

Petteri Kuorikoski

**ORCS AS CREATURES IN *THE LORD OF  
THE RINGS***

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# ABSTRACT

Petteri Kuorikoski: Orcs as creatures in *the Lord of the Rings*  
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In this thesis I examined how the fantasy creatures known as orcs are portrayed in J.R.R. Tolkien's *the Lord of the Rings*-trilogy. In the trilogy, orcs are monstrous humanoid creatures in service to the story's antagonist. Orcs are a common type of monster in the fantasy genre, and I deemed it valuable to examine them in the work that first popularized them.

I conducted the study by closely examining the passages of the books where orcs appear, identifying recurring themes in the passages, and then analyzing these themes with the help of relevant existing research. The existing research I utilized consisted of an article on the connections between Tolkien's orcs and demonizing propaganda narratives from World War II by Robert Tally, an article by Jeffrey Cohen dealing with monster stories generally as meaning-producing cultural narratives, and a book exploring the emotion of disgust by William Miller. I also examined various letters by Tolkien related to orcs and mapped the possible inspirations for the creature. I divided my analysis into two main sections. The appearance and description of the orcs, with subsections dealing with their creation within the story, descriptions of their bodies, and the possible racism of these descriptions. Followed by an examination of the narrative roles fulfilled by the orcs, with subsections dealing with their roles as monsters, despoilers, enemy soldiers, and characters.

As expected, the results of the analysis showed that the demonization of the orcs simplifies the narratives of war and battle found in the trilogy by providing the heroic warrior characters an unambiguously evil enemy to fight and kill. The orcs are rendered physically monstrous by describing them as bestial and deformed, and some of these descriptions can also be seen as racist. Unexpectedly, themes of authoritarianism and mundane human evil were found to be portrayed as orc-like in the examination of orcs as characters. Through the orcs, Tolkien condemns some human behavior such as environmental destruction and torture in describing it as typical of the monstrous orcs.

Keywords: J.R.R. Tolkien, fantasy, orc, monster, demonization

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# TIIVISTELMÄ

Petteri Kuorikoski: Orcs as creatures in *the Lord of the Rings*

Kandidaatin tutkielma

Tampereen yliopisto

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Tässä tutkielmassa tutkin miten örkkeinä tunnetut fantasiaolennot kuvataan J.R.R. Tolkienin *Taru Sormusten Herrasta*-trilogiassa. Trilogiassa örkit ovat hirviömäisiä ihmisenkaltaisia olentoja, jotka toimivat tarinan antagonistin palvelijoina. Örkit ovat fantasiagenren teoksissa usein esiintyviä hirviöitä, ja koin hyödylliseksi tutkia niiden kuvausta teoksessa, joka popularisoi ne.

Suoritin tutkimuksen tarkastelemalla kirjojen katkelmia, joissa örkit esiintyvät, erittelemällä näissä katkelmissa toistuvia teemoja, ja analysoimalla näitä teemoja niille relevantin aikaisemman tutkimuksen kautta. Työssä käyttämäni aikaisempaa tutkimusta olivat Robert Tallyn artikkeli, joka käsitteli yhteyksiä Tolkienin örkkien ja toisen maailmansodan aikaisten vihollista demonisoivien propagandanarratiivien välillä, Jeffrey Cohenin hirviöitä kulttuurisina merkityksenmuodostusnarratiiveina käsittelevä artikkeli, sekä William Millerin inhon tunnetta käsittelevä kirja. Tutkin myös örkkeihin ja näihin teemoihin liittyviä Tolkienin kirjoja, ja kartoitin olennon innoituksena toimineita tekijöitä. Jaoin analyysini kahteen pääosiin. Ensimmäisenä analyysiosiossa käsittelemällä örkkien ulkonäköä, alaosiossa käsittelemällä örkkien luomista tarinamaailman sisällä, örkkien kehojen arvottavia kuvauksia, sekä näiden kuvausten mahdollista rasistista luonnetta. Toisessa analyysiosiossa käsittelemällä örkkien suorittamia tarinankerronnallisia rooleja; hirviöinä, turmelijoina, vihollisotilaina, ja henkilöinä.

Kuten odotin, tutkimuksen tuloksena selvisi, että örkkien demonisointi yksinkertaistaa trilogian sota- ja taistelukohtauksia antaen sankarillisille soturihahmoille läpipahan vihollisen, jonka tuhoamisesta ei tarvitse kantaa syyllisyyttä. Örkkien fyysinen hirviömyyden saavutetaan kuvailemalla heidät eläimellisinä ja epämuodostuneina, ja jotkin näistä kuvauksista voidaan nähdä rasistisiksi. Örkkejä henkilöinä tutkimassani osiossa selvisi yllättävänä seikkana, että autoritäärinen valta sekä arkipäiväinen pahuus kuvataan metaforisesti örkkimäisenä käytöksenä. Örkkien kautta Tolkien arvottaa ja tuomitsee tiettyjä ihmisen toimintamuotoja kuten ympäristön tuhoamista ja kidutusta kuvailemalla sitä örkeille tyypillisenä ja hirviömäisenä käytöksenä.

Avainsanat: J.R.R. Tolkien, fantasia, örkki, hirviö, demonisointi

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In this thesis I will examine the portrayal of the fantasy creatures known as orcs in J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*-trilogy. The trilogy will be my focus, but I will make some references to its prequels, *The Hobbit* and *The Silmarillion*. In Tolkien's works set in his fictional world of Middle Earth, orcs are a race of monstrous and evil humanoid creatures created by the Dark Lord Morgoth to serve as his slaves and soldiers. In this role they continue to serve Morgoth's successor, the Dark Lord Sauron, the titular Lord of the Rings, and primary antagonist of the trilogy. The wizard Saruman, an ally of Sauron, also commands an army of orcs.

As my secondary academic sources, I will refer to collection *the letters of JRR Tolkien*, Robert T. Tally's article "Demonizing the Enemy, Literally: Tolkien, Orcs, and the Sense of the World Wars," Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's article "Monster culture (seven theses)," and William Ian Miller's book "*The anatomy of disgust*." As my underlying philosophical approach, I will explore monsters and villains as devices for constructing categories and value hierarchies. I will examine the descriptions of the appearance of orcs within Tolkien's works, focusing on their creation within the story itself, the way their bodies are described, and how some of those descriptions may be viewed as racist. This is followed by an exploration the narrative roles that the orcs perform in the story and how these roles devalue and prohibit certain activities as monstrous. Chief among these roles are orcs as dehumanized enemy soldiers and as perpetrators of environmental destruction.

There is quite a bit of variation in the names that Tolkien uses to refer to his orcs, which I will explain here for clarity. In the first published work set in Middle Earth, *The Hobbit* (1937), the creatures later known as orcs are referred to as "goblins." The orcs in Tolkien's works are in

many ways similar to the goblins found in folklore. *A dictionary of English folklore* defines “goblin” as “A general term for fairy creatures of malicious or evil nature, especially if small and ugly.” (Simpson et al. 146) In a 1954 letter to Naomi Mitchison, Tolkien commented on the name and inspiration for orcs:

Orcs (the word is as far as I am concerned actually derived from Old English *orc* ‘demon’, but only because of its phonetic suitability) are nowhere clearly stated to be of any particular origin ... They are not based on direct experience of mine; but owe, I suppose, a good deal to the goblin tradition (*goblin* is used as a translation in *The Hobbit*, where *orc* only occurs one, I think), especially as it appears in George MacDonald (Tolkien, *Letters* 193)

In the letter, Tolkien is referring to George MacDonald’s book *The Princess and the Goblin* (1888). In *the Princess and the Goblin*, goblins are described as “a strange race of beings” living in subterranean caverns that are in appearance “not ordinarily ugly, but either absolutely hideous, or ludicrously grotesque both in face and form.” (MacDonald, 3) In MacDonald’s book, the goblins serve the narrative role of threat and antagonist to the main character, Irene the princess. In *the Lord of the Rings*-trilogy, consisting of the novels *The Fellowship of the Ring* (1954), *The Two Towers* (1954), and *The Return of the King* (1955), the word “orc” is used interchangeably with the earlier “goblin,” with “orc” being the more common name. Additional names exist in Tolkien’s fictional languages, which he explains in Appendix F of the book *The Return of the King*.

Orc is the form of the name that other races had for this foul people as it was in the language of Rohan. In Sindarin it was orch. Related, no doubt, was the word uruk of the

Black Speech, though this was applied as a rule only to the great soldier-orcs that at this time issued from Mordor and Isengard. The lesser kinds were called, especially by the Uruk-hai, snaga 'slave'. (Tolkien, *King* 1486)

Unlike the distinction between “uruk” and “orc” or “snaga,” the distinction between “orc” and “goblin” is not used to classify different breeds or types of orcs, but the two words are used interchangeably. This is worth mentioning, as in many later works of fantasy, such as *Dungeons and Dragons* and *Warhammer* (or even some adaptations of *the Lord of the Rings*), where orcs and goblins appear as creatures that are distinct from each other.

## 2. APPEARANCE AND DESCRIPTION

### 2.1. “Ruined and twisted:” the origin of the orcs

In Tolkien’s Middle-Earth, the orcs were created by Morgoth (also known as Melkor) within the timeframe of *the Silmarillion* (1979), a prequel to *The Lord of the Rings* released posthumously. *The Silmarillion* describes the creation of the world and its ancient history. The antagonist Morgoth is an immensely powerful spirit being in this tale, akin to Satan as a fallen angel in the Christian tradition. The antagonist of *the Lord of the Rings*, the Dark Lord Sauron, is a former lieutenant of Morgoth, and is also an immortal spirit being, albeit less powerful than Morgoth. By the time of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, Morgoth has been overthrown and imprisoned. Morgoth’s orcs are presented as a corruption of the human form, and the act of their creation is treated as a kind of affront against life itself.

The creation of the orcs is discussed within dialogue and the appendixes of *The Lord of the Rings*, and in the narration of *The Silmarillion* (decades later in order of publication). Though “creation” is too strong a word, as it is repeatedly discussed that they are not a true creation, but rather a corruption of existing creatures. In Appendix F, Tolkien directly states that “The Orcs were first bred by the Dark Power of the North in the Elder Days.” (Tolkien, *King* 1486) The Ent Treebeard describes trolls as “only counterfeits, made by the Enemy in the Great Darkness, in mockery of Ents, as Orcs were of Elves.” (Tolkien, *Towers* 633) Similarly, the learned hobbit Frodo claims that “The Shadow that bred them ... only ruined and twisted them” as they could not “make: not real things of its own.” (Tolkien, *King* 1195) In *the Silmarillion* the narrator introduces the possibility that the orcs were bred from a captured group of Elves called the



Quendi, who in the “hands of Melkor” were “by slow arts of cruelty were corrupted and enslaved; and thus did Melkor breed the hideous race of the Orcs in envy and mockery of the Elves” (Tolkien, *Silmarillion* 47) These accounts paint orcs as twisted abominations that should not be. Miller described this disgust associated with horror as an unpleasant reminder: “the deformed, the mutilated, corpses, and madmen, those poor souls who remind ‘normals’ just how fragile, transient, and partible they are.” (Miller, 27) As mockeries crafted by the Enemy, orcs serve as a message and example of the vulnerability of mortal bodies. It is notable that despite the ancestors of the orcs being the victims of this “vilest deed of Melkor,” no sympathy is ever given to them over it or their present condition, but they are treated with universal contempt by the other peoples and characters in the story. (Tolkien, *Silmarillion* 47)

The breeding of orcs is also discussed within the timeframe of *the Lord of the Rings* as well, in the context of Saruman and his Uruk-hai. The fact that Saruman “has taken up with foul folk, with the Orcs” is seen by Treebeard as the surest sign of his moral corruption. (Tolkien, *Towers* 616) Like Melkor before him, Saruman is violating the sanctity of life in breeding the Uruk-hai. They are also referred to as “goblin-men” and seem to be half-orc, half-human, as Treebeard describes them as “more like wicked Men ... and wonders whether they are” Men [Saruman] has ruined, or has he blended the races of Orcs and Men? That would be a black evil!” (Tolkien, *Towers* 700, *Towers* 633) This “black evil” of breeding half-orcs is not limited to the fear of miscegenation and implied forced breeding but is also a kind of encroachment on the superiority of humans in the sphere of warfare, as these “Great Orcs, who bore the White Hand of Isengard” are stated to be “stronger and more fell than all others.” (Tolkien, *Towers* 569)

These new “Great Orcs” are a greater physical threat, as orcs are generally smaller than humans, even “a huge orc-chieftain” is described as only “almost man-high.” (Tolkien, *Fellowship* 423)

## 2.2. “Hideous bodies:” physical description

The “ruined and twisted” orcs are depicted as physically repulsive by appealing to the emotion of disgust and giving them features associated with human sickness and deformity, as well as features and vocalizations that resemble those of animals. (Tolkien, *King* 1195) Aesthetics and morality are more closely intertwined in Tolkien’s world than they are in the real world. This is related to traditional ideas of beauty and goodness. The heroic Men and Elves are tall and fair, while evil orcs are squat and ugly. In a wartime letter to his son Christopher, Tolkien writes that in his writing, he sought to express his “feeling about good, evil, fair, foul in some way: to rationalize it, and prevent it just festering.” (Tolkien, *Letters* 90) Miller argues that this kind of thinking that “makes beauty and ugliness a matter of morals” is ingrained in our human psyche, and that on some instinctual level we do want to believe that beauty equals goodness which is highlighted in “the sense of betrayal we feel when a beautiful person turns out to be mean-spirited or in the sense of grudgingness with which we finally concede the inner beauty of an ugly person when the concession turns out to be warranted.” (Miller, 200) This human tendency to equate goodness with beauty can be uncomfortable and make us question our own sense of justice in how we treat others. In Tolkien’s Middle Earth, the simplifying narrative that marries moral evil and physical ugliness exorcises this anxiety. The twisted, crooked, and beastly bodies of the orcs serve as a warning of their similarly compromised hearts and minds.

Orcs are simply directly described as “ugly-looking” (Tolkien, *Hobbit* 71) or as having “hideous bodies,” (Tolkien, *King* 1197) but there are certain themes to the more exact

descriptions that devalue certain physical characteristics as repulsive. The silhouette of an orc is presented as different from that of a normal human being. They are described numerous times as having disproportionately long arms and bowed or crooked legs, the orc leader Grishnákh is a typical example as a “a short crook-legged creature, very broad and with long arms that hung almost to the ground.” (Tolkien, *Towers* 582) In a scene where hobbits disguise themselves as orcs, after Frodo dons the “long hairy breeches of some unclean beast-fell, and a tunic of dirty leather” looted from dead orcs, Sam jokingly remarks that Frodo would make for “A perfect little orc... if we could cover your face with a mask, give you longer arms, and make you bow-legged.” (Tolkien, *King* 1195) This suggests that long arms and bowlegs are the norm in orcs. Sallow skin and squinted eyes are two other orcish physical characteristics, of which the Uruk-hai of Isengard give a good example “man-high, but with goblin-faces, sallow, leering, squint-eyed.” (Tolkien, *Towers* 738) Sallow skin is a symptom of a number of diseases, such as jaundice, and crooked legs and squinted or “crossed” eyes can be caused by the conditions genu varum and strabismus respectively. As human minds are pre-programmed to find health and symmetry beautiful and attractive, these features of deformity paint the orcs as repulsive and undesirable by appealing to our deeply rooted “strong sense of disgust and horror at the prospect of a body that doesn’t quite look like one, either grotesquely deformed by accident or disorganized by mayhem.” (Miller 82)

Another way of portraying orc bodies as monstrous is by describing their features as animal-like. This kind of hybridity is typical of many monsters found in mythology and folklore, such as the minotaur or harpies of Greek myth. Orcs are portrayed as having “rending claws” and “protruding fangs,” (Tolkien, *King* 1185) and referred to by other characters as “beastly.”

(Tolkien, *Towers* 590) Of course, human nails and teeth can at a stretch be considered claws and fangs, this is what Miller calls “our anxious relation to animals, a relation which we are so eager to repress and deny.” (Miller, 43) This “horror that we are assimilable [animals]” is another kind of unpleasant reminder of the realities of human bodies. (Miller, 49) The savage orcs are considered inhuman by the other peoples of the setting, in Appendix A, a past king of Rohan, Folca, is said to have been “a great hunter, but he vowed to chase no wild beast while there was an Orc left in Rohan.” (Tolkien, *King* 1402) This tacitly puts orcs and wild beasts in the same category of creature to be hunted and killed for sport. The most apparent animal association for orcs is with apes. Orcs are also explicitly likened to apes in the story, by the narrator during a battle scene “Hundreds of long ladders were lifted up. ... and Orcs sprang up them like apes in the dark forests of the South” (Tolkien, *Towers* 698) and as an insult by the orc leader Uglúk during an orc-on-orc squabble: “Curse you! You're as bad as the other rabble: the maggots and the apes of Lugbúrz.” (Tolkien, *Towers* 592) The association with apes is fitting, as in the real world, animals that closely resemble human beings such as apes and monkeys can make us uncomfortable as “reminders of our own animal origins.” (Miller 49) Maggots obviously serve as very strong animal epithet as well, likening the object of ridicule to a repulsive and insignificant worm that can be found in spoiled food and decaying corpses.

Apart from their bodies, the vocal expressions of orcs are also described as inhuman and unpleasant. In the *Hobbit*, the goblins emit a cacophony of strange noises “The yells and yammering, croaking, jibbering and jabbering; howls, growls and curses; shrieking and skriking, that followed were beyond description.” (Tolkien, *Hobbit* 47) A very similar description of orcs in Mordor is found in *the Return of the King*, “as they ran they gabbled and yammered after the

fashion of their kind” (Tolkien, *King* 963) When they do speak in words, it does not make for pleasant listening. From Pippin’s point of view, it is stated that the “abominable tongue” of the orcs “sounded at all times full of hate and anger.” (Tolkien, *Towers* 579, *Towers* 580) This is particularly notable, as in Tolkien’s world language is given a special significance, perhaps owing to Tolkien’s career as a linguist. The creation of the world for example is achieved through song, resembling the creation myth of the Christian tradition.

These descriptions of the unpleasant voice and appearance of the orcs serve as an amplifier for their narrative roles as villains and enemies. Their descriptions marry the metaphorical and physical.

### **2.3 “Black shapes:” orcs as racist caricatures?**

Certain physical descriptions of orcs are worrying in their resemblance to derogatory narratives of non-European ethnicities. In color, orcs are repeatedly described as “swart” (Tolkien, *Fellowship* 423, *Towers* 540, *Towers* 587) and “black.” (Tolkien, *Fellowship* 422, *Towers* 582, *Towers* 695) It should be noted here that the word “black” is utilized metaphorically very widely in the story, for example the land of Mordor is known as the Black Land, where the Black Speech is spoken. In this vein, orcs are also depicted as creatures of darkness and the night as described by Treebeard when discussing the Uruk-hai: “It is a mark of evil things that came in the Great Darkness that they cannot abide the Sun; but Saruman's Orcs can endure it, even if they hate it.” (Tolkien, *Towers* 616) There is one passage however that describes an orc as “black skinned, with wide and snuffling nostrils” (Tolkien, *King* 1209) and by contrast the orcs themselves refer to the Men of Rohan as “whiteskins.”(Tolkien, *Towers* 587) We can thus

assume that most orcs are meant to be read as having black or very dark skin, which is concerning as much discrimination and demonization in the real world has focused on skin color. Orcs are described as being “slant-eyed” twice in the text. (Tolkien, *Towers* 540, *Towers* 587) This kind of description is of course deemed offensive if used to describe a person of Asian ancestry. Whether or not it was his intention when creating the orcs, Tolkien admits that the orcs can be read this way in a 1958 letter to Forrest J. Ackerman:

“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-types.” (Tolkien, *Letters* 292)

While Tolkien acknowledges his own cultural bias in the letter, the borrowing of features from ethnicities historically demonized by his own culture and transplanting them on his villainous monsters can be seen as xenophobic and racist. This characterization closely resembles historical demonization narratives that Cohen describes in his article:

“Representing an anterior culture as monstrous justifies its displacement or extermination by rendering the act heroic. In medieval France the chansons de geste celebrated the crusades by transforming Muslims into demonic caricatures whose menacing lack of humanity was readable from their bestial attributes (Cohen, 8)

It can be argued that orcs in some ways resemble the various Othered anterior cultures in European consciousness such as the Mongols mentioned by Tolkien and the Saracens mentioned by Cohen, as orcs are a military threat associated with the East, and “curved scimitars” such as both of these real-world groups used, are stated to be “usual with Orcs” (Tolkien, *Towers* 540)

Though it can be fairly argued that these descriptions do reveal an unconscious value structure of devaluing dark skin and slanted eyes as “unlovely,” (Tolkien, *Letters* 292) it was certainly not Tolkien’s intention to make any kind of allegorical statement, as in a 1957 letter to Herbert Schiro, he unequivocally states that “There is *no* ‘symbolism’ or conscious allegory in my story,” (Tolkien, *Letters* 282) In fact, if Tolkien has a message to share about war between different cultures and ethnic groups, it is one that acknowledges the shared common humanity between them. From the hobbit Sam’s point of view, we observe a battle between the forces of Gondor and the Men in service to Sauron, from the southern realm of Harad. Particular attention and sympathy are given by the narrative to a “swarthy” (Tolkien, *Towers* 863) and “brown” Haradrim soldier whom the Gondorians “hew down.” (Tolkien, *Towers* 864)

It was Sam's first view of a battle of Men against Men, and he did not like it much. He was glad that he could not see the dead face. He wondered what the man's name was and where he came from; and if he was really evil of heart, or what lies or threats had led him on the long march from his home; and if he would not really rather have stayed there in peace (Tolkien, *Towers* 864)

This kind of sympathy and humanization is never extended to the orcs, but they do not closely resemble any real cultural group as Men like the Haradrim do. For Tolkien, orcs seem to represent the evil side of human nature, in an externalized form. A kind of effigy or avatar. In a 1944 wartime letter to his son Christopher, Tolkien dips into allegory in saying that “In real (exterior) life men are on both sides: which means a motley alliance of orcs, beasts, demons, plain naturally honest men, and angels” as opposed to the “‘inner war’ of allegory in which good is on one side and various modes of badness on the other.” (Tolkien, *Letters* 95) In another letter

to Christopher, he categorically rejects narratives of dehumanization in defence of Britain's enemy at the time, Germany: "The Germans have just as much 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, *Letters* 105)

Thus, I argue that although prejudice can be read in Tolkien's descriptions of the orcs, it was not intentional nor meant as any kind of message, and it is apparent in other passages that Tolkien recognized the common humanity of all ethnicities and claimed that the orc-like negative aspects of human nature are present in all of us.



### 3. NARRATIVE ROLE

#### 3.1 “Wicked and bad-hearted:” orcs as monsters

The actions and behavior of orcs in the world mark them as monstrous and morally condemnable. When goblins are first introduced in *The Hobbit*, they are given an extensive introduction that quite well described their proclivity to reprehensible behavior:

Now goblins are cruel, wicked, and bad-hearted. They make no beautiful things, but they make many clever ones. They can tunnel and mine as well as any but the most skilled dwarves, when they take the trouble, though they are usually untidy and dirty. Hammers, axes, swords, daggers, pickaxes, tongs, and also instruments of torture, they make very well, or get other people to make to their design, prisoners and slaves that have to work till they die for want of air and light. It is not unlikely that they invented some of the machines that have since troubled the world, especially the ingenious devices for killing large numbers of people at once, for wheels and engines and explosions always delighted them... (Tolkien, *Hobbit* 73)

Torture in particular is a practice that clearly marks the orcs as morally condemnable, and as discussed before, they themselves were formed by “slow arts of cruelty” (Tolkien, *Silmarillion* 47) Taking sadistic pleasure in inflicting pain on others seems to be a regular part of orc culture, and they refer to torture as “sport” and “play.” (Tolkien, *Towers* 580) This practice also serves to motivate other peoples of Middle-Earth in their hatred and enmity of the orcs, as is the case with the Elven Sons of Elrond who “rode often far afield with the Rangers of the North, forgetting never their mother’s torment in the dens of the orcs.” (Tolkien, *Fellowship* 466) The goblins’

affinity for technology and weapon-crafting is not a classic monster characteristic, but perhaps a reflection of Tolkien's own world view. I will explore this theme more in the context of environmental destruction. Another classic behaviour of monsters of fairy tales is cannibalism or man-eating. I will extend the definition of cannibalism to include other clearly sapient beings capable of speech in this fantasy world, even though whether they are the same species is debatable. In *the Hobbit* goblins are said "eat horses and ponies and donkeys (and other much more dreadful things), and they are always hungry." (Tolkien, *Hobbit* 73) The Uruk-hai praise Saruman as "the Hand that gives us man's-flesh to eat" (Tolkien, *Towers* 581) and Sam at one point stumbles on a "place of dreadful feast and slaughter" containing "a pile of charred and broken bones and skulls" (Tolkien, *Towers* 851) The fear of being eaten is one that many children experience, and many even enjoy playing games where an adult takes on the role of a man-eating monster, according to Cohen "The monster awakens one to the pleasures of the body, to the simple and fleeting joys of being frightened, or frightening—to the experience of mortality and corporality." (Cohen, 17) This vicarious frightening thrill is more pronounced in the story as the characters captured by the orcs are the childlike and innocent hobbits, and the reader is invited to fear for them and through them.

By engaging in these taboo practices of torture and cannibalism, the orcs become "The monster of prohibition" that "exists to demarcate the bonds that hold together that system of relations we call culture, to call horrid attention to the borders that cannot—must not—be crossed." (Cohen 13) The orcs serve as a kind of externalized personification for the forbidden practices of humankind that one must not engage in, lest they become a monster themselves.

### **3.2 Maggot-folk of Mordor; orcs as despoilers**

Orcs and their works appear as the most visible manifestation of Evil in the story. Apart from the obvious physical threat of violence and enslavement the orcs pose, they also engage in environmental destruction of the natural world, and vandalism of beauty, in this way their presence is often presented as a kind of contamination or defilement.

The titular Lord of the Rings and the primary antagonist, the Dark Lord Sauron, never actually physically appears in the main story of *The Lord of the Rings*. He enacts his will in the world through his servants, of which the orcs are the most numerous. Through the work of orcish hands is the evil of Sauron made manifest in the world. Throughout the first book of the trilogy, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, orcs are mentioned as a kind of an omen of the growing power of the forces of evil “The Dark Tower had been rebuilt, it was said. From there the power was spreading far and wide, and away far east and south there were wars and growing fear. Orcs were multiplying again in the mountains.” (Tolkien, *Fellowship* 57) According to Cohen’s Monster theory, “The monstrous body is pure culture. A construct and a projection, the monster exists only to be read: the monstrum is etymologically ‘that which reveals,’ ‘that which warns,’ a glyph that seeks a hierophant.” (Cohen, 2) In this function, the growing number of orcs both warns of and reveals the impending return of their master. After orcs physically appear in the story, signs of their presence can be seen as both as warnings and as a kind of defilement. Both as a warning of their immediate physical danger, but also of what would happen to the world should Sauron emerge victorious. The two most important examples of this can be seen in and around the land of Mordor, and in the environmental destruction wrought upon the area around the fortress of Isengard by its ruler, the traitor wizard Saruman. The border of Mordor before the Black Gate is described as “the lasting monument to the dark labour of its slaves ... a land defiled, diseased

beyond all healing - unless the Great Sea should enter in and wash it with oblivion.” (Tolkien, *Towers* 825) The orcs residing there are themselves described more akin to an infestation than a population of people: “the rock was bored into a hundred caves and maggot-holes: there a host of orcs lurked, ready at a signal to issue forth like black ants going to war.” (Tolkien, *Towers* 823) Later at the same location the “great heaps and hills of slag and broken rock and blasted earth” are characterized as “the vomit of the maggot-folk of Mordor” (Tolkien, *King* 1161) and in another scene beautiful statue of a King of Gondor has been vandalized with “the foul symbols that the maggot-folk of Mordor used” (Tolkien, *Towers* 919) Associating the orcs with maggots, vomit, and disease clearly portrays them as disgusting and contaminating. The narrator also introduces the idea that the world would be improved if these contaminating orcs were cleansed into oblivion by the sea.

The industrialisation of Isengard is described as a marring of natural beauty. The grounds of the fortress that “had once been green and fair ... was now filled with pits and forges. Wolves and orcs were housed in Isengard.” (Tolkien, *Fellowship* 339) In the forest of Fangorn bordering Isengard, the Ent Treebeard attributes a petty malice to the orcs destroying his beloved trees “his foul folk are making havoc now ... Some of the trees they just cut down and leave to rot - orc-mischief that ... There is always a smoke rising from Isengard these days.” (Tolkien, *Towers* 617) Similarly to how the goblins in *the Hobbit* were described as being delighted by “wheels and engines and explosions” (Tolkien, *Hobbit* 73) Treebeard describes Saruman as having “a mind of metal and wheels” and “not [caring] for growing things” (Tolkien, *Towers* 616) This juxtaposition of nature and technology also presented as a contrast of beauty and ugliness, of pure and spoiled.

Through metaphor, orcs are strongly associated with vermin, and they are once explicitly referred to as “these vermin of orcs.” (Tolkien, *King* 1282) In addition to being compared to “maggots” (Tolkien, *Towers* 592) and “ants,” (Tolkien, *Towers*, 823) orcs are also likened to “rats” (Tolkien, *Towers* 698 & 740) and one of their camps is said to be “like some huge nest of insects.” (Tolkien, *King* 1208) Characterizing the orcs this way as vermin and pests dehumanizes them and serves as a call to action that justifies their extermination.

### **3.3 Hosts of Mordor; orcs as enemy soldiers**

Orcs are present in most battle scenes of the trilogy in the role of enemy soldiers. They exist almost as props for the martial hero characters to use in proving their might and valor. Unlike the Men fighting on the side of Evil, the orcs are given no pity or mercy by the narrative nor the other characters. In their role as inhuman soldiers, orcs serve as a simplifying device to render scenes of war and violence more palatable and even righteous. Tally calls the depiction of the orcs “literal demonization of the enemy.” (Tally, 3) It is a good description, as in real world wartime propaganda narratives the demonization is a kind of veil or mask drawn on top of the all-too human face of the enemy to make the violence and horror inflicted upon them more palatable to the perpetrator. In the case of the orcs however, there is no human face beneath the mask, but they truly are literally monstrous within and without. Tally claims that “Demonizing the enemy makes for a pragmatic short-cut for overcoming the genuine apprehension of confusion and complexity.” (Tally 3) I believe this is the case with Tolkien, where the demonization of the orcs makes for “a pragmatic short-cut” to guilt-free scenes of war and battle.

(Tally 3) This demonization of the orcs is achieved through the description of their appearance and behaviour as evil and repulsive, as I have detailed earlier.

A particular kind of dehumanization applied to orcs in scenes of battle is describing them as masses. Similar to the descriptions likening them to vermin, groups and armies of orcs are often described as deindividuated masses. At the Battle of Helm's Deep, the area before the fortress is said to be "boiling and crawling with black shapes," this teeming mass of enemies is characterised as "The dark tide." (Tolkien, *Towers*, 695) This evokes both fear of crowds and mobs, as well as disgust for teeming masses of creatures.

In thesis IV of Cohen's article, "Fear of the Monster Is Really a Kind of Desire," he argues that "Through the body of the monster fantasies of aggression, domination, and inversion are allowed safe expression in a clearly delimited and permanently liminal space." (Cohen 15) While in *the Lord of the Rings*, the viewer is never invited to identify with the orcs or fantasise about being an orc, through the vehicle of the orcs "fantasies of aggression [and] domination" (Cohen 15) are realized as the reader can indulge in the fantasy of being a mighty heroic warrior such as Aragorn as he cuts the monstrous orcs down by the dozens. A good example of this sort of glorified heroic violence is found when the Fellowship comes across "a guard of orcs crouching in the shadows" and "Aragorn smote to the ground the captain that stood in his path, and the rest fled in terror of his wrath." (Tolkien, *Fellowship* 432) Or in the eucatastrophe as the Riders of Rohan arrive to relieve their besieged allies "the hosts of Mordor wailed, and terror took them, and they fled, and died, and the hoofs of wrath rode over them. And then all the host of Rohan burst into song, and they sang as they slew, for the joy of battle was on them." (Tolkien, *King* 1097) In these scenes, the reader is invited to join in joy and triumph of the destruction of the

orcs. Orc-slaying even becomes a sort of sport for two members of the Fellowship, as they engage in a contest of who can slay more orcs at the Battle of Helm's deep: "'Twenty-one!' said Gimli. 'Good!' said Legolas. 'But my count is now two dozen. It has been knife-work up here.'" (Tolkien, *Towers* 699) This kind of attitude from the heroes might well be considered bloodthirsty or psychopathic, if their enemies were human beings, and not despicable monsters. This attitude of considering orcs as less than human is perhaps the most pronounced in scenes depicting the aftermath of battles. Unlike the men in service to Evil, orcs are never taken prisoner. After the battle of Helm's Deep "No Orcs remained alive; their bodies were uncounted. But a great many of the hillmen had given themselves up; and they were afraid, and cried for mercy. The Men of the Mark took their weapons from them, and set them to work." This scene also includes an interesting case of a false demonizing narrative within the world of the story, as the hillmen are "amazed" by the mercy their enemies show them, "for Saruman had told them that the Men of Rohan were cruel and burned their captives alive" (Tolkien, *Towers*, 711) Orcs as demonized and dehumanized enemy soldiers serve as sorts of object or props for the benefit of the heroes of the story as simplified guilt free cannon-fodder, rather than allowing for more complex and realistic exploration of the nuances of war and violence.

### **3.4 "A few trusty lads:" Orcs as characters**

Orc characters with names and substantial dialogue appear in scenes of the trilogy where hobbit characters are taken captive by the orcs. They are Uglúk and Grishnák, who capture Merry and Pippin at Amon Hen, and Shagrat and Gorbag, who capture Frodo in Mordor. Both pairs are leaders of different groups of orcs, which leads to animosity between them. From the point of view of Pippin and Sam, the reader gets to observe orcs interacting with each other. The

characters are quarrelsome thugs and bullies, and most of the interactions consist of the orcs arguing with each other, insulting each other, and fighting and killing each other. The orc characters do however have individuality and motivations separate from those of their masters. In their interactions, orcs are malicious and sadistic and motivated by negative emotions. In appendix F, they are said to be “filled with malice, hating even their own kind” (Tolkien, *King* 1486) As discussed earlier in the context of torture, they derive joy from the pain of others: “Merry cried out and struggled wildly. The Orcs clapped and hooted.” (Tolkien, *Towers* 584) They do seem to have some group loyalty, and the various orc captains routinely refer to their subordinates affectionately as “lads” (Tolkien, *Towers* 583, *Towers* 964, *Towers* 965) This affection does not extend very far however, as Shagrat gleefully recounts a story of how one of his orcs, was paralyzed with venom and captured by the giant spider Shelob. Shagrat and his men found their comrade bound in a web “wide awake and glaring,” and they simply “laughed” and left him there. (Tolkien, *Towers* 969) There does not seem to be much love lost between orcs, as leaving one their comrades hanging helpless in a web to be devoured alive by a monster is treated as an amusing occasion.

The orc captain Uglùk could even be considered admirable in some ways, it is through his leadership and discipline that the captive hobbits are spared the usual fate of torment and death at the hands of the orcs, as Uglùk is under orders to deliver them to his master “*Alive and as captured; no spoiling.*” (Tolkien, *Towers* 580) He is given quite a heroic death as the orc party is surrounded and destroyed by the Riders of Rohan, the great warrior Eómer “dismounted and fought him sword to sword.” (Tolkien, *Towers* 599) He is certainly no paragon of virtue however, and is not truly concerned about the hobbits, only his orders, and he does constantly



demean the other orcs as “swine,” “maggots,” and “apes.” (Tolkien, *Towers* 581, *Towers* 592)

As exemplified by Uglúk, the Uruk-hai are portrayed as more courageous, more disciplined, and more competent than other orcs. They have a strong sense of group identity, which seems to have been instilled in them by the indoctrination of their master, Saruman, as can be seen when Uglúk asserts his dominance over the war-party holding the hobbits captive: “We are the fighting Uruk-hai! We slew the great warrior. We took the prisoners. We are the servants of Saruman the Wise ... I am Uglúk. I have spoken.” (Tolkien, *Towers* 581) This phrase “We are the fighting Uruk-hai” is repeated by Uruk-hai later as they “parley” with Aragorn, and it seems to be a kind of affirmation and point of pride for them. (Tolkien, *Towers* 704)

There are indications that the orcs chafe under the rule of their masters and have a desire for more freedom. In Mordor, orc soldiers are “driven unwilling to their Dark Lord's wars; all they cared for was to get the march over and escape the whip.” (Tolkien, *King* 1217) Gorbag even suggests to Shagrat that should they “get a chance” they ought to “slip off and set up somewhere on our own with a few trusty lads, somewhere where there's good loot nice and handy, and no big bosses.” Shagrat is amenable to the idea, and remarks that it would be “Like old times.” (Tolkien, *Towers* 965) This is perhaps the most sympathetic portrayal of orcs found in the story, however it is rather undermined by the events that follow it, as Shagrat eventually murders Gorbag in a squabble over loot, even going so far as to “stab and slash” and “stamp and trample” his corpse. (Tolkien, *King* 1186) Tally argues that “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” (Tally 6) Tally’s assessment is compelling, as the more heroic characters such as Aragorn or Faramir do seem larger than life and unreachable in their

nobility and honor. It is even possible that some of the orc behaviour was inspired by Tolkien's own experience as a soldier, as he recounts in a letter that parts of his story were written during World War I in "grimy canteens" and "huts full of blasphemy and smut." (Tolkien, *Letters* 90)

There are a few hints that orc society has elements of an Orwellian police state. Orcs do doubt and criticize their dread superiors in saying "they can make mistakes, even the Top Ones can" but are constantly afraid of being overheard and informed upon as "they've got eyes and ears everywhere; some among my lot, as like as not." (Tolkien, *Towers* 964) Indeed, the threat of reporting their fellow orcs to their superiors is something that they use to intimidate each other. In Mordor, a pair of orcs argue, and one threatens to "give your name and number to the Nazgûl" (Tolkien, *King* 1211) This theme is present in the Scouring of the Shire, where the hobbits return to their homeland to find it oppressed with draconian rules by Saruman and his ruffians. In these scenes, the line between orc and man becomes blurred. The dialogue and narration liken the human ruffians to orcs, and some can be understood to be literal half-orcs. There is however an indication that orcishness is a mode of being and behaviour that even a hobbit can fall into, as Sam condemns the new rules enforced by the hobbits as "orc-talk," and a witness of the occupation remarks that "Even in the Shire there are some as like minding other folk's business and talking big." (Tolkien, *King* 1309, *King* 1312) This kind of pedestrian evil reveals that even the seemingly innocent hobbits can harbour orcish tendencies.

Though the chapters featuring orc characters that provide a more of an orc's point of view of the world do explore the experience of being an unwilling soldier amidst the horrors of war. However, these circumstances do not redeem the orcs in the narrative, and they remain villainous and treacherous even in this context. The orc serves as "the monster of prohibition" in

their social interactions in condemning infighting, as well as the behaviours related to authoritarian rule, such as informing on your fellow man in hopes of inflicting punishment on them or seeking positions of authority in order to boss around one's peers. (Cohen, 13)

#### 4. CONCLUSION:

In this essay I have examined how orcs are portrayed and the narrative roles they perform in J.R.R Tolkien's *the Lord of the Rings, the Hobbit, and the Silmarillion*. I also studied the collection *The letters of JRR Tolkien* for correspondence that discussed the authors creation of the creatures and their possible inspirations. By close examination of passages in the books that orcs appear in and those that discuss orcs, I identified several themes: their creation within the story and outside of it, their monstrous bodies, their monstrous behavior, and their role as demonized enemy soldiers in the war narrative of the story. In his article, Cohen states that "Monsters are our children ... They ask us why we have created them." (Cohen 20) In this essay, I have asked why Tolkien has created the orcs, and why they remain compelling to audiences many decades later. Like the goblins of fairy tales and folklore that inspired them, orcs exist as frightening and exciting monsters that can provide the reader thrills associated with the horror genre.

Through his writing, Tolkien sought to express his "feeling about good, evil, fair, foul" and he did this by externalizing the battle between good and evil that is waged within every human heart, and giving it physical form as monsters and heroes. As a simplifying narrative, the inner wickedness of human nature took outer shape in Middle-Earth's monsters, who are foul within and without. The physical ugliness of the orcs is connected to our own discomfort about our human bodies, and the moral anxiety generated by devaluing others based on their physical appearance alone. Unlike real life, judging the orcs based on their ugliness is justified. Some of the physical attributes that Tolkien chose to give his monsters appear prejudiced and Eurocentric

to modern eyes. This is somewhat salvaged by his more sympathetic description of the similarly Otherized wicked Men, but not entirely.

As “monsters of prohibition” orcs serve as warnings of what not to do. (Cohen 13) What not to become. The glee the orcs take in horrific practices such as cannibalism, enslavement, torture further serve to mark them as morally corrupt. In his descriptions of the deforestation, industry, and pollution enacted by the orcs, Tolkien reveals his own anxiety about the destruction of the beauty of the natural world. In portraying environmental destruction as the work of the “maggot-folk of Mordor,” he announces his disgust for it. (Tolkien, *King* 1161) As enemy soldiers, orcs exist primarily to serve the need heroic fantasy has for enemies to be dispatched by the martial heroes through swordplay. The depiction of orcs resembles wartime propaganda aimed at dehumanizing the enemy, which Tolkien denounces in his letters. Yet in his fiction he indulges in the fantasy of the mighty hero smiting down his unambiguously monstrous enemy. As characters orcs appear as contentious and unpleasant. They are relatable in their desire to escape the oppressive rule of their dread masters, but given the words and deeds of the orcs, we can surmise that would not mend their ways even if given their freedom. The chapters showcasing the orcish point of view are unpleasant and uncomfortable because they show us what the world would be like should Evil achieve dominance and assert its design upon the world.

Why did Tolkien create the orcs? To provide his heroes with acceptable targets for their swordplay, and to explore the nature of evil in our world and within ourselves in an externalized monstrous form.

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