

U N D E R S T A N D I N G

MIDDLE
EARTH

ESSAYS ON TOLKIEN'S MIDDLE-EARTH

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**SECTION I:
THE INHABITANTS
OF MIDDLE-EARTH**

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Chapter 1: Do Elves dream of eclectic sleep?

J.R.R. Tolkien devoted a lot of time and thought to determining what it means to be an Elf. He described the Elves (*The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, No. 144) as representing “Men with greatly enhanced aesthetic and creative faculties, greater beauty and longer life, and nobility -- the Elder Children, doomed to fade before the Followers (Men), and to live ultimately only by the thin line of their blood that was mingled with that of Men, among whom it was the only real claim to ‘nobility’.”

But what does all that mean? Tolkien mentioned as an aside that the Elves represent “beauty and grace of life and artefact” (Ibid., No.73). Much later, Tolkien wrote: “Elves and Men are represented as biologically akin in this ‘history’, because Elves are certain aspects of Men and their talents and desires” and “they have certain freedoms and powers we should like to have, and the beauty and peril and sorrow of the possession of these things is exhibited in them....” (Ibid., No. 153)

Sorrow and regret are commonly associated with the Elvish nature. The Elves acknowledge these feelings as easily as we acknowledge hope and desire. When Frodo meets with Gildor Inglorion in the Shire, Gildor says, “The Elves have their own labours and their own sorrows, and they are little concerned with the ways of hobbits, or of any other creatures upon earth.” That is a very curious thing to say, for it contrasts deeply with the picture that others paint of the Elves, such as Gandalf and Treebeard.

Gandalf tells Frodo that some of Sauron’s greatest foes remain in Rivendell, the Elven-wise, lords of the Eldar from beyond the Sea. When other Elves have fled from Middle-earth, and while some are still only lingering as Gildor’s folk do, a few of the Eldar hold steadfast to the purpose of opposing Sauron.

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And Treebeard tells Merry and Pippin that it was the Elves who first woke up the trees, and taught them to speak. The Elves were once curious about everything, and they wanted to know as much as they could about the world in which they themselves had awakened.

In an interview he made for a documentary of his father's life, Christopher Tolkien notes that the Elves are almost consumed with regret. By the time of the War of the Ring, the Elves no longer look forward. Rather, they look back. And in looking back, they bring about their own eclipse or twilight, or welcome it. For it is indeed their fate to fade, to vanish from the world and the light, leaving all that they had achieved to the merciless hands of Men.

But how do the Elves become so embroiled in regret? What is the difference between the Elven nature and the Mannish nature which leads the Elven races to dwell in sorrow?

On numerous occasions, Tolkien wrote or stressed that the Elves are immortal within the timeframe of Arda's existence, but that they are not eternal. It is their nature to exist as living beings for the duration of Time itself, as measured by "the life of Arda". And yet, Arda has not existed from the beginning of Time, and is not necessarily fated to exist until the end of Time. Arda may end and Ea, the rest of the universe, may continue. But *Eä* is identified with Time and Space. So, if the Elves endure until Arda ends, does Arda end with Time, and Time with Arda, or does Time continue onward to some other end?

The Elves did not know the answer to this question. Nor could they perceive or foresee any ultimate fate for themselves beyond the inevitable conclusion of their existence. In a note attached to "Athrabeth Finrod ah Andreth" (the Debate of Finrod and Andreth), Tolkien stipulated that "Elvish 'immortality' is bounded within a part of Time (which [Finrod] would call the History of Arda), and is therefore strictly to be called rather 'serial longevity', the utmost limit of which is the length of the existence of Arda....A corollary of this is that the Elvish *fëa* is also limited to the Time of Arda, or at least held within it and unable to leave it, while it lasts."

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In elucidating further upon this point, Tolkien said that “beyond the ‘End of Arda’ Elvish thought could not penetrate, and they were without any specific instruction....It seemed clear to them that their [bodies] must then end, and therefore any kind of re-incarnation would be impossible....All the Elves would then ‘die’ at the End of Arda. What this would mean they did not know. They said therefore that Men had a shadow behind them, but the Elves had a shadow before them.”

Now, the shadow behind Men was the shadow of their Fall, whereas the shadow before Elves was the shadow of their End. Men, in the perception of the Elves, were granted release from life, from the bondage to the world which to the Elves became a great burden. It was confusing for the Elves to learn that Men should so want to remain in the world, whereas the Elves wanted to be assured they would continue after the world. It was rather like the crew of a sinking ship watching in amazement as passengers leaped from the lifeboats back aboard the larger vessel.

The Elvish longing for release was not necessarily a part of their natural state. By the time the Valar discovered the Elves living in Cuiviënen, they had already been harassed by Melkor and his servants. Some of the Elves had vanished, and since Mandos himself apparently knew nothing of their fate, they must have been completely entrapped by Melkor in Utumno or some other dread prison. The Elves thus lost the innocence with which they had awakened before they even met the Valar.

The loss of innocence was the first step on a long road toward sorrow, a road filled with grief and loss. But sorrow and grief were not the same thing for the Elves. Grief apparently passed, whereas sorrow did not. A grief might become extended and turn into sorrow, but the greater part of Elvendom seems simply to have grown into sorrow. Overcoming grief was something they did time and again.

For example, Tolkien explains in Letter 212 (actually a draft for a continuation of Letter 211 which was never sent) that “in the Elvish legends there is record of a strange case of an Elf (Miriel mother of

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Fëanor) that tried to *die*, which had disastrous results, leading to the ‘Fall’ of the High-elves....Miriel wished to abandon being....”

Míriel’s death was so unusual the Eldar had to devise a new word to describe it. They had experienced physical death before, whereby some members of their race had succumbed to grief or violence and their bodies died. But the Eldar learned in Aman that their spirits were intended to pass to the Halls of Mandos and, after a time of reflection in which they would be healed of their griefs, they could and should be re-admitted to the ranks of the living.

Miriel did not wish to live again. She wanted to be dead, truly dead, and to have nothing more to do with the world. Míriel’s choice, or stubbornness, led to an important debate among the Valar, and to the establishment of a law which altered the natural course of Elven fate. The Valar were empowered by Ilúvatar to mandate the permanent death of an Elf within the life of Arda. That is, they could refuse to let an Elf live again.

Miriel refused to accept life, even though she was all but ordered to live again. The Valar therefore reluctantly consigned her to the Halls of Mandos until the end of the Time of Arda. Finwë, her husband, thus became free to seek another wife. But after Finwë was murdered by Melkor, his spirit communed with Míriel’s spirit in Mandos (and that was apparently a rare occurrence). When Miriel learned of all that had befallen her people, she regretted her decision to stay dead, and appealed to the Valar. Finwë now agreed to remain dead, because he could not return to life and have two wives (a state which the Elves regarded as unnatural).

Míriel’s decision was made at least in part as a result of regret. And though permitted to live again, she elected not to live among her people, the Elves, but instead was admitted to the service of one of the Valar. Miriel from that time forward documented the deeds of her people. Rather than doing new things and seeking new knowledge, she became engrossed in recording the events of her people’s history. Miriel was therefore the first Elf (among the Eldar, at least) to

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succumb to regret, choosing to live again out of regret, and perhaps devoting her life to remembering that regret.

Some of the rebellious Noldor gave in to regret -- a healthy regret -- before going too far along the road to Exile. These Noldor, led by Finarfin, returned to their city of Tirion and were forgiven their part in the rebellion by the Valar. But the majority of the Noldor continued on their path with resolution, perhaps mostly because of Fëanor's determination.

In Middle-earth most of the Noldor tried to look forward despite the hopelessness of their war against Melkor. But Turgon, who was inspired to build the greatest city of all, seems to have become mired in regret. Gondolin was modeled after Tirion, and Turgon's people seldom went to war. Ulmo warned him that the time would come when Turgon would have to give up everything to save his people, but when that day came Turgon proved unwilling to make the sacrifice. Rather than lead his people safely out of Gondolin, Turgon trusted to the city's natural defenses. He wanted to preserve his way of life at the risk of losing his life.

After the fall of Gondolin, the Noldor squandered their last resources in the bitter conflicts over possession of the Silmaril which Beren and Lúthien had recovered from Melkor. The Sons of Fëanor, unable to recover the other jewels, destroyed first Doriath and then Arvernien in fruitless attempts to seize the gem. They no longer dreamed of avenging their father and grand-father's deaths, nor of recovering the Silmarils. Instead, they merely focused on what they felt was theirs by right, failing to realize they had lost that right through their misdeeds. Their minds were trapped in a past which could not be recovered.

After the First Age, the Noldor began anew. Gil-galad established a kingdom in what had been Ossiriand, and some of the Noldor migrated eastward to establish Eregion. But as the centuries rolled by, the Elves succumbed to worries about fading. The Noldor of Eregion decided to do something about the fading when Sauron (in disguise) offered them an opportunity to stop or delay the effects of Time.

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Tolkien said of this second “Fall” that the “Elves wanted to have their cake and eat it”. They wanted to remain in Middle-earth for the rest of Time, rather than sail over Sea to avoid a fate worse than death. Instead of crafting new beauty, the Elves turned their thoughts to preserving the old beauty of Middle-earth, and of healing its hurts. So they created the Rings of Power. But even after the Elves discovered Sauron’s treachery, they could not bring themselves to destroy the Rings, which Sauron obviously intended to use against them.

The regret which Gildor alluded to undoubtedly began in the conflict between the Elves and Sauron in the Second Age. For they not only lost many Rings of Power, they lost most of the lands they were trying to hold on to. Elvish homes with all their mementos and special artifacts must have gone up in smoke across hundreds of miles. The Elves would have preserved nothing of their former world -- in which they were a superior caste, as Tolkien put it.

Regret should not have consumed the Elves merely for what they had lost, but also for what they had done. Betrayal and loss go hand in hand throughout Elvish history, and their betrayal of the natural order in the Second Age ensured that they would lose nearly everything. The Elves who survived the war -- especially those who did not know anything at all about the Rings of Power -- must surely have questioned what had brought on the conflict.

In the late Third Age, Frodo teased Gildor by repeating a popular saying among Hobbits concerning Elves: go not to the Elves for advice, for they will tell you both yes and no. And Gildor laughed, pointing out that “Elves seldom give out unguarded advice, for advice is a dangerous gift, even from the wise to the wise, and all courses may run ill.” All the historic choices made by the Elves, perhaps even after grave deliberation by their wisest leaders, do seem to have led them down paths filled with grief and suffering. So, at the very least, in the Third Age the Elves appear to have become reluctant to give out advice.

In the Third Age, the Eldar concentrated on preserving their dominions, but they gave no thought to expanding their power and

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influence. As Men grew more numerous, the Elves withdrew into enclaves. In their seclusion, the Elves could only perfect their skills in poetry and music, celebrating the events of their past and the glories of their youth, and looking forward to their return to Valinor. The Elves were not so much looking forward as looking back. Their future became a reactionary movement across the Sea.

Whereas in the Second Age the Eldar had hoped to exercise their art upon all of Middle-earth -- or at least a great portion of it -- in the Third Age they elected to confine their art to small regions protected by the Three Rings of Power they still controlled. The Third Age Elves remembered all the great stories that the First and Second Age Elves had made. They made no new tales to preserve in future ages. Or, as Tolkien put it, they attempted nothing new.

The transition from making the past to remembering the past was undoubtedly a slow one. The Elves did not simply decide in a day that they would seek to accomplish no more. Rather, they must have gradually settled down to enjoy life and celebrate their achievements. But as the world grew dark and lonely, the Elves elected not to expand. For a brief time the Silvan Elves of Lothlórien became the most prominent champions of freedom in the West, but with the departure and subsequent death of Amroth their king, they withdrew into their forest and were seldom heard from again.

All choices made by the Elves were fraught with the gravest peril. Everything they did, everything they touched, was ultimately consumed by the consequences of their actions. They tried to avoid suffering the fate which had been set before them. Instead of destroying the Rings of Power, the Eldar used them in the Third Age. And when the One Ring was finally destroyed, all that the Eldar had achieved in the way of preserving and healing was undone. They could no longer think in terms of building up a future. They only wanted to preserve a past which was ideal for them.

The shadow the Eldar saw upon their horizon must therefore have loomed large over them all toward the end of the Third Age. Sauron's rise and return to Mordor were inevitably a result of the Elves' failure

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to resolve their conflicts in the past. Middle-earth's change in power and structure was just another mark against them. The candle could only burn down so far, and then there would be no more wick. Despite their best efforts to hold back change, they had really failed to prevent its onset. Change ensured that Middle-earth evolved around them; the world continued without the Elves. Time simply dragged the Elves back into the natural course of things once the Rings were out of the way.

And once the Rings of Power were gone, the Elves had no choice but to face their future, which to them seemed like no future. To a mortal Man, the uncertainty of immortality would be an opportunity to make new stories. But to an immortal Elf, the certainty of the end of that immortality meant there was less and less time to celebrate the great stories of the past. Crowding them out with new stories might only deprive the tales of their dutiful audience. Or, worse, living a new tale might bring on more grief and suffering, and so add to that burden of regret which grew heavier year by year.

It was all about choices: the choices they had made, the choices they had to make. The Elves were really burdened by the need to choose, and they wanted to choose both ways. For an Elf, Time in the Third Age was just a means of deferring the ultimate choice. Tolkien implies that many of them chose to remain in Middle-earth and fade, dwelling near the places they had loved in life, remembering only the events most dear to them.

Maybe in the end the only Elves to actually let go of the past were those who finally resolved to leave Middle-earth forever. It was a fate better than death, and one of their own choosing. To be true to their own nature, the Elves understood that they had to make a choice between the certainty of the past with all its known greatness and the uncertainty of the future with all its great unknowns. The trip over Sea was therefore the first step beyond regret and sorrow.