Taking Comfort in Virtual Humor: Tolkien Memes as Adaptation and Escape

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The initial aim of this paper was to analyze meme trends in 2020 from three of the largest Tolkien meme pages located on their respective social media platforms. The meme pages of interest were "LOTR Memes" on Facebook, @lotr_memelord on Instragram, and r/LOTRmemes on Reddit. The original hypothesis put forth was that the creation and circulation of Tolkien memes on social media would have increased during the start of and on through COVID-19 quarantine when people were in their homes more than usual. However, after gathering and analyzing the data, this does not seem to be the case. If anything, the data showed that after the holiday season at the end of 2019 and the beginning of 2020, Tolkien meme activity on social media declined significantly. The only social media platform that showed any evidence of increased activity at the start of COVID-19 lockdown was Instagram. The activity and growth of the @lotr_memelord page could be credited with how young the page is (the page was created in October 2019) rather than as a direct result of people's increased screen time due to being quarantined in their homes. But even that analysis is highly speculative.

In analyzing the social media data, it became clear that the original hypothesis was being disproved. So, why talk about Tolkien memes? Should that question be thrown out since the original intention was shown to be irrelevant? With the continued rise of the creation of internet memes in the form that people currently recognize them along with social media pages solely dedicated to their creation and distribution, our global community has integrated memes into its cultural lexicon. Why is this so? Particularly, why is this so in Tolkien community circles? The purpose of this paper is an attempt to provide answers to this question.

This paper will begin with a brief cultural and etymological introduction to the contemporary understanding of the word "meme." Following will be an argument that memes—particularly Tolkien memes—fit under the criteria of adaptation as Linda Hutcheon defines it.

The paper will conclude with a case for a hermeneutic, i.e., interpretive lens, of Tolkien's concept of Escape as laid out in his essay *On Fairy-stories* as a way to shed light on Tolkien meme creation and circulation. Some concluding remarks will be made on the spreadability[1] of Tolkien memes and leave the inquiry of Tolkien memes open for others to attend to.

Today, the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines memes as "an image, a video, a piece of text etc. that is passed very quickly from one internet user to another, often with slight changes that make it humorous." However, memes as a word and concept did not harbor such a meaning in its inception. The word "meme" was coined by the evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins in his book entitled *The Selfish Gene*: "We need a name for the new replicator, a noun which conveys the idea of a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of *imitation*. 'Mimeme' comes from a suitable Greek root, but I want a monosyllable that sounds a bit like 'gene.' I hope my classicist friends will forgive me if I abbreviate mimeme to *meme*."[2] Dawkins's purpose for these memes was to relate them to genes as to expand the concept of genes as "selfish" replicators to individual cultural ideas. These memes could then be understood, like genes, as units of cultural evolution to demonstrate the function of their transmission. Like genes, memes are not entirely original. They are derived from a source and that source is derived from another source and so on. There will be no deliberation on memetics or biology here, but internet culture has taken Dawkins's word and ran with it to develop the internet meme as we know it today. Dawkins's original intention for the word will be helpful in this paper's aims because of its etymological relevancy in accurately describing, in part, how Tolkien memes are created and circulated.

Connections to pop culture and current events are typical elements of meme creation. Tolkien memes are no different. For example, it did not take long for people to start creating

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[1] Jenkins, Henry, et al. *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture*. New York, 2013.
[2] Dawkins, Richard. *The Selfish Gene*. Oxford University Press, 1976. 206. Italics original.

Tolkien memes related to COVID-19. This social concoction of source material (in this case Tolkien, his legendarium, and adaptations of his work), pop culture, world culture, and fan participation has been observed by many media scholars. Henry Jenkins categorizes phenomena like internet meme culture as *convergence*. Jenkins says, "By convergence, I mean the flow of content across multiple media platforms, cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want."[3] Dawkins has given us a concept for understanding cultural ideas as units that transmit and evolve from person to person through time and Jenkins has laid out a category for us to grasp how these various cultural units or contents converge to create a new entity. From here, there will be an attempt to classify Tolkien memes as adaptation.

While anthropologists and media scholars have been formulating and reformulating ways of observing and understanding the phenomenon of convergent content, literary scholars have been classifying cultural "texts" of convergence. Helpful to the task at hand is the work of Linda Hutcheon—particularly her theory of adaptation.[4] She says, "...adaptations have an overt and defining relationship to prior texts, usually revealingly called 'sources'...adaptations usually openly announce this relationship."[5] This introductory understanding of adaptation that Hutcheon puts forth sounds like a basic description of how memes are made. It is here that the relationship between Hutcheon, Dawkins, and Jenkins should be made clear. Hutcheon's sources can take the place of Dawkins's memes. The relationship between adaptations and their sources can be understood through the lens of Jenkins' convergence. Dawkins and Jenkins have given a foundation for understanding memes as a phenomenon. Hutcheon's definition of adaptation will

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[3] Jenkins, Henry. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York University Press, 2006. 2.
[4] Hutcheon, Linda. *A Theory of Adaptation*. Routledge, 2013.
[5] Ibid. 3.

serve as a framework for how Tolkien memes may be classified and provide broader insight into the popularity of Tolkien memes.

Tolkien memes primarily rely on work related to the legendarium along with adaptations of Tolkien's work as source material. Reliance on Tolkien and works around and related to him are used by meme creators and distributors to bolster their popularity. This approach to adapting a source fits Hutcheon's first criterion for a work of adaptation. "...an adaptation is an announced and extensive transposition of a particular work or works."[6] An argument can be made that the open and announced relationship between Tolkien and these memes are what help Tolkien memes thrive. Another contributing factor to the popularity of Tolkien memes is that memes as adaptation are not attempting to capture what is considered the canonical core of the original stories and scenes from the lengendarium with any real integrity.

In her research on fan memory of Tolkien and his works in light of the Peter Jackson films, Mina D. Lukić says of fan experience of adaptations, "When experiencing an adaptation, we fill in the gaps with information from the adapted text based on our knowledge and memory, and our level of satisfaction depends on the amount of similarity we expect compared to our own vision."[7] Fans want to see memes that are explicitly connected to Tolkien, his works, and adaptations of his works because there lacks an expectation of similarity between them.[8]

The second criterion that Hutcheon gives for adaptation is "as *a process of creation*, the act of adaptation involves both (re-)interpretation and then (re-)creation; this has been called

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[6] Ibid. 7.

[7] Lukić, Mina D. Is Adapting Tolkien (Mis)Remembering Tolkien? *Adapting Tolkien: Proceedings of The Tolkien Society Seminar 2020*. Edited by Will Sherwood, Luna Press Publishing, 2021. 81.

[8] The intentional lack of integrity in adapting Tolkien for meme-making and the popular acceptance of Tolkien memes despite their desacralizing nature also bestows the qualities of parody as Hutcheon has defined it: "Parody is fundamentally double and divided; its ambivalence stems from the dual drives of conservative and revolutionary forces that are inherent in its nature as authorized transgression." Hutcheon, Linda. *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms*. University of Illinois Press, 2000. 26.

both appropriation and salvaging."[9] Meme-makers participate in both appropriation and salvaging. On one hand, the canvas of a Tolkien meme (usually an image) is a scene in or related to the legendarium in most cases, acting as a salvager of the work. On the other hand, the scene is appropriated for whatever purpose the meme-maker has for it, whether that is to make an absurd joke or to satirize world events. However, not all Tolkien memes utilize images directly related to Tolkien as a primary meme layout. Sometimes there are popular meme "formats" that are derived from other sources and are made into a Tolkien meme either by text or photoshopping a Tolkien-related image onto the meme format. These meme formats are taken from other cultural sources, whether that be a movie, a celebrity, a piece of literature etc. Meme-making can then be a complex interweaving of multiple content entities that go through the process of adaptation to be molded into its own work of adaptation.

With the reception of these memes by a certain audience being a major consideration in the minds of meme-makers, Tolkien memes fit Hutcheon's third and final criterion for adaptation. "...seen from the perspective of its *process of reception*, adaptation is a form of intertextuality: we experience adaptations (*as adaptations*) as palimpsests through our memory of other works that resonate through repetition with variation."[10] There exists a wide range of Tolkien memes because the Tolkien fandom contains multitudes and, as Hutcheon points out, is particularly demanding.[11] Some Tolkien memes will be received differently by fans based on what exactly these fans are interested in. Are these fans interested in the Peter Jackson films? Tolkien's languages? The legendarium as a whole? Or maybe just *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, excluding *The Silmarillion*? Not to mention the other meme formats that the Tolkien-

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[9] Ibid. 8. Italics original.
[10] Ibid. 8. Italics original.
[11] Ibid. 29.

related content interacts with in any meme. What other fandoms are the Tolkien fan committed to? And how will that affect their reception of it? These layers lead to more questions that range outside the scope of the present inquiry, but the aim here is for adaptation to serve as a lens for the observer of Tolkien meme activity to be better equipped for asking questions pertaining to the phenomenon.

Hutcheon's criteria of salvaging and reception assume a collective memory is present in the circulation of any adaptation. She says, "As audience members, we need memory to experience difference as well as similarity."[12] Diversity among Tolkien fans has already been mentioned, but it is important to touch on again in considering differing fan memories. Fan memories also include an awareness of the Tolkien fandom itself. Because Tolkien's work and various adaptations of it contain different conventions through the transcoding of these conventions through a change of medium,[13] Tolkien fans have a multiplicity of relationships and experiences with each Tolkien-related product as well as the process by which these products are created and circulated. Tolkien memes are assuredly caught up in this dynamic.

Tolkien memes carry a collage-like nature about them. Memes are created with elements of showing, telling, and interacting. Sometimes, they contain all three elements at once. Hutcheon speaks to the added complexity of internet adaptations:

> "In interactive digital installations and Internet-connected work, a collective model of creation best describes the web of interlinkages that are constantly being reorganized by the various participants both before and during the interaction itself. This fluid collaboration is more like that of an ongoing stage play...and when [the ongoing stage play is] the site of adaptations from a prior work there is always contention over exactly who of the many artists involved should be called the actual adapter(s)."[14]

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[12] Ibid. 22.
[13] Ibid. 34.
[14] Ibid. 80-81.

This question of which artist owns the title of adapter is prevalent in the internet meme community. There are debates surrounding the sovereignty of the creator of an "original" meme format along with those who adapt a meme format in a particular context for the first time. Whether or not a meme-maker should even claim originality or utilize meme creation for economic gain is also under debate. Regardless of adapter(s)'s and audiences' opinions on such matters, all of these conflicting elements are present in Tolkien meme communities and lead us into why memes are created and circulated.

Regardless of audiences' interaction with Tolkien or other Tolkien related intellectual properties, Tolkien memes are generally created to contain jargon that Tolkien fans are familiar with. Here, an explanation to the experiential reason why Tolkien meme-makers and audiences participate in Tolkien meme circulation in a way for those who are familiar with Tolkien can understand will be given. It is important to note that Tolkien memes have been classified here as adaptation and not as *sub-creation* as Tolkien defines the art of Secondary World creation in his essay.[15] There will be no attempt to develop or speak to a particular philosophy of art in the conclusion of this paper. The purpose of this conclusion is to argue for the interpretation of the phenomenon of Tolkien memes through Tolkien's concept of Escape under his subheading of "Recovery, Escape, Consolation" in *On Fairy-stories*.[16]

To understand Escape as Tolkien means it in *OFS*, and how it applies to memes, one must begin with Tolkien's concept of Recovery. Tolkien talks of Recovery as being a "regaining of a clear view."[17] By this he means the exercising of a human's ability to put down their "taking-for-grantedness" of the world and picking elements of the world back up to reexamine

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[15] Flieger, Verlyn, and Douglas A. Anderson, editors. *Tolkien On Fairy-Stories*. HarperCollins, 2014. 13.
[16] Ibid. 66-76.
[17] Ibid. 67.

them with a renewed vision of the world and its elements. Tolkien does not limit recovery to fairy-stories. He spells it out clearly by saying, "Of course, fairy-stories are not the only means of recovery, or prophylactic against loss. Humility is enough. And there is (especially for the humble) *Mooreeffoc*, or Chestertonian Fantasy." *Mooreeffoc* is the word Coffee-Room spelled backwards and is the start of the renewing of our view of the surrounding world. This starting point, Tolkien says, "has...limited power; for the reason that recovery of freshness of vision is its only virtue."[18] It is this limited aspect of Recovery that meme-makers employ when creating Tolkien memes. There are not just adjustments made to one's vantage point in observing Tolkien, but also to cultures local and at large.

Tolkien famously criticizes the critics of Escape with confusing "the Escape of the Prisoner with the Flight of the Deserter."[19] Modern humans, Tolkien puts forth, have manipulated elements of the natural world through "'improved means to deteriorated ends.'"[20] Humanity continues to manufacture societies that increase their disconnection from the natural world at the very cost of the natural world. The irony is made apparent. The critics of Escape are those who tend to embrace a different and, according to Tolkien, destructive form of escapism. The escapism that Tolkien is defending (the escapism of Fantasy) is one that is rooted in the natural world in its proper beauty, uncorrupted by the white hand of industry. Readers of *On Fairy-stories* are given an image of a prisoner appreciating the outside world from the inside of their cell. Both the inside of the prison and the outside are composed of the same natural stuff of the world. But between the two options, which is more real? The Tolkienian answer is clear. However, human-made "prisons" are not the only things deemed worthy of escaping. As Tolkien

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[18] Ibid. 68.
[19] Ibid. 69.
[20] Ibid.72.

says, "There are hunger, thirst, poverty, pain, sorrow, injustice, death."[21] And, to add to the list, pandemics. As the saying goes, sometimes things get worse before they get better. But this crux of worse and better serves as a fitting means of Escape to its proper end: Consolation—or the *eucatastrophe*.[22]

Many liberties have been taken in dealing with concepts and themes from Tolkien's section on "Recovery, Escape, Consolation." After all, memes, as already mentioned, are not claimed to fit the criteria of sub-creation, but adaptation. Similarly, there is no argument for memes to be classified as fantasy either. It would, however, be unwise to claim that Tolkien memes, their making, and circulation share no qualities of Recovery, Escape, and Consolation. Although there may be no intention to create secondary worlds or to ultimately guide audiences to a eucatastrophe, Tolkien memes undoubtedly borrow from Tolkien's legendarium, give their audiences a new perspective on Tolkien and the world, and, in large part, aim to make their viewers laugh. In a letter to Stanley Unwin, Tolkien says in reference to *The Lord of the Rings*, "...it seems to me that in real life, as here, it is precisely against the darkness of the world that comedy arises, and is best when that is not hidden."[23] Amid war, pandemics, and political divides, which existed during Tolkien's lifetime and well before, many of us will turn to our various screens for comfort in escaping to Tolkien, those who know him, and those we can laugh with.

I will not commit the Chestertonian sin of claiming that Tolkien memes are "here to stay," but there is a reason, or a multitude of reasons, that Tolkien memes are created and

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[21] Ibid. 73.
[22] Ibid. 75.
[23] Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*. Edited by Humphrey Carpenter, First Houghton Mifflin Paperback ed., Houghton Mifflin Co., 2000. 120.

circulated in the vast quantities that they are. Turning back to Lukić's study, she presents a case for why Tolkien internet activity circulates the way that it does:

> "…fans are strongly motivated to produce and circulate media materials, and their activities are best described as *memory-based making*, since they derive their significance from appealing to the specialised knowledge of fan audience, dependent on memory."[24]

Lukić's main argument deals with how adaptations influence how Tolkien fans remember Tolkien and his works, but her research displays that the ownership of Tolkien that fans claim plays a vital role in why Tolkien memes along with other internet activity is circulated at such a high volume. Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green specifically deal with expansively distributed content in their book *Spreadable Media*. They refer to this phenomenon as *spreadability*. They say, "Spreadability assumes a world where mass content is continually repositioned as it enters niche communities...As material spreads, it gets remade: either literally, through various forms of sampling and remixing, or figuratively, via its insertion into ongoing conversations and across various platforms."[25] Jenkins, Ford, and Green have meticulously mapped out the terrain of spreadable media among content consumers and fan communities. Lukić's research is a trailblazer for the way of future investigations into Tolkien fandom. We are in need of more perspectives regarding Tolkien fandom. This paper has been an attempt to present another perspective in this tradition.

I have laid out an argument that Tolkien memes can be classified as adaptations of Tolkien and that Tolkien memes as adaptations are a way for fans to escape the catastrophes of the world, and that people seek consolation in a shared laugh amongst those of like mind—or, at

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[24] Lukić. *Adapting Tolkien: Proceedings of The Tolkien Society Seminar 2020*. 114-115. Italics original.
[25] Jenkins, Henry, et al. *Spreadable Media*. 27.

least of like interest. And that this approach by fans to Tolkien memes partly leads to why

Tolkien memes spread in huge quantities to fans via the internet.