

“The Sweet and the Bitter”:  
Death and Dying in J.R.R. Tolkien’s  
*The Lord of the Rings*

by

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PREVIEW

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## Preface

Tolkien scholarship has made significant advances in the last ten years, due in no small part to the contributions of scholars who were courageous enough to champion the literature that they loved even in the face of a certain established resistance. Classes on Tolkien now abound in American universities, appearing in the syllabuses of such prestigious universities as Duke, Rice, and Purdue; academic journals have devoted whole issues to scholarly examination of Tolkien's works, and the recent advent of *Tolkien Studies* puts the Professor in the same professional realm as other major British authors with eponymous journals devoted to the study of their lives and works. Tolkien has finally come into his own.

It has been my privilege and delight to participate in the growing scholarly interest in Tolkien's work. However, I never imagined that I would be writing about death and dying. The idea came about, as such ideas often do, from a chance observation, made by Dr. Tom Shippey, that no one has ever made a detailed study of all the ways people die. He was speaking specifically of characters in the Old Norse sagas, but it occurred to me that, perhaps, such a study could be done for the characters of *The Lord of the Rings*. What seemed to me then a relatively straightforward undertaking turned out to be instead a rich and intricate field of study, filled with not only moments of dying and attitudes toward death, but with the importance of memory, the celebration of heroism and sacrifice, and above all the enduring power of hope.

Because there are now so many editions of *The Lord of the Rings* available, I have followed the convention proposed by *Tolkien Studies*: volume, book, chapter, page. This

formatting is intended to make it relatively easy for other scholars to find relevant quotes in their own copies. The edition I used for this project is in fact a single volume (exactly the way Tolkien wished it to be), so I have cited any quotes taken from the Preface, Introduction, or Appendices as “*LR*.”

In keeping with Tolkien’s precedent, I shall use the term “Men” when referring to the human race in the context of *The Lord of the Rings*. At all other times, I shall use the more inclusive “humans,” “humankind,” or “humanity.” It should be noted, however, that Tolkien’s use of the term “Men” is not automatically exclusive; my sense is that it is a deliberate echo of the Old English word *mann* (d & a.pl. *men*), which *could* include women (though it rarely did). One possibility is that Tolkien sensed that behind the Old English word there must have been a similar asterisk-word which included the entire human race. But he was certainly aware of the implications of the word: otherwise Éowyn’s rejoinder to the Witch-king’s statement would make no sense.

A few other notes on terminology are necessary. First, I have used the term “cosmology” to indicate Tolkien’s conception of how the universe works, “mythology” to denote the evolving corpus of stories themselves, and “legendarium” to indicate the entire collection of written works, including *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Silmarillion*, and materials now available through *The Histories of Middle-earth* series edited by Christopher Tolkien. The *Silmarillion* (not italicized) is sometimes used as a synonym for the legendarium; *The Silmarillion* indicates the collection of stories published under that title. Tolkien’s legendarium is nothing if not complex; in attempting to create an entire mythology for his Middle-earth, he necessarily created a history for it

as well, and that history is divided into four ages. In keeping with established precedent, I adhere to the standard abbreviations: “F.A.” refers to the First Age, “S.A.” to the Second, and “T.A.” to the Third. The Fourth Age is written out as such.

Tolkien was a medievalist by training and by inclination, and it is now widely recognized how much his professional vocation influenced his private avocation. His profound knowledge of Old English and Old Norse naturally found its way into his writing, and it is sometimes necessary to offer those texts as a means of enhancing a modern reader’s understanding of the text. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own, and any mistakes therein are likewise my own. Since my interest is primarily upon Tolkien’s interpretation of these texts rather than their precise literal translations, I leave it to more able scholars than I to wrestle with the complexities of those poems and stories.

One of the great advantages of writing a dissertation about death is that it highlights for the author the things she values most about life. My study of Tolkien’s theme has once again emphasized for me the deep and abiding belief that what matters most in life is our interconnectedness with other people. This project owes its success to a variety of people who have helped and supported me during the past two years (or sometimes even longer). The community of Tolkien scholars welcomed me with open arms and took me seriously, even when it seemed as if no one else did. They probably did not even know they were doing it, but those few words of kindness and faith meant more to me than I will ever be able to express. For that reason, I wish to thank Drs. Verlyn Flieger, Marjorie Burns, Lynn Forest-Hill, Patricia Reynolds, and Jane Chance,

and especially Douglas A. Anderson.

Also deserving of a special mention is Dr. Mary Catherine Bodden, who took an interest in this project in its early stages and has been a valuable mentor and friend throughout my years at Marquette. She offered encouragement and support at critical moments, took me out for coffee, and laughed at my jokes. Writing this project required hours upon hours spent in the Marquette University Archives, during which time I was aided and supported by Susan Stawicki-Vrobel and Matt Blessing. I also owe a great deal to my beta-readers, Lisa DePauw Fischer, Kerry Olivetti, and Carol Klees-Starks. These women were unfailingly supportive, laughed with me, cried with me, listened to me rant, and shared my frustrations and triumphs. Similarly, my parents, Peg and Dick Amendt, and my brother, Paul, never failed to listen when I needed a sounding-board, and they steadfastly believed in me throughout this process.

I would also like to thank my dissertation committee. I am especially honored because Dr. Edwin Block and Dr. Albert Rivero edit the work of authors far superior to myself, and yet they treated my work as if it were worthy of equal attention. They read my drafts with painstaking attention to detail and offered wonderful feedback, all with an eye toward making this dissertation the best it could possibly be. I am grateful for their humor, insight, and dedication. As for Dr. Diane Hoeveler, I hardly know where to begin. Despite facing her own very difficult challenges over the past few years, Dr. Hoeveler has been a constant source of strength and encouragement, always providing just the right blend of support and kicks in the pants to keep me going. She patiently answered millions of questions, laughed at my foibles, celebrated my victories, put up with my

bleaker moments, and above all believed in me. She has been instructor, mentor, advisor, champion, counselor, hero and friend. To say “thank you” seems woefully inadequate, rather like bringing a cup of water to a forest fire. But it is the best I can do. Thank you, Diane.

And finally, I come last to those who are first in my thoughts: my wonderful family. My husband, John, gave up his practice in Amery so that I could follow my dream. During these years, he’s learned to shop for groceries, do the laundry, and care for a puppy. My wonderful children, Andrew, Alexandra, and Ariana, believed in me, took on extra chores, tried very hard to minimize the in-fighting, and learned to sort their own laundry. You are the greatest. I am profoundly grateful that I have been given the opportunity to do what I love, but it wouldn’t mean anything without you four. *Lux et veritas et comedia.*

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PREVIEW

## Chapter One

### “Sufficient Tragedy”

On December 28, 2004, Staff Sergeant Dustin C. Holcomb wrote a letter honoring his commanding officer, Captain William W. Jacobsen. The letter began not with a commendation of his officer’s rapport with his men, nor of his bravery, nor even of Jacobsen’s status as a hero, though all those qualities are mentioned later. Instead, he began with a simple reminiscence of the moment of recognition which initiates friendship: their shared appreciation of J.R.R. Tolkien’s epic fantasy *The Lord of the Rings*:

He was inspecting the barracks before signing for the building. He came to my room and noticed that I was a fan of *The Lord Of The Rings*. He did his inspection quickly and then started talking about the movies and books. We visited for 10-15 minutes, during which I told him that I was disappointed that we were supposed to leave for Iraq before the extended edition of the third movie was available. He told me that he had asked his wife to send it to him as soon as she could and that when he got it we would have a movie marathon. (Strykernews.com)

The marathon never happened. Captain Jacobsen was killed by a suicide bomber just before Christmas.

Like many soldiers currently deployed in Afghanistan and Iraq, SSG Holcomb and Cpt. Jacobsen carried the text of *The Lord of the Rings* with them when they went to war. Though at least one soldier, Specialist Robert A Wise, described the book as “a workout both mentally and physically” (4.11), copies of the text have been reported at battlefields and bunkers, patrols and palaces, fronts and foxholes. At just under 1,140 pages, the paperback edition weighs in at 2 lbs, 7.5 ozs, added to the eighty pounds of equipment the average soldier already carries. These soldiers are caught in the midst of a

very real conflict, daily confronted with horror, suffering and death. Yet they choose to read, repeatedly, a fairy-story<sup>1</sup> built upon not weapons of mass destruction or high-tech weaponry or even every day life, but upon an imagined past where the most advanced weapons are swords, the cavalry really is a cavalry and not a cavalcade of tanks, and the old heroic code is a lived experience. Or perhaps, it is not so surprising after all. For all its fantastic trappings, *The Lord of the Rings* is essentially about the very things that these soldiers experience: friendship, loyalty to a cause higher than oneself, a belief that some ideals are worth risking one's very life for, and above all, the inevitability and inexorability of death.

In 1956, J.R.R. Tolkien wrote that upon rereading *The Lord of the Rings* he realized that “the real theme... is about something much more permanent and difficult: Death and Immortality” (*Letters* 246). Two years later, he affirmed the same position: “It is mainly concerned with Death, and Immortality; and the ‘escapes’: serial longevity, and hoarding memory” (*Letters* 284). While W.A. Senior and Charles W. Nelson have both argued that given “the depth and complexity of the Tolkien canon,” there might be “various other central concerns” besides those that they chose to focus on, Senior himself says that the concept that subsumes the others is “the sustained and grieved sense of loss, of which death is but one form” (173). In a sense, Senior is right that loss is a major theme of *The Lord of the Rings*, and death certainly can be viewed as but one aspect of

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*The Lord of the Rings* was and remains fairly difficult to classify; it has been called, by various critics, a novel, a romance, a fantasy, an epic, and a fairy-tale. I have chosen to apply Tolkien's own term, “fairy story,” which he rather ambiguously defines as a story “that deals with ‘marvels’ but which “cannot tolerate any frame or machinery suggesting that the whole story in which they occur is a figment of illusion” (“On Fairy-Stories,” *MC* 117).

this theme. Yet for the characters and readers of *The Lord of the Rings*, death goes far beyond the inevitable sense of loss that accompanies it; it is a real and continual possibility lying at the end of all their actions, the inevitable outcome that each of them must face, the fear they must overcome. Though the philosophy of death certainly merits consideration, much more remains to be said about the way individual characters face or fear death, and still more about the consequences of those deaths for the living. The ways in which the peoples of Middle-earth honor their dead, especially the dead who died in particular ways, reveal a great deal about their morality, their worldviews, and their values – much as it does in our own.

Though Tolkien knew he was writing what he called “fairy-stories,” he believed that the true function of any literature was to shed light and meaning on everyday life. He was interested in what he called the “applicability” of his work, which he located in “the varied applicability to the thought and experience of the readers” (*LR xvii*). Such a viewpoint is remarkably similar to one outlined by Kenneth Burke in an essay called “Literature as Equipment for Living.” In it, he argues that much of our daily lives is governed by proverbs, which he breaks into five categories: consolation, vengeance, admonition, exhortation, or foretelling; each type offers various strategies for dealing with a “typical, recurrent situation” (593) encountered in daily life. By extension, Burke argues that literature can be considered as “proverbs writ large” and that “observation from this perspective should apply beyond literature to life in general” (594-5). Both men thus express some interest in the way works of literature find expression in the real lives of readers. Given this mutuality of interest, it seems no infringement on either author to conclude that *The Lord of the Rings*, like any other work of literature, can be

seen to function on the societal level as a proverb of consolation.

The evidence provided by the soldier readers seems to confirm this assessment. For instance, Army Chaplain RJ Gore used *The Lord of the Rings* extensively during his tour of duty in Iraq, both in his sermons and on his weblog. In a Prayer Breakfast for the 84<sup>th</sup> Combat Engineers, he confesses, “I have read the Trilogy four times since I arrived in the theater, and the only reason I haven’t read it more is that about five months ago I decided to read a bit more in my field. And my field is not English Literature.” In a sermon delivered on 17 Oct. 2004, he formed an explicit connection between the book and its characters and the men and women in his care:

Many of you have seen *The Lord of the Rings* movies, or read the books. Perhaps you feel a bit like Frodo when he found out that the Ring he received from his uncle, Bilbo, was the Ring of Power that was being sought once again by the Dark Lord himself. ‘I wish it need not have happened in my time,’ said Frodo. ‘So do I,’ said Gandalf, ‘and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us.’

(www.xanga.com)

Gore goes on to acknowledge the enormous sacrifice required of the men and women in the field, the spiritual as well as the physical demands they face, and the temptation to despair and inaction. Frodo, Gandalf, and the others face “authentic struggles that parallel many of the struggles that you have experienced,” Gore told his congregants. Clearly, the soldiers identify with the struggles of Frodo and Sam, and see in the hobbits’ travails and hardships something of their own. *The Lord of the Rings* is thus a balm for many things, including deprivation and sacrifice. But if we accept Tolkien’s own assertion of the real theme, the soldiers’ affinity for the book becomes all the more meaningful and poignant. The real battles endured by soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan, and those portrayed in *The Lord of the Rings*, affirm that all deaths are meaningful and

significant. Anyone who dies so that others might live free dies like a hero. *The Lord of the Rings*, then, speaks powerfully as a proverb of consolation for the inevitability of death itself.

Though Tolkien is often accused of being too soft on his characters—Edwin Muir, in fact, said “There are only one or two minor casualties” (qtd. Shippey 154)—more sensitive readers quickly discern that Muir was mistaken<sup>2</sup>. At least fifty named characters die during the course of events in *The Lord of the Rings*, including several principal characters. Thousands more perish in the battles at Helm’s Deep, Pelennor Fields, and before the Morannon. Each battle ends with anguish and the need to bury the dead; no one emerges unscathed by grief. The story’s chief protagonists, Frodo and Sam, witness a number of deaths of profound personal impact, ranging from Gandalf’s self-sacrifice in the caverns of Moria to a nameless soldier’s death in Ithilien to Gollum’s final plunge into the abyss. Other characters watch friends and family die in scores around them. And the losses are not limited to physical beings. As Tom Shippey puts it, “its casualties include, besides Théoden and Boromir, beauty, Lothlórien, Middle-earth and even Gollum. Furthermore, the characters are aware of their losses all the time, and bear a burden of regret” (*Road* 160). And still, the characters press on, continuing to endure despite the overwhelming odds against them, even though they know their deeds and bravery will receive little thanks at home, even though they know their own lives are at risk, even though they know that death may be their only reward.

In Tolkien’s view, this quality was the legacy of the Germanic tribes who populated Northern Europe, whose literature Tolkien devoted his professional life to

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<sup>2</sup>Originally in “Oo, Those Awful Orcs.” *Nation* 14 April (1956): 312-314.

understanding. Tolkien's love of ancient cultures, particularly those of the Anglo-Saxons and the Norse, is well documented, and much of Tolkien's ideology arises directly from his long engagement with the literature of these old cultures. For Tolkien, vocation and avocation were inextricable; he found that his creative impulse gave impetus to his scholarly life, and the material he studied as a scholar found its way into the mythology he so painstakingly created. He drew on his extensive knowledge of literature, folklore, old legends, and fairy-tales to create a believable Secondary World that is, to informed readers, recognizably our own. Though *The Lord of the Rings* is undoubtedly a modern work, much of it embodies Tolkien's love and longing for the Middle Ages, and his mythology is deeply rooted in the lore and literature of Northern Europe. He used a wide variety of medieval themes and ideas in his texts, ranging from weapons and armor to place-names and literary structures. And in particular, he used the medieval modes of heroic death to explore the significance of death itself.

Since the art of the pen did not reach Northern Europe until the arrival of Christian missionaries, there are very few pre-Christian records, but the Christians who recorded the old stories seem to have taken care to preserve the culture of their ancestors as they understood it. By the time such stories were written down, however, much of their original meaning had been lost forever, and other stories existed only in fragments, hints or allusions. However, we are fortunate that "many monks rejoiced in the old stories and poems, and wished to preserve them" (Davidson 15). With care and patience, therefore, the beliefs of these ancient peoples can be extracted and studied.

What they seem to reveal is a culture of remarkable sophistication and subtlety, capable of appalling cruelty, certainly, but also of laughter and a love of beauty. Though

the Vikings in particular exist in the popular imagination as brutes and plunderers, scholars have long known that their cultures were considerably more complex than that.

Among the more admirable traits of the Anglo-Saxons and their Nordic cousins were:

courage, vigour, and enthusiasm, an intense loyalty to kindred and leaders, and a keen appreciation of fair dealings between men. They had unusual respect for their women-folk. . . . They were great individualists. . . and resented any attempt to curb their freedom of action. Nevertheless they were capable of considerable self-discipline, and could accept adversity cheerfully, without whining or self-pity. A man who was prepared to die for what seemed to him important was held in honor, whether friend or

enemy, and won even greater admiration if he could die with a jest on his lips.

(Davidson, *Gods and Myths* 10)

Anglo-Saxon and Old Norse were, of course, distinct cultures and languages, but there is no reason to suppose that they were isolated from each other. The conversation recorded in *The Battle of Maldon*, for instance, shows Byrhtnoth and the Viking messenger having no difficulty understanding each other. The great Old English poem, *Beowulf*, is about a Swedish hero. Several Old English charms seem to draw on Norse fertility gods. Archaeological evidence confirms interaction between the two peoples; the boar-image, for instance, seems to have been a jointly recognized symbol of protection, and certain Scandinavian fertility gods seem to have had cults on English soil (Davidson, *Gods and Myths* 113).

As a philologist, Tolkien was unusually aware of the difficulties involved in understanding the past. But he was fascinated, both by training and inclination, with the idea that behind the recorded stories were hints of other stories, once well known but now largely lost to history. In a sense, much of the mythology of Middle-earth is rooted in Tolkien's desire to reconstruct stories now forever lost. The character of Eärendil, for instance, is one of the oldest members of Tolkien's mythology. His name comes from the

enigmatic opening lines of the Old English poem *Christ I*:

*Eala earendel,            engla beorhtast,  
ofer middangeard        monnum sended...*

[Hail, earendel, brightest of angels, sent to men above Middle-earth...]

But who or what was “earendel”? Tolkien eventually decided he was a sailor who reached the shores of Elvenhome and now sailed his great ship through the heavens with a Silmaril bound to his brow – a beautiful story recounted more fully in *The Silmarillion*, but alluded to only briefly in *The Lord of the Rings*. Other songs and stories arose out of similar discrepancies, and those too linger in the background of Tolkien’s fiction.

Yet for all his longing for the Middle Ages, Tolkien was a product of his time. He lived and wrote in the twentieth century and was subject to its pressures and interpretations, and his views of death and dying were undoubtedly shaped by personal experience. Tolkien himself remained deeply skeptical of any attempt to link biography with creativity, not because biography was irrelevant, but because “the ways in which a story-germ uses the soil of experience are extremely complex, and attempts to define the process are at best guesses from evidence that is inadequate and ambiguous” (xvii). Nevertheless, he concedes that an author’s experience necessarily helps shape the story, and if it would be too much to draw precise correlations, it would be shortsighted to omit them altogether.

Tolkien experienced his first major loss when he was just a child of four. While visiting family in England with his mother and younger brother, his father Arthur, who had remained behind in Blomfonstein, South Africa, died. Though Tolkien longed to return to Africa all his life, he never saw his father’s grave. Tragedy struck again eight

years later, when Tolkien's mother, Mabel, died from complications due to diabetes. She had been the major focus of Tolkien's young life; she was her sons' first teacher and principal mentor, encouraging young Ronald's gift for languages and providing a loving home for her sons. Her death affected Tolkien deeply; not only did it have a "cementing effect" on his love for languages, but it filled him with "a deep sense of impending loss"(Carpenter 39).

For all that, Tolkien insisted that his childhood was not unhappy. He had his guardian, the jovial and affectionate, if unimaginative, Father Francis Morgan. He had his brother, Hilary. In his teenage years, he had his secret romance with the lovely young Edith Bratt, an orphan like himself who took lodgings in the same house. And above all, he had the companionship of four young men who shared his interest in language and writing: Christopher Wiseman, Vincent Trought<sup>3</sup>, Rob Gilson and G.B. Smith. Together, they formed an informal society that called itself the Tea Club and Barrovian Society, or T.C.B.S., the prototype of similar groups Tolkien was to recreate later in life. The tight-knit group maintained contact even when separated; Tolkien and Smith went to Oxford and the other two to Cambridge, but they continued to meet when possible and to exchange and critique each others' poems.

Then came the Great War. Tolkien was a reluctant soldier at best; he was not unpatriotic, but being of a naturally sensitive disposition he had little stomach for bloodshed. Humphrey Carpenter reports that Tolkien was delighted when he found a way that would permit him to remain at Oxford without suffering the slights levied

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<sup>3</sup>

Vincent Trought was the first casualty of the TCBS: he died in 1912 of a lingering illness.

against young men who did not enlist in the first rush of war. Nevertheless, he could not avoid the inevitable and in 1915 he accepted a commission in the 13<sup>th</sup> Lancashire Fusiliers, hoping to be assigned to the same company as his friend Rob. He was not, but being an Oxford graduate he was automatically assigned as an officer. Even in military service, he used his love of language to his best advantage, choosing to become a signaller. In anticipation of his deployment, he and Edith married on 22 March 1916, but their honeymoon was cut short by the War. On 4 June, Tolkien was at last ordered to set off for Folkestone to depart to France. As he reported to Bill Caters in 1966, “One didn't expect to survive, you know. Junior officers were being killed off, a dozen a minute. Parting from my wife then - we were only just married - it was like a death” (23).

For the first three weeks in France, Tolkien was stationed at Étapes. Shortly after arriving in France, however, he was ordered with the rest of his unit to the front lines of the Somme, one of the bloodiest battles of all time.

The Battle of the Somme began on 1 July 1916. At precisely 7:30 a.m., British troops crossed the line and flung themselves at the German defenses:

The planners assumed that these troops—burdened for the assault with 66 pounds of equipment—were too simple and animal to cross the space between the opposing trenches in any way except in full daylight and aligned in rows or ‘waves.’ It was felt that the troops would become confused by more subtle tactics like rushing from cover to cover, or assault-firing, or following close upon a continuous creeping barrage. (Fussell 13)

The result was a slaughter: the British suffered approximately 60,000 casualties the first day, 20,000 of whom lay dead and abandoned in No Man's Land. 30,000 more died the next day. Though rescues were attempted, the numbers were simply too great to be met by the remaining troops. Middlebrook reports that “there were so many seriously hurt

mixed among the dead bodies that, in the darkness, some were even trampled to death or pressed into the mud and choked in the slime” (241). Daytime excursions into No Man’s Land ran the risk of drawing German fire, so most rescues were attempted at night – a dangerous undertaking in the best of circumstances, but doubly dangerous on the Somme: the battle had left the ground pitted and scarred, and pools of slimy water collected in the craters, where the dead stared up with sightless eyes.

Conditions in the trenches were no better. By the time Tolkien’s battalion was sent forward two weeks into the battle, the dead lay everywhere. Corpses were piled like cordwood and rotting bodies littered the field of No Man’s Land. Because there was no place to put so many dead, most of the soldiers were left to rot where they lay; those few who had been retrieved – or died before they could be evacuated – decomposed among their living comrades. A certain Pte G.S. Young, a survivor of the first day of the Somme, reported that “We propped the dead in rows at the back of the trench and sat the wounded on the fire-step and we waited to be relieved” (qtd. Middlebrook 242). The living quickly became accustomed to the “bloated and putrescent dead” (Garth 164) inhabiting the trenches alongside them and the fields around them. In addition to the disconcerting proximity of the dead was the clinging mud and constant threat of enemy bombardment. Prior and Wilson report that all battalions on the front were well within range of the German artillery, so that “only the training area could be said to be truly safe” (205). And, of course, the persistent rains meant that the earthen walls were always about to collapse; femurs and ulnas from decomposed corpses were used to prop up the sagging walls. Death was thus constantly present, both in the physical form and staring eyes of dead comrades and friends and the persistent, imminent threat of a well-

aimed mortar.

For Tolkien, the horror was personal as well as general. His commanding officer was killed just a few days after they reached the front, and Tolkien was promoted to lieutenant. As an officer, one of his duties was to respond to the desperate letters of families seeking some word of their loved ones; a grim task in the best of circumstances, but worse at the Somme because so many soldiers simply disappeared and their bodies were never recovered. Even those that were retrieved were seldom identified unless they chanced to be discovered by their own units; there were far too many dead to worry about such technicalities. By the time the fighting ended, nearly one million soldiers on all sides had been lost; though nearly a century has passed, bones are still regularly unearthed by French farmers. So Tolkien must often have been faced with telling families the worst of all possible news: that their loved one was simply, and in every sense of the word, lost. John Garth reports that this was one of the “hardest tasks a sensitive officer faced” and that, instead of discarding the letters as soon as they were answered, Tolkien seems to have kept most of them (193).

In all, Tolkien spent nearly five months at the front before he contracted trench fever and was invalided home. The sickness probably saved his life; though the Battle of the Somme ended shortly after Tolkien returned to England, Tolkien’s own battalion was quickly moved to Ypres. Their fate was grim:

...on 27 May they bore the brunt of one of the fiercest bombardments of the war, and the Germans’ third 1918 offensive. After two days of fighting and falling back, they turned at bay to cover the retreat of the 74<sup>th</sup> Brigade. Nothing was heard of them again.

(Garth 247)

Of the nearly 1,000 men who had originally comprised the 13<sup>th</sup> Lancaster Fusiliers, only

seventeen survived: Tolkien himself and sixteen others who had been kept in reserve. The battalion was officially disbanded in August, 1918, never to be reformed.

Clearly, then, death was more than a philosophical problem for Tolkien; it was an intensely felt personal experience, prolonged and painful. He had endured the deaths of many men he knew and admired, but probably none was more painful than the near-extirpation of the T.C.B.S. Two of the four remaining members would not survive the War. Rob Gilson was killed the first day of fighting on the Somme. Tolkien's own reaction is not recorded, but something of the stark despair he must have felt is echoed in the letter in which G.B. Smith broke the news: "I am safe but what does that matter?" he wrote. "...O my dear John Ronald, what are we going to do?"(qtd. Carpenter 92). Smith himself was killed just after the Battle of the Somme ended, from gas gangrene due to infected wounds. He died on 3 December 1916, while Tolkien was convalescing at Great Haywood. Tolkien, always a private man, said little of the loss of two of his closest friends during the War, but their deaths remained with him all his life. In the preface to the second edition of *The Lord of the Rings*, he wrote, "By 1918, all my friends were dead" (xvii).

In a very real sense, Tolkien owes his mythology to his lost friends. Shortly before his own death, Smith, who had aspired to be a poet, posted a letter to Tolkien defining what he thought the TCBS represented and which urged him to continue writing at all possible costs:

My chief consolation is that if I am scuppered tonight . . . there will still be left a member of the great T.C.B.S. to voice what I dreamed and what we all agreed upon. For the death of one of its members cannot, I am determined, dissolve the T.C.B.S. Death can make us loathsome and helpless as individuals, but it cannot put an end to the immortal four! . . . May God bless you, my dear John Ronald,

and may you say the things I have tried to say long after I am not there to say them, if such be my lot. (qtd. Carpenter 94)

Gilson and Smith, of course, had both been reading Tolkien's faërie-inspired poetry for years, offering advice, criticism, and encouragement. But it was after their deaths that his mythology really began to take shape. During his convalescence at Great Haywood, which must have been where he learned of Smith's death, he set aside his poetry and began writing "The Book of Lost Tales." Though *The Lord of the Rings* was still well into the future, the beginnings of the vast mythology that lay at the heart of Middle-earth had been formed.

Like those of many of his contemporaries, Tolkien's stories were rooted in war, grief, and death. Unlike most other World War I writers, however, he seems never to have embraced the irony or cynicism that marks so many traumatized authors. Many survivors of the Great War, and veterans of the War after that, turned to fantasy as a means of dealing with their experiences; many more treated War itself with profound irony. Tolkien did not. He had seen too many good men die to dismiss their loss as a mere literary trope. Though he can and does use irony in *The Lord of the Rings*, it is used either as a plot device or to show character, never as the prevailing mode (Croft 30). For him, to dishonor the experience of war was to dishonor those who had experienced the war: an utterly unacceptable position. Instead, he saw something noble and honorable in the notion of risking and sacrificing one's life for an ideal, to face death itself for the sake of those whose words of thanks would never be heard. Small wonder, then, that he turned his back on most of the forms of contemporary literature, with its cynicism and irony and profound need to rationalize.

Tolkien found in the literature of the past a mode of honoring the sacrifices made by soldiers of the present. For Tolkien, the literatures written in languages no longer spoken had always been a source of mystery and fascination; now they became a source of inspiration as well. He had shared his love of language with his friends; in attempting to find a way to honor their memory, Tolkien naturally turned to the literature that had always fascinated him, and found therein the seeds of Middle-earth.

Even by 1918, Tolkien had a long familiarity with the literature of the Anglo-Saxons; he had studied Old English since his teacher had first given him a text of Anglo-Saxon poems when he was sixteen. After the War, Tolkien returned to Oxford to work on the *New English Dictionary* (as the *Oxford English Dictionary* was then called), and then accepted a position as Reader of English Language at the University of Leeds. He reached the rank of Professor by the age of thirty-two, “remarkably young by the standards of British universities” (Carpenter 114). With his friend, E.V. Gordon, he began work on a translation of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, in which Tolkien sought to preserve the alliterative cadences of the dialect of the North West Midlands. In 1925, however, he returned to Oxford, this time as Rawlinson and Bosworth Professor of Anglo-Saxon, a position he held until 1945, when he was elected Merton Professor of English Language and Literature. During that time, he tutored a number of graduate students who later made major contributions in their own right – Bruce Mitchell and W.H. Auden number among them – and regularly delivered lectures to undergraduates. Though he was expected to deliver only thirty-six lectures a year, he did not consider that sufficient to cover the subject, and in the second year of his tenure at Oxford he delivered one hundred and thirty-six (Carpenter 140).