

In the name of

god



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Faculty of Literature and Humanities
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M. A. Thesis

Title of the thesis:
A Derridean Study of Tolkien's *The Silmarillion* and *The Hobbit*

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**“By
Pen,
and
What They
Inscribe”**

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Abstract

This thesis is an attempt to read Tolkien's two works of high epic fantasy, *The Hobbit* and *The Silmarillion*, in the light of Derrida's philosophical and literary views. Although, the term 'Derridean reading' assumes a certain approach to the texts, this study has attempted to try its best to compare Derrida's writings on structure and liberality of literature to Tolkien's narratives in these two texts. However, such reading of Tolkien includes a certain degree of reliance on Derridean concepts as apparatuses of a critical approach. Instead of seeking closing in the presence and being of the text on itself, this study investigates the affinity that exists between Derridean terms and Tolkien's text through analyzing the play of the structure, undecidability, iterability, and alterity. Thus, in lieu of the dominance of one or a few origins and centers over *The Hobbit* and *The Silmarillion*'s narrative, we observe that the play of structure is at work to keep the stories' continuum alive and dynamic. As the findings of this study demonstrate, the stories themselves would neutralize any claim over idealities by constantly revisiting their own contexts. The finalized and whole identities, presences, and claims are challenged and destabilized by the undecidable discourse of the story. The outcome of the performative reading of Tolkien's novels reveals more meanings and possibilities in a provocative way of investigation. Additionally, the findings reveal the similarities between Derrida's views on liberality, historicity, and originarity of literature (fiction) and Tolkien's views on the writing/reading acts of fairy-stories genre.

Keywords: Tolkien, Derrida, fairy-stories, *The Hobbit*, *The Silmarillion*

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction

1. Overview.....	2
1.1. Myth and Fantasy	2
1.2. Tolkien and the Question of Fairy Stories	4
2. Statement of Problem	5
3. Theoretical Framework	7
3. 1. Tolkienian and Derridean Ideas of Structures.....	7
3. 2. Critique of Ideal, Pure Bodies	8
4. Research Questions	11
5. Significance of the Study.....	12
6. Approach and Methodology	12
7. Derridean Reading.....	13
8. Definition of Key Terms.....	14
9. Organization of the Thesis.....	18

Chapter 2: Review of Literature

2. 1. Introduction.....	21
2. 2. Review of Literature on Tolkien	23
2. 3. Review of Literature on Derrida	34

Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework

3. 1. Overview	43
3. 2. Fairy-stories: A Tolkienian-Derridean Approach	46

3. 2. 1. Writing Experience	46
3. 2. 2. Myths as Origins of Faerie	53
3. 2. 3. Reading Experience: Tolkien and the Transcendental	56
3. 2. 4. Reading Tolkien as a Performative Act	61
3. 3. The Reflection of Derridean Concepts in Tolkien’s <i>The Hobbit</i> and <i>The Silmarillion</i>	64
3. 4. Approach and Methodology	67

Chapter 4: Discussion

4. 1. Inauguration of <i>The Hobbit</i> : The Undecidable, the Khoratic, and the Subject.....	70
4. 2. The Undecidable Quest.....	77
4. 2. 1. Pure Ideals, Kings, and Subjects under the Mountain.....	77
4. 2. 2. Complexities of Beorn, Gollum, and Bilbo: Hybridity and the Liberality of the Text.....	80
4. 2. 3. The Resolution of the Quest: Monolingualism, Bard/Smaug, and Arkenstone/Bilbo	87
4. 3. <i>The Silmarillion</i> : Pharmakonic Bodies and Ideals	92
4. 3. 1. The play of Structure in <i>The Silmarillion</i> : Examination of Feanor and Melkor.....	93
4. 3. 2. Beren and Lúthien: The Hybridity’s Force.....	101

Chapter 5: Conclusion

5. 1. Overview	107
5. 2. Findings.....	108

5. 2. 1. Liberality of Literature and the Question of Good/Evil Idealities.....	108
5. 2. 2. The play of Structure and Challenging Pure Bodies.....	111
5. 2. 3. The Impossible and the Subject.....	113
5. 2. 4. Tolkien and Derrida: Non-belongingness and the Troublesome Eras .	114
5. 3. Suggestions for Further Studies	115
References.....	117

Chapter One

Introduction

1. Overview

What is the exact border that separates the real and the imagined? If events, images, worlds, beings, etc. exist only in our mind, does this mean that they are not real? Is an author's created world of any significance more than the mere fantasy and imagination? Moreover, what is the significance of an enormous yet well-wrought work of myth and fantasy beyond its mere consequential joy? What can a work of fantasy contribute to the troublesome world of the twenty first century? In other words, how does a critical mind of the contemporary literary and critical heritage respond to a massive work of fantasy? Additionally, how is a mytho-poetic and fantasy work received and appreciated by a contemporary reader of literature? These questions are of particularly great importance in the present century when many texts of fantasy and mythology are even adapted by film producers. Therefore, these types of texts and their created worlds can be scrutinized in the light of philosophy and literary criticism to reveal the underlying significances.

1.1. Myth and Fantasy

The gradual but immense development of myths among nations over several thousand years seems to be one of the most ancient inventions of human's faculty and imagination. These myths not only reflect the lifestyles of different peoples but also prove to be significantly effective in portraying religious beliefs and rituals, systems of thought, and world views. The grandeur of the extent to which myths have penetrated, shaped and defined people's lives, views, literature and philosophy is undeniable. Greek, Roman, Nordic, Gaelic, Irish, Old English, Germanic, and so forth are of the most influential

mythological systems in the Western culture. Throughout the history of European countries, an enormous body of literary works has been created under the influence or inspiration of a vast variety of mythological systems and heritages. As instances of such phenomena we can mention Homer and his reliance on Greek mythology, or Dante who employed Greco-Roman mythology and Christian heritage in his *Divine Comedy* to symbolize concepts such as wisdom, reason, love, betrayal, etc. Ironically, Virgil, the very figure that leads Dante through his perhaps inner expedition to seek love is a great figure in depicting myths. Dante was tremendously dependent on myths to convey meanings and significations. This becomes more significant when one pays attention to the allegorical structure of *The Divine Comedy*. Ergo, Myths have been more than mere inventions of the human's faculty of fantasy and imagination. Human has always been inventing myths, living them, and employing, reshaping and reinterpreting them.

Dealing with myths and mythological associations in his poetry, the Romantic poet, William Blake, invented his own version of mythology; a well-shaped system of myths inspired by the Bible and close to an independent religious creed. His world views and philosophy are represented by his own myths and symbols. The state of man in his contemporary time, his new hope of the New-Jerusalem, and the misery and dark side of industrialization are conveyed in a magnificent and enormous body of myths and fantasized creatures, characters and places. Even greater questions, like that of creation, are examined and scrutinized throughout these myths. Therefore, it most certainly is not futile to consider works of a poet such as Blake of several layers of significations as most myths are. In twentieth century, William Butler Yeats elevated a system of myths of his own imagination and poetical power. Having observed man's unstable, bemusing, complicated, and even painful state, Yeats came to create his own indigenous mythology. Since myths would serve as grand participants in the literary heritage, it is well justified and even

essential to approach them as more than bodies of fantasized and unreal entities. A possible apex of such tendency in creating and examining myths could be Roland Barthes's *The Eiffel Tower and Other Mythologies* (1957). In this work, Barthes, as a semiotician, investigates the inclination in the modern societies towards inventing myths of their own. Barthes's text is influential in treating myths in the matter of semiotics and language in a social context. Yeats and Barthes were not the only ones to create and investigate the realm of myths.

Tolkien's body of mythology represents a deep and complex cosmos created by the author's mind. *The Silmarillion*, a volume compiled by his son, begins with the most fundamental issue of most of the mythological bodies in different cultures, which is the myth of creation. This shows the extent to which Tolkien tried to compose his writing to be independent and well-wrought since his text starts with one of the first questions that has been pondering on by men: the story and origin of creation. Although there are many traces and inspiration sources originated in Greco-Roman and Christian traditions, Tolkien's body of myths and legends remain to be innovative and unique. In *The Hobbit*, the readers face races and cultures whose beliefs and dispositions find their origins in the myths created in *The Silmarillion*. In this regard, one can observe how the whole works of Tolkien are coherent to be in tandem with a single yet vast and diverse system of myths.

1.2. Tolkien and the Question of Fairy Stories

Speculative fiction is a domain that provides a considerable level of liberality for the author to write on a great variety of subjects on a tremendous scale of fantasy and innovation. This realm can be utterly remote from the realities of the world we live in as in Tolkien's text. This can lead to some objections to this genre. To deal with reductionist assumptions about this genre and also to provide a theoretical framework to some extent, Tolkien (1966) defends fairy stories as belonging to an essential and independent genre. As

a prominent literary scholar of his age, he investigates, in this text, as he puts it, the nature of the Faerie. The definition, he suggests, does not hinge upon historical accounts of fairies and elves. Described as an independent and quintessential genre, Fairy story could offer great significance in the realm of language particularly symbols, signs, and myths. To quote Tolkien himself, “Faerie cannot be caught in a net of words; for it is one of its qualities to be indescribable, though not imperceptible” (Tolkien, 1966, p. 39).

In his three renowned master pieces of high fantasy *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and *The Silmarillion*, Tolkien has created, in fact, an enormous yet autonomous system of interwoven myths and fairy stories. Autonomous in the sense that his mythology, though inspired by British or Greco-Roman mythologies, covers in its own unique trend a complete and vast body of concepts including creation of cosmos, men’s status and condition, gods and goddesses’ deeds and struggles, rebellions against creators, or the classic war of good and evil. To speak more precisely, *The Silmarillion*, compiled and published posthumously, is the narrative of Tolkienian cosmos and mythology. This text narrates the origins of Tolkien’s mythology and cosmos independently from any other systems of myths in the western culture and history; a personal system of myths of sorts (indeed, some influences and traces can be found in his texts whose origins are Celtic, Nordic, English, Greco-Roman or Christian. However, Tolkien’s innovation and originality remains unprecedented).

2. Statement of the Problem

Derridean texts and concepts have paved the way for the arrival of new considerations in the traditions of critical approaches to literary texts. A Derridean reading or a reading comparing literary texts with his ideas reflected in his writings could reveal and shed light upon many aspects and meanings that might have been overlooked before. Derridean concepts cover a scale of considerable variety. The notions of signs and structures, the

sense of non-belonging, the impossible and the relations tangled to it, the pure ideal bodies and so forth are among those concepts that Derrida is concerned with in his writings. Thus, Derrida's writings would reshape the previous interpretations of literary works into deeper evaluations and readings under the light of this vast scope.

Tolkien's texts have the potentiality to be read and interpreted under the paradigms of many critical theories. These approaches would surely reveal aspects of his works in fortuitous ways, however, the speculative and fantasy nature of Tolkien's works could be evaluated in ways that possibly restrain and limit the scope of interpretation to few certain frameworks. Each of these frameworks may address one or two aspects of Tolkien's works. A stylistic study would tend to Tolkien's unique style of prose and high epic fantasy, or a biblical investigation could trace back the origins and themes of his mythology to the text of the Bible.

Tolkien's outstanding achievement in creating a massive set of myths, linguistic structures, and cultural and philosophical trends in *The Silmarillion* is representing questions and concerns that Tolkien, Derrida himself and other thinkers have been dealing with during the twentieth century. The matter of structurality and structure is one of them. Derrida challenges the self-legitimacy of the centers that assume themselves in charge of the structures controlling them. Tolkien's texts could be perused and scrutinized to find how he has dealt with such matters. Legends, myths, gods, and creatures present in the Tolkienian cosmos are constantly related to and dependent on structures of languages, cultures and dispositions in their existence and relations among themselves. Tolkien, in his own way of considering the theory and practice of fairy stories and high fantasy, challenges the self-legitimacy and absolute power of centers over the structures. Although, upon the first reading Tolkien's works appear to be for the joy seekers or the young readers; analytical study of his works and juxtaposing them with Derridean concept would

reveal their deeper and more significant aspects and layers. Those significances and layers that might be over looked in traditional studies of fantasy.

3. Theoretical Framework

3. 1. Tolkienian and Derridean Ideas of Structures

Tolkien's achievement in creating both a variety of languages and a unique system of myths in *The Silmarillion* makes it possible to consider and examine them regarding their structures. Language and myth as two structures (structure as in pre-Derridean terms) function through signs and presuppose notions such as logos. These logos claim to be centers. They presume that around their authority structures must be formed and monitored by that authority all the time. While these centers claim to have their existence in the outside of the structures, Derrida's intervening reading demonstrates that they have no existence or authority outside the structures. They belong to the structures that are self-allegedly and constantly trying to organize and control. However, this is what deprives these central presences of their authority and self-legitimacy for what belongs to a structure has no absolute and unchallengeable authority but an arbitrary one over the structurality of the structure.

It seems proper here to continue the discussion with elaborating some of the concepts introduced by Derrida in his 1966 paper 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences' because they will be employed later when the text of *The Silmarillion* comes under analysis. Derrida's views on how the central presence arbitrarily organizes the structure and impedes the play of structures could be more elaborated by alluding to an anecdote from Barthes's *The Eiffel Tower and Other Mythologies* about Guy de Maupassant. He hated the Eiffel Tower, yet he had his lunch at the top of the Tower restaurant of the Eiffel on a daily basis. Answering to enquiries on this paradox, he would say it was the only place upon which if he looked up at the sky, he did not have to behold

and bear the presence of the Tower; quite amusing yet fortuitous of an anecdote of course. Like the Tower, each center (sign) entails a subsequent presence invariable as that of the Being (essence, subject, etc.) and of the transcendent (God, Supreme Being, man, etc.). Before the “rapture” that Derrida perceived as an event, in the concept of structure there were just the substitutions of these centers one after the other while a central presence was always absent from the structurality of structure. These constant substitutions of central presences demonstrate that their authority over the structure has been always arbitrary and alleged as self-legitimized logos (Derrida, 1966). In both *The Silmarillion* and *The Hobbit*, the myths that govern and organize the narration and the Tolkienian cosmos continue to establish a similar arbitrary authority through their presences. However, the significance of Tolkienian mytho-poetic text and fantasy is that they demonstrate how this authority is only self-legitimized. This self-legitimized authority is challenged and questioned all the time, and the self-proclaimed centers are constantly replaced by substitutes. Furthermore, these substitutes themselves are prone to the process of substitution in the structurality of the structure.

3.2. Critique of Ideal Pure Bodies

Since the concept of sign can be expanded to any other concept, such as concept of ideal, pure bodies are what Derrida is concerned with. He demonstrates that there can be no pure body. These phantoms of pure, ideal bodies have in themselves both the threat and the cure to their integrity and can be taken into consideration as Pharmakons in Derridean terms. If a drug is to restore an ideal purity, so that purity entails a contamination in itself that necessitates the drug in the first place. Furthermore, these pure bodies seek a state of restoration and integrity through practicing what exactly is considered to be a contamination to them: using force and violence to restore a sense of democracy, or using oppression and exploitation to restore an ideal of faith. Therefore, Derrida suggests we

examine various contexts of history, politics, etc. to find these alleged pure bodies and see through their incoherence.

Accordingly, the existence of the Tolkienian beings could be discussed in this regard, too. Not unlike men outside Tolkien's fictional world, these beings understand themselves in terms of pure and ideal phantom bodies, e.g. Valar, and try to maintain and comprehend the world they live in through these central presences. However, these alleged pure bodies appear to be pharmakonic from the very beginning of the narration. The evil presences as well as the pure and good entities constantly entail in themselves contaminations that contradict their self-assumed, arbitrary and unchallengeable authority and purity.

Throughout the story of the creation in Tolkienian cosmos and mythologies, the reader encounters the emergence of many centers and logos in the text. Each of these logos carries with itself a sense of the metaphysical authority, legitimacy, etc. The creation of the Tolkienian cosmos is the result of actions and interactions of gods and goddesses (as in the example of phantom bodies) whose deeds and intentions are channelized through a path that is alleged to presume and self-legitimize structures. As centers and logos tend to appear, these divine faculties would bear with themselves phantom bodies that are assumed to close the play of structure, in Derridean terms. However, what Tolkien is concerned with is a demonstration of constant struggles and negotiations between these self-legitimized logos themselves or between them and their opposing forces. Ergo, what is supposed to be avoided (the play within the structurality of the structure) is compromised in Tolkienian discourse. The gods and goddesses (Valar in Tolkienian term) would lose their position of authority (which is only an alleged, arbitrary and self-legitimized one) and fall from a divine and meta-human apex to an anthropocentric discursivity that is as unstable as the previous one. Thus, what Derrida has demonstrated through a philosophical investigation could be compared with what Tolkien has achieved in his fantasized

mythologies; the shaky and illegitimately legitimized position of the metaphysics of presence.

Mostly, Derrida has referred to ideals of purity in the discourses of the different fields of human thoughts. Tolkien's narratives *The Silmarillion* and *The Hobbit* have unflinching critiques of pure ideals at their core. In both, the apparent, simple struggles between traditional forces of good and evil move beyond the classic presentation. On the surface, these struggles are simply resolved in the defeat of the evil by the good and the righteous. However, it is the underlying forces in these struggles that are interesting and noteworthy in a Derridean reading. The mythoi that are the centers to the structurality of Tolkienian cosmos are constantly in strife to reach the borders of the pure ideals; absolute purity, undeniable originality, undefeatable authority, undisputable authority, uncorrupt and pure form of existence. These phantoms, more than often, claim beings as others and banish them to legitimize their reign over structures of their own creation. Moreover, Tolkien never approves or disapproves the alleged origins of these phantom bodies. What he does is bringing the ideals of purity into sorts of negotiations with the forces opposing them. This demonstrates the pharmakonic and unstable position of authority and legitimacy of these bodies. For example, when a spiritual god like evil entity (Melkor, most powerful of the Ainur) amongst these mythoi, claims even a more exceptional place of authority and originality for itself, the other mythoi (Valar) as its rivals would rise based on the same ground of ideals from which that evil supposes a right of supremacy over the others. As another instance, when a king (Thorin) despite his long alleged divine blood of kingship and supremacy is replaced and sent into exile by Smaug, Tolkien presents a play in the structurality of the tradition of noble blood. This king and his people would later bear a strong sense of non-belonging to the land they once owned even when they would succeed in reclaiming it. The phantom bodies of royal blood and noble class are undermined and

removed from the center of their structures by another phantom, Smaug that is also later eradicated by a marginalized other; Bard the Huntsman. Hence, the transformation and replacement of mythoi into logos that afterward serves in structurality of Tolkienian mythologies and cosmos could be read in Derridean philosophy and critique of the metaphysics of presence.

4. Research Questions

This study is going to provide answers to the following questions based on the analytical comparison between the texts of Derrida and Tolkien:

1. In what ways Derrida's reading and writing of literature and Tolkien's writing and reading of myths seem to be parallel?
 - A. Do Derridean concepts and Tolkienian mythology contain the same trends and orientation in dealing with notions such as good, evil, creation, divinity and so forth?
 - B. Do Derrida and Tolkien have the same idea on questions brought upon literature and philosophy?
 - C. How Tolkienian fantasy being studied and compared with Derrida's text demonstrates the importance of speculative fiction that is at times over looked?
2. What are the common grounds of Derridean philosophical concepts and Tolkienian philosophical trends?
 - A. How is the notion of ideal pure bodies portrayed in Tolkien's texts?
 - B. Do both of these thinkers share the same ideas of the relationship between the subject and the impossible?
 - C. How are the concepts of logos represented in the Tolkienian cosmos, and how are they in accordance with Derrida's ideas of logos and centers?
3. What is the significance of war and postwar experience in Derrida and Tolkien's writings? Is their experience of human suffering and bondage reflected in their texts?

A. How does Derrida introduce and treat the sense of non-belonging? Does Tolkienian treatment of this notion in *The Hobbit* and *The Silmarillion* find its common grounds with that of Derrida?

B. How is the classic clash of good and evil contributing to the portrayal of the play of the structure and thusly the unstable nature of structurality in Tolkien and Derrida's fantasy and critique of phantom bodies?

5. Significance of the Study

Bearing this in mind that speculative fiction and invented systems of myth both have a fortuitous and long history in the English literature; this study aims to uncover the underlying layers of Tolkienian cosmos, myth, and fantasy in the process of a Derridean reading. However, unlike studies that mainly explore a work of art while tracing Derridean concepts the present study is to focus on both authors to identify a common ground that exists between them and to demonstrate the ways they converge and diverge. The significance of this study lies in the fact that, unlike many studies made on the writings of these two thinkers, this study juxtaposes their thoughts and understanding of logos and signification that is an important attempt demonstrating the originality of this study. The present study, in addition, tries to apply Derridean terms to the texts of Tolkien as much as this is in accordance with the act of juxtaposing Derrida and Tolkien's texts. Also, this study is significant because it explores speculative fiction in a new way to demonstrate that such literature is of tremendous value and weight. Thus, this genre of fiction is worthy of being considered a thought provoking genre far away from a superficial view that holds it as merely of shallow joy and entertainment.

6. Approach and Methodology

To explore the selected novels in this study, an exponential approach which heavily relies on close reading which consists of comparisons and contrasts as well as applying critical