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Dr. Verlyn Flieger's *Tolkien's World of Middle Earth*

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The Challenge: Explain the "inner consistency of reality" as Tolkien employs the phrase in "On Fairy-stories." Write an essay analyzing and evaluating his success in giving Gollum such inner consistency.

In his 1939 essay, "On Fairy-stories," J.R.R. Tolkien defines in a footnote the phrase "inner consistency of reality" as an expression of Sub-creative Art "which commands or induces Secondary Belief." (68) In fantasy stories, this secondary belief is applied to things that are "not to be found in our primary world," but fantasy specifically "is a rational, not an irrational activity." Paraphrasing, fantasy does not need to be identical to our known world, but must be rational and consistent within itself so that the reader or listener can easily believe the story to be understandable on its own terms. The fantasy should neither contradict itself nor jar the reader out of the fantastic setting or characters. Earlier in the essay, Tolkien describes the effect of producing "literary belief:"

'What really happens is that the story-maker proves a successful 'sub-creator.' He makes a Secondary World which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is 'true': it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside.' (60)

Tolkien took the opportunity in *The Hobbit* publication history to create two distinctly different stories for the character Gollum. In the 1937 first edition of *The Hobbit*'s "Riddles in the Dark" chapter, Gollum is an unpleasant and potentially menacing character who nonetheless loses a riddle game gracefully and shows Bilbo the way out of the tunnels. The second edition, published in 1951 after *The Lord of the Rings* was drafted, has quite a different Gollum develop as the chapter progresses and a significantly different ending to Bilbo's episode with the changed Gollum. Gollum and his encounter with Bilbo needed to hit several new narrative and character notes for consistency with the unfolding of the *Lord of the Rings* sequel. This paper explores Gollum's inner consistency of reality as presented in both versions. Is the earlier Gollum more believable within the world of *The Hobbit*, or is it less

successful compared to the more wicked Gollum in the later edition?

Gollum is introduced as a character deep under the Misty Mountains in exactly the same way in the first and later editions. The narrator states, "I don't know where he came from, nor who or what he was. He was Gollum —"[05.012] Gollum is described as dark, sneaky, and quick, a carnivore who catches and feeds on fish and goblins. He lives on a slimy island, utterly alone, and carries in his pockets things such as goblins' teeth, bat-wings, and a stone to sharpen his fangs. Like the trolls in an earlier chapter, Gollum is interested in killing and eating Bilbo. Tolkien includes some humanizing details in the Gollum of both editions — although now alone, he once had friends with whom he played riddles and a grandmother who is mentioned twice during the riddle game. Gollum also knows how to act "quite polite" in the company of an unexpectedly armed visitor. Thus in the material common to both editions, Gollum is not a one-dimensional villain but a complex character with both clearly menacing aspects and a few more sympathetic details. These clues add up to a character that is isolated from and preys upon fellow creatures, but is not necessarily malicious.

Gollum has an odd, hissing voice punctuated with a swallowing gollum noise, and speaks of himself in the plural and as "my precious." The one possibly discordant note in his portrayal as a threatening character is an extra syllable in his plural words: Gollum says "handses," "eggsses," "pocketses," and the wildly sibilant "guesseses," which come across as comical. He also says, "Praps ye sits here and chats with it a bitsy," almost as an English nurse would speak with a small child (120). This may soften the horror of the creature for the young audience, but the juvenile mispronunciation of plurals is jarring and takes some getting used to for adult readers.

[fn: According to the earliest manuscript of the "Riddles in the Dark" chapter, presented in John D. Rateliff's *The History of The Hobbit*, Gollum says "bitsy" and "handses," but uses eggs, pockets, and guesses for the other plurals. [05.018 - 05.131] In the published *Hobbit*, Tolkien amplifies Gollum's speech pattern of using childish plurals, which is not a part of any British dialect of which I am aware.]

The slightly comic dialogue choices disappear while reciting the riddles, however. Gollum's riddles are never light, and

progress to more and more sinister descriptions, such as crying and biting wind; a life-ending and laughter-killing dark; cold-as-death fish; and devouring, ruining, gnawing, grinding time. The increasingly dark portrayals in each riddle-rhyme magnify Gollum's menace to Bilbo.

One key difference between the two portrayals of the Gollum episode is the wager in the riddle game. In both cases, if Bilbo cannot answer a riddle, Gollum eats Bilbo. The stakes are as high as they can be for Bilbo. But in the original reading, Gollum will give Bilbo a present if Gollum loses, and the intended present is the gold ring. In the second edition, Gollum has nothing to lose on his side of the wager; Bilbo's reward is to be shown the way out of the tunnels. With the change in the power of the ring in the sequel to *The Hobbit*, it would be inconsistent for Gollum to give away the ring willingly. Tolkien deliberately and significantly edits the chapter to increase the rationality of the overall hobbit plot and to enhance the "inner consistency of reality" across his linked stories.

Within the first-edition *Hobbit* itself, does Gollum remain a consistent character? He goes from an unpleasant and chancy hunter in the dark, before and during the riddle game with Bilbo, to a relatively gracious loser who is anxious to live up to his obligation in the game wager. This response is not incompatible with the full character as drawn earlier in the chapter. Gollum had friends long ago but "he was cut off from his friends far under ... the mountains." [1937.05.022] The narrator further explains that "Gollum had learned long long ago ... never, never to cheat at the riddle-game, which is a sacred one and of immense antiquity. Also there was the sword." [1937.05.077] This Gollum once had friends and family, and still retains the recognition of honoring a promise. He apologizes profusely to Bilbo, explains all about the magic ring, and that he "meant to give it our only only present, if it won the competition." [1937.05.082] The resolution of the debt is for Gollum to show Bilbo the way out of the tunnel and say goodbye as they approach the goblin-inhabited area. This conclusion is consistent and ties up the episode neatly.

The Gollum in the second and subsequent editions of *The Hobbit* turns much darker and more nefarious after he loses at riddles – most of the editorial changes are inserted after the riddle game. However, a small, key point of internal consistency with the Gollum's changes is inserted into the chapter when the

narrator establishes Gollum's early history. In the original, Gollum was cut off from his friends in a passive voice, by implication due to the arrival of the goblins. In the revision, Gollum "lost all his friends and was driven away, alone," [05.022]. There is a great difference between being cut off from companions and being driven away, as any child involved in playground politics will recognize.

After the riddles game, the narrator both says and shows that the second-edition Gollum is not honorable. Gollum is described as "wicked" three times in the edited copy, where he was never judged as such in the earlier version. On three occasions he curses the situation of the lost ring and curses "the Baggins" repeatedly. In the first edition of this chapter, only the goblins curse, never Gollum. Most of all, he is now shown to be duplicitous, planning to fetch the ring of invisibility once he lost the game and use it to sneak up on Bilbo as he had done with stray goblins to throttle their throats. The unpleasantness of Gollum established at the start of the episode is slightly magnified in the second edition when he must be driven away from his community, and is given exponentially greater malevolence when he plans not only to cheat Bilbo but to murder him with the aid of the ring of invisibility.

Yet even now, the thoroughly wicked second-edition Gollum is not an inhuman and simplistic villain. His misery and loneliness are audible to Bilbo and, through Bilbo's understanding and pity towards Gollum, to the reader. His treachery has something of an explanation in his years of loneliness, misery, and rejection. His actions are neither irrational nor inconsistent with the character of Gollum that Tolkien develops in the second edition. Later in the chapter, after Bilbo has escaped the murderous but pitiable Gollum, we even see hints that the ring itself affects those around it, as the narrator notes a possible "last trick of the ring before it took a new master" when the ring of invisibility slips off Bilbo's finger. A further clue is in Bilbo's reaction to the abandonment of the ring as he encounters goblins in the tunnel:

'A pang of fear and loss, like an echo of Gollum's misery, smote Bilbo, and forgetting even to draw his sword he stuck his hands into his pockets. And there was the ring still, in his left pocket, and it slipped on his finger.' [05.138]

The attentive reader may be able to see that Gollum's misery at the loss of the ring has significance beyond mere possessiveness

of a piece of jewelry. This curious effect quickly transfers to the next ring owner, whom the second-edition narrator portentously calls "a new master." [05.137]

Gollum then, as portrayed in the "Riddles in the Dark" chapter of *The Hobbit*, stands as a complex yet internally consistent character within both of the two editions of this chapter. In both instances there are minor aspects of the character that can jar the reader out of the fantastic setting, primarily in the juvenile word syntax given to the voice of Gollum. While obviously a fantasy creature, dwelling by a lake under a mountain and owning a magic ring of invisibility, Gollum feels "true" within the story. He presents a mortal threat to our hero Bilbo lost under the mountain. He also presents the opportunity for Bilbo to contend in a challenge, earn a magic prize, and find his way back to the surface. The nature of Gollum changes across the two different editions, at first subtly set up in how his separation from friends in the past is described, and then it changes drastically with Gollum's response when Bilbo wins the riddle game. But both Gollums have inner consistency within the character and the story. Gollum is dangerous but ultimately a fair and even affable individual in the first edition. The conclusion of the episode leaves no loose strings in Gollum's story. In the later editions of *The Hobbit*, Gollum is a tormented and treacherous creature just barely held at bay, but in his miserable situation Gollum gives Bilbo the opportunity for true heroism, to show pity and mercy. The revised episode also leaves the loose string of a character left behind that is bitterly angry at Bilbo. The changes to Gollum in the second edition, while equally internally consistent within *The Hobbit*, have the overriding virtue of maintaining an inner consistency of reality with the *Lord of the Rings* story to follow. Tolkien has followed his own rule.

Works Cited

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