

10-1-2013

For King and Country: *The Hobbit* and the Great War

Ryan Chiu '14

Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.imsa.edu/fall2013>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#), and the [Nonfiction Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Chiu, Ryan '14, "For King and Country: *The Hobbit* and the Great War" (2013). 2013 Fall Semester. Paper 1.
<http://digitalcommons.imsa.edu/fall2013/1>

This Senior Award Winner is brought to you for free and open access by the Award for Excellence in Expository Writing at DigitalCommons@IMSA. It has been accepted for inclusion in 2013 Fall Semester by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@IMSA. For more information, please contact pgarrett@imsa.edu, jean@imsa.edu.

For King and Country: *The Hobbit* and the Great War

British professor and author J.R.R. Tolkien is widely distinguished for his literary works that reshaped the fantasy genre, including *The Hobbit*, which serves as the prequel to the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. While writing *The Hobbit*, Tolkien frequently attempted to incorporate aspects of his personal life, particularly the experiences he encountered in his service during the First World War. He represents these events vicariously through the eyes of the protagonist, Bilbo Baggins, and his quest through Middle Earth. According to fantasy literature scholar Michael N. Stanton in his book *Hobbits, Elves, and Wizards*, “[readers] can go back and see how various elements of Tolkien’s life fit into the creation of his book [*The Hobbit*]” (3). Thus, it comes as no surprise that Tolkien may have incorporated his own views of World War I into his literary masterpiece. Through *The Hobbit* and its characters, J.R.R. Tolkien reflects upon the origins of the First World War by analyzing systems of alliances, the search for a common enemy, and the wider concept of nationalism.

Through his descriptions of the battles between the various races of Middle Earth, Tolkien highlights the effect of international alliances in inciting conflict during World War I. In the novel, as Bilbo Baggins and his dwarven companions venture through a secret pass in the Misty Mountains, they encounter “big goblins, great ugly-looking goblins, lots of goblins, before [they] could say *rocks and blocks*. There were six to each dwarf, at least, and two even for Bilbo” (Tolkien 57). Despite this initial obstacle, the group manages to “kill the Great Goblin and a great many others besides, and they had all escaped, so they might be said to have had the best of it so far” (89). The celebration that followed the dwarven victory over the goblins is rather short-lived, since upon hearing the news of the battle, the Wargs, a race of wolf-like creatures, are incited into battle against Thorin and his band. This is because, according to the

text, “the Wargs and the goblins often helped one another in wicked deeds,” signifying that the two species are allied with one another (94). Since the Wargs are already engaged in a pact with the goblins, they feel the responsibility to assist as soon as the goblins are assaulted.

A similar scenario was reflected in the complex system of European alliances that ultimately culminated in the commencement of the First World War. For example, following the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand by Serbian nationalist Gavrilo Princip, Austria-Hungary immediately invaded Serbia (Clark 58). As a response, Russia, Serbia’s closest ally at the time, mobilized its own armed forces in preparation for a full-scale attack on the Austrians, the primary instigators of the conflict (58). Consequently, when news of Russia’s intentions reached the Kaiser’s palace in Berlin, the German Empire (Austria-Hungary’s principal ally) mobilized its military might against the armed Russians (59). The aggression that stemmed from alliances during the First World War greatly resembles the incitement of the Wargs into battle through their friendship with the goblins. Through the use of fictional characters in a high fantasy novel, Tolkien demonstrates the role of alliances in igniting World War I.

In conjunction with this web of alliances, Tolkien also addresses the union of former, historical adversaries against a common enemy, a practice that was common in the period leading up to World War I. In *The Hobbit*, as they hear about the death of Smaug the Magnificent, the human inhabitants of Lake-town, along with the wood-elves of eastern Mirkwood, approach Thorin and his dwarves with “request[s] of a fair share of the profits [reaped from Smaug’s defeat]” (Tolkien 247). After Thorin refuses to distribute the wealth contained in the mountain, the human and elven armies prepare for a fight to the death with the dwarves, as “trumpets called men and elves to arms” (253). Following this succession of events, Tolkien provides the reader with the ultimate impression that, due to the offenses committed by

Thorin, the humans and elves are to remain enemies of the dwarves. However, this initial attitude changes when the “goblins ... scale the Mountain from the other side and ... were on the slopes above the gate,” accompanied by “a host of ravening Wargs” (258). As a direct result, although the dwarves are about to engage in a significant conflict with the humans and elves over the Mountain’s wealth, the three races are united once again by the hatred of a common enemy – the goblins and the Wargs (259).

This phenomenon parallels the situation in Europe immediately prior to World War I. Just like the elves and dwarves finally unite to combat the imminent goblin threat, Great Britain and France, despite a long history of British-French tension, collaborated to halt the spread of German imperialism. In fact, according to historian and author Christopher Clark, “British-French relations have been in turmoil for the majority of the 19th century ... leading into the early 20th century,” until the inception of the war (Clark 92). Through the adventures of *The Hobbit*, Tolkien sheds light on the change of national interests that pitted old enemies together against common foes. Despite the effect of international relations, several domestic issues also incited the entrance of nations into World War I, many of which are alluded to in *The Hobbit*.

One of these principles, the sentiment of nationalism, is constantly demonstrated through the characters of *The Hobbit*. Throughout the course of the novel, leaders of each major faction attempt to rally their own populace behind the belief that their respective races is justify in pursuing the mountain’s treasure. For example, as Thorin attempts to inspire his band of dwarves, he states that the treasure must be recovered in full in order to “do for revenge ... [and] recover the heirloom of [Thorin’s] house,” referencing the Arkenstone (Tolkien 250). The humans, on the other hand, have their own agenda and reasons for the recovery of the treasure. After their hometown is destroyed in a battle with Smaug, Bard emerges as the new human

leader and pursues the treasure to seek adequate compensation for its reconstruction (246). Each racial faction, from the dwarves to the wood-elves, formulates its own reason to pursue the treasure. Accordingly, this same overarching belief, that one's own nation and ethnicity is superior in motive to others, also played a significant role leading up to World War I. German citizens, for example, were consistently exposed to "propaganda that boasted about the superior state of the German military" (Clark 151). Nationalism – the extreme belief that one's own nation is superior over others – is represented by Tolkien's illustration of inter-racial tension in *The Hobbit*.

Although critics of Tolkien's literature often point to his outspoken aversion for allegory, the references to the causes of World War I in *The Hobbit* were not intended to be allegorical, but rather to serve as a historical allusion. By alluding to the events that occurred leading up to World War I, Tolkien is not attempting to present an overarching philosophy on human existence or human nature. Instead, he merely attempts to reflect upon his own interpretations of the war, as a British soldier. His affinity for meticulous reflection on his war experiences came after his participation in the infamous Battle of the Somme, in which he became stricken with trench fever and watched many of his dearest school friends die in combat (Carpenter 143). Just as he is able to reflect upon the two sides of his family through Bilbo's background, Tolkien is also able to reflect upon many of the characteristics of World War I through the characters of *The Hobbit*.

Tolkien's novel may not have been an allegory by definition, yet it remains inundated with a wide array of historical allusions about the First World War, inspired by his own propensity for self-reflection. Through the actions of Bilbo Baggins, the dwarves, and the other races of Middle Earth, J.R.R. Tolkien's literary masterpiece, *The Hobbit*, extensively sheds light

on several principal causes of the First World War – particularly the effect of alliances, common adversaries, and nationalism.

Works Cited

Carpenter, Humphrey. *J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biography*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000.

Print.

Clark, Christopher. *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914*. New York:

HarperCollins, 2013. Print.

Stanton, Michael N. *Hobbits, Elves, and Wizards*. New York: Palgrave, 2001. Print.

Tolkien, John R.R. *The Hobbit*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1995. Print.