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Essay 1

In writing The Lord of the Rings, Tolkien is very interested in the ideas of history and myth, and this bleeds though every aspect of his worldbuilding and storytelling. One aspect of his written world that is often skimmed over by the common reader is the use of song all throughout his works. These songs appear incredibly frequently and are used to different effect each and every time, to give us insight to the setting around us, to invoke the sorrow a character is feeling without the author telling us directly, and even to foreshadow the coming events. Tolkien uses song as a powerful tool in order to present to us key information and background lore without compromising the structure of his work with extraneous exposition and in doing so has created one of the greatest works of fiction in history.

Before the written word became the de facto way that the past was recorded, many tribes and people passed down their history though poetry and song, but the issue that arises with this is that the song must be given to someone else to sing before the death of everyone that knows it or else the history preserved in it is lost forever. The interest in forgotten lore and myth that fascinated Tolkien so much is deeply planted in his works even expanding to his bible, The Silmarillion, which has songs as a key facet of the universe and is tied to the first use of verse in his works, explaining history. In the creation myth of Iluvatar and Morgoth, the Ainur are singing a song in accordance with the guiding hand of Iluvatar, but Melkor wishes to sing his own song, thus creating the discord that would make his own pride evident and have him cast out of the heavens. In creating this mythos, Tolkien has grafted the idea of song and prose directly into the skeleton of his very world.

With that said, it is unsurprising that the One Ring has a poem engraved in it that tells the history of the Ring and it’s power over the lesser rings. This not only is written history, but also a song that can be passed down through the ages. Gandalf does not need to read the runes inscribed on the ring to know of its purpose and power. Many over the ages have sang the song that ends with *“One Ring to rule them all”* and the Ring has seeded it’s reach over all the races of the world just though this short poem. Even the lesser races like the Orcs know of the One Ring and this is why the quest must remain absolutely secret. Every person in Middle Earth that knows these few lines will be tempted by the powers of the ring and thus lead it ever closer to its Master. Sauron, being a general in the service of Morgoth would certainly know the power of songs in the world that was essentially sang into existence. This was most likely intentional by Sauron to keep the legend of his power alive.

In keeping with the discussion of history, Bilbo, gifted with an abnormally long life, has used his time to commit many histories to verse. *The Fall of Gil-Galad* is a work of the Elves that Bilbo has taen upon himself to translate and preserve for the other races. The song tells of Gil-Galad and his push to take the tower of Barad-Dur deep in the heart of Mordor. This is significant as the Elves have decided to move out of Middle Earth and to the Undying Lands. Aragorn is shocked to learn that Frodo knows of the tale, and he couldn’t have known it had Bilbo not transcribed it from Quenya to the common tongue. This is a common occurrence in the real world, as cultures have died without having any way to relay their history and traditions to the modern world. Bilbo mourns this very idea in the song he signs to himself just before the Fellowship leaves Rivendell; “*I sit beside the fire and think of people long ago, and people who will see a world that I will never know.”* He knows the importance of this history and worries what will happen after his death, where he is not able to continue recording the histories of Middle-Earth.

This emotional movement present in many of the songs is another aspect that is very powerful in the songs scattered though the book. The profound sadness present in Bilbo’s lament on the passing of time is an incredible work of prose that Tolkien uses to impart a specific emotional note to the reader that wouldn’t be possible with just simple descriptive language. His characters often emote and break out in songs seemingly out of nowhere to express themselves either in joy, sadness or longing. This appears very early on with Sam and Pippin singing a drinking song, “*Ho! Ho! Ho! To the bottle I go!”*  and again later on in the baths at the Prancing Pony*.*  This gives us not only a great insight into what they expect from the journey early on, they seem almost aloof and ready to celebrate at the grand adventure they are going on, but this also serves as a stark contrast to the song that was just sang by the Elves just pages before. The Elves sing of Elbereth, a deity of theirs who exists beyond the sea, where the Elves came from before residing in Middle Earth. You can hear the sorrow in their song as they are now drifting even further from the radiance of Elbereth as they move to the Undying Lands in the west as all the Elves decide to do. This gives an incredible contrast in the journeys that both parties embark on. Frodo is heading, unknowing as of yet, to Mount Doom, on a journey of peril and despair, yet they sing cheerfully on this first leg of their journey forward. The Elves are on an exodus, however, to leave the world they inhabit after crossing the seas and leaving the radiance of their god, not knowing what fate is in store for them on their journey to the Undying Lands.

This emotion is not only passed from the text to the reader but also used to effect on other characters. This effect can be akin to magic, and in the case of the character with the most songs, Tom Bombadil, real magic. At the Council of Elrond, Boromir is unconvinced that Aragorn and the Sword of Elendil are the keys to solving his riddle that came to him, ironically enough, in a song. He asks the question as to why and is glaring at Aragorn when Bilbo stands and sings his tune he wrote to record in history the story that Aragorn has told him in the past, and by singing that it helps to convince Boromir that he should place his faith in the Fellowship. This seems to be powerful magic, as to convince someone with simple prose, but this does occur more literally with Tom Bombadil.

Tom comes to the aid of the hobbits constantly singing in The Old Forest and he is their salvation more than once though the power of song. The hobbits are being consumed by the Forest itself and Merry and Pippin are both being crushed inward by Old Man Willow, but any force that is applied to the tree only makes the situation more dire until Tom arrives and gently sings to the tree and the hobbits are released without causing harm to the tree. This would happen again later at the Barrow-Downs, where life is sang back into Sam, Merry, and Pippin, bringing them back from certain death. This is possibly the most powerful statement that Tolkien makes in the service of songs and this should show the reader that the songs presented to him or her are incredibly important pieces of this narrative journey that he has created.

Tolkien has brilliantly used subtle interjections of song to express many key features of his world to the reader. His use of song has either shown us the history of the world, the plights and perils of characters, and the magic of song. Tolkien is making a point about myth and forgotten history, and that the importance of preserving this history is paramount to the continuation of civilization. How else could the hobbits have made it from the clutches of Old Man Willow, or the party to know of the history of Gil-Galad, or even convinced Boromir to join the fellowship without the power of song, however subtle and faint its presence is to the reader. Understanding the importance of these seemingly insignificant pieces of a sprawling puzzle that is the world Tolkien has created is essential in understanding the points he is trying to impress on the reader and give life and substance to the world of Middle Earth.