonds both the horse and his master, Gandalf, with both seemingly the only ones able to face the terror of the Witch-

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[7] I am truly indebted to William Fliss of Marquette library for his help with this essay.

[8] Tolkien's novels established many fantasy norms, but the paths that led to his Middle-earth were many. First, there was the medieval literature, fairy-tales, and folklore that he had read, and in the case of Old/Middle English and Old Norse, studied and taught. Second, there was the centuries earlier appropriation of many medieval tropes and motifs by a range of writers under the Romantic and Gothic movements. Third, there was the early stages of what we could discern as the fantasy genre with the likes of William Morris and Lord Dunsany (who in turn influenced other writers pre- or contemporary with Tolkien). All of these were synthesized and added to by Tolkien, and followed thereafter, but importantly for this analysis was the established setting of a a pseudo-medieval period complete with dragons, trolls, wizards, elves, dwarves, castles, and so on.

king[9]. The symbiotic link (in earlier passages made clear by colour – a white horse and a white wizard) is strengthened by language. Consider the descriptions used for each – "All save one" and "alone", "waiting, silent and still" and "Gandalf did not move", "endured the terror" and "unmoving, steadfast". They are as one.

As to Gandalf he can not only withstand the Nazgûl's presence, but his direct speech is a beacon of resistance through the use of imperatives – "You cannot enter here", "Go back!" (twice), "Fall into the nothingness …", and "Go!"[10] (*RK* 1085). He is a commanding presence seizing the authority from the Nazgûl who up to this point has been directing events. The reader would naturally associate this act of defiance with Gandalf's refusal to yield ground to the Balrog in Moria, and the fateful consequences of that event[11]. Will the same happen again?

An easy to overlook character in the scene, because it is inanimate, is that of Grond – the great battering ram. In the manuscript drafts that led to the final version Grond is noticeably absent from the plot outlines; Ci (4a) and D (*War* 336) simply note the presence of "great rams". However, in the notes in Ci (4b) where Tolkien experiments with phrases the ram is mentioned:

> "With a great rush Grond was hurled forward \by hands/. It reached the gate. It swung. But the doors of steel withstood its stroke".

The idea of a named single great ram seems to be a later deliberate development[12]. Tolkien invests in the weapon a sense of overwhelming power magnified by its historical precedent (the original Grond was the weapon of Melkor); but he goes further than that. Grond is "huge", as great as a "forest-tree a hundred feet long", held by "mighty chains", "hideous", "a ravening wolf" infused with "spells of ruin" (*RK* 1083-4)[13]. In manuscript Di he extended this even further with [my emphasis]:

> "… and its hideous head founded of \black/ steel was shaped in the likeness of \wolf/[14] *Blood dripped from it*, [deleted: spells of ruin were over it] upon it spells of ruin lay."

The phrase "Blood dripped from it" survived into E but was removed in F presumably because it was seen as excessive (and hard to imagine why a ram would have this level of detail).

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[9] It is interesting that whilst Pippin is present in *RK* he is not mentioned at all in the critical scene, unlike in the film where he is visible throughout. The last we read is that he was "cowering into a shadow" (*RK* 1083). In MS Di 17b it appears Tolkien considered bringing the Hobbit into the action as he begins to write "Pippin …" just before "All save one". But he then deletes it preferring, presumably, the simple symmetry of Gandalf/Shadowfax against Nazgûl/Horse.

[10] This final "Go!" is inserted in pencil in Di 17b by Tolkien at a later stage, drawing Gandalf's declaration to a close with a final command.

[11] Indeed in the manuscript (3/7/14/6a, *War* 337) Gandalf originally says "You cannot pass" with "enter here" written above.

[12] On the overall importance of naming in Tolkien see Walker (2009, 128-129).

[13] The appearance of a wolf on a battlefield also could be a reference to the beasts of battle motif used in Old English poetry, in which its appearance (or that of a raven) symbolises imminent slaughter. See for example *The Battle of Brunanbugh* ll. 60-65a.

[14] Interestingly in the margin there are a couple of illegible words (in ink and pencil) both crossed through, and then finally the addition of "wolf". This suggests, at least, that Tolkien was initially uncertain as to what animal form the ram should take.

To Croft, Grond is another example of Sauron's embracing of pseudo-mechanized warfare[15]. However, whilst at first there is a sense of the passive associated with the machine – it is forged, named, drawn by "great beasts", surrounded by Orcs, and wielded by "mountain trolls" – we gradually see elements of personification[16]. Whilst no speech or thought is given to Grond the language used becomes more active – "Grond crawled on", "It reached …", "It swung …" (as opposed to "it was swung"), and the weapon is invested with ownership ("its housing" and "its path"). There is nothing new in this device, of course, but one is tempted to draw parallels with the naming of weapons in Old Norse and Old English. In the latter we not only have personification in the riddles where inanimate objects describe themselves in obscure ways to present a puzzle, there is also the Cross in *The Dream of the Rood* that recounts its own story. Whilst in the poem we feel pity, with Grond we sense an extra level of menace and threat arising from a living being with a purpose and power of its own.

The dominant character of the section is clearly the Lord of the Nazgûl. Whilst his first appearance is obscured by the simple "their Captain" (*RK* 1083), he arrives fully onto the scene as "a hideous shape … a horseman, tall, hooded, cloaked in black" (1084) – to which the reader can only but respond by recalling the Black Riders of Book One. Groom (2014, 299) notes the almost Miltonic "compound of shadows and nothingness" that Tolkien employs to (not) describe him (see also Shippey 2000, 129-130 and 213-214)[17]. There is a measured purpose to his entrance – his movement is slow, he halts, he commands, he raises his flaming sword, he cries as if to invest further power in Grond, and then he rides in through the broken gate. All the time though there is motion and action, a sense of relentless progression, contrasting therefore with the stoic motionless we see in Gandalf and Shadowfax. At the point of confrontation we get what could be described as a minor piece of flyting. The Nazgûl is contemptuous and insulting towards Gandalf expressing his belief in his own superiority and victory. We are already aware that this creature, who becomes "a great black shape", can cause silence to fall on the battlefield, and men to despair and flee – but the wizard and horse hold firm. The reader reacts by sensing a difference.

Perhaps more interestingly are the names and epithets associated with the Nazgûl. Beginning with "Captain" (military), he is then a "hideous horseman". He is also referred to as the "Black Captain", "the Lord of the Nazgûl", "the Black Rider", "he", "a great black shape", "a vast menace of despair", "a huge shadow", and eventually takes on through his own words the persona of "Death"[18]. A lesser writer might simply have retained his proper

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[15] Where, as Croft notes, "the good of the machine is held as all important" (Croft 2004, 117).

[16] See Walker (2009, 47-48) for a further discussion of personification elsewhere in Tolkien's fiction.

[17] The non-description of a monster is a common device employed by writers from the *Beowulf*-poet who offers no real description of Grendel, to H. P. Lovecraft. It allows readers to sub-create in their imagination and Tolkien often employs this in what has been called his "invitational style" (Walker 2009, and Rateliff 2009). Agoy (2013, 55) noted this is in direct contrast to Tolkien's elaborate description of landscape.

[18] Throughout the entire legendarium, the character enjoys a range a titles (possibly around 18) from the Lord of Morgul, Wraith-lord, Lord of the Ringwraiths, to the popular Witch-king. However, with reference to his taking on the mantle of Death, Walker takes issue with a deeper reading of this (2009, 57). In response to the Nazgûl's question "Do you not know Death …", a parallel for which can be found in Andreth's words to Finrod (*Morgoth's Ring* 220), Walker writes "We probably would not have, had we not been told. Even without a body, the Lord of the Nazgûl, however much "Death" in the abstract, is very much an individuated being." Whilst this is true, as we shall see at the end of this essay, if we choose to extend the interpretation of the passage to a more religious interpretation the symbolism of the Nazgûl's personification as Death becomes critical.

title alternating with a personal pronoun, but instead Tolkien magnifies the character by what is known as variation, a device he would again have been familiar with from medieval poetry. For example, in the approach to Heorot by Grendel (*Beowulf* ll.720ff) the creature is a "rinc" (man/warrior), "he" (he), "feond" (fiend/demon), and "atol aglæca" (terrible slayer).

We then get this description:

	"him of eagum stod
ligge gelicost	leoht unfæger"
	(from his eyes stood
most like flame	a light unholy)

(ll. 726b-727)

Notably, when the Nazgûl throws back his hood to reveal no head but just a crown we are told "red fires shone between it"[19]. The *Beowulf*-poet quickly eases the tension by declaring that Grendel's mental gloating over the feast to come is premature as the nebulous concept of "wyrd" (usually translated as "fate") would not allow the monster to devour more men (ll. 734b-735). As we shall see Tolkien also, at the scene's close, changes the reader's perception of events in an equally layered way.

In earlier drafts Tolkien repeatedly named the Nazgûl as the "Wizard-king" (*War*, 326, 359, 331). Why this might be so is indicated in a comment, that was later excised, that "the W[izard] King … is a renegade of his [Gandalf's] own order" (326). The switch from Wizard-king to Witch-king may reflect a desire to disassociate the character from the Istari, but also brings in the more negative connotations of "witch" stemming from the Old English *wicca*– (which as a noun could mean "a sorcerer", i.e. masculine as well as feminine).

Style

Moving to style let us first consider the role of the narrator in this piece. Whilst not as intrusive as we find in *The Hobbit*, throughout *The Lord of the Rings* the narrator takes on an omnipresent role moving back and forth across Middle-earth. As is well known the framing device for the book is that of the collected memoirs of Frodo (in the main), who has reflected back on the events of the war and attempted to narrate them drawing on his own personal experiences and those of his friends. Despite that the first person would not be suitable for such an important historical record and instead we get a "heterodiegetic" narrator who does not take part in the story (Kullmann and Siepmann, 2021, 90) [20]. In this scene the narrative swoops across the battlefield like a drone, taking in the sights and sounds of the conflict[21]. Rateliff (2009, 6) suggested that Tolkien "often describes a scene not as you experience it but as you would remember it afterwards" but in this instance no single protagonist could have seen all these things (in this case, if it was a Hobbit, it could only be Pippin and then Merry after the arrival of the Rohirrim). Perhaps then it would be

[19] Woods (2020, 198) likened this to descriptions of the Vampire, or Undead in literature – notably Dracula.

[20] This calls to mind E. M. Forster *Aspects of the Novel* (1927), ch. 5 – "He [the novelist] is competent, poised above his work, throwing a beam of light here, popping on a cap of invisibility there, and (*qua* plot-maker) continually negotiating with himself *qua* character-monger as to the best effect to be produced."

[21] The depiction of the battle again recalls medieval literature, notably Old English poems such as *The Battle of Maldon* and *Exodus*, where the poet often steps out of the experience of an individual to tell the events from multiple angles. Described famously by Renoir (1962) as the Old English poet's ability to be free of "space and time", akin to a film director.

better to describe this as "how Frodo would *imagine* it afterwards" based on what he heard. More interestingly, in this scene we are given two insights into what a character might be thinking. First, we are told the Nazgûl cared not for his troops, but sought to exploit the weakness of the gate (*RK* 1083) – but how could Frodo, or anyone present at the battle, know this? At best it could be said to be evident by the tactics employed and by the trampling underfoot of the fallen (*RK* 1084). Then curiously, at the end, we are given an insight into the thinking of the cockerel who is noted as "recking nothing of wizardry or war". Is this an attempt to add an anthropomorphic element to the animal, or simply Frodo's assumption that such a creature would revert to an instinctive action at the long-awaited dawn.

We can make too much of this, however, and end up in a tangle. For a start, as Pezzini (2018) observed Tolkien gave himself a perfect get-out clause by stating in the prologue that he himself had intervened as a compiler so any anomalies could be explained away by his (Tolkien's) artistic interventions. Flieger (2005, 79) also concluded that:

> "It will not do to pursue too far the notion of *The Lord of the Rings* as serially written by Bilbo, Frodo, and Sam. Too many things will not fit comfortably into the concept – narrative voice, point of view, the amount of knowledge each of these "authors" could have had at any one time. If these are put together, the whole concept falls apart."

Instead let us explore the stylistic devices that Tolkien (*the* author/compiler) used in this scene in more detail, which in turn will begin to shed light on its effectiveness. The common devices used by Tolkien have been noted by earlier scholars. For example, Drout (2004) observed repetition and mirroring, and non-standard sentence structure. Walker's (2009) study included the use of allusion, irony, double-meaning and punning ("words … work overtime" 123), understatement, and anti-climax. Kullmann and Siepmann (2021) using quantitative analysis noted archaic semantics, heavy use of descriptive verbs, and co-ordinated adjective use. Shippey, commenting on this scene specifically, noted touches of alliteration, some "old-fashioned" semantics, and a simple, monosyllabic style (2005, 245).

Alan Turner (2014) proposed four areas one could explore to get to the bottom of what is good (or perceived as bad) style in *The Lord of the Rings*:

- The linguistic registers given to different characters
- Asymmetrical stylistic arch
- Semantic archaisms
- Syntactic archaisms

In this particular scene as only two characters speak and only very briefly an exploration of registers beyond the earlier discussion is not possible. Similarly in terms of the "arch" the scene is too short, but one can discern a feeling we are at – or near – a pinnacle (though the destruction of the Ring will be the real climax).

What then can we derive from an analysis of the semantics and syntax? For the most part both are, as Shippey noted, reasonably straightforward and a reader should not encounter too much difficulty[22]. That said there are some terms used that might be unfamiliar as they either relate to Middle-earth specifically (e.g. "mumakil") or they are

[22] Shippey argued that it would take little rewriting to remove the old-fashioned feel "to seem comprehensible and even colloquial at any time over the last half-millennium" (2005, 245).

actual English words that have fallen out of general use and feel archaic – “hardiest”, “wreck”, “slain”, “foe”, “thrice”, “asunder”, “riven”, “steadfast”, “abyss”, “behold!”, “mantled”, “recking”. We can see in this a deliberate attempt to impress on the reader a sense of past, use of the romantic mode, and in so doing a sense of importance. This is not uncommon. Kullmann and Siepmann note that *The Lord of the Rings* shares “around twice as many key words with nineteenth-century fiction as it does with late twentieth-century fiction” (2021, 53) which they conclude gives it a distinctly archaic feel.

If coming to Tolkien for the first time through this passage the syntax may also engender a similar response. The most common device is one of “fronting” where the object is moved to the beginning, often referring to something just mentioned in a previous sentence (e.g. “Grond crawled on. *Upon its housing* no fire would catch” [my emphasis]). There is also the delay of adjectives – “the orcs innumerable”, “a mouth unseen”; and inversion with the delay of the subject – “Over the hills of slain a hideous shape appeared”, and “In rode the Lord of the Nazgûl”. Rosebury argued this showed Tolkien’s sense of freedom in diverting from standard modern English (2003, 73-74). Combined with the language used this reinforces a sense of past (calling to mind older books, including the Bible) and the inverted syntax creates delay and suspense. Consider how much the impact would be lessened by rephrasing to “lots of orcs”, “a hidden mouth”, “The Lord of the Nazgûl rode in”[23].

Shippey referred to a use of alliteration but let us explore this in more depth. Again this may stem from its common use in medieval poetry where, like here, it was used to give a sense of cohesion but also to emphasise key terms. To give but a few examples:

> “still was stout … stood at bay”
> “hideous … a horseman, tall, hooded”
> “steel withstood the stroke”
> “the last stroke … stricken … blasting spell it burst”
> “silent and still … sat Gandalf”

Clearly a lot of thought has gone into this. For example, in *RK* (1084) the sentence:

> “But about the gate resistance still was stout, and here the knights of Dol Amroth and the hardiest of the garrison stood at bay”

Originally read in manuscript Di:

> “But about the gates resistance still was stout, and here [deleted: still] the hardiest of the garrison\the knights of Dol Amroth/[24] stood still at bay”

Tolkien clearly was drawn to the “st” sound but was also conscious of the overuse of “still” (hence the single deletion in Di), circling the word in the phrase “still at bay” for later removal[25]. Similarly Tolkien expanded the phrase “The drums rolled” (in Di 17a) to “The

[23] For a good example of why this is so effective see Drout (2004, 153) where he analyses the confrontation between Éowyn and the Nazgûl, especially Tolkien’s effective use of the “object-verb-subject” word order.
[24] Inserted in the margin in pencil.
[25] The focus on “st” may also explain the change in E 21a from “would go mad and spread *trampling* ruin among the orcs innumerable” to “would go mad and spread *stamping* ruin among the orcs innumerable” [my emphasis].

drums rolled like thunder" (E 21a) but seeing the further opportunity for alliteration he then crossed through "like thunder" in E and replaced it with "and rattled".

In a similar vein to variation and alliteration medieval poetry may also have inspired Tolkien to use another device – repetition. The repeated use or mirroring of similar phrases is noticeable throughout the section, and the effect again is to reinforce[26]. This is evident in the repeated verb/object phrase that builds up the layers around the readying of Grond "named it … drew it … surrounded it … wield it"; and also the entrance of the Nazgûl with the repetition of the phrase "In rode the Lord of the Nazgûl" in quick succession. All this serves to emphasise the historical and strategic importance of the events (especially the fall of the gate). Most importantly repetition is used to convey the relentless onslaught of the army of Sauron – it is slow but purposeful, all-consuming, with nothing able to resist. The pace and power is conveyed and drawn out by the assonance in the verbs "rolled", "crawled", and "hurled". Indeed the abrupt "Grond crawled on" is used to begin two adjoining paragraphs enforcing a pause. In the background are the ever-present drums repeatedly referenced – a signal of impending danger already encountered in Moria – "The drums rolled", "The drums rolled louder", "The drums rolled wildly", "The drums rolled and rattled".

Tolkien's control of the sound of battle is important[27]. First the cacophony is suddenly halted with the appearance of the Nazgûl whose mere presence brings silence – "no bow sang. For a moment all was still". Then after the pause the drums sound again, "a deep boom … like thunder running in the clouds" is heard as the ram strikes the gate. The Nazgûl cries aloud in a "dreadful voice" and then enters the city after the gates break. We then return to quiet as if the entire battle pauses to witness the momentous events about to enfold with Gandalf and Shadowfax "silent and still". Then the close of the scene is heralded by two key sounds – the cock crowing to signal the dawn and the horns of the Rohirrim – both of which come as a shock to the Nazgûl. The Riders are heard "wildly blowing" mirroring the drums of Mordor that earlier "rolled wildly".

In terms of space, short sentences come one on top of each other and manuscript evidence shows that Tolkien deliberately condensed the prose[28]. Tolkien also cleverly employs the use of the caesura to manage pace – evident here with the blank lines in the typesetting. This occurs twice – first just before the Nazgûl enters the city and then before the last two paragraphs. Both push the reader to a natural pause, to take a breath, and in so doing heighten the suspense. These are not obviously evident in the manuscripts but appear in the typescripts, E, F, and G. In E Tolkien played with having an extra caesura before "The Black Ruder flung back his hood …" (21a) but then settled on just the two as in the published version for F. In G he reinforces these by drawing "––– # –––" at each gap[29].

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[26] For a parallel see the Old English poem *Deor* with its repeated refrain at the end of each stanza.

[27] We should not be surprised as to how attuned Tolkien was to the use of sound bearing in mind it was an important weapon in a medieval poet's armoury. For a clear example of his sense of sound there is Gollum's lisping "sss". See also Walker (2009, 131-133).

[28] E.g. MS Di (17a) has "And in the midst Grond crawled on" but this became simply "Grond crawled on". Similarly the phrase "The drums rolled wildly" was originally "The drums rolled \wildly/ and rose to a tumult and were [?]". See also Kullmann and Siepmann's analysis (2021, 115-116) of the departure of the Rohirrim for Helm's Deep. They note the "short, stark sentences" complete with repetition, archaic syntax and semantics to convey a sense of "epic". This tight control is in direct contrast to Oliver's observation (2018) that a lot of fantasy literature falls back to "flowery prose".

[29] Taken all together these can perhaps add more substance to Walker's observation that the closing section of this extract feels like poetry, an example of an "undelineated poem" (2009, 142).

Wider Themes: Fantasy, World-building, Diversity, War, and Religion

The analysis above of the language and devices used by Tolkien answers in part why this scene is so powerful. However, we should also consider a thematic analysis and in so doing use this as a springboard to engaging with some established and developing areas of Tolkien studies.

As noted the scene (and indeed the book[30]) is set in a pseudo-medieval time, but one that did not or could not happen (i.e. fantasy). Let us now consider how Tolkien handles the fantastical elements then. We can note the presence of creatures such as "orcs", "mountain-trolls", and the Nazgûl himself – all impossible in their own way. But perhaps the most interesting element is the presence of magic. Tolkien, unlike many fantasy writers, gave this considerable thought[31] but in summary we could state that he tends to underplay magic. It is evident but not overwhelming, it is there to be glimpsed out of the corner of the eye. In this extract, for example, we have hints but nothing more. We are told "spells of ruin" lay on Grond, but not what they were. Furthermore "no fire would catch" but is this magic or craft? In MS Di Tolkien initially had "Upon its housing by spell or device no fire would catch" and then deleted "by spell or device". Similarly, is the Nazgûl's ability to bring fear to soldiers, and his "words of power and terror" that rended "both heart and stone" evidence of magic or simply down to his presence? When Grond smashes through the gate it is described as "if by some blasting spell" implying such things might exist but were possibly not used here. Undoubtedly though the final description of the Nazgûl does convey something unreal – a crown on an invisible head with fiery eyes – but this lends itself as much to the supernatural or Gothic as it does to fantasy.

In his essay *On Fairy-stories*, Tolkien described the importance of creating Secondary Belief in the reader, so that they could fully immerse themselves in the Secondary World. How this is done relates, in part, to what is now termed "world-building", the devices that writers use to describe and populate their imaginary world, that draw the reader into believing in the setting. Much has been written about this[32], but two examples present themselves in this extract to illustrate common Tolkienian devices.

First, consider the use of the medieval setting. Whilst this may now seem commonplace, this was not so much the case in Tolkien's time. True it reflected his own interests but he also used it to allow the reader to draw on knowledge they already held – character types, settings, and so on that were familiar. Tolkien's fantastical creatures are those a Western audience (at least) would readily know of through childhood encounters with fairy-tales. In this scene alone we have trolls, orcs (goblins), a big bad wolf (Grond), a wraith or ghost (the Nazgûl), a wizard (Gandalf), and a castle. The world-building is off to a great start.

Second, Tolkien created a depth to his mythology by often hinting at the history and legends that underpinned Middle-earth. Grond is forged long ago "in memory of the Hammer of the Underworld of old" but we are never told more than this. We just note (perhaps unconsciously) that there is a further (hi)story here. Similarly, when the Nazgûl enters through the gate the importance is accentuated by stating this had never happened before – the reader can only then conclude that this city has seen many battles and sieges

[30] For an exploration of the multiple historical periods Tolkien reflects in Middle-earth see Lee and Solopova (2015, 64-67).

[31] See notably *Letters* 199-200.

[32] For example see Fimi and Honegger (2019).

but so far has never been breached, but we are told no more. This all creates the impression of a believable world with a developed history.

An important area of study for Tolkien (and other writers) is how they treat the "other" as defined by race, gender, or sexuality[33]. Whilst we have detailed insights into the protagonists on the side of "good" (even if they change as with Boromir and Denethor), what about the enemy? For example, in this extract we are given no insight into the thoughts, aspirations, or feelings of the massed forces of Sauron (the Nazgûl aside), with perhaps the minor insight that some would occasionally "go mad" presumably as a result of what we might term battle-stress. This at least suggests they were subject to fear or a desire for self-preservation. However, the sense of the individual is gone – they are "innumerable", a wave that seems "driven as by a madness" and indeed earlier on in the chapter they are reduced to being described as "ants" (*RK* 1075). Is this evidence of Tolkien's unwillingness to consider the alternative view, to simplify the struggle into good and evil, with the bad side deserving no further consideration? In isolation this extract may substantiate that view, but at the same time we should note that we are also given little insight into the thoughts of the men of Gondor. The knights defend, as knights do; and the orcs die as infantry does[34].

The line of thought leads us into a further area of investigation, one which brings in the personal context of the author, namely his own war experiences in 1916. In the extract the Captain:

> "cared not greatly what they did or how many might be slain: their purpose was only to test the strength of the defence"

Could this be a reflection of the tactics Tolkien witnessed on the Western Front on the Somme? Was the disregard by the Nazgûl for the mounting casualties (Croft's "faceless interchangeable parts"[35]) a swipe at the perceived mismanagement of battles by British High Command? If so the "trenches" dug earlier by the Orcs (*RK* 1075) take on a new significance, as does the sight of the ground "choked with wreck and with bodies of the slain" (*RK* 1084) calling to mind what Tolkien would have seen around Ovillers and Thiepval. Even the great gate of Minas Tirith, that had never allowed an enemy to pass through it, may call to mind either the French General Nivelle's declaration at Verdun in 1916 of "ils ne passeront pas!" or the stoic British defence of Ypres throughout the war commemorated now by the Menin Gate memorial.[36]

Much has been written on the subject of Tolkien's war experiences and how much they affected his writing[37] and he himself pointed out the influences of the landscape of France, citing the Dead Marshes as a key example (*Letters* 226). However, in the same letter he also specifically stated neither war (WW1 or WW2) affected "the plot or the manner of its [*The Lord of the Rings*] unfolding". So we are in danger here perhaps of

[33] Considerable study and attention has been given to this area in recent times. See Chance (2016) and Vaccaro and Kisor (2017).

[34] Elsewhere we do get what Tolkien described as "some close-ups actually, which give you a bit more insight" in response to Edmund Wilson's scathing critique entitled "Oo! Those 'orrible orcs". See Lee (2018, 157).

[35] Croft (2004, 65).

[36] Senior (2000) suggested the early description of the Witch-king not caring for his troops – "what they did or how many might be slain" conjurs up memories of General Haig's supposed attitudes at the casualties on the Somme, and Hammond and Scull (2005, p.551) agree citing Malcolm Brown's *The Imperial War Museum Book of the Somme* (p. 119). See also the minor note by Martsch (2015) which considered parallels between Minas Tirith and the Somme.

[37] See Garth (2003), Croft (2004), Croft and Röttinger (2019).

overinterpretation. The trenches noted above may have nothing to do with 1916, and instead relate more to a common tactic in medieval and classical sieges. Notably the Orcs use the trenches as a firewall and stand behind them which was not a Great War tactic. The battlefield description is perhaps simply an imagined description of the carnage that was taking place, not a description of the Somme, and the Nazgûl's indifference to his troops is exactly how such an evil creature would behave, and cannot be taken as proof that Tolkien was denouncing British Army commanders (indeed there is no record of Tolkien, as with most ex-soldiers, criticising the General Staff). As to the taking of the gate as it would be seen as an essential part of any walled city, its fall (even for the first time in history) is simply there to show the calamitous event of the defences crumbling.

The Denouement

Whilst there is undeniable power across the whole extract the ending is possibly where the reader feels the full impact. The sudden cut, after the caesura, to the somewhat innocuous cockerel going about its normal business, and its call being answered by the arrival of Rohan lives long in the memory. We have already considered why this might be so in terms of language and style, but this ending also offers a chance to engage further with Tolkien's theory on fantasy as witnessed in *On Fairy-stories*. Tolkien argues that one of the major elements a fantasy writer should strive for is what he called "eucatastrophe" – the "sudden joyous turn" in the text where hope triumphs over despair, and victory is snatched from the jaws of defeat. The ending of the Siege of Gondor gives us a wonderful example of this[38]. Up to the final section the reader has been led to the point of believing all is lost. Sauron's troops seem unstoppable, the city has been breached for the first time, and the Nazgûl looks ready to destroy Gandalf. With the suspense drawn out by the caesura noted earlier, the situation is then reversed. The cockerel, a sign that nature takes no heed of such events, does what it always does – it welcomes the dawn. That in itself is a sign that things are changing, as it symbolises light conquering darkness. More importantly though, dawn signals the arrival of the Rohirrim. The first time a reader encounters this piece, not knowing where events would lead, emotes a powerful response. We had last left the Riders at the ending of "The Muster of Rohan" only just crossing the border of Gondor many leagues away, so their arrival is unexpected (we only learn of the full journey in the following chapter "The Ride of the Rohirrim").

The final two paragraphs also mirror the proceeding flyting scene with the Nazgûl and Gandalf exchanging verbal blows – but here the crowing by the cockerel is answered less confrontationally by "another note". Again, Tolkien uses pace to create tension before he reveals exactly what the answer is. We have the repeated "Horns, horns, horns", then two short sentences describing the effect of the noise, and ambiguously that these are "Great horns of the North". But who are sounding these horns the reader demands? Are they more forces of the enemy who have marched down to join the battle? It is only in the final sentence that their identity is revealed. It is Rohan who has come, closing the entire piece with the very appropriate "at last" – the literary equivalent of a sigh of relief.

[38] It is noted that the battle presents three eucatastrophic events. The first is the arrival of the Rohirrrim. The second is the unravelling of the prophecy around the Lord of the Nazgûl when he faces Éowyn, a woman. Finally there is the unforeseen arrival of Aragorn on the ships of the Corsairs. Again the reader is led to believe all is lost, and that the battle has swung the way of the enemy again, only to receive the uplift when it is discovered the boats of the enemy are actually bringing further relief to the city.

For Tolkien the eucatastrophe took on a spiritual significance. He argued that its importance derived from the fact that it acted as an evangelium, it "denies … universal final defeat" (Tolkien 2008, 75) with good triumphing over evil and in the Christian sense the conquering of Sin and Death by Christ's passion. As noted earlier the Nazgûl allocates himself the proper noun "Death", but with the arrival of the dawn and Rohan, darkness and Death are defeated (for the time at least). The cockerel would engender in any reader with a knowledge of the New Testament a memory of the episode known as the "Denial of Peter" (*Matthew* 26:69-75). This is seen as the ultimate point of Jesus's desertion when he stands completely alone. But it is also the point at which we have confirmation of his deity (*Zechariah* 13:4-5) the point at which Peter now knows through the realisation of Jesus's prophecy, that Christ was truly the Messiah who would redeem mankind. Shippey observed it was hard to "avoid the memory of the cock that crowed to Simon Peter" (2005, 243), and that cockcrow "means dawn, means day after night" and importantly "life after death" (244). Moreover, Tolkien's deliberate insertion of "thrice" with the Nazgûl's instruction to the wielders of Grond mirrors, perhaps, the fact that Peter denies Christ three times. The narrator's intensifying exclamation of "Behold!" as the Nazgûl is described, also reflects the semantics of the Bible (a device used occasionally by Tolkien with expressions such as "Lo!" to alert the reader to "the approach of a supremely terrible moment"[39]).

But again are we in danger of overinterpreting again? Rohan's horns could just be the reuse of a motif common in Germanic literature, where the sounding was seen as an act of defiance (as is the case, in part, with Boromir[40]). The cockerel may be there to simply convey the arrival of dawn[41], but not with any religious intent, or perhaps even the neutrality of nature (as Naumann termed it the "independent persistence of the natural world" – 2014, 29). Tolkien uses the word "thrice" liberally (9 times in *The Silmarillion*, 14 other times in *The Lord of the Rings*) to convey an archaic tone[42], or a sense of completeness associated with the number three, but not with any reference to the Bible.

Conclusion

In a private correspondence Tony Wood (alumni, Merton College, 1957) recalled a personal conversation with Tolkien, his then tutor. Wood recalled:

> "What impressed and moved me most was his admission that he was so engaged and emotionally bound up with his characters, that he had wept on two occasions whilst writing the story. The first was when Gandalf stands alone at the gates of Gondor, a small figure defying the huge size and power of the Lord of the Nazgûl. For Tolkien this brave, single, small figure standing alone against this terrifying menace was very clearly a scene and moment of huge emotion ..".[43]

[39] Rosebury (2003, 75). Drout (2004) suggests expressions like "Lo!" actually owe more to the Old English "Hwæt!'' often used at the opening of a poem, but Rosebury's argument seems more convincing as these declarations appear mid-sentence and not, as with the poems, at the beginning to demand attention.

[40] Noting analogues in the stories of Beowulf and Roland, to name but two (Shippey 2005, 244).

[41] As Douglas Anderson (*The Annotated Hobbit*, 150; noted by Hammond and Scull, 2005, 552) showed by drawing a parallel to a similar scene in S. R. Crockett's *The Black Douglas*.

[42] See Kullmann and Siepmann (2021, 45) for use of "thrice".

[43] The second instance was when "the two small hobbits, Frodo and Sam, are brought out before the King and the vast assembled throngs at the end of the story and are hailed and cheered to the skies".

In this detailed analysis using setting, character, style, and themes I have attempted to show why this may have been so. And why this is experience shared by many of his readers.

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