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Demonizing the Enemy, Literally: Tolkien, Orcs, and the Sense of the World Wars

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Abstract: A seemingly inescapable feature of war is the demonization of the enemy, who becomes somehow less human and more deserving of death in times of military strife, which unsurprisingly helps to justify the violence against them. This article looks at the development, character, and role of the orcs—creatures that are in some senses, *literally* demonized—in J. R. R. Tolkien’s writings in connection with the ideological need to demonize the enemy in World Wars I and II. Yet, in creating an enemy whom the heroes could kill without compunction, Tolkien also betrayed his own sympathy for the devils, perhaps owing to his own experiences as a soldier. This ambiguity pervades Tolkien’s writings, even as his demonized orcs are dispatched by the thousands, thus shaping the *sense* of warfare and our experience of it according to the desire to simplify, and make more comprehensible, the martial narrative.

Keywords: J. R. R. Tolkien; fantasy; war; narrative; ideology

1. Introduction

In his powerful study of the First World War, Paul Fussell elaborated upon the logic that seemed to underwrite a soldier’s ability or willingness to kill his fellow man. Fussell pointed to what he called “gross dichotomizing,” which he identified as “a persisting imaginative habit of modern times, traceable, it would seem, to the actualities of the Great War.” As he explained,

“We” are all here on this side; “the enemy” is over there. “We” are individuals with names and personal identities; “he” is a mere collective identity. We are visible; he is invisible. We are normal; he is grotesque. Our appurtenances are natural; his, bizarre. He is not as good as we are. Indeed, he may be like “the Turk” on the Gallipoli Peninsula, characterized by a staff officer before the British landings there as “an enemy who has never shown himself as good a fighter as the white man.” Nevertheless, he threatens us and must be destroyed, or, if not destroyed, contained and disarmed. (Fussell 1975, p. 75)

The racial distinction, of course, is part of the demonization of the enemy as well—Fussell’s quotation of the British officer comes from Robert Rhodes James’s 1965 book, *Gallipoli* (James 1965, p. 86)—but racial difference explains little about the gross dichotomizing Fussell identifies, particularly as the “sides” in question were equally “white,” that is, British and German. (It is well worth recalling that the British Royal Family itself *was* German, and during the war, in June 1917 specifically, King Georg V cannily opted to change the family’s ancestral moniker from the rather Teutonic-sounding House of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha [i.e., *Haus Sachsen-Coburg und Gotha*] to a more English-like House of Windsor, owing to quite understandable anti-German sentiment in the United Kingdom at the time.) Fussell goes on to quote British soldiers apparently in awe of the enemy’s “monstrous and grotesque” attributes. “Sometimes the shadowy enemy resembled the vilest animals,” with enemy soldiers being compared to water-rats scrambling into their holes or earwigs scattering under a rotten tree stump (Fussell 1975, p. 79). Fussell notes that descriptions of the German dead frequently mentioned the

bodies' porcine qualities. All of this contributes to the general idea that one's wartime enemy is not entirely human.

At the very moment when these impressions were being felt and expressed by his fellow enlisted men, a young soldier in the Lancashire Fusiliers was working on what he referred to as "my nonsense fairy language" (Tolkien 1981, p. 8), in connection with which he would develop an elaborate series of connected myths, a *legendarium* in which fair but tragic elves and bold but equally tragic men took up arms against an insuperably powerful evil Enemy, one whose "vilest deed," it could be said, was to create the demonic race of orcs (Tolkien 2002, p. 47). (Please note that Tolkien's texts are inconsistent in the capitalization of the word *orc* and those signifying other "races," and I have opted to use lowercase spelling except when quoting directly from texts in which the uppercase appears.) As J. R. R. Tolkien later confessed to his son, while the latter was serving in the Royal Air Force during the *next* World War, part of the urgency with which he wrote these tales emerged from a longing to make sense of the terrible world in which he was living, to express his "*feeling* about good, evil, fair, foul in some way: to rationalize it, and prevent it just festering." Tolkien encouraged his son to write, as a way of dealing with these pains that come with serving as a common soldier in a great war. As he continued, "In my case it generated Morgoth and the History of the Gnomes [i.e., the earliest versions of *The Silmarillion*]. Lots of the early parts of which (and the languages)—discarded or absorbed—were done in grimy canteens, at lectures in cold fogs, in huts full of blasphemy and smut, or by candle light in the bell-tents, even some down in dugouts under shell fire. It did not make for efficiency and present-mindedness, of course, and I was not a good officer" (Tolkien 1981, p. 78).

Tolkien does not here, or really anywhere else in his letters, demonize Britain's or the Allies' wartime enemies. He has too much respect for Germanic cultures—though not for Nazis, whom he blamed for perverting and abusing the majestic Nordic mythologies and folklore to serve their own foul ideological ends (see Tolkien 1981, pp. 55–56)—to imagine the German soldiers as subhuman. John Garth has suggested otherwise, noting that Tolkien during World War I may have connected his idea of goblins (also known as orcs) and trolls to Germans, particularly in his earliest version of "The Fall of Gondolin," but Garth concedes that "Tolkien later insisted there was no parallel between the Goblins he had invented and the Germans he had fought, declaring 'I've never had those sorts of feelings about the Germans. I'm very anti that kind of thing'" (Garth 2003, pp. 218–19). Moreover, as a combat veteran of "the Great War," Tolkien had too much respect for the common soldier on either side of the lines of battle to envision them as inhuman, animal-like, or unworthy of life. Even during and after World War II, Tolkien expressed anger at those in England who called for destroying the Germans, stating that "The Germans have just as much a right to declare the Poles and Jews exterminable vermin, subhuman, as we have to select the Germans: in other words, no right, whatever they have done" (Tolkien 1981, p. 93). If Tolkien's fantasy narratives required the presence of orcs in order to have a distinctively demonized enemy for the heroes to battle, it was certainly not a matter of substituting orcs for Germans or any other real-world enemy of England. Indeed, in one of the few instances among his wartime letters in which he refers to orcs metaphorically, Tolkien does so only to note that "in real life they are on both sides, of course" (p. 82). Janet Brennan Croft has analyzed the manner by which Tolkien's use and characterization of the orcs parallels the demonization of the enemy in wartime, and she specifically connects Fussell's observations with Tolkien's (see Croft 2004, pp. 47–50). However, Croft notes Tolkien's misgivings about the demonization of the enemy, as he revised his ideas about the orcs over the years, often in the attempt to make them less worthy of sympathy by denying their free will and humanity. But still, the stories required enemies to be clearly demarcated as such, and the orcs served that purpose. Tolkien's desire for narrative, as it might be called, is not informed by a need to demonize the enemy, but as a need to make sense of the war and the world in which it is waged.

In this essay I want to discuss these two elements of the wartime narrative impulse in terms of modern fantasy's effectiveness as a means for imagining the world system as whole, but especially in the context of World Wars I and II. The demonization of the enemy is, I believe, a critical element of *Realpolitik*; if it is so useful in wartime, that is in part because of its intensely practical political

value, war after all being merely the continuation of politics by other means, as Carl von Clausewitz famously put it. As such, the practice is subject to political critique. But the demonization of the enemy is also a crucial element in formulating incidents, persons, and events into a cognizable narrative, and this narrative impulse in turn shapes the way in which the world and everything in it is understood. Narrative is, in this manner, a sense-making system, and the more readily elements within a narrative can be assimilated into identifiable tropes, themes, categories, and patterns, the more easily the purportedly underlying reality can be given shape and made meaningful.

Demonizing the enemy makes for a pragmatic short-cut for overcoming the genuine apprehension of confusion and complexity by offering a simplistic, straightforward identity, which in turn serves as its own justification for action and reaction. The development, deployment, and legacy of Tolkien's orcs, which function in both *The Hobbit* (where they are referred to as *goblins*) and *The Lord of the Rings* as enemies to be dispatched without the slightest hint of moral compunction, offer a case study in the literal demonization of the enemy, but Tolkien's orcs also suggest ways in which this facile demonization can inspire meaningful critique of the very system they were meant to help make visible. The basic humanity of Tolkien's inhuman creatures, as I have discussed at length elsewhere (see [Tally 2010](#)), invites readers to question the racial and moral hierarchies presented in the narratives themselves, and also in the world we live in.

2. Generating Demons

I should state clearly up front that I do not mean to suggest that Tolkien used orcs or other enemies as allegorical counterparts to any "real-world" enemies fighting in the World Wars. As I discuss in the next section, Tolkien was extremely wary of such demonization of the enemy, particularly when connected to race, even though his own racialized rhetoric and descriptions in *The Lord of the Rings* can be problematic at times. The orcs of *The Lord of the Rings* most certainly do not represent German, Russian, or Japanese soldiers, and Tolkien makes clear in his wartime letters to his son Christopher that the orc, if it were to be viewed metaphorically as a violent, boorish, uncivilized person, would be well represented in every country in the world. Yet, in the fantasy writings for which he is most famous, the orc stands out among the various enemies—a category that includes "evil" men, as well as such traditional monsters as dragons, trolls, fell beasts (wolves, for instance), and god-like villains, Morgoth or Sauron—as a special case of demonization.

Contrary to much popular belief, Tolkien did not create the race of orcs, although his writings did more to shape the characteristic images of these creatures in fantasy novels, films, and video games than perhaps any other twentieth-century writer. As Tolkien himself noted, the word *orc* appears in Old English, where it had the apparent meaning of "demon" (see [Tolkien 1981](#), pp. 177–78). Indeed, the word *orcneas* appears in *Beowulf*, where Tolkien translated it "haunting shapes of hell" (see [Tolkien 2014](#), pp. 161–62). In Tolkien's overall *legendarium*, orcs emerge as the mortal enemies of the primordial elves, later men (although some men fight alongside the orcs), and sometimes dwarves (and, in *The Hobbit*, it is suggested that dwarves conduct trade with orcs or goblins). Their primary narrative function seems limited to the role of cannon fodder for the enemy's war machine, and orcs form the rank-and-file of Morgoth's armies in *The Silmarillion*, and of both Sauron's and Saruman's armies in *The Lord of the Rings*. (Interestingly, whether affiliated with "Bolg of the North" or the goblins of the Misty Mountains, the orcs in *The Hobbit* appear to fight for themselves, not for any "Big Bosses," as two memorable orcs will later refer to them.) As enemy soldiers, the orcs are certainly demonized, but Tolkien's writings concerning the origins and character of the orcs make it clear that he does not view them as literal demons.

Tolkien's published and posthumously released writings give different accounts of the origins of orcs within Middle-earth, but for the most part he did not imagine them to be *demons* in the traditional sense of the word. In order to understand to role of orcs in his writings, one first needs to get a basic understanding of the broader mythological system upon which Tolkien's narratives rest. In Tolkien's mythology, which is ascribed to the beliefs and histories of the elves, there is one god, Eru or Ilúvatar,

but from him emanates an infinite number of god-like, or perhaps angelic, beings known as the Ainur. At the beginning of the world, some of these Ainur descended to Arda (i.e., the planet Earth), and the mightiest of them formed the pantheon of Tolkien's myths, the Valar or "powers" of the Earth. Lesser Ainur, but still very powerful god-like beings, also came to Arda, and many of these served the Valar in one capacity or another. These were the Maiar, whose numbers includes such famous characters as Gandalf, Sauron, and Saruman. The most mighty of all the Ainur was Melkor, whom the elves later named Morgoth, a great Satan-figure for these mythic narratives. Melkor seduced many of the lesser Ainur into his own service, Sauron most significantly; some of these evil demigods took the form of demons, and the Balrogs (also known as "demons of might") and possibly even Dragons are among the most striking examples. It is well worth noting that, here in the early characterizations of these creatures, Tolkien might have chosen to list orcs among the lesser Ainur as well, effectively making them demons or devils, but he does not. Far from considering the Balrog a kindred spirit or even ally, for instance, the orcs of Moria in *The Fellowship of the Ring* seem to fear it and flee from it (Tolkien 1965a, pp. 369–70). However, Tolkien's characterization of orcs and his speculations as to their origins show that he was not comfortable assigning them the role of the actual demon, even if his narratives required that these creatures be thoroughly demonized later.

Regarding the origins of orcs, perhaps it is telling that even Tolkien changed his mind over time, as he seemed uneasy about the ways in which they fit into the mythic histories of Middle-earth. The standard view is that orcs were once elves, who through various means had somehow become ugly, violent, uncouth, and altogether monstrous. As *The Silmarillion* relates the matter, the elves "by slow arts of cruelty were corrupted and enslaved; thus did Melkor breed the hideous race of the Orcs in envy and mockery of the Elves" (Tolkien 2002, p. 47). In *The Two Towers*, the authority of Treebeard is asserted, as he explains to his hobbit guests, Merry and Pippin, that "Trolls are only counterfeits, made by the Enemy in the Great Darkness, in mockery of Ents, as Orcs were of Elves" (Tolkien 1965c, p. 91). Elsewhere in *The Silmarillion*, there is also the surmise that orcs actually *were* elves, specifically the Avari or Dark Elves, which is to say, the ones who did not migrate to the holy realm of Valinor, which is what distinguished the Light Elves from the Dark. As the narrator puts it, "Whence they [the orcs] came, or what they were, the Elves knew not then, thinking them perhaps to be Avari who had become evil and savage in the wild; in which they guessed all too near, it is said" (Tolkien 2002, pp. 103–4). If orcs were merely another race of elves, however, it would be much more difficult for their demonization to be tolerated. At least, one would hope so.

The hypothesis that orcs are simply different races or types of elves probably does make the most sense in accordance with Tolkien's overall *legendarium*, if only because orcs appear in these tales after elves but before men, and the special hatred that the elves bear toward orcs, and vice-versa, could almost be taken as a personal grudge. However, as Dimitra Fimi has elaborated, "the thought that the hideous and malicious Orcs were once Elves—the 'highest' beings of Middle-earth—became increasingly unbearable to Tolkien" (Fimi 2009, p. 155). In fact, in several posthumously published manuscripts written in the 1950s and 1960s (see, e.g., Tolkien and Tolkien 1993, pp. 408–25), during which period Tolkien was endeavoring to revise his earlier *Silmarillion* legends in order to make them more internally consistent and compatible with *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien entertained a number of different ideas regarding the origins and characters of his orcs. Of the more bizarre explanations, Tolkien briefly considered the possibility that orcs were automatons, robots or puppets controlled by Morgoth or Sauron, without free will, languages, or thoughts of their own. This was an admittedly unlikely scenario, especially after readers had already been exposed to various goblins and orcs in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* who clearly had their own views. Whatever else orcs may be, they are most assuredly sentient; moreover, the orcs we meet in Tolkien's writings are imbued with fears, desires, values, families, and even cultures. Tolkien did toy with the idea that orcs might be lesser Maia, which was certainly possible given that Balrogs were already so understood, but he abandoned that notion as well. It seems that the orcs were far too *human* to be categorized as angels or demons.

Indeed, if we had to make a case for which of the various origins stories were most likely to be believed by Tolkien himself, the best bet seems to be that orcs are some form of human being. Rather than being tortured, twisted, or corrupted versions of elves, they were more likely corruptions of men. Among the unfinished writings published after Tolkien's death, there is even the vague suggestion that orcs *were* a kind of man, distant cousins of the Drúedain or related to the Púkel Men who appear in *The Return of the King*: "some thought, nonetheless, that there had been a remote kinship, which accounted for their special enmity. Orcs and Drúgs each regarded the other as renegades" (Tolkien 1988, pp. 401–2). And, as Christopher Tolkien concludes the discussion in *Morgoth's Ring*, "This would appear to be my father's final view on the matter: Orcs were bred from Men" (Tolkien and Tolkien 1993, p. 421).

There is one crucial philosophical or religious point in the various arguments concerning the origin of orcs that clearly troubled even Tolkien himself. To wit, their very existence shows they have value and are worthy of being. To put it another, less formal way, one could say that by their very nature, it seems, orcs must have souls; furthermore, being so endowed means that they must be, in theory at least, redeemable. As I have discussed in my article, "Let Us Now Praise Famous Orcs," the origin story of the dwarves as told in *The Silmarillion* offers a powerful test case, one that calls into question any view of the orcs as merely soulless monsters. There I pointed out that,

An article of faith in Tolkien's world is that only God (in the Elvish, Eru or Ilúvatar) can create, and the evil ones—whether Melkor (a.k.a. Morgoth, Tolkien's original Satan figure), or Sauron (Melkor's acolyte and successor), or Saruman (who apparently breeds his own Orcs or "half-Orcs")—can only *pervert* that creation. To put it another way, no new "souls" or "spirits" can be created. Frodo explains as much to Sam when he states: "The Shadow that bred them [the Orcs] can only mock, it cannot make: not real new things of its own. I do not think it gave life to the Orcs, it only ruined them and twisted them" [1965b, p. 201].

Indeed, this principle is dramatized and made perfectly clear in *The Silmarillion* in explaining the existence of the Dwarves. Aulë, a Vala (or "good" god) who longs to share his great knowledge with pupils and becomes impatient waiting for the Elves to awaken, actually creates Dwarves, but they are merely as clay figurines or puppets with no independent being. Ilúvatar chastises Aulë for attempting a thing "beyond thy power and thy authority," but even so grants his wish by giving his Dwarves life [pp. 37–38]. What this episode underscores is that not even the most powerful beings in the world—the Valar—can create new beings or imbue creatures with life. What this also means, of course, is that anything that in fact *has life*, has it with the tacit if not explicit approval of Ilúvatar. As Tolkien concedes in a letter, drafted but unsent, "by accepting or tolerating their making—necessary to their actual existence—even Orcs would become part of the World, which is God's and ultimately good" [1981, p. 195]. Hence, like Men and Elves, Orcs are in a way also the "Children of Ilúvatar." (Tally 2010, pp. 18–19)

By their very existence, then, orcs cannot be viewed as literal demons, yet in the stories, they are demonized throughout and dispatched thoroughly without pause or pity.

The extent to which the orcs are demonized, by the other characters if not by the author himself, can be measured by the vastly different treatment of orcs when compared to other characters. Notably, in the midst of terrible bloodshed, Legolas and Gimli maintain a friendly competition to see who can kill the most orcs. This grisly entertainment would seem almost inhuman were it not for the demonization of the enemy in the case. Contrast the positive glee these heroes express when killing orcs to the famous scene in which Sam for the first time witnesses a battle between armies of men. Looking upon the corpse of a "swarthy" Southron soldier, who had been cut down while fleeing, his "brown hand" still clutching a broken sword, Sam "wondered what the man's name was and where he came from; and if he was really evil at heart, or what lies or threats had led him on his long march from his home; and if he would not really have rather stayed home in peace" (Tolkien 1965c, p. 301). In *The Lord of the Rings*, Sam witnesses orcs both living and dead, but never does he wonder about their motivations and preferences, and needless to say, despite frequently longing for home and

peace himself, Sam never considers what potential “lies and threats” have brought his own friends to wage war on diverse peoples and races of the South and East. Later, after the war had ended, Aragorn (now King Elessar) releases the Easterlings who had surrendered on the battlefield, makes peace with the swarthy men of the South, and frees the thralls of Mordor, granting them lands in that region (Tolkien 1965b, pp. 266–667), but no reference is made to any such accommodations or humane treatment of orcs. It is assumed that the orcs of Mordor simply die off after the ring was destroyed, but, as noted above, that seems rather unlikely given what the reader would have gleaned about orcs and their character from earlier scenes. Moreover, living orcs are not even taken hostage or held as prisoners of war by the heroes, who instead happily slaughter the enemy even as they recognize the baleful effects of war on men and elves. Within these pages, Tolkien’s characters may view even humans in the service of “evil” as being potentially good—note Frodo’s sympathy and kind treatment of the treacherous renegade Wormtongue, for example—but the reigning assumption is that orcs must be inherently evil, demons to the end.

3. Sympathy for the Devils

If Tolkien’s orcs appear to be merely one-dimensionally evil beings, or even worse, simplistic and racist caricatures, it is worth noting that Tolkien himself had his concerns about the matter. For example, Shippey has pointed out that, “though he became increasingly concerned over the implications of the orcs in his story, and tried out several explanations for them, their analogousness to humanity always remained clear” (Shippey 2000b, p. 186). Elsewhere Shippey had conceded that “Orcs entered Middle-earth originally just because the story needed a continual supply of enemies over whom one need feel no compunction” (Shippey 2003, p. 233), but Tolkien could apparently not resist “fleshing out” these default enemies with almost the same sort of cultural and historical detail with which he had made his elves and men so compelling.

For one thing, as noted above, he gives different groups of orcs distinctive cultures, languages, and even families. In *The Hobbit*, for instance, Gandalf declares, “The Goblins are upon you! Bolg of the North is coming, O Dain! whose father you slew in Moria” (Tolkien 1982, p. 281); the actual battle in which Bolg’s father, Azog, is killed by Dáin Ironfoot is described in Appendix A to *The Lord of the Rings* (see Tolkien 1965b, p. 392). Orcs can bear grudges and be motivated by vengeance just as humans can. In *The Two Towers*, Tolkien includes a scene in which three different groups of orcs—one from Mordor and in service to Sauron, one from Isengard representing Saruman’s forces, and a third group of “Northerners” who want no part of such politics, but who (as one says) “have come all the way from the Mines and wish to kill, and avenge our folk. I wish to kill and go back north” (Tolkien 1965c, p. 43)—whose very languages, not to mention allegiances and motives, are completely different. The narrator observes that the different orcs speak in the “Common Tongue,” for they did not know each other’s native language, and the debate they hold in this lingua franca reveals their vastly different aims and allegiances. Shippey even points out that the basic sense of morality—their views of good and evil, for instance—aligns with that of the heroes, even if, in practice, the orcs engage in immoral activities. As Shippey puts it, the orcs “have a clear idea of what is admirable and what is contemptible behavior, which is exactly the same as ours” (Shippey 2000a, p. 133). Far from being mindless drones, orcs are “rational, incarnate beings” (Tolkien 1981, p. 195), with what we might recognize as deeply *human* feelings, perhaps even more so than the elves, whose near-perfection marks them with a profound alterity.

Later in *The Two Towers*, Tolkien depicts a scene in which two orc captains are discussing the war that they find themselves waging, and each expresses not only his concerns over its potential failure, doubting the word of their own leaders as to its inevitable success and complaining about the circumstances of their own service. Moreover, these two express the sincere desire to live free, without “Big Bosses” to rule them, which is a far cry from the notion that all orcs are mindless slaves or minions. True, the freedom they seek is to become itinerant raiders and pillagers, but their desire for autonomy and independence clearly indicates that they are not slaves to greater powers, whether evil or not. In

fact, by complaining about their jobs and their supervisors, these orc soldiers seem more realistically human than many of the heroic men fighting against the armies of Mordor.

Of course, the question of race is part of the problem when examining the role of orcs in Tolkien's world. In this fantasy universe, the "races" usually involve types of beings, such that elves, men, and dwarves each constitute a separate race, yet within these racial categories, there exist other racialized hierarchies (Light Elves versus Dark Elves, for instance, or even the various elven kinship groups, such as the Vanyar, the Noldor, the Teleri, and so on). Among men, and orcs may well be merely corrupted men or perhaps another race of men, Tolkien clearly distinguishes a number of different racially identifiable cultures. But regardless of the specific culture or kinship group they belong to, orcs are almost invariably described as "swart" and "slant-eyed," to the extent that one cannot help finding the characterization offensive at times, all the more so if one is familiar with Tolkien's description of orcs as being Mongol-like in appearance. In a 1958 letter, Tolkien averred that "The Orcs are definitely stated to be corruptions of the 'human' form seen in Elves and Men. They are (or were) squat, broad, flat-nosed, sallow-skinned, with wide mouths and slant eyes: in fact degraded and repulsive versions of the (to Europeans) least lovely Mongol-type" (Tolkien 1981, p. 274). By granting that orcs bore the appearance of Mongols, Tolkien emphasizes their basic humanity even as he underscored their profound Otherness when compared to the Northern European physical types comprising his various heroes. Although the racial stereotyping is problematic, this nevertheless allows readers to see orcs as discernibly human, if also demonized by their enemies.

Admittedly, Tolkien's own texts are somewhat inconsistent on this matter. For example, even though *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* contain scenes in which orcs are shown to operate in well-organized societies, ones that can be completely independent of such "Big Bosses" as Saruman and Sauron, for example, Tolkien bizarrely depicted the orc armies as scattering like mindless insects after the destruction of the Ring: "As when death smites the swollen brooding thing that inhabits their crawling hill and holds them all in sway, ants will wander witless and purposeless and then feebly die, so the creatures of Sauron, orc or troll or beast spell-enslaved, ran hither and thither mindless, and some slew themselves, or cast themselves in pits, or fled wailing back to hide in holes and in dark lightless places far from hope" (Tolkien 1965b, pp. 243–44). Needless to say, such a fate makes little sense given the conversations already depicted among the orcs, but this does serve the narrative function of allowing the war to end at the very moment that Sauron's power is overthrown. Such a fantasy makes for a neat, simple narrative of victory or defeat, and allows the characters to avoid the long, messy aftermath of battle, and the far more complicated process of rebuilding and reorganizing the geopolitical frameworks of a postwar world.

Tolkien was reluctant to pronounce orcs "irredeemably bad" (Tolkien 1981, p. 195), although he could not really envision any real salvation for them, but even the most evil creatures, in theory, ought to have redeeming qualities. As a survivor of the Great War and the father of a Second World War veteran, Tolkien also exhibits a knowing ambivalence towards the horrors of battle, even amid the tremendous bloodshed of his tales, and there should be at least grudging respect for the orc warriors, although one must perhaps read between the lines to find it. Although Tolkien's readers do not necessarily sympathize with the orcs directly, they can hardly have missed scenes such as those I have discussed, in which the basic humanity of orcs, in both the good and bad senses of the word "human," is on display. However, the narrative structure and plot requires an endless supply of enemies to be defeated, in which case the literal demonization of the enemy—orcs *as* demons—serves a valuable purpose. As Shippey has pointed out, recasting the origins of the orcs and of their behaviors in the books "would have involved, to be consistent, a complete revision of all his earlier work" (Shippey 2003, p. 234). The unlikely end of the orcs at the conclusion of the War of the Ring allows for the sort of narrative closure that most real-world wars cannot. Here demonization becomes as "strategy of containment," as Fredric Jameson famously called it (Jameson 1981), which ideologically delimits the narrative field in order to make the story more easily comprehended.

4. After the Wars

Tolkien's two great completed works of fantasy feature warfare, but in each case, the depiction of the fighting is mostly ambiguous. In *The Hobbit*, for example, the Battle of the Five Armies would appear to be the climactic event of the novel, except that most of it takes place, as it were, *off camera*, since the protagonist and eponymous hero, Bilbo Baggins, is knocked unconscious early on in the great skirmish. When he awakens, the war is over, and the leader of the "good" forces, the dwarf King Thorin Oakenshield, lies wounded and dying, hanging on only long enough to express his admiration for the hobbit's pacificism and humility. Not that Tolkien himself is a pacifist exactly; he seems to recognize that some wars may be necessary, and in any case, like Kurt Vonnegut, he knows that wars are inevitable so long as humans are imbued with human nature. But Tolkien certainly does not celebrate warfare. Good warriors and leaders, such as Aragorn, do their work out of a sense of duty, but do not seek renown on the battlefield. In *The Lord of the Rings*, both Éowyn and Théoden come to realize that their desire for glory in battle was wrongheaded, and, while many characters are regarded as great warriors, they generally fight only when necessary, taking little pleasure in the fighting. (Here, Legolas's and Gimli's orc-killing game stands out in sharp relief to the more sober, even grim sense of duty seen in Aragorn, Faramir, or Gandalf.) As noted above, King Elessar actually forgives the people (i.e., the men, but not orcs) of Mordor, allowing them to live and to thrive in their homelands. Only the demons, the demonized enemies, are dispensed with at the conclusion of Tolkien's two novels. Their defeat, presumably, must be total.

It is not so simple in the real world, after all. The rank artificiality of these forms of demonization becomes all the more apparent when a given conflict ends and the ideological commitments of a postwar political order are established. Almost immediately after World War II, within days or weeks at most of the end of the hostilities in Europe and the Pacific, Americans were expected not only to stop demonizing the Germans and the Japanese, but to offer sympathy and aid to them. At the same moment, many people in the United States, France, and Great Britain found that they were now supposed to shift their allegiances away from former Allies. Studs Terkel's monumental oral history of World War II, *The Good War*, details some of these paradoxes. As Dellie Hahne, a retired music teacher and one of Terkel's interlocutors recalled,

The OWI, Office of War Information, did a thorough job of convincing us our cause was unquestionably right. We were stopping Hitler, and you look back at it and you had to stop him. We were saving the world. We were allied with Russia, which was great at that time. Germany had started World War One and now it had started World War Two, and German would be wiped off the face of the map. A few years later, when we started to arm Germany, I was so shocked. I'd been sold a bill of goods—I couldn't believe it. [. . .] As soon as the war was over we dropped Russia. During the war, I never heard any anti-Russia talk. (Terkel 1984, pp. 117–18)

It is remarkable how quickly, in the minds of the public, an ally can become an enemy and vice versa, but Hahne goes on say that her "disillusionment was so great, that was the beginning of distrusting my own government" (Terkel 1984, p. 118).

To offer another example from the same moment, consider a statement from a well-known journalist, the *Chicago Tribune's* Mike Royko. Royko was too young to fight in World War II, but he fought in the Korean War, where he saw clearly just how absurdly insubstantial the earlier demonization of the enemy had been. "I didn't know anyone who was in Korea who understood what the hell we were doing there," he told Terkel. As he explained, "We were over there fighting the Chinese, you know? Christ, I'd been raised to think the Chinese were among the world's most heroic people and our great friends. [. . .] I was still mad at the Japs. The Japanese are now our friends, our pals. I'm going from Japan to Korea, where I'm supposed to fight the Chinese, who are now our enemies. A few years earlier, I was mad at the Japanese and I was supposed to love the Chinese. Now I gotta love the Japanese and hate the Chinese. (Laughs.) That's when I decided something's wrong"

(Terkel 1984, pp. 137–38). One of the most telling things about these observations is that both Hahne and Royko, in their moment of revelation, discovered that “something’s wrong,” which in turn caused them to distrust their own government, as well as other sources of information, when they saw the eerie reversibility of the demonization of the enemy.

The propaganda of the war machine finds outlets throughout mass culture, not merely through the news media or official government reports. In Terkel’s *The Good War*, legendary film critic Pauline Kael complained about the egregious representation of the enemy in films from that period. Films, like novels and other forms of narrative, helped to shape the way both allies and enemies would be viewed, which in turn shaped how the entire narrative of the war would be understood. As Kael put it,

Oh, I hated the war movies, because they robbed the enemy of any humanity or individuality. In all these films you were supposed to learn a lesson: even the German or the Japanese who happened to be your friend, even the one who was sympathetic, had to be killed because he was just as dirty as the others. Even those who were trapped trying to save American lives were weaklings and untrustworthy. We had stereotypes of a shocking nature. They could never be people, who were just caught in the army the same way Americans were and told what to do. They always had to be decadent, immoral people, sneaks. (Terkel 1984, p. 137)

The demonization of the enemy, while quite effective for ideological—which is also to say, for narrative—purposes, rings hollow to those who can read beyond the surfaces. But in oversimplifying matters, this trope also made the war all the more cognizable or *sensible* to the soldiers and, moreover, to the average citizen.

Tolkien’s depiction of the orcs at the end of *The Lord of the Rings* is, in my view, clearly an error, given what the reader would have gleaned about orcs and their cultures in those revealing chapters of *The Two Towers* mentioned above. Moreover, Tolkien’s presentation of the orcs’ origins in *The Silmarillion* and other posthumously published writings indicates that he was well aware of their “humanity,” if we may call it such. Yet in creating the orcs as a race to be demonized in wartime, Tolkien demonstrates the perverse effectiveness of this form. He also proved himself able to see beyond the mere demonization of the enemy, by showing that whatever demonic or orcish behavior there was to be found in the world, it was not limited to the ranks of the enemies. As he famously put it in a wartime letter to his son Christopher, “I think the orcs as real a creation as anything in ‘realistic’ fiction,” before adding, “only in real life they are on both sides, of course” (Tolkien 1981, p. 82).

This acknowledgement cannot stand long without calling into question the entire ideological program associated with demonizing the enemy, which at least suggests a crack in the armor, a scarcely visible yet undoubtedly real utopian element in the martial narratives of both Tolkien’s fantasy novels and the stories of the World Wars. From this fissure, one can imagine, might emerge a more powerful sense of sympathy with one’s fellow man, during times of war and times of peace, in which the demonic characteristics for the moment evanesce, and the face of our shared humanity shines forth. In this moment, our fellow “orcishness” may also be acknowledged, along with the profound desire for freedom from “Big Bosses” and other repressive authorities. That Tolkien allows this image of freedom to be voiced by disgruntled orc soldiers, Shagrat and Gorbag, indicates his own, perhaps unconscious sense that “both sides” deserve respect and sympathy.

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