

# The Unnatural History of Tolkien's Orcs

An overview of the Middle-Earth facts about the orcs envisioned by J.R.R. Tolkien, from their quotidian side (what they eat, how they reproduce) to more existential issues of orcs in the Middle-Earth cosmology.

*By Tyellas*

***Editorial Acknowledgements To: Aayesha, Nekron's Lovesong, and Sharka***

*"There are elves, dwarves, trolls, dragons, princes and princesses, wizards and, inevitably, those most maligned of fictional creatures, orcs, the despised proletariat of conservative fantasy...."*

The Socialist Review<sup>i</sup>

## "They Know What An Orc Is"

This essay examines Tolkien's orcs as Tolkien would have them. Before this, it is important to distinguish between Tolkien's orcs and their wider adaptation in fantasy writing.

The fiction written by J.R.R. Tolkien has had a huge influence on the genre of fantasy writing. The character archetypes and plot devices Tolkien used in his main novel, *The Lord of the Rings*, have been adapted by dozens of other fantasists, in more or less creative ways. Of Tolkien's Middle-Earth concepts, the idea of orcs stands out as being frequently adapted with minimal change.<sup>ii</sup> This has reached the point where a fantasy critic, Terence Casey, has stated in advice to aspiring fantasy writers:

*"Someone who's familiar with fantasy isn't generally going to have a problem with "orcs" being in a novel or game — they know what an orc is and are used to it. If you start making up your own monsters instead of drawing from "generic fantasy", however, the mere newness of them can make it harder for people to suspend their disbelief."<sup>iii</sup>*

This statement is stunning because Tolkien, in the creation of orcs, was very literally making up his own monsters. Tolkien also used the concepts of elves, hobbits, dwarves, and medieval-type kingdoms in creating his Middle-Earth. However, all of those concepts, or their symbolic equivalents, were strongly established in European myth and fantasy writing before Tolkien began his own works. There was no exact equivalent to the orcs.<sup>iv</sup> European folklore has small creatures of evil – bogies, tommyknockers, goblins – and fearsome monsters, from Grendel as commemorated in *Beowulf* to the evil elementals of Celtic tradition.<sup>v</sup> But there was no faerie or supernatural evil that was the parallel of human warriors, which faced them as equals and was sent out to mow them down.

Tolkien needed to create his particular monsters, and their newness had a purpose. Long-term Tolkien scholar Tom Shippey has said of Tolkien's orcs, "There can be little doubt that orcs entered Middle-Earth originally just because the story needed a continual supply of enemies over whom one need feel no compunction."<sup>vi</sup> Hence, for the purposes of his own narratives, Tolkien combined items from then-obscure folklore with more modern concepts of violence and evil to concoct orcs. Heroes were more heroic with orcs to slay; with orcs at their bidding, higher-caste

villains were more fearsome. For these purposes, orcs were a successful narrative device – and one not seen previously in fantasy writing.

Orcs were more than a good idea. There was authorial work required to set the stage for this new creation, especially to do so in a way that helped the reader support the concept.<sup>vii</sup> Tolkien did this so well that, in the process, he created a new archetype that became popular. It is disturbing to think that there was a gap in imagination and myth for what the orcs represent, but their popularity shows that this has indeed been the case.

### **Orc Evolution in Middle-Earth**

We all know what an orc is – but, just to be sure, what are orcs in Middle-Earth? They are bipedal sapient beings that serve evil. Tolkien noted in one of his letters<sup>viii</sup> that he had adapted the word orc from the Old English word *orx*, which means “demon,” using this term “only because of its phonetic suitability.” In this same letter he notes that orcs “owe a good deal to the goblin tradition, especially as it appears in George MacDonald.”<sup>ix</sup>

In further correspondence, Tolkien notes how the goblin idea became blended with a more modern concept; that of the evil inherent in human beings. In correspondence in Tolkien’s published *Letters*, he compares evil or small-minded humans to orcs multiple times, in letters 66, 71, and 78 – all in the context of military service. It is neatly phrased in letter 153, where Tolkien says, as part of a longer point, “Orcs – who are fundamentally a race of “rational incarnate” creatures, though horribly corrupted, if no more so than many Men to be met today.”

Orc origins in Middle-Earth cosmology are described in *The Silmarillion*. Morgoth, a powerful, self-serving Vala (god-equivalent) fallen into evil, captured some Elves (Quendi) early in the existence of their race.

*“Yet this is held true by the wise of Eressëa, that all those of the Quendi who came into the hands of Melkor [later Morgoth]...by slow arts of cruelty were corrupted and enslaved; and thus did Melkor breed the race of the orcs, in envy and mockery of the Elves, of whom they were afterwards the bitterest foes.”<sup>x</sup>*

This idea is tidy and strongly appealing with its parallel of beautiful elves directly linked to ugly orcs. Nonetheless, in his own varied writing about orcs, Tolkien vacillated between this concept of orcs-from-elves and a related concept of orcs-from-men.<sup>xi</sup> He even toyed with the idea that orcs were cunning animals, lacking the spiritual element of sapient beings, or with the concept that orcs were Maiar (divine spirits) serving Morgoth who had been corrupted into orc-form. Both the orcs-from-men and orcs-as-beasts concepts seem to come from Tolkien’s personal reluctance to taint elves, his “ideal” race. However, he kept being drawn back to the idea of orcs-from-elves in multiple drafts of his own orc essay, written through 1959 and 1960, and he acknowledges that orcs-from-elves was the most workable origin for the Middle-Earth timeline he desired.<sup>xii</sup>

Christopher Tolkien, editing *The Silmarillion* after J.R.R. Tolkien’s death, opted for the orcs-from-elves origin. Yet this is not the end of orcish overlap with other

racess. In *Lord of the Rings* (LOTR), Tolkien presents us with orcs interbred with humans. It is never absolutely stated in LOTR that the Uruk-Hai, who can endure the sun better than regular orcs, are partly human. This is powerfully suggested in dialogue given to the Ent Treebeard.

*"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. I wonder what he has done? Are they Men he has ruined, or has he blended the races of Orcs and Men? That would be a black evil!"*<sup>xiii</sup>

And it is confirmed outside the novel in a separate quote from Tolkien's later writings:

*"Men could under the domination of Morgoth or his agents in a few generations be reduced almost to orc level and then they would or could be made to mate with orcs producing new breeds more large and cunning. There is no doubt that long afterwards, in the third age, Saruman rediscovered this or learned of it in lore, and in his lust for mastery committed this, his wickedest deed: the interbreeding of men and orcs."*<sup>xiv</sup>

The important idea is that Orcs are not an original life form. Orcs are a previous life form that was corrupted. Their will is inextricably bound to that of Middle-Earth's prime evil powers – first that of Melkor, later known as Morgoth, then that of Sauron.<sup>xv</sup>

### **Life As An Orc**

Though Tolkien did not care to let his imagination linger among the Orcs, he did note the basic "facts of life" about them to make them a solid, believable part of Middle-Earth. Tolkien provides the reader with this information through the point of view of his most sympathetic protagonists; elvish historians, and hobbits.

The lack of orc language is one proof that Tolkien, who expanded the details of Middle-Earth to support his hobby of creating languages, was not imaginatively engaged with them. "It is said that they had no language of their own, but took what they could of other tongues and perverted it to their own liking, yet they made only brutal jargons, scarcely sufficient even for their own needs, unless it were for curses and abuse..."<sup>xvi</sup> As a result, the Orcs used the common Westron language of Middle-Earth for inter-tribe communication, and there is a distinctive orcish voice in their dialogue. Sauron created the Black Speech to be the language of all his servants<sup>xvii</sup> as a sort of Esperanto of evil, and, like Esperanto, it never achieved its goal. Some words of it were used by orcs, inconsistently, especially among the orcs of Mordor. Having noted the basic concept of the Black Speech, Tolkien created only minimal notes about its vocabulary.<sup>xviii</sup>

Orcs were far from invulnerable; they were subject to disease, they could die, they were not immortal, and they "needed food and drink, and rest."<sup>xix</sup> Orcish food, though unappetizing as a rule, can be eaten by other people – a starving hero, Tuor, hungers when he sees orcs roasting meat ("even the meat of orcs would be a prize").<sup>xx</sup> In the hands of the Uruk-Hai, Merry and Pippin are fed orcish bread.<sup>xxi</sup> Later orcs who take Frodo captive both raid Frodo's food supply and feed him, though they specifically disdain the elvish waybread, *lembas*.<sup>xxii</sup> Orcs also eat horses,

ponies and donkeys,<sup>xxiii</sup> and, most famously, man-flesh.<sup>xxiv</sup> Pippin refuses to eat a piece of dried meat an orc gives him, “the meat of he knew not what creature.” Surprisingly, there are no canon references to orcs eating other orcs, though presumably the food chain in Moria had to go around somehow. Orcs were afraid that Elves would torment and eat their orcish captives, though Elves did not engage in either activity.<sup>xxv</sup>

In the books, orcs reproduce as humans, hobbits, dwarves and elves do; through sex leading to pregnancy and childbearing. Tolkien describes this discreetly as “embodied procreation” and refers repeatedly to orcs being ‘bred’.<sup>xxvi</sup> They are even referred to as “breeding quickly” and “multiplied like flies,” terms that evoke animals.<sup>xxvii</sup> As noted previously, orcs can and did interbreed with mortal humans. Despite these constant references to orc breeding, Tolkien never presents us with an orc character identified as female.

Tolkien is silent about a question some readers have: do orcs rape? This seems completely typical of orcish evil, of which Tolkien says, “They were indeed so corrupted that they were pitiless, and there was no cruelty or wickedness that they would not commit...they took pleasure in their deeds. They were capable of acting on their own, doing evil deeds unbidden for their own sport.”<sup>xxviii</sup> But Tolkien never directly assigns this particular violence to them. The terrible question of orcs interbreeding with Elves seems circumvented by Tolkien’s statement that Elves die when raped,<sup>xxix</sup> and by Tolkien being too tasteful to postulate a situation where an Elf voluntarily has sex with an orc. This may be an aspect of why the creation of orcs was Morgoth’s “greatest evil.”<sup>xxx</sup> There is also a sinister undertone to orcs taking elf-women captive<sup>xxxi</sup> and the orcs’ capture and torment of the elf-lady Celebrían.<sup>xxxii</sup> And Saruman’s breeding program between mortals and orcs had to begin somewhere.

Tolkien says nothing about orcish childhood or upbringing. Tolkien likes children, as noted in his quotes about hobbit children and elf children.<sup>xxxiii</sup> This may be the reason for his silence about the probable misery of orcish childhood.

Both *LOTR* and *The Silmarillion* lack descriptions of orcish appearance – Tolkien provides more description in *LOTR* of how orcs *smell* than of how orcs look. In *Return of the King* (ROTK), there is one striking scene with two orcs of different size, a small tracking orc with black skin and a snuffling nose working alongside a large warrior orc.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Tolkien did provide a description of how he pictured orcs. Ironically, he wrote this in a letter criticising a proposed movie treatment of his works:

*“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.”<sup>xxxv</sup>*

The out-of-date racial stereotyping in this statement is regrettable. In Tolkien’s more focused orc/human comparisons in correspondence, Tolkien compares Axis members in WWII and even evil Englishmen<sup>xxxvi</sup> to Orcs. In the recent *LOTR* films, the special effects interpretations of the orcs are more racially neutral than

Tolkien's description, using a palette of grey, patched, or dermatologically blemished skin.

Apart from pillage and plunder, orcs had a creative streak; a slimy, poisonous creative streak. A passage in *The Hobbit* describes the nature of orcish creativity: "They make no beautiful things, but they make many clever ones...Hammers, axes, swords, daggers, pickaxes, tongs, and other instruments of torture, they make very well, or get other people to make to their design."<sup>xxxvii</sup>

Orcish pleasures are few, apart from the amusement they derive from cruelty. In a possible holdover from their elvish origins, they do chant and sing.<sup>xxxviii</sup>

Amongst themselves, orcs are capable of rough friendships and clan alliances, though these fragile and likely to fall apart if they get angry enough. This is illustrated with Ugluk in *The Two Towers*, an Uruk-Hai who returns to a band he has quarrelled with for the sake of "some good fellows", and with two orcs, Shagrat and Gorbag, plotting to leave Mordor some day with a few "trusty lads". Orcs hate Elves with a passion. They have a special term of contempt and fear for Numenoréan mortals, "tark." Orcs do have some allies. They were known to make alliances with other mortal Men, notably Easterlings.<sup>xxxix</sup> Another possible holdover from Elves, who communicate with 'good beasts' is the orcs' occasional alliance with non-good beasts, namely wolves,<sup>xl</sup> and with the wolf-like wargs.<sup>xli</sup>

### **The Evil That Orcs Do**

Because Tolkien never gives us the narrative perspective of orcs, we experience orcs in Middle-Earth through their deeds as seen by others. The Orcs are never presented as sympathetic, or kind, or wishing to be free from evil (though they do wish to be free from their masters). An orc's appearance is a cause for fear and an immediate precursor of violence. At times, an evil orcish deed serves a good purpose – at several points in the *LOTR* story, orcs fighting amongst themselves provide the hobbit characters with chances for defiance or escape – but no orc is ever deliberately helpful. In instances where orcs restrain themselves from tormenting captives, they are noted as doing so under command, in fear of a greater evil than themselves.

The nature of orcish evil changes to suit the story that Tolkien is telling. Orcs feature in each of Tolkien's three novels: *The Hobbit*, *Lord of the Rings*, and *The Silmarillion*. *The Hobbit* is a children's story set in Middle-Earth. In *The Hobbit*, these orcs are, in both quality and literal reference, interchangeable with "goblins" in folklore and Victorian fairy-telling. The striking description of orcs' creativity that Tolkien includes here has distinct faerie-tradition overtones. The slightly diminutive presentation of orcs as "goblins" places them on a par with the book's protagonist, the hobbit Bilbo Baggins. It is implied in later, related writings that if another character, Gandalf or Thorin, had narrated the orc encounters, they would have a different tone.<sup>xlii</sup>

The most remarkable orc incident in *The Hobbit* is Gandalf's attempt to parley with the orcs when the travelling party of dwarves and hobbit are captured. This is the only instance in Tolkien's works where a "good" character tries to reason with orcs, as if they were the peers of other races in Middle-Earth. This is in line with

Gandalf's characterization as an avatar of good, sent to inspire the best part of Middle-Earth's inhabitants. The orcs' king, the Great Goblin, does not rise to the occasion, and a fight immediately ensues.

*The Lord of the Rings*, with its characters embarking on a quest against evil, is the most traditional novel-type narrative of Tolkien's major writings. Here all the races shown in *The Hobbit* are presented from an adult perspective. Orcs have shed their goblin associations, though, as in *The Hobbit*, the protagonists first encounter the orcs deep underground. The orc characters who appear later in the narrative are crude, random, and fearsome – and distinctly military, with a modern edge. For the orc soldiers have numbers assigned to them.<sup>xliii</sup> This is not the only curiously modern touch about them; the orcs speak in sharp, vulgar, abbreviated dialogue, distinctly different from the elegant medieval tones assigned to many other characters. Only the hobbit characters have a similarly modern ring to their dialogue.

A side note about orcs in *LOTR* is their appearance in the Tale of Years appendix to the novel. This appendix presents Tolkien's backstory idea that, orcish activity has built up over time and affected many of the protagonists directly, notably Arwen and Aragorn. With the dryness of a historian, the Tale of Years notes the war of the Dwarves and Orcs (further Appendix notes make this more vivid and grisly) and an orc attack on the Shire, Tolkien's idyllic hobbit land. In addition to this and attacks upon Gondor and Rohan, the orcs at one point captured, poisoned and tormented Arwen's mother, Celebrían. Celebrían is rescued, but cannot be healed, and she departs for the Undying Lands. This sets up a future tragedy that almost seems destined. Celebrían's sons vow vengeance and take to hunting orcs, at times in the company of Aragorn's ancestors. On one such hunt, orcs kill Aragorn's father. Thus, dwarves, mortal men, elves, and even hobbits have suffered at the hands of orcs, and stood to suffer more if evil had triumphed.

*The Silmarillion* is a cosmology and epic history of Middle-Earth in its eras before *The Lord of the Rings* takes place. We rarely receive intimate details about characters in this book, and, in keeping with this, orcs are presented as faceless hordes of evil. Their creation is reviewed, as noted previously. When elves first encounter orcs, the elves note them as follows: "Among them were Orcs, who afterwards wrought ruin in Beleriand; but they were yet few and wary... Whence they came, or what they were, the elves knew not, but thinking them perhaps to be Avari [a type of elf] who had become evil and savage in the wild; in which they guessed all too near, it is said."<sup>xliv</sup>

After the orcs' timid debut, they participate in a series of battles, with their success<sup>xlv</sup> linked to the fortunes of their masters. When their masters fall, they scatter and dwindle, but, like evil itself, a few of them always endure to be summoned again. But overall, the *Silmarillion* orcs present a very impersonal evil. Only twice is there a mention of a specific cruel act.<sup>xlvi</sup> No orc in *The Silmarillion* – nor in its source notes, chronicled in the History of Middle-Earth series – merits a name.

*The History of Middle-Earth* series are fifteen volumes of Tolkien's notes and backstory that have been published. Upon reviewing these books, it is remarkable



how little Tolkien's other writings concern the orcs that he created. The main writings are the essays on orcs published in *Morgoth's Ring*, which encompass about ten pages, total. In these essays concerning orcs, Tolkien's preoccupation is how the great evil forces of Middle-Earth use orcs and the spiritual significance of orcs.

### **What Orcs Mean in Middle-Earth**

Orcs have several layers of significance beyond that of battle-fodder for elvish swords. As noted, orcs' role in Tolkien's narratives is simple. It is their place in Middle-Earth cosmology that makes them complex, entangled in issues of the nature of evil, free will, and redemption.

Because Orcs, in Tolkien's cosmology, are not meant to exist, they would seem to represent the unseelie, uncanny, and wrong – the classical Other.<sup>xlvii</sup> The idea of the Other gains power from its reflection in the self, and what is reflected in the orcs is the possibility for banal evil in all peoples, very specifically humans.

Instead, Orcs are evil made manifest, and a very specific evil at that, the will of their masters. Tolkien gives us an event in *Return of the King* that makes this clear. After witnessing \*a\* one orc killing another, an act that keeps Sam and Frodo from being discovered, Frodo notes, "That is the spirit of Mordor, Sam; and it has spread to every corner of it. Orcs have always behaved like that, or so all tales say, when they are on their own."<sup>xlviii</sup> Frodo goes on to add, "But you can't get much hope out of it," and indeed, whenever an orc appears, it is a reason to fear, even to despair.

The evil of orcs is not the evil of the drowsy undead. There is a terrible vitality to them, shown in their ferocity, readiness to fight and breed, and their impulsive, id-level emotions. Orcs are alive but fallen; the living, breathing mark of evil's investment in the world of Middle-Earth, a phenomenon Tolkien summarizes as "Arda marred."<sup>xlix</sup>

### **Orcish Conclusions**

If orcs are Arda Marred, can orcs be redeemed? Maybe. Tolkien is reluctant to rule this out, though, as with other cosmological points in his notes, he explores several interpretations. In one of the "Orcs" texts of *Morgoth's Ring* he says that orcs "might have become irredeemable (at last by Elves and Men), but that they remained within the Law." As part of this, if an Orc had ever asked for mercy, good people were obliged to grant that mercy, "even at a cost". Orcish repentance and redemption, however improbable, was supposed to be given a chance.

Significantly, orcs are not present in an interpretation of Arda renewed and healed; it seems that, as a spectacular aberration and mockery, they should not exist at all. A comment in Letter 153 proves otherwise, and, while not presenting a solution, sums up the cosmological conundrum of orcs:

"They would be Morgoth's greatest Sins, abuses of his highest privilege, and would be creatures begotten of Sin, and naturally bad. (I nearly wrote "irredeemably bad"; but that would be going too far. Because 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)."

Tolkien is aware that in his cosmology Morgoth did not create the Orcs, but corrupted them, and his comment on this is “That God would ‘tolerate’ that, seems no worse theology than the toleration of the calculated dehumanising of Men by tyrants that goes on today.”<sup>i</sup> This also echoes the sad theme that, of all the beings high and low of Middle-Earth, it is the orcs who he sees as having most enduring effect on humanity.

Tolkien even seems to have been aware of the dark appeal orcs would have to some readers, and to have explored it, in observations about rebelliousness leading to evil, in an unfinished sequel to *LOTR*. This sequel, *The New Shadow*, exists as about ten pages of manuscript (published in *Peoples of Middle-Earth*). It is the beginning fragment of a story set in Gondor about 100 years after the beginning of the Fourth Age. A notable plot point in it is “‘orc-cults’ among adolescents.”<sup>ii</sup> In this future Gondor, once orcs have vanished enough to be a piece of folklore or a by-word, there comes to be a rebellious appeal to their acts of empty, wasteful evil, and some defiant youngsters take up playing at doing “orc-work.” This is a shadow of a wider evil plot, and a sign of renewed potential for corruption amongst mortals.

Readers will never know the full details of what this orc-work foreshadowed. Tolkien attempted to work on the story several times, up to fifteen months before his death.<sup>iii</sup> However, he did not finish the story, saying that its concept proved “both sinister and depressing....not worth doing.”<sup>iii</sup>

Tolkien, in the end, declined to apply more creativity to his orcs than necessary to make them probable within Middle-Earth. In his writings, they have nothing of value to call their own, are treated as cannon fodder, and their elusive redemption is never shown. It is a testament to Tolkien’s creativity that even his minions of evil, his grown-up goblins that click in our modern minds as fierce archetypes, are intriguing and inspire curiosity. This brings us to the observation that began this essay: that modern fantasists have embraced Tolkien’s archetype of the orc, expanding on its foundations. Some fantasists following Tolkien present orcs as even more hollow minions of evil, either in Tolkienesque imitation or in parody. Others take a sympathetic view of the orcs, presenting them as ugly ducklings, Everymen archetypes, or avatars of powerful masculinity<sup>iv</sup>. It seems that the orcs will be redeemed, after all, in our imaginations.

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> <http://www.socialistreview.org.uk/article.php?articlenumber=7990>

<sup>ii</sup> See the Appendix, a list of other authors’ interpretations of orcs and role-playing games that incorporate orcs.

<sup>iii</sup> [http://www.skotos.net/articles/BSTG\\_40.shtml](http://www.skotos.net/articles/BSTG_40.shtml)

<sup>iv</sup> Rose, Carol; *Spirits, Fairies, Gnomes and Goblins: An Encyclopedia of the Little People*. 1996, ABC-Clío, Santa Barbara, California. Conveniently this book divides the myriad creatures of folklore from around the world into categories. Negative creatures are included in the categories of Demons (Malevolent), Devils, Spirits Associated with Animals, Spirits Associated with Disease, Spirits Associated with Forests and other



places. This breakdown helps to show that most “goblins” are personifications of negative natural forces or dangerous places. Orcs differ from this in that they are presented as parallels and peers to other races in Middle-Earth. One could look an orc in the eye; they were no fairy-story but a terrible fact. Nor do orcs represent anything but the will and envy of evil.

<sup>v</sup> Briggs, Katharine; *An Encyclopedia of Fairies: Hobgoblins, Brownies, Bogies, and Other Spiritual Creatures*, 1976, Pantheon Books, New York.

<sup>vi</sup> Shippey, Tom, *The Road to Middle-Earth*, HarperCollins, 1992.

<sup>vii</sup> Zipes, Jack, *The Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales*, 2000, Oxford University Press, New York. This is not in reference to orcs specifically but in reference to the fact that “Tolkien’s concept of fantasy literature...is based on the suspension of disbelief...that is, unlike fairy tales, we as readers apprehend fantasy within its own premises as ‘true.’ For Tolkien, genuine and skilful fantasy creates Secondary Belief (unlike the Primary Belief of myth or religion), putting the reader in a temporary state of enchantment.” Thus, Tolkien expended a lot of authorial energy in establishing the practical side of Middle-Earth.

<sup>viii</sup> Carpenter, Humphrey. *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*. Houghton Mifflin Co., 1995. Letter 144.

<sup>ix</sup> George MacDonald was a Victorian intellectual who, as part of his contribution to the Arts and Crafts area of Victorian culture, wrote several fantasy stories for children. His most extensive use of goblins is in a piece called *The Princess and the Goblin*, in which goblins are described as having once been like ordinary humans, but been changed and corrupted when they live underground to avoid their obligations. Modern orc fans who read this story will find it incredibly sugary.

<sup>x</sup> Tolkien, J.R.R., *The Silmarillion*, edited by Christopher Tolkien, Ballantine Books, 1977. Chapter *Of the Elves*.

<sup>xi</sup> *Morgoth's Ring: The Later Silmarillion Part One, Volume 10 of The History of Middle Earth (MR)*, J.R.R. Tolkien, edited by Christopher Tolkien. Houghton Mifflin Co, 1993. Source for the two *Orcs* essays and *Myths Transformed*.

<sup>xii</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>xiii</sup> *The Two Towers (TTT)*, J.R.R. Tolkien, Ballantine Books, 1955. Chapter *Treebeard*.

<sup>xiv</sup> *Orcs, MR*

<sup>xv</sup> *Myths Transformed, MR*

<sup>xvi</sup> *The Return of the King (ROTK)*, J.R.R. Tolkien, Ballantine Books, 1955. Appendix F.

<sup>xvii</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>xviii</sup> Allan, Jim (ed.) *An Introduction To Elvish (And to Other Tongues and Proper Names and Writing Systems of the Third Age of Middle Earth As Set Forth in the Published Writings of Professor John Ronald Ruel Tolkien)*, 1978, Bran’s Head Books, Bath, UK.

<sup>xix</sup> *Orcs, MR*

<sup>xx</sup> *Unfinished Tales of Númenor and Middle-Earth (UF)*, J.R.R. Tolkien, edited by Christopher Tolkien. Houghton Mifflin Co, 1980. Chapter *Of Tuor and his Coming To Gondolin*.

<sup>xxi</sup> *The Uruk-Hai, TTT*

<sup>xxii</sup> *The Tower of Cirith Ungol, ROTK*

<sup>xxiii</sup> Tolkien, J.R.R., *The Hobbit*, Ballantine, 1947.

<sup>xxiv</sup> *The Uruk-Hai, TTT*

<sup>xxv</sup> “For one thing Morgoth had achieved was to convince the Orcs beyond refutation that the Elves were crueller than themselves, taking captives only for ‘amusement’ or to eat them (as the Orcs would do at need.)” Footnote to *Orcs, MR*.

<sup>xxvi</sup> *Orcs, MR*

<sup>xxvii</sup> *Alkallabeth, Silm*

<sup>xxviii</sup> *Orcs, MR*

<sup>xxix</sup> *Laws and Customs..., MR*

<sup>xxx</sup> *Of the Elves, Silm*

<sup>xxxi</sup> *Of Turin Turambar, Silm*

<sup>xxxii</sup> *Tale of Years, LOTR*

- xxxiii Tolkien quotes re: children in Middle-Earth: Letter 144 - "Hobbit children were delightful..." LACE in Morgoth's Ring re: elf children - "as if they were the children of some fair and untroubled Men"
- xxxiv The Land of Shadow, *ROT*
- xxxv Letter 210
- xxxvi Letter 78
- xxxvii Over Hill and Under Hill, *The Hobbit*
- xxxviii *ibid*
- xxxix Tale of Years, *ROTK*
- xl Shelob's Lair, *TTT*.
- xli Out of the Frying Pan, Into The Fire, *The Hobbit*
- xlii The Quest of Erebor, *UT*
- xliii The Land of Shadow, *ROTK*
- xliv Of the Sindar, *Silm*
- xl xlv After several initial defeats, Morgoth changed how orcs are used in his battle strategy, for "Morgoth perceived now that the Orcs unaided were no match for the Noldor." In later battles, he used Orcs in a very specific fashion, first seen at the great battle of the Dagor Bragollach. Here, he sent the Orcs out first "in multitudes such as the Noldor had never seen nor imagined." This is successful – to a certain point; the Orcs are still afraid of specific elf-lords, and certain strongholds do not fall as a result. At a later battle, the Nirnaeth Aenordiad, Morgoth took this orcish weakness into account. He repeated the previous strategy of large quantities of Orcs until "The Orcs wavered, and their onslaught was stayed, and already some were turning to flight." Then, Morgoth unleashes his more powerful creatures of evil into the battle. Significantly, at Gondolin, even a band of Orcs left in the area near Gondolin to try and destroy any who escape is backed up with a Balrog. As a side note, the words "Orc" and "Orcs" are always capitalized in *The Silmarillion* text, but not in *The Hobbit* or *The Lord of the Rings*.
- xlvi One is when the orcs pin an elf-lady, Finduilas, to a tree with a spear to kill her. (Of Turin Turambar, *Silm*.) The other is of the Orcs' attack and pursuit, "by scent and slot," of Isildur in the Second Age. (*Silm*)
- xlvi Tolkien scholar Ainur Elmgren's essay, "The Image of the Enemy: An issue of Race and Class in the works of J.R.R. Tolkien" provides a sophisticated analysis of the topic of orcs as Other. [http://www.ainurin.net/image\\_of\\_enemy\\_intro.htm](http://www.ainurin.net/image_of_enemy_intro.htm)
- xlvi The Land of Shadow, *ROTK*
- xlvi Myths Transformed, *MR*
- <sup>1</sup> Letter 154.
- <sup>li</sup> Letter 338.
- <sup>lii</sup> *The Peoples of Middle-Earth, Volume 12 of The History of Middle Earth*, J.R.R. Tolkien, edited by Christopher Tolkien. Houghton Mifflin Co, 1996.
- <sup>liii</sup> Letter 256.
- <sup>liii</sup> Remarkably, all these alternative roles for orcs in modern fantasy (ugly duckling, Everyman figure, or hypermasculine power) hearken back to important roles for protagonists and powers in European fairy-tales. The youngest son or questing prince has become an orc! References throughout *Zipies*.

## Appendix: Other Orcs in Modern Fantasy

To support my assertion that the idea of orcs has made a large impression on the genre of fantasy writing, I have collected this list of representative role-playing games and novels that use Orcs or orc-parallels.

### *Orcs In Role-Playing Games*

Orcs have become such a part of role-playing games that a large "strategy game" convention in California is named "OrcCon."

*The Dungeons & Dragons* role-playing game system published by Wizards of the Coast, a famous Tolkien derivative, uses orcs and half-orcs. A fine example of this is the D&D “module” book *Fury in the Wasteland: The Orcs of Terrene*, which “delves into orc culture like no other book has before. Topics such as life cycle, habitat, recreation, diet, clothing, medicine and healthcare, race relations, trade, and language are all covered.”

*Sabertooth Games' WarCry* – Another game publisher invites the power-hungry to “Control the hordes of darkness (Chaos, Dark Elves, and Orcs and Goblins) or the Grand Alliance (Empire, High Elves, and Dwarfs) in massive battles that will decide the fate of kingdoms!”

*EverQuest* – Noted in Forbes magazine in 2001 (<http://www.forbes.com/best/2001/0625/webextra.html>) as a social phenomenon among online gaming, orcs are part of the game. Interestingly, while orcs are “non-player character” enemies or allies, players with dark urges cannot choose to be an orc as a character, but are fobbed off with trolls, ogres, evil reptilian bipeds, and dark elves.

### ***Orcs By Any Other Name***

The minions of evil in these series are distinctly similar to orcs.

*Eragon* series by Christopher Paolini, (2003, Knopf) – Has orc-parallel characters Urgalls.

*Shannara* series by Terry Brooks (19 books from 1977 to present, Ballantine Books) – Has orc-parallel characters Gnomes.

*The Fionvar Tapestry* series by Guy Gavriel Kay (three books, published in 1984, 1985, 1986, Roc) – Has orc-parallel characters Svart Alfar and Urgaches. This series – Arthurian in intent, interpreted by some as Tolkienesque – was Kay's first novels, published ten years after Kay had assisted Christopher Tolkien in editing “The Silmarillion.”

### ***Orcs Called “Orcs” in Non-Tolkien Writing***

Unlike the authors who use orc-parallels, these authors call an orc an orc, often to highlight the contrast or note the satire between their work and Tolkien's.

*Abacar the Wizard: Book One: A Tale of Magic, War, Elves, Goblins, Orcs, Monsters, Fantasy, and Adventure* by Timothy Erenberger (Writer's Club Press, 2001) – In the title alone, orcs are distinguished from both goblins and monsters as a distinct category.

*Grunts!* by Mary Gentle (Bantam Press, 1992) – Satirically aware of its derivation from Tolkien, in this novel, orcs (sympathetic protagonists) are

hired to protect halfling thieves who go to steal treasure from a dragon. Some of this treasure includes weapons from the U.S. Marine Corps.

*ORCS: First Blood* by Stan Nicholls (multi-book series, Gollancz, 1997- 1999)  
– Here the orcs are depicted as, though ugly and stupid, nonetheless heroic/sympathetic protagonists.

*Red Orc's Rage* by Philip Jose Farmer (Tor Books, 1991) – Technically this belongs in the “Orcs By Any Other Name” section for its use of orc-parallel gworlds. However, this unusual book was written for use in a type of psychotherapy, Tiersian therapy, based on reading evocative fiction. It features a troubled character being invited, as part of Tiersian therapy, to project his personality onto any type of person he likes in a specific fantasy world – and he chooses Red Orc, the most prominent villain in the fantasy world. Part of a longer science fiction series with this therapeutic goal, this book is noted for being recursive, self-referential, and all-around odd. Read an article about Tiersian therapy, with more mention of the specific book, here. [Hhttp://www.psychiatrictimes.com/p010756.html](http://www.psychiatrictimes.com/p010756.html)

*The Orc's Treasure* by Kevin Anderson, (I Books, 2004) Orc protagonist as antihero: “Gree is a workaday Orc without many aspirations, as greedy and as nasty as they come.”

*The Orc Wars: The Yngling Saga*, Books I & II by John Dalmis, (Baen Books, 1992) A blend of fantasy and science fiction with orcs (as minions of an evil telepath) and neo-Vikings in a post-apocalyptic Europe.

*The Thousand Orcs* by R.A. Salvatore (Wizards of the Coast, 2003). A novel in a fantasy world that is an offshoot of the Dungeons & Dragons role-playing game system. The synopsis speaks for itself: “The band returns from Icewind Dale in the company of the dwarves of Mithral Hall, who are escorting King Bruenor back to reluctantly assume his throne. ...Emboldened by a dark alliance with the deadly frost giants, an orcish horde is massing quietly, waiting with uncharacteristic patience to move against dwarves, elves, and humans alike.” Nonetheless, this particular novel was featured on the New York Times bestseller list – not a first for this author in this series.

*Thraxas* by Martin Scott (Baen Books, 2000) Winner of the World Fantasy Award in 2000. Yet another satiric use of orcs: “Thraxas is a down-on-his-luck detective, a fantasy world Sam Spade, living in a magical world which is refreshingly clichéd in its trappings...a world populated by conflicting kingdoms of humans, elves and orcs.”