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Tolkien, Enchantment, and Loss: Steps on the Developmental Journey (2022) by John Rosegrant

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Tolkien, Enchantment, and Loss: Steps on the Developmental Journey, by John Rosegrant. Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2022. xii, 208 pp. \$55.00 (hardcover) ISBN 9781606354353. Also available in ebook format.

Authors of Tolkien studies generally view his life and works through their own professional lenses: literary scholars describe textual sources and styles; botanists discuss the *olvar* of Middle-earth and their relationships to our own plants; linguists discuss the languages, and historians the influences of events and cultures, from the classical period to the mid-twentieth century; and biographers offer general studies of Tolkien's life and times. Dr. John Rosegrant, a practicing psychoanalyst, offers a view of Tolkien and his writings through the frame of psychology, and in particular the theories of Sigmund Freud, Donald W. Winnicott, and Julia Kristeva. The result is an interesting and sometimes startling departure from the familiar paths of Tolkien scholarship, and yet one which provides readers with rich new insights into the familiar themes of enchantment and loss which shape Tolkien's life and permeate the legendarium. While some of the material is based on previously published essays, the book is able to draw together their various concepts into a more complex whole.

For Rosegrant, the tension that lies at the heart of Tolkien's writing is the longing for something beyond the everyday "that can never quite be grasped, or if grasped is threatened with loss" (2). This, he explains, is Tolkien's response to Max Weber's concept of "the disenchantment of the world". It also reflects the personal tension resulting from Tolkien's lifelong psychological strains, manifested in part in his Atlantis dream of the overwhelming, inescapable wave. For Tolkien, creativity was a source of enchantment, a way to cope with the many losses and traumas he lived through. At best, as Rosegrant demonstrates, one can find a balance in the tension, but it can never be fully resolved.

In an enchanted world view, all things are connected (like a garden), both to each other and to The Other. The world is affected by mysterious forces, which produce wonder and terror. Not all can be explained rationally, but there is a sense of meaningfulness for those who can be open to it. Often it is transitional spaces, objects, and phenomena – the liminal and the numinous – which produce this sense of enchantment. Rosegrant agrees with theorists, such as Winnicott, who maintain that such meaning-making is essential to a fulfilled life, as well as Freud, who stated that the opposite of play is not seriousness but instead actuality, the True versus the Real. To have a healthy psyche, humans must be able to grow up from, but not entirely out of, a childlike enchantment with the world; that which exists in between pure imagination and grim reality offers just such an experience of the liminal which helps people deal with the tension between enchantment and loss, a process which is part of modern psychological development. Rosegrant believes that this is why Tolkien appeals particularly to teenage readers; his stories deal with the

transitional, and with maintaining a sense of meaning in the face of disillusionment (as he himself learned to do in the wake of his parents' deaths and the horrors of world wars), even as one establishes an identity for "the real world." This may explain, in part, Tolkien's approval of the fairy tale "The Juniper Tree" (in his essay "On Fairy-stories"); it contains both the enchanted and the gruesome in a way that is manageable for young readers. Moreover, Rosegrant writes, Tolkien's works "may be seen as an expression of his struggle to maintain enchantment in the face of the many losses he experienced", and they helped him to be "able to write more directly about the effects of war than would have been possible with [mere] realism" (29-30).

Rosegrant draws from a wide swath of Tolkien's writings to illustrate these points. The Master of Laketown, with his Weberian pragmatism, winds up a victim of the enchantment of dragon gold, while Bilbo is instead able to strengthen his relations with enchanted beings while still maintaining his Hobbit-sense. He becomes an example of a healthy intermingling of magical and realistic thinking, thus demonstrating that "[g]enuine maturity is not found in the use of rational thought alone, but in the capacity to shift between and combine rational thought and fantasy" (52). Tom Bombadil demonstrates that adventures are playful, and contain enigmas which can offer relief to their authors who feel overwhelmed with the "grownupishness" of overwork and underpayment. Galadriel, in her exile from Valinor, her grief for the fading of Lórien, and her eventual need to leave Middle-earth, often expresses Tolkien's own concerns about separation and loss. Her Mirror stands in for a mother's face by offering a means of seeing one's self reflected, a crucial task for self-development according to Winnicott.

The maternal theme is particularly present in the multiple uses of song and music, which Rosegrant compares to mother's lullabies, to represent both enchantment and loss. There are songs of disruption and repair, and songs that may enchant the hearer into either oblivion or awareness. The very creation of Eä is a song that moves between mutuality and disruption, between a maternal form of unity offered by Ilúvatar and the disruptive individuality preferred by Melkor, who can never establish mutuality with anyone or anything. In this Rosegrant sees an echo of Tolkien's relationship with his mother Mabel, one of both mutuality through love and disruption through her death. Music is also used to reconnect with a lost love one three times in the legendarium, by Fingon seeking Maedhros, Lúthien seeking Beren, and Sam seeking Frodo. Both Melian and her daughter Lúthien sing so beautifully that a hearer is lost to himself, and Lúthien brings even the implacable Mandos to pity, a change of heart which equals a change of consciousness. Finrod's song likewise awakens humans and leads them into deeper wisdom. Like eucatastrophe itself, music carries joy and a possibility for the repair of pain and disruption.

From Tolkien's writings, Rosegrant moves more deeply into Tolkien's life to explore his understandings of creativity and the function of Faërie in a painful world. Entering into Faërie requires the liminal, both/and attitude which allows for both subjectivity and objectivity, and for a comfortable integration of inner and outer realities. One enters into Faërie rather than suspending disbelief about it, and love and wonder are crucial attitudes that enable the visitor to see things as they really are. It's also important to accept that symbols can have multiple meanings; the familiar Atlantis wave contains destruction, but it also unlocks creativity and allows for new beginnings, just as Tolkien's work on "The Notion Club Papers" and "The Drowning of Anadûnê" unlocked his stuck creative process for *The Lord of the Rings* in 1944-1946. Ultimately, Rosegrant writes, "The deepest truth lies not in resolving the ambiguity, but in the process of looking at the ambiguity directly and honestly" (111).

This is a core concept of the book, one which resonates deeply with Buddhist and other teachings and gives rise to the question of the place of contemplation in the experience of enchantment. Rosegrant sees physical spaces of contemplation in the legendarium (the Hall of Fire in Rivendell, the Cottage of Lost Play) where tales can be told and pondered, which may lead to enchantment. Again, like the contemplative practices of many spiritual traditions, finite beings cannot remain in infinite spaces forever; they move in and out of them, provided they consent to being enchanted in the first place. [Interview with Rosegrant, *The Texas Tolkien Talk Podcast*, 6 March 2022] One is also reminded of Nienna, the Vala who mourns for the marring of Arda and produces regeneration through her tears. She is a profoundly contemplative figure who taught pity and patience to Gandalf, both contemplative traits; an exploration of her contribution to the themes of enchantment and loss would be welcome should the book ever appear in a revised edition.

Tolkien wrote "Mythopoeia" comparatively early in his life in response to C.S. Lewis's views on myths, but Rosegrant also sees in the poem a defense against the dangers of hubris in creativity. By claiming his right to create as a reflection of his Creator, Tolkien justified that which might otherwise be considered pride and possessiveness, two of the greatest character flaws of the legendarium. By saying his visions of Middle-earth came from Somewhere Else, Tolkien was protected from "the terrors of claiming the work as [his] own" (124). Rosegrant also points to the presence of an unusual (for Tolkien) number of father-figures in all the versions of the fall of Númenor as an indicator that Tolkien may have been working out his own guilt over surviving his father and having his mother all to himself for a time. In the following chapter, Rosegrant turns a psychoanalyst's lens on the familiar territory of Tolkien's emotional losses and stress ailments, exacerbated by his experiences in The Great War, with a detailed chronology of stressful events and various illnesses. In effect, Rosegrant argues, since Tolkien had trouble

symbolizing painful feelings, his body did the work instead, even as the pervasiveness of loss throughout the legendarium may have helped him integrate his earlier losses. Tolkien's strong personal connection to Kullervo, well-documented by Verlyn Flieger, led him to retell the Finnish tale with more abuse and deformity than appeared in the original story, which may reflect the earliest example for Tolkien of enacting such integration. Both Faramir and Éowyn experience a loss of love, leading to physical ailments, and are healed by a new love for each other, a possible reflection of Tolkien's relationship with Edith Bratt. Frodo certainly embodies the clearest depiction of stress reactions in response to prior trauma: he is both fascinated and destabilized by the faces in the Dead Marshes; he wants to return Gollum to his former identity as Sméagol, because he fears suffering the same fate; he becomes averse to violence; and he re-experiences old traumas on their anniversaries. In the end, Frodo must undergo loss (of the Shire) in order to obtain healing; he is unable to attain in his daily world the liminal, transitional approach to enchantment and loss that Sam is able to enact, but then Sam, though a Ring bearer himself, did not experience Frodo's level of trauma.

Rosegrant demonstrates the importance of a transitional stance to the work of healing by contrasting Tom Bombadil with *the* Lord of the Rings himself. Sauron locks himself into an inward stance, treating people as things out of fear of loss and splitting himself to produce a Ring which he thinks will enhance his power. Like his Nazgûl, themselves caught by Rings of power, Sauron is a failed transitional space. By contrast, Tom, in his singing, dancing, and playing, is the embodiment of transitional space. Tolkien emphasizes this quality by refusing to define Tom, resulting in deep bewilderment and endless speculation on the part of many readers. Tom and Goldberry are exemplars of negotiating the boundaries of self and other: they "weave a single dance, neither hindering the other," and are uninterested in power, possession, or domination, all of which would be a great burden – and so the Ring has no power over them. They are under no enchantment but their own.

In his final chapter, Rosegrant offers an insightful and poignant account of the ways Tolkien's approach to his legendarium changed towards the end of his life. He seemed to have found it harder to enter transitional space as he aged (and approached his own, final transition out of life), as is depicted in *Smith of Wootton Major*. Smith is told by the birch tree that saved him from one of the perils of Faërie that he doesn't belong there, and the King reminds Smith that the Star he clings to is a privilege, not a right, which must be passed on to others. Like Tom Shippey, Rosegrant sees this as a reemergence of Tolkien's conflict with hubris, echoed in the poem "Looney," in which the Traveler commands a response from the enchanted realm, and is instead blinded and beaten down.

Indeed, during his final years Tolkien was concerned with making his legendarium even more consistent with Christianity, with science, with the "real world," thus losing the early freedom of creativity in which he had reveled. He

actually rewrote the first few chapters of *The Hobbit*, ostensibly to make them match the “tone” of *Lord of the Rings* more closely, but also to try and make it less “fantastical”. Fortunately, a friend dissuaded him from the project, but he continued to pick at the legendarium, making accurate chronologies and deep theological explorations into the ethics of creating orcs, the remaking of Galadriel into a Marian figure, and even a hint of the Incarnation in the “Athrabeth”, a dialog between an Elf and a Human. Rosegrant sees this revisioning as a movement away from childhood and towards disenchantment, where all things may be calculated and therefore controlled. He claims Tolkien was giving up on the creative play of ideas: “Instead, it is as though he is standing in shame before an inner board of examiners who demand the realistic choice” (171). Rosegrant also quotes Christopher Tolkien as saying “... he [Tolkien] was devising – from within it – a fearful weapon against his own creation” (172). The late notion at this time of the earth as Morgoth’s Ring, to be used to assert power rather than to be loved for itself, matched Tolkien’s own despair over modernity and the increasing destruction of nature.

And yet, Tolkien’s monumental achievement remains. The legendarium offered him a way to work through tragedies and maintain connection with hope and meaning, and it continues to do so for readers today. As Rosegrant writes, it was Tolkien’s answer to, though not a resolution of, Weber’s “disenchantment of the world”: “Living in modernity means living in ongoing tension between enchantment and loss” (174). Desire remains, even as it is satisfied – and unsatisfied. Like a kaleidoscope, Rosegrant’s work takes a twist on the familiar pieces of Tolkien’s life and writings by viewing them through a new framework, rearranging the facets to reveal unexpected meaning and offer greater depths of understanding. As more readers develop an interest in Tolkien’s metaphysics, they would do well to put this book at the top of their list.

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Works Cited

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