WOUNDS IN THE WORLD: THE SHARED SYMBOLISM OF DEATH-SITES IN MIDDLE-EARTH

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Abstract: This paper examines a correlated aspect of the symbolism of Middle-earth's three most prominent death-sites: the barrow downs, the dead marshes, and the paths of the dead. It suggests that the unquiet dead in these three sites owe their state not simply to these locales' status as tombs, but to burial following acts of unresolved violence. It is this state of unresolved conflict which maintains these discordant links to the past. While some scholarship has focused on these sites individually or as a category of ruins, this paper seeks to bring new attention to them as a different kind of symbolically-related category within Middle-earth. Furthermore, this promises to open new lines of inquiry into Tolkien's symbolic depiction of death, and to flesh out current understandings of the structure of symbolism in Middle-earth.

Key words: Tolkien – symbolism – Middle-earth – death.

In her 2007 paper “The Curious Incident of the Dream at the Barrow,” Verlyn Flieger said of Middle-earth that “the past is not just tributary to the present, but also inhabits and immediately affects it” (FLIEGER 2007: 99). This paper will focus on how this present influence of the past is borne out in a very particular setting in J.R.R. Tolkien's trilogy of novels, *The Lord of the Rings*: the grave. Nowhere in Middle-earth does the past seem more alive than in these haunts of death, far less resting places than they are battlegrounds or barracks for, as Margaret Sinex writes, “[u]nder mounds, under mountains and..under marsh the unquiet dead await the living” (SINEX 2005: 107). And, as students and fans of Tolkien's work will doubtless be aware, the places most haunted by these restless dead are the Barrow-Downs, the Dead Marshes, and the Paths of the Dead. These “death-sites” have of course been written about and analyzed at length before, but I have not found any comment on a particularly interesting and strong feature shared by all three. Not only do the dead of each remain active, but as this paper will explore, these cases share a common cause: the presence of an ongoing, unresolved conflict. Let me clarify by examining each in turn.

Of all the episodes involving these lingering dead in *The Lord of the Rings,* perhaps the most uncanny is the hobbits' encounter on the Barrow-downs. While crossing a landscape of tumuli containing tombs left over from a deceased kingdom, Frodo, Sam, Merry, and Pippin become lost in the fog, and are subsequently seized and drawn below ground by a barrow-wight. But despite this violence, this remains perhaps the most subtle of the encounters with the dead, for the wight, as noted by Tom Shippey in his *Road to Middle-Earth*, is not the owner of the tomb (SHIPPEY 2003: 110). Instead, the true revenant interred beneath the turf does not make his presence felt until the very end of the encounter, and far from rising from his tomb, he merely speaks through the unlikely vehicle of Merry. But even as the wight's actions form a part of this encounter with the dead, so too does its invasive presence represent an inseparable component of the conflict lurking beyond the grave. Taken as a whole, the encounter reveals the power of unfinished business to perpetuate itself across time, both in the wight's and the dead man's presence.

The conflict at the root of the Barrow incident is in fact the old war between Arnor and Angmar, the long-crumbled kingdoms of the Dúnedain and the Witch-King, respectively, and it is a part of that war which lingers on within the barrow. Though this particular struggle ends with the eviction of the wight, it is itself merely a piece of the greater battle between the forces of darkness and light that overshadows the history of Middle-earth. But to glean the connection between the wight's assault on our halfling heroes and a long-forgotten war, we must begin at the end, when the man buried in the tomb appears in the voice of Merry, waking from an enchanted sleep.

“'What in the name of wonder?...Of course, I remember!,' he said. 'The men of Carn Dûm came on us at night, and we were worsted. Ah! the spear in my heart!' He clutched at his breast. 'No! No!' he said, opening his eyes. 'What am I saying? I have been dreaming'” (TOLKIEN 1954 1955 1991: 158).

This seeming dream is the last memory of the tomb's long-dead inhabitant, irrupting through Merry into the waking world centuries after his death. Flieger expertly teases out the history of this memory's author at length, which I will summarize briefly. The dead man is identifiable as a prince of the Dúnedain, the men of the West, who perished fighting the forces of Angmar. Furthermore, Flieger explains that:

> The Appendices also tell us that the barrows, many of which were built in the First Age as grave mounds for the Dúnedain (cf. Tom Bombadil above), came to be haunted by “evil spirits out of Angmar” who “entered into the deserted mounds and dwelt there.” (RK, Appendix A, I, iii, 321) (FLIEGER 2007: 10).

This means that Merry is not simply recounting just any last memory, but that both the man possessing him and the wight are products of the same war, each a partisan for vanished sides. Because everything of Angmar and Arnor but broken stones and dull gold has rotted away centuries before, this may seem like mere historical curiosity, but since this was all just a part of the war between the men of the west and Sauron, which at the time of the hobbits' encounter was escalating to its final conclusion, the conflict remains fundamentally unfinished.

Unfinished conflicts, however, have ongoing consequences, so it comes as no surprise that

the wight's invasion of the Dúnedain's tomb is a continuation, or even an escalation (surely the defilement of graves in a culture that prioritizes elaborate burials counts as such) of the war between the barrow-raisers and Angmar, the wight's origin. The wight has perverted the tomb of its enemy and transformed it into a trap for the hobbits, who are after all on the side of the man buried there. So not only does the war outside continue, between Ring-bearer and Ring-lord, but Angmar, in the “person” of the wight, has continued the struggle with the Dúnedain prince within the barrow. And thus it is this unresolved conflict that spills over into the present through the activity of both dead and the undead – in the wight's assault, and in the Dúnedain's subsequent awakening.

Since at first blush it might seem that these two events are unconnected, we must recall that the wight's abduction of the hobbits, which brought them into the tomb, directly precipitates Merry's encounter with the dead. And this attack was itself not random malice, unconnected to the age-old war against the West; what Frodo witnesses in the tomb makes it clear that the wight is bent on continuing, even ritually reenacting the war of old. Tolkien writes:

> “He turned, and there in the cold glow he saw lying beside him Sam, Pippin, and Merry. They were on their backs, and their faces looked deathly pale; and they were clad in white. About them lay many treasures, of gold maybe, though in that light they looked cold and unlovely. On their heads were circlets, gold chains were about their waists, and on their fingers were many rings. Swords lay by their sides, and shields were at their feet. But across their three necks lay one long naked sword” (TOLKIEN 1954 1955 1991: 155).

In the wight's ritual the hobbits are arrayed like the dead – they even look “deathly pale,” and their placement with swords, treasures, and new garments serves to cast them in the character of those for whom the barrows were first raised. The wight has not just waylaid the hobbits, but has chosen to dress them up as its ancient enemies. And then it begins to reach for the sword. Here is a microcosm of the conflict between Angmar and Arnor being played out once more: the barrow wight, emissary of Angmar, is putting on a ghastly play of the prince of Arnor's death, executing him again in the effigy of the hobbits. And this is no mere

battle reenactment: it is a blow in the ongoing war, for the hobbits are themselves agents in the fight against Sauron – though it is unclear if the wight knows this (TOLKIEN 1954 1955 1991: 206, 327, 235).[1] But this is not simply the reliving of a death, but of a battle, and the wight's attack is met by Frodo, who takes up what seems to be one of the swords of Westernesse, and with it hews off the wight's hand (TOLKIEN 1954 1955 1991: 157).[2] Thus Frodo answers the ancient spawn of Angmar in kind, with an old weapon of the west, and both begins the defeat of the wight and with it the resolution of the conflict within the barrow, while continuing the struggle against Sauron outside it. As an aside, it is fitting that the blades the hobbits take from the barrow go on to do great service in that war. It is with one of these blades that Merry, who had, however briefly, assumed the identity of the Dúnedain (FLIEGER 2007: 107), himself reenacts as a proxy the ancient war in the north and inverts the wight's death-play by striking the penultimate blow against the king of Angmar himself. It is in this context of relived and ongoing conflict that the dead man's memories of past war come welling up through Meriadoc.

Finally, the conflict at the barrow is linked not just to the past, but to the future, through the songs of both the wight and Tom Bombadil, which look toward the ultimate end of the struggle. For its part, the wight does not just reenact the old war; it anticipates, and – for as Frodo realizes, the song is an incantation – participates in what it sees as the final victory of darkness. The wight chants:

[1] It is worth noting that the wight may, consciously or otherwise, be targeting the company in part not simply as an arbitrary ambush of travelers, but due to the pull of the Ring or the influence of the Dark Lord's power in searching for it. Beyond the Ringwraiths being drawn to it, Gandalf himself observes that the watcher in the water seizes upon Frodo first of the company at the gate of Moria. Instances such as these suggest the possibility that the wight is likewise moved somehow to play a role in the conflict; one that might have proven decisive, given how Gandalf described the encounter in the barrow as “perhaps the most dangerous moment of all” in the hobbits journey to Rivendell. Cf. Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings,* 206, 327, 235.

[2] Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings,* 157. While the identity and origin of the sword used by Frodo is not explicitly stated, it is probable that it shares its origin with the daggers drawn from the same tomb, which are identified as being the work of “Men of Westernesse.” Cf. p. 161.

> “Cold be hand and heart and bone,
> and cold be sleep under stone:
> never more to wake on stony bed,
> never, till the Sun fails and the Moon is dead.
> In the black wind the stars shall die,
> and still on gold here let them lie,
> till the dark lord lifts his hand
> over dead sea and withered land” (TOLKIEN 1954 1955 1991: 156).

These words, spoken as the wight prepares to kill the hobbits, position its action in the context of the ongoing war as a whole, motivated by that unresolved conflict. Here the wight looks for resolution in the permanent victory of Sauron. But the song is answered by Tom Bombadil, who like the wight has a strong relationship and association with a particular landscape (SHIPPEY 2003: 108). Tom also frames his actions as a part of an ongoing war; breaking the tomb open, he drives out the wight with his own incantation:

> “Get out, you old Wight! Vanish in the sunlight!
> Shrivel like the cold mist, like the winds go wailing,
> Out into the barren lands far beyond the mountains!
> Come never here again! Leave your barrow empty!
> Lost and forgotten be, darker than the darkness,
> Where gates stand for ever shut, till the world is mended" (TOLKIEN 1954 1955 1991: 158).

Tom's song concludes the conflict in the barrow, expelling the wight, but like the wight's attempt to kill the hobbits, it is part of a grander play. Tom's reference to the mending of the world does not speak so much to Sauron's end, but, mirroring the wight's song, to the end of the struggle between light and darkness, with the outcome reversed. Each song places the episode within the cosmic conflict of which the War of the Ring is a part. The conflict within this chapter is a miniature of the grand, ongoing battle between death and life – between the

wight, as Sinex puts it, transforming the hobbits into corpses, and Tom breaking in with air and sunlight, disinterring them (SINEX 2005: 106). Here, at the moment of Merry's figurative resurrection as he is brought out of the tomb, the dead prince prince wakens for a moment in him. Perhaps it is only a lingering dream, or perhaps Merry's waking, if momentary, identification with the prince is a response to the resolution of the conflict with the wight, as its hold on the tomb and its inmate breaks (FLIEGER 2007: 109). Regardless, it can be no coincidence that the dead prince speaks now, at the end of his part in the age-old conflict, to recall its beginning. It is the conflict that allows him now to speak, through Merry's enchantment at the wight's hands, though only at its end does he do so.

Unlike the barrow, where the dead prince visits only the mind of Merry, the eponymous deceased of the Dead Marshes actually appear to Frodo, Sam, and Smeagol in visible form. Though they bear the visage of the corpses they were, this still places them in a state of unnatural unrest, since their bodies should have decayed an age ago. However, the activity of the dead beyond this is limited to lighting candles, Smeagol's “tricksy lights,” and luring the travelers down toward them. Like the other death-sites, the marshes are a grave. Here it is the manner of grave and place that the marshes are which forms the link to their past conflict. They were once a part of the battle plain at the gate of Mordor, site of the clash which led to Sauron's first defeat. The dead buried there are soldiers of both sides, fallen in battle, and interred in war-graves. Besides having their origin in conflict, this struggle remains unresolved, since the battle failed to end the threat of Sauron and achieved only a deferment of the war until his return.

Indeed, when Frodo arrives the conflict has been renewed, not only in the war being fought in Rohan and Gondor, but in the marshes themselves. Smeagol pictures the marshes as swallowing up the graves, framing them as an aggressor against the soldiers' repose. Sam also suggests that the influence of Sauron is at work in the illusory revival of the corpses, asking if it is “some devilry hatched in the Dark Land?” (TOLKIEN 1954: 653; SHIPPEY 2003: 143-4) It seems that, like the barrow-wight, Sauron has invaded and perverted the graves of his enemies, turning them into an obstacle, if an unplanned one, for the ring-bearer

(SHIPPEY 2003: 117; SINEX 2005: 97). And the revived dead are not inert shades of an old battle, but current participants in the conflict, tempting unwary trespassers to a watery end as march-wardens of Mordor. Sinex and Shippey note that the marshes present a temptation toward despair and even suicide for the Ringbearer, and so the dead actively threaten the quest (SINEX 2005: 93; SHIPPEY 2000: 216). But the marshes' role is not one-sided, for it is the Ring-bearers who make the best use of them in sneaking towards Mordor. It suits well that this ambivalent, conflicted path be found by Smeagol, himself wracked by an unresolved, internal struggle as he leads the hobbits through the marshes. Here we again have a grave which the dead haunt, thanks to an unresolved conflict with three aspects – Sauron's continued existence, the war, which caused them to die, and still remaining undead where they lie.

It is also at the end of the marshes that Frodo, like Merry at the barrow, has a dreamlike vision of a past battle. “He looked up at the smoke-streaked sky and saw strange phantoms, dark riding shapes, and faces out of the past. He lost count of time, hovering between sleep and waking, until forgetfulness came over him” (TOLKIEN 1954: 658). In this context, it seems probable that this vision is of the battle that spawned the marsh-dead. This would explain both the riders and the faces, given the battle and the emphasis earlier placed on the faces of the dead. In both hobbits' visions, by mere or on moor, the memory of the unfinished conflict bursts into the present across time. While the barrow served as an ongoing battle-ground, the Dead Marshes are more a set tableau of a conflict, preserved in a continuously hanging, unburied state.

The last and most clear-cut case of unresolved conflict keeping the dead active is of course the Paths of the Dead. Here, the unresolved nature of the conflict stems not from an inconclusive battle, but the absence of one. Thousands of years before the events of *The Lord of the Rings,* the mountain men had sworn to allegiance to Isildur, only to refuse to join him in the first war against Sauron. In response, Isildur cursed them to remain as restless spirits until their part in the ongoing war was resolved:

Then Isildur said to their king: “Thou shalt be the last king. And if the West prove mightier than

thy Black Master, this curse I lay upon thee and thy folk: to rest never until your oath is fulfilled. For this war will last through years uncounted, and you shall be summoned once again ere the end." (TOLKIEN 1954 1955 1991: 813).

In this case, the connection between the mountain-folk's unfulfilled oath, resulting in an unfought war, and their unrest is a simple, direct causal one. Their post-mortem activity, referenced by their moniker the "Sleepless Dead," is sustained solely by the fact that the war persists without conclusion, and without a chance for them to fulfill their oath and take part in it. Like the dead in the mere of faces, this host is a pawn of both sides: refusing to help Isildur because they had worshipped Sauron (TOLKIEN 1955: 813), they ultimately become a crucial weapon against the Dark Lord in the hands of Aragorn. It seems the graves of the sleepless dead are haunts of ambiguity, no-man's lands caught between both sides in an undying war.
Of course, it is not the conclusion of the war, strictly speaking, that frees these dead and allows them rest, for their final battle predates the overthrow of Sauron. But it also precipitates the Dark Lord's fall, and thus links them to his end. Moreover, they are intertwined with the fate of the war as a whole, since by abstaining from the first downfall of Sauron, they were made to wait until they could partake in the second. The relevant conflicts here, however, are not simply the war but those of the dead with Isildur's line, begun by their betrayal, their conflict with their own oath, and their unjoined battle with Sauron – not to see his defeat, but simply to fulfill their oath by fighting for Isildur's heir against him. As long as they did not fight, these conflicts remained open wounds, separating the dead from their natural rest. For the army of the dead, simply accepting their place in the great conflict is enough to resolve those that bound them to the present long after their time has passed.

Before concluding this tour of tombs, it is necessary to address a possible alternative explanation for the supernatural phenomena haunting Middle-earth's graves: the idea that they may be the result of a sort of curse, the moral impression left on the landscape by death or the dead. It is clear that in Tolkien's world death can have a lasting effect on its locale. This can be clearly seen from the twin burial sites of two great mounts whose riders clashed upon the Pelennor fields. Théoden's steed, Snowmane, and the Witch-king's winged mount both

fell in the battle and remained on the field afterwards, and both had a pronounced impact on that environment: “green and long grew the grass on Snowmane's howe, but ever black and bare was the ground where the beast was burned” (TOLKIEN 1955: 878). This establishes the possibility for death to permanently alter the landscape through implicitly supernatural means, and in a manner that reflects the differing moral characters of the dead. But while this device of moral corruption or blessing should not be dismissed outright as a relevant factor in making the death-sites of Middle-earth what they are, it cannot account for the three examples of true haunting given above. In cases where the dead themselves remain active, we are no longer dealing with simple after-impressions left as an imprint on the landscape. These could perhaps be seen as natural consequences in a world of moralized nature, like stains on the landscape, but the lingering dead stand out as explicitly supernatural (BRISBOIS 2005: 201, 206).[3] What is more, the corruption present with them does not fall along anything resembling the clear moral line between Snowmane and the fell beast. Instead, the barrows feature the tomb of a Man of the West, on the same side as the hobbits, whose grave has still been made into a haunt of evil. Likewise the marshes, where good and bad, friend and foe, are all jumbled up together, are twisted into a trap for any who wander there. The only instance where the location seems to fit its ghosts is the Paths of the Dead, which seems an appropriately bleak place for the restless spirits of oathbreakers. So while the character of the dead clearly can have an effect on the death-site, something more is required to explain why the dead, good and bad, linger on. And here we must note that both Snowmane and the fell beast had fought their last fight, and shortly thereafter their war ended; while our three ghostly graves all share the common explanation of an unconcluded history not nearly as brief or as neat.

[3] Michael J. Brisbois, “Tolkien’s Imaginary Nature: An Analysis of the Structure of Middle-earth,” *Tolkien Studies* 2.1 (2005): 201, 206. It is worth noting that Brisbois' description of nature in Middle-earth as containing moral symbols perfectly describes the neat contrast between Snowmane's howe and the scorched grave of the fell beast. Cf. Randel Helms, *Tolkien's World,* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company 1974), 79-81, on the principle that moral laws govern Middle-earth.

These “clusters of unquiet dead” form a strangely consistent anomaly amidst what is on the whole the more-or-less realistic landscape of Middle-earth (BRISBOIS 2005: 198-9). What helps to explain these hauntings as more than random deviations from this is their shared reason for rising: the call of unfinished conflict.

While my goals in examining this aspect have been humble, I hope that this connection will lead to further exploration of the nature of death in Tolkien's works. I believe that applying this reading to a more general study on the symbolism of death in Middle-earth could be a fruitful line of research. In the meantime, I hope that the argument advanced here leads to a more complete, coherent, and explicit understanding of both how these death-sites operate as a category, and of Tolkien’s Middle-earth as a whole.

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