Bachelor's thesis

NTNU
Norwegian University of Science and Technology
Faculty of Humanities
Department of Language and Literature

Ingrid Elin Stokke

The Responsibilities of the Reader

Tolkien's 'applicability' and what it implies about fiction

Bachelor's thesis in English
Supervisor: Paul Goring
June 2024

NTNU
Norwegian University of
Science and Technology

Ingrid Elin Stokke

The Responsibilities of the Reader

Tolkien's 'applicability' and what it implies about fiction

Bachelor's thesis in English
Supervisor: Paul Goring
June 2024

Norwegian University of Science and Technology
Faculty of Humanities
Department of Language and Literature

NTNU
Norwegian University of
Science and Technology

“The Responsibilities of the Reader”

Table of Contents

Abstract

This thesis will discuss Tolkien's 'applicability' and how it differs from allegory. The main concern is how Tolkien's view of allegory, and consequently applicability, has been misunderstood as wanting to control the reader's interpretative freedom, and what has been ignored about Tolkien to come to these conclusions. Especially Tolkien's view of what fiction is, and does, will be explored to understand his problems with allegory, and how applicability functions as a way to approach fiction. Tolkien's letters and other personal writings of his have been examined to understand not only his primary claims, but the foundational thoughts behind them. The thesis will then look at an allegorical interpretation of Tolkien's legendarium to exemplify the issues Tolkien saw in allegory, and why he offered applicability as an alternative. Tolkien did not dislike allegory as a whole but a specific way the term was used, and proposed a change in how language was used in interpretation. Applicability is a sort of response to the act of denying the author any authority over the text, while still appealing to the author as an authority of the text through language use. Applicability establishes separating lines between the reader, the author, and the text, where all of them are equally valid and none 'dominate' the other parts.

There was Eru, the One, who in Arda is called Ilúvatar; and he made first the Ainur, the Holy Ones, that were the offspring of his thought, and they were with him before aught was made. And he spoke to them, propounding to them themes of music; and they sang before him, and he was glad.

Then Ilúvatar said to them: 'Of the theme that I have declared to you, I will now that ye make in harmony together a Great Music. And since I have kindled you with the Flame Imperishable, ye shall show forth your powers in adorning this theme, each with his own thoughts and devices, if he will' (…).

But as the theme progressed, it came into the heart of Melkor to interweave matters of his own imagining that were not in accord with the theme of Ilúvatar; for he sought therein to increase the power and glory of the part assigned to himself.

—J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*

1. Applicability and Allegory

What responsibility does a reader have to stay faithful to the text of a fictional work when interpreting it? When an author protests against interpretations, are they playing God and imposing their will upon the reader? J.R.R Tolkien, throughout his life, denied many times that allegory of any kind lived in *The Lord of the Rings* and, self-admittedly, had strong distaste for allegorical interpretations (Tolkien, *The Letters of J.R.R Tolkien* 121, 212, 232-233, 307). He preferred what he referred to as 'applicability'. His words are often misunderstood and misconstrued as wanting to control interpretations made of his work. By analysing how Tolkien spoke about allegory and applicability, and how his fundamental beliefs about fiction shaped his understanding of both, it becomes apparent that applicability is rooted in freedom for not only the reader but also the text, and that Tolkien's argument boils down to terminology and how it shapes how readers approach fiction. This especially concerns subjectivity, the purpose of fiction and the responsibilities the reader holds. Further, by examining an allegorical reading of *The Lord of the Rings* we will demonstrate how applicability is a great tool in internal criticism between different readers.

Tolkien does not outright define 'applicability', nor does he give explanations for how it works. But if one examines the contexts in which he used the term, it is possible to get a proper impression of what he meant by it. The most coherent use is in the foreword to the second edition of *The Lord of the Rings*. Tolkien's mentions of applicability here are framed in a conversation about how readers will relate elements in a fictional work to the external world, where he, for example, referenced and debunked the idea that the Great War in his work is an allegory for World War II (xxiv). Applicability, in the sense described here, is a way of examining and reading a fictional text. Further, Tolkien writes that "history, true or feigned," has "varied applicability to the thought and experiences of the reader" (xxiv). An 'applicability reading' examines the fictional text and compares it to associations a reader might have while reading the text. Most important, though, is that this hinges on a separation between the work and the reaction of the reader, where the fictional work is an independent actor in meeting a reader. Thus, this association the reader has should not be imposed upon the text itself. The relationship between reader, text and author is one of applicability's main concerns and will influence the overall understanding of the term.

One of the most prominent arguments Tolkien made concerns how language is used. Tolkien was a philologist and, according to Ralph Wood, believed "that languages and cultures are inextricably rooted in time and place" (qtd. in Saxton "Tolkien, Sub-creation & Authorship" 56). How a language is used by a society will reflect how said society views things. The mentions of applicability are placed in comparisons with allegory and offer it as an alternative to certain types of allegorical readings (which ones will be elaborated on later) (Tolkien *Letters* 262, 297-298; Tolkien Foreword xxiv). In comparing them, Tolkien writes that applicability "resides in the freedom of the reader", while allegory resides in "the purposed domination of the author" (Foreword xxiv). Applicability appeals to subjectivity, while allegory appeals to objectivity, in the sense that the author has absolute authority over the 'meaning' of a work. In a draft to Walter Allan, April 1959, Tolkien expressed that readers often confuse allegory with applicability (*Letters* 298). They seem to be using 'allegory' where they should be using 'applicability'. In other words, allegory is overstepping its own definition.

Luckily, Tolkien's words about allegory give a clear idea of how he defined it. Overall, an allegory, for Tolkien, is concerned with the "moral, political, or contemporary", and the "particular and topical" (*Letters* 212, 232). This implies different things about the act of reading and writing, as Tolkien distinguished between the act of writing and reading quite a lot (*Letters* 145, 212). What this has to say for the act of writing allegory is that it would mean the work is created for the purpose of hiding subject matter that is topical and specific. Essentially, the work is 'about' something other than itself. What this says about reading, is that the reader will approach the work from a specific, topical point of view or draw what seems relevant to the specific and topical out of the work to examine what it 'says' about these things. The written one, while he dislikes it, was not something Tolkien was explicitly opposed to. Reading an allegory, however, introduces subjectivity in meeting the text into a category that appeals to the authority of the author. In this way, allegory can be made to contain more texts than the ones that have provable allegories.

What Tolkien saw as allegory overstepping its definition, though, will be better understood by examining the history of and complications within the field of allegorical study. In his introduction to *Allegory Studies*, Vladimir Brljak defines allegory as "saying one thing but meaning another" (5). With regard to fictional prose, an object in an

allegorical text is not truly itself, but is there to signify another, external entity. Further, Brljak writes that literature can be "used to convey political, satirical, autobiographical, and other forms of broadly topical allegory", but also "moral, philosophical [and] religious allegorical meanings" (7). Thus, the fictional text has a hidden significance beneath the surface of its literal sense, and this significance refers to the external, real world. As Brljak writes: "the literary work itself becomes a covering of rhetorical 'delight' cast over a body of philosophical 'teaching'" (9). The purpose of the allegory, and subsequently the work, is to be the conveyor of a message, while at the same time hiding this from the reader. Brljak and Tolkien agree on what allegory is, but differ in their view on the relation between allegory and text. Tolkien wrote about the allegory as something imposed upon creation; a choice made in how to create. Brljak's phrasing, on the other hand, suggests that literature is being created to convey the allegory; the creation is imposed upon the allegorical 'meaning'.

Working with only this definition of allegory, however, would be unfair. As with any literary concept, there are underlying thought systems and assumptions present in both the word and the school centred around it. For example, Michael Silk points out in his article "Invoking the Other: Allegory in Theory, from Demetrius to de Man", that the relationship between the allegory and personification is a complicated one, as they are often assumed to 'be' the same thing (46). Although this is a nuanced discussion, the overall impression is that while a personification itself is not allegorical, the attributes it has can make it one (Silk 46-47). In addition, there are disagreements within the tradition of allegory concerning the difference between "the other instead of the one" and "the other as well as the one" (Silk 56). The 'other' is here the actual words written in the text and the 'one' is the hidden significance of these words. The former one defines the 'other' as only existing to suggest the 'one', while the latter one allows for the 'other' to 'mean' both itself and the 'one'.

This distinction within the field is not invariable, though. Anthony Ossa-Richardson explains in his article "Allegory, Ambiguity, Accommodation", that for one side of the allegoresis field the allegory is "a structure in which two (or more) sets of meanings are held in a fixed relation to one another, an intricate and inflexible machine" (129). In other words, both the 'other' and the 'one' are observable in the work and have an inherent, visible connection to one another. This is, however, not true for other, more

contemporary, sides of the field. In his article "'[C]osigned to a Florida for tropes': Theorizing Enlightenment Allegory", Jason J. Gulya writes that the 'signifier', what is in the text, does not place any limits on what the 'signified', what is suggested by the text, can be, nor on what connection can be made between them (153). Thus, we can understand that there is no 'objective' truth to what an 'other' can represent. The 'meaning' of the allegory boils down to what the reader can associate with the 'other', which will allow them to read it as an allegory. Relevant to this is Silk's claim that, in more contemporary times, "the distinction between allegory *in* the text and allegoresis *of* the text" has disappeared (60). The text can become, and 'mean', whatever the reader wants it to, regardless of whether an author intended the work to be allegorical or not. However, this 'meaning' is seen as having been discovered by the reader, where it is an "obvious sense of the story" that has been "revealed by perceptive rereading" (Ossa-Richardson 144). Essentially, what a reader interprets from the text becomes part of the text. The belief is that a reader has found a 'truth' in the text, something that was always there available to read in the way the reader has chosen to.

This nuance seems to conflict with Tolkien's rather rigid definition of allegory. In fact, Ossa-Richardson explicitly acknowledges this and characterizes Tolkien's words in the Foreword as "[refusing] to conceive of allegory as a hermeneutic category" (142), where allegoresis is not a legitimate way of understanding a text. However, this neglects the nuances of Tolkien's relationship with 'truth' in a text, and above all, language. The problem is that allegorists would like to break away from the one objective truth and intentionalism, but that the language they use is still steeped in it. When allegory shifted from needing to exist *in* the text to also encapsulating what readers can read *into* a text, the word and what it implies did not change. Allegory requires intent, conscious or subconscious, as allegorical reading presupposes the text has been used for the purpose of saying something else. For something to 'signify' something else, that needs to have been thought of when placing it there. For example, Ossa-Richardson, appeals to there being no objectively 'true' allegory in a text, he still talks of texts "using" allegory (134). Tolkien acknowledged allegoresis as a hermeneutic category, he merely pointed out that to speak of an allegory as if it is in the text the reader must have enough evidence that the author intentionally put it there. He offered a change in language and approach to match the change in ideology.

2. The Act of Reading

Tolkien's distinction between allegory and applicability showcases how the act of reading, what one chooses to do during it, affects the text. Tolkien wrote that it is "naturally attractive […] to suppose that movements of thought or the events of times common to [both the author and the critic] were necessarily the most powerful influences", but that this is false (Foreword xxiv). Essentially, a reader's context will influence their reading, and one must acknowledge this context. In her essay "Against Interpretation", Susan Sontag claims that in the act of interpreting a reader is altering the text, but that this "sensory experience of the work of art [is taken for granted]" (5-6; 13). The reader's subjective reaction to the work is assumed to have been meant to happen, that their reading always was a possibility in the work, where their own subjectivity played a minimal part in how the words were interpreted. In other words, the subjectivity was not something that acted upon the work, but something that was acted upon by the work. What this means for the allegory is that a reader can hide their own role by appealing to subjectivity, while at the same time appealing to the author, and objectivity, through how they speak about the text. For example, if one were to defend the interpretation that the One Ring is an allegory for atomic power[1] by appealing to the validity of one's subjective experience of the text, one is at the same time appealing to Tolkien as an authority of the text and declaring oneself the authority of it. While Ossa-Richardson claims that Tolkien "[seeks] to impose his interpretive will on the reader" by requiring a distinction between allegory and applicability (142), what Tolkien is actually doing is refusing to let readers impose *their* interpretive will on the text.

This problem extends into other aspects of interpretation, as well. When anything can be read as anything, as Zhang Longxi writes in *Allegoresis*, the interpretations that can be constructed are at risk of "displac[ing] the literal sense of the text" (91). In other words, the interpretation can claim things that are not in or directly oppose what is actually in the text itself. Umberto Eco, in his *The Limits of Interpretation*, explains interpretation as a "chain of meanings" (31). There is A, the literal sense, followed by B (what was associated with A), C (What was associated with B) and D (What was associated with C). B will have a closer association to A than D does, as the only common factor between A

[1] This example is taken from an actual letter Tolkien received from Joanna de Bartadano, around April 1956, where she asked if this interpretation was 'correct'. (Tolkien *Letters* 246)

and D is the chain of association (31). Eco continues by explaining that the moment D is known, "any notion about A has vanished". The literal sense has been discarded in favour of whatever the reader has associated with it, or another association the reader has with the first association. It means that there is now no point of reference for different readers to discuss and disagree over. Discussing differences in allegoresis thus becomes quite difficult, as both sides will claim to have found a truth, that the other side is lying to appease their subjectivity, while also appealing to their own subjectivity. This, when coated in the language of intent and objectivity, leads readers to believe that they cannot misunderstand a work, and that every reader is equipped, and able, to evaluate and understand every work. Moreover, it gives the impression that one has, in fact, found an 'objective' text that one does not need to question the authority of. In a sense, the reader has created an author whose authority they appeal to.

In this way one can see why applicability, to Tolkien, is seen as freedom. Applicability declares no one the authority of the text and does not gloss over the reader's relationship with the text. When one applies something of a fictional text to the real world, one must first acknowledge the literal sense of the text, for so to acknowledge one's own reaction by acknowledging what one associated it with. A reader can say, "a can be applied to b, because they share similarity c". Eco writes that "if there is something to be interpreted, the interpretation must speak of something which must be found somewhere, and in some way respected" (7). Applicability explicitly acknowledges this origin point, the literal sense, making it far more difficult to ignore. In addition, it makes it easier for other readers to disagree with and discuss interpretations, as the reader's subjectivity is acknowledged, and cannot be used as a 'defence'. Benjamin Saxton, in his article "J.R.R. Tolkien, Sub-creation, and Theories of Authorship", writes that in applicability, "the text […] has a determinate meaning, but also has many "significances" that change over time and from reader to reader" (58). The text does not have to 'mean something' to any specific reader, nor does it have to actively 'try' to say something about any specific reader's context. Every reader can interpret whatever they want as long as they have respect for the literal sense.

While not inherent to allegory as a whole, the preoccupation many allegorists have with morality is significant when considering 'meaning'. Silk cites Heraclitus in his explanation of why Homer had to be read allegorically: If Homer were not allegorical "he

was guilty of impiety", and the reader's mission was to "track down the sacred truths of his poems" (53). Also Gulya has this understanding, where elements of a fictional text can "signify religious or secular concepts, real-life persons, or moral lessons" (153). What can be seen here is an anxiety around fiction that supposedly promotes the wrong moral lessons or glorifies the wrong persons (or type of persons). The need to impose interpretation upon a text can here be seen as a need to advertise one's own morality and establish one's perception of the world as objectively correct. Ossa-Richardson explains that before the twentieth century it was mainly the Bible that was studied allegorically and that, to Christian theologians, religious texts needed to be interpreted allegorically if one were to glean any clear moral message from them (131). In the tradition of allegoresis, the need to establish an 'objective' truth comes from the readers' wish that the text should reflect a distant authority's moral that they can appeal to as an authority to justify their own moral system. In this, one can also see a belief that if a text 'is about' something, it reveres it, as the Bible is largely seen as being there to promote the word of God. The text is a tool to promote a lesson, presumably by the author of the text.

However, some allegoresis readings can be seen by the field as 'wrong'. Gulya briefly mentions such readings, where "readers can use [allegoresis] to rationalize what is immoral or wrong under the guise of looking for hidden meaning" (150). However, this suggests that Gulya accepts displacing the literal sense as long as it agrees with his personal morals. Sontag, in a more neutral explanation, writes that interpretation makes art manageable and conformable (8). Readers will have convictions of what is right and wrong, what is right and wrong to write about and how to write about it, and when challenged by the text they will find a way to make the text agree with them instead. This is far more useful, as a 'wrong' reading is now not about having the 'wrong' morals, but about how one changes a work to make it fit one's own convictions. In November 1957, Tolkien replied to a letter written to him by a Herbert Schiro, who had asked Tolkien if "the Orcs 'are' Communists" (*Letters* 262).[2] What Tolkien offered instead was a rather firm rebuttal, where he stated that this was as sensible as asking if "Communists are Orcs", and subsequently listed morally grey aspects of the other races of Middle-earth, such as "folly and wickedness among the 'Kings of Men'" and "power-lust even among the 'Wizards'"

[2] Schiro's letter is itself unavailable, but Tolkien's thorough reply offers enough context to make this assumption. The text of the letter was taken from an article in *Mallorn*, 10, p. 19, and is probably a fragment of a larger letter. See *Letters* 447n[203]1.

(*Letters* 262). Tolkien pointed out the nuance in the literal sense of the text that Schiro would have to ignore confirm his own prejudices. For Tolkien this is not an 'immoral' interpretation, but one that oversteps its own authority and must be reminded of its own origin.

Tolkien's own approach as a reader suggests how seriously he viewed the role of the reader. When speaking of *The Chronicles of Narnia* in a letter to David Kolb, S.J., 11 November 1964, Tolkien wrote "It is sad that 'Narnia' and all that part of C.S.L's work should remain outside the range of my sympathy" (*Letters* 352). Tolkien did not place himself as an authority to be pleased by the work, but instead seemed to talk about his own tastes as a limitation that kept him from being pleased. In fact, it seems he would have preferred to enjoy the work. He was, as a reader, examining himself in relation to something he had been given access to. He was not, as a reader, deconstructing something he had been given to find value in it for himself. One can also see this when Tolkien comments upon Frank Herbert's *Dune* in a letter to Sterling Lanier, 29 September 1965. He wrote that while he did "dislike *DUNE* with some intensity", it was also "impossible for an author still writing to be fair to another author working along the same lines" (Cilli Entry 964). Tolkien acknowledged his own context as a reader of *Dune*, how it affected his reading, and considered his reaction to not be fair. At the same time, he did not dismiss his own reaction in favour of a literal sense he was wrongfully reading. Instead, he acknowledged that there was a gap between him and *Dune*, which he also did with *The Chronicles of Narnia*, that did not make them compatible as reader and work.

3. The Fictional Nature of Fiction

What is often neglected when talking about Tolkien, which subsequently makes it much more difficult to understand his understanding of allegory, is that he had other fundamental disagreements with the approach to fiction typically found in allegoresis. The following thoughts are also important in understanding applicability, as Tolkien's approach to fiction overall would form the foundation for how he used applicability. This understanding is rooted in Tolkien's religious faith and how this shaped how he viewed the world itself. In his essay "On Fairy-stories", Tolkien wrote that "we make in our measure and in our derivative mode, because we are made: and not only made, but

made in the image and likeness of a Maker" (145). This is something Tolkien referred to as sub-creation. The foundational thought of sub-creation is that God has created something from nothing, and that humans wish to emulate this but cannot, due to everything already having been made by God ("Fairy-Stories" 143-145). Essentially, one must not claim to have made something 'true' in the real world. In a draft to Peter Hastings, September 1954, Tolkien wrote that sub-creation is "a tribute to the infinity of His potential variety" (*Letters* 189). 'Reality' is what humans use as a tool to satisfy their need to create, exercising the creative freedom given to them by God. Art is not born out of a wish to 'alter' or secretly present the 'real world', but out of an inherent need to make art. Art is made for the sake of making it. The art is not there as 'rhetorical delight', it is the primary drive of creation.

This carries over into how Tolkien approached the 'realism' of art. According to his letter to Sir Stanley Urwin, 31 July 1947, Tolkien viewed his 'fairy tale' as a "particular phase of history, one example of its pattern perhaps but not The Pattern; and the actors are individuals." (*Letters* 121). The work has its own fulfilled system of reality that does not have to adhere or appeal to the real world's system. According to a draft of a letter Tolkien wrote to Michael Straight,[3] the characters in the imaginary world act as "it appears to be *probable* that [they] would" based on their characteristics and history (*Letters* 233). The characters are actors within their world and react and behave as their history within said world would make them. Saxton claims that, in doing this, Tolkien resists the thought that characters and plot are used to portray "the author's engineered moral or idea" (57). One clear example of this is Tolkien's draft to Peter Hastings, September 1954. Hastings, in his letter, was concerned with Treebeard claiming that the Dark Lord created the Trolls and the Orcs, as evil should be incapable of creating anything (*Letters* 187). Tolkien replied that Treebeard is a character, not himself, and that "there is quite a lot he does not know or understand" (*Letters* 190). Tolkien has thought of what the character's position would be in comparison to his own and does not 'enforce' his own position on these characters. Therefore, looking for a moral message would have no purpose, as this fictional world does not care for what is moral or not in the real world.

[3] The draft is undated. Humphrey and Christopher Tolkien set January or February 1956 as probable timeframe.

However, in the same draft to Hastings, Tolkien emphasised that the tale is "a piece of literature, intended to have literary effect, and not real history" (*Letters* 188). Tolkien is here acknowledging his writing as works of narrative art, and all that this entails. Gregerly Nagy claims that due to *The Lord of the Rings* containing multiple narrative accounts, the "texts' layers, reflecting various uses, make available a variety of voices, from the past and present of the imagined world" (qtd. in Saxton 56). The characters, by not being mouthpieces for the author or a 'moral', influence how the story is presented. This means that the author can be critical of, and disagree with, what the narrative, nor merely the characters, is claiming. As an example, we can again look to the draft to Hastings. Hastings questioned Tolkien if the reincarnation of Elves was not bad theology. Tolkien replied that while it would be in 'our' world, it "cannot be wrong inside this imaginary world, since that is how it is made" (*Letters* 188). The fictional world has no reality besides its own and does now have to acknowledge the real world, not the reader in it. Hints of applicability can be seen in the distance maintained between the real world and the fictional one. Applicability sets no obligation for the work to reflect or imitate the real world and instead pays attention to the act of relaying information; how the narrator narrates and how the reader interprets. This also concerns the completeness of the work. Things important to the narrative (not to the author or the reader) are set in relation to each other, fitting together to make up an ecosystem that makes the narrative what it is.

4. Fiction, Independent From the Real World

When trying to understand something in a work, readers often find it tempting to look at what they assume it was inspired by and then assert it as imitation of said thing. The allegory relies on this imitation, as the 'other' is a derivation of the 'one'. But, as Tolkien wrote about the creation myth of Middle-earth in the letter to Waldman, "these tales are 'new', they are not directly derived from other myths and legends, but they must inevitably contain a large measure of ancient wide-spread motives or element" (*Letters* 147). To Tolkien, elements that might have been inspired by the real world quite simply share general similarities with these inspirations. While the fictional elements have been influenced by the real world, parts of the real world have been discarded, altered or outright ignored in order to fit whatever was born out of them into the narrative.

Attempting to limit this element to what it was inspired by means attempting to ignore the creative process in which it was altered. Tolkien wrote that "An author cannot of course remain wholly unaffected by his experience, but the ways in which a story-germ uses the soil of experience are extremely complex" (Foreword xxiv). The real world, the author's experience, is a tool used to create a fulfilled fictional narrative. In replacing allegory with applicability, one removes the inherent assumption that art is imitation, thus making interpretation a more free practice as art is no longer restricted by the real world and a reader's preconceived notions of said world.

There are additional pitfalls in assuming inspiration to be imitation. In his essay, "The Monsters and the Critics", Tolkien wrote that searching for historical 'truth' in a work of art does not assist in literary criticism of said work, and that such searches must not be mistaken for criticism (7). Essentially, one has said nothing of the literary nature of the work, but more about one's ability to make connections. Tolkien continued by writing that by focusing only on historical factors in literary criticism, a reader is essentially saying that the work "has no literary merits" (7). One is not speaking of the work, but of how one can use it for more 'important' purposes. One ignores that art has been made to be art. If a reader goes looking for historical 'fact' in a work, they must "beware lest the glamour of Poesis overcome them" (Tolkien, "Monsters and Critics" 7). Essentially, a reader cannot know, without any doubt, that something they interpret as 'historical fact' has not been altered by, or is an invention of, the creative process. In fact, Tolkien asserted that where materials came from, and what their "original or aboriginal nature" was are questions that "cannot ever be decisively answered" ("Monsters and Critics" 9). There are too many uncertainties, especially when the creative process of inspiration is taken into account, to securely establish something as imitation if one does not have outright proof from the author that it is imitation. By emphasising the work's fictional nature, applicability sets a clearer line between historical approaches and literary ones, while also making the author's supposed intent irrelevant to the text's 'meaning'.

The advantages of approaching fiction as not imitating the real world, is that it becomes more general and, therefore, more 'powerful'. Sara Upstone claims in her article "Applicability and Truth in The Hobbit, The Lord of the Rings, and The Silmarillion" that "Tolkien's idea of authorship is rooted in ideas of myth preceding […] critical preference for mimetic realism" where being accurate to the real world was not important, but being

true to the essence of it was (53). Tolkien would rather look at fiction as exemplifying. In the draft to Straight, he wrote "we all, in groups or as individuals, *exemplify* general principles, but we do not *represent* them." (*Letters* 233). Everything, including fiction, contains nuances, but are not uniquely ruled or embodied by said thing. The text does not need to reference specific phenomena in the real world, but capture something general that can be applied to the real world by association and relation. Tolkien writes in same draft that ""fairy story has its own mode of reflecting 'truth'" that in some ways is "more powerful" than allegory, satire and 'realism' ("181" 233). If we look back to Tolkien's reply to Schiro, he ends his list by stating that "there is I suppose applicability in my story to present times" ("203" 262). What makes the general nature of this more 'powerful' than Schiro's interpretation is that it can be applied in many more situations in many different ways that can reflect different nuances of both the fictional object and the real one. When something is not merely an image of something else, the nuances of said something are not there to add 'rhetorical delight', nor indicators of said something's nature, but are equal parts of a whole.

When providing notes on himself to Houghton Mifflin Co. in a letter written 30 June 1955, Tolkien wrote that *The Lord of the Rings* "is not 'about' anything but itself" (*Letters* 220). In composing a work, the most important factor is to compose it to be the way it is. The world of *The Lord of the Rings* does not hide any 'truth' that can be found if one deconstructs it enough but displays its truth in every word on the page. It is about the struggle to destroy the One Ring, the struggle between death and immortality, and second breakfast. Tolkien wrote about *Beowulf* that the function of its elements "as shaped and placed, in the poetic economy of *Beowulf* as it is" is what should be given attention, and not what they might 'hide' ("Monsters and Critics" 15). Essentially, there is no 'key' to, nor any 'hidden meaning', in a fictional text that can offer a clear, realistic moral lesson. Instead of trying to find this where it does not reside, readers should seek what makes *Beowulf* what it is; how the story is shaped and told. In addition, how a reader interacts with how the different elements in the text interact can reveal things to the reader about themselves and their relationship to the world. This demonstrates the usefulness of applicability, as it easily and clearly acknowledges the text as text, while making it clear that a reader is making an active choice to interpret something in one specific way.

5. The Uncomfortable Reader and the Responsible Author

What this 'equal' relationship to a text also brings, is that it allows text to exist outside of a reader's conventions of what text should be. Gulya writes that an allegory not only describes works that have an internally consistent allegory, but also non-allegorical texts that "used allegorical conventions" (154). In short, readers have a prejudice of how works of art should function and when art breaks this mould, it is reshaped to fit into the mould again. Works that incorporate and celebrate fantastical elements are at a higher risk of being read as allegory, simply because they are unfamiliar to a limited reader. In "The Monsters and the Critics" Tolkien wrote that readers are reluctant to admit that the reactions the fiction inspired in them in fact stemmed from something fictional (16). The fantastical elements must be a 'sad mistake', or in a more familiar term 'rhetorical delight', to such a reader, as only what is real and serious should be revered as important. Upstone writes that in its time, *The Lord of the Rings* was criticized for "escapism and irrelevance", as its only connection to the real world was "metaphysical reflection" (52). His work was therefore useless and nothing more than a wish to reimagine the world. *The Lord of the Rings* does not fit conventions of what fiction should 'be about' and instead of considering what this might bring to the narrative, allegoresis of it chips away at it until the similarities shared between it and the real world are the only remaining parts. The freedom that applicability gives to the text allows it to be fully realized, not having to hold itself to subjective standards set by individual readers, while also forcing readers to acknowledge their own feelings in meeting the work.

For Tolkien, analysis was something that was not compatible with many styles of fiction. In a draft to Peter Szabó Szentmihályi, October 1971, Tolkien quoted Gandalf in saying "He that breaks a thing to find out what it is has left the path of wisdom" when talking of analysis (*Letters* 414). Put in other words in "The Monsters and the critics", a reader would have to "accept" *Beowulf* without analysing it to see something "far more powerful, and that cannot be sharply separated from myth, being derived from it, or capable in poetic hands of turning into it" (15). Picking apart a work to see all individual parts turns it into something mechanical and ignores the wholeness the work has been created as. While Tolkien disliked intentional allegory, he wrote that "any attempt to explain the purport of myth or fairytale must use allegorical language" (*Letters* 145).

Essentially, to analyse it will break it apart and destroy its literary effect. Tolkien continued in his draft to Szentmihályi that if a reader *were* to do an analysis, they must first have "read it with attention throughout" (*Letters* 414). The reader must care about what the work cares about, and actively pay attention to what the work is doing as a work and not merely how it relates to them. Redundantly, the freedom that applicability allows the text is also present here, as there is set an expectation for the reader to actively engage with the work as a work.

There is one small comment made by Tolkien, though, that has led many to cast doubt upon applicability. In a letter to Robert Murray, 2 December 1953, Tolkien wrote that "*The Lord of the Rings* is of course fundamentally and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but conscious in the revision." (*Letters* 172). For Ossa-Richardson, and many more, this proves that Tolkien "admitted" to "[exploiting]" unconscious allegorical thoughts, essentially making his work an allegory for Catholicism (145). However, this does not take the entire expression into account. This is made clear by what follows the few words Ossa-Richardson has decided to quote:

> *The Lord of the Rings* is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but conscious in the revision. That is why I have not put in, or have cut out, practically all references to anything like 'religion', to cults or practices, in the imaginary world. For the religious element is absorbed into the story and the symbolism. However that is clumsily put, and sounds more self-important than I feel. For as a matter of fact, I have consciously planned very little; and should chiefly be grateful for having been brought up (since I was eight) in Faith that has nourished me and taught me all the little that I know… (*Letters* 172)

First of all, it is dishonest to present Tolkien's words as if they were said in a conversation primarily concerning allegory and his own use of it, while insinuating that Tolkien acknowledged his work was allegorical. Second, as Tolkien viewed allegory as specific and topical, the fact that the work does not have overt reference to religion immediately disqualifies it as an allegory for him. Third, Tolkien saw the religious elements as absorbed into the world of *The Lord of the Rings*. Saxton's explanation of a "thematic interpretation" is best suited here, as it is the thematic ideas present in the work, and not the fact that they might have been Catholic in origin, that are important.

Fourth, and most important, is that Tolkien demeans his own statement as clumsy and self-important. This is not an assured statement of fact, but an expression Tolkien himself was weary of.

In fact, Tolkien had a rather flippant attitude towards his own authority. In a letter to W.H. Auden, April 18 1955, Tolkien wrote, when asked how *The Lord of the Rings* came to be written, that due to the story itself being finished so long ago, his own interpretation of it would be no better than any other reader's (*Letters* 211). Further, he emphasised that these also are *post scriptum*; that is, not part of the completed work. His impression of his own work now has no bearing on what he intended while writing it, nor does he view this impression as important to how the work should be understood. Applicability makes this an easy concept, as the author is not considered important to the relationship between the reader and the text at all. Ossa-Richardson's framing of Tolkien is a contradictory one, as he uses it as an example of how allegory should be seen as an act of reading rather than writing, as even authors themselves become 'readers', unable to see, or remember, their own intent (145). In this, he and Tolkien agree. What makes the framing contradictory is that Ossa-Richardson still appeals to Tolkien's authority as an author by suggesting that later readings such as these in a way reveal what already existed in the work (144-145), and framing Tolkien's words as an admittance of unintentionally writing an allegory. Ironically, this exemplifies the exact problem applicability addresses: Allegory would like to be subjective, but it cannot tear itself away from the language of objectivity.

6. The Effects of a Presumptuous Interpretation

In the article "Middle-earth: The Real World of J.R.R. Tolkien", Brian N. Weidner makes an interpretation of Tolkien's legendarium that relies heavily on allegory. Weidner claims to have recognized "blatant references to real life" (79). In reading the Shire as an allegory for England, Weidner uses superficial similarities, such as the landscape, the people, and their customs, as his arguments (76). These are superficial due to Tolkien's distinction between inspiration and imitation, where the real-life origins are irrelevant to the overall work. These similarities are the foundation for the rest of his interpretation, where the rest of Middle-earth is an allegory for Europe, Asia,

and Africa (76-77). This is approached as a natural extension of the Shire representing England, and no further argument is provided for making this connection. Weidner questions why Tolkien did not see these references and "either change the nature of the novel or alter his beliefs about the book as myth without basis in modernity" (79). For Weidner, Tolkien's staunch opposition to allegorical readings of his work is self-denial.

Weidner uses this biographical reading to claim things about Tolkien as an author. He writes that Tolkien subconsciously equated "the West with Good and the East with Evil", due to all things evil in *The Lord of the Rings* originating from the East, and that this proves that Tolkien had an "hidden, anti-Eastern message" and that his "imperialist British upbringing becomes evident" (80). Everything west of Mordor–the Shire, Rohan, Gondor etc. – is 'good' and everything East of Gondor–Mordor, Rhûn, Haradrim etc.–is under Sauron's control and therefore 'evil'. In addition to this, he claims that the culture and language associated with 'evil' in *The Lord of the Rings* is associated with 'our' East. His main examples include Orkish words having "even to the uneducated reader, a Middle Eastern sound to them" (80). Both of these claims can be disputed with examples from the legendarium, as the Western, colonial empire of Númenor, that subjugated other races of Middle-earth, is not positively referred to by the narrative of *The Silmarillion*, where they "appeared now as lords and masters and gatherers of tribute rather than as helpers and teachers" (Tolkien *Silmarillion* 319). All evil, apparently, does not come from the East. In addition, Orkish is an unfinished language, made up of numerous dialects that, when spoken, are heavily influenced by Sauron, who is from the West, and his Black Speech (Tolkien *The Lord of the Rings* 1131). In spite of the text conflicting with him, Weidner argues that because these Eastern factions are underlings of Sauron, their culture and language can be tied to this 'evil' nature.

When Tolkien himself applied Orcs to the real world, he did it quite differently. In an airgraph to his son, Christopher, 25 May 1944, Tolkien wrote 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" (*Letters* 82).[4] Gathering a whole group of real people

[4] It is difficult to discern the full context of this sentiment. The whole text goes as follows: "I hope you will have some leave in genuine Africa, ere too long. Away from the 'lesser servants of Mordor'. Yes, I think the orcs as real a creation as anything in 'realistic' fiction: your vigorous words well describe the tribe; only in real life they are on both sides, of course" (Tolkien, *Letters* 82). It is possible Tolkien was responding to Christopher's likening of an African tribe to the Orcs, but Christopher's own airgraph is unavailable so we cannot say anything for sure.

under the definition of the imaginary 'evil' ones is not something one should do. Tolkien here treats Christopher's utterance as applicability and responds accordingly, pointing out differences between the work and what it has been applied to, at the same time challenging Christopher's perceptions of the world. Moreover, in the draft to Hastings, Tolkien wrote of the Orcs that "the Dark Lord has exerted the fullness of his power in remodelling and corrupting them, not making them", comparing it to "the calculated dehumanization of Men by tyrants that goes on today" (*Letters* 195). The Orcs became 'evil' through not only actions of their own, but through acts acted upon them by other people. Not only that, it seems the Orcs and Easterners are *victims* of tyrants, such as Sauron, who are deliberately oppressing them. Essentially, they cannot and should not be equated with their leaders. When Tolkien made this comparison, he presented factors from both the work and real life that apply to each other. This application is not one of a nuanced fictional work onto a 'fact' of the real world, but applying one aspect of how evil is shaped to another.

What Weidner also does is reduce the person that was Tolkien. Firstly, as Tolkien wrote to W.H. Auden,[5] "[i]n my story I do not deal in Absolute Evil. I do not think there is such a thing, since that is Zero." (*Letters* 243). As suggested above, evil without nuance does not exist to Tolkien. In the draft to Hastings, Tolkien wrote that 'evil' beings are not inherently so but can end up serving evil ends due to "the nature and motives of the economic masters who provide all the means for their work being as they are", and they will "not necessarily be to blame, even if aware of them" (*Letters* 190). Every being is affected by their societal situation, and their 'evil' actions must be viewed with nuanced consideration of how they ended up performing these actions. In declaring that Tolkien believes everyone from the east, both within and outside his work, is evil, Weidner reveals that he believes an entire group of people can be inherently evil by being part of said group, and that any cultural aspect of said group is associated with this evil, he merely disagrees with who Tolkien has casted as this group. If Tolkien was not racist, Weidner would have to acknowledge that he was presented with a little explained culture with a language he could only interpret as 'sounds', from a geographical location

[5] This letter was apparently never sent to anyone, and according to Carpenter and Christopher Tolkien, it seems to have been written for personal satisfaction. The text is a rewrite of an earlier version that is now lost, but was probably written sometime in 1956. (Tolkien, *Letters* 238)

he had deigned 'the bad one', under the rule of a tyrannical leader, and immediately designated them as 'evil'.

As a reader it is irresponsible to lay ideological assumptions on Tolkien based on his fictitious works. Tolkien, the person, was a human being that was alive at some point, that most readers do not personally know. Nor can they know how every moral stance in his works contrast with his personal beliefs, due to the fictional nature of the work. A reader has a responsibility to not make Tolkien an object of fiction as well. In doing so, one is essentially inventing stories about Tolkien to please one's own perceptions. Any other reader not familiar with Tolkien's view of evil, for example, will look at Weidner's claims and assume that both Tolkien and his imaginary world believe that a group of people can be wholly evil, and that this group is the Middle-East. I, as reader, cannot say whether Tolkien was 'friendly' towards the Middle-East or not, because I do not have sufficient evidence to prove either way, even when knowing and referring to his personal interpretations. However, I can say that all of Weidner's evidence is fictitious.

Tolkien's own legendarium is, surprisingly enough, applicable to this situation. When Ilúvatar gives the Valar the freedom to make whatever they like in the world he has created, Melkor wants absolute control over creation, as he views his own attributes as the most important and directly interferes with other Valar's making by either undoing or marring them (Tolkien *Silmarillion* 3-4; 16-22). Melkor wants the created world to reflect, and answer to, only him. He creates without Ilúvatar's permission because Ilúvatar has not primarily cared about the parts of the world Melkor wants most attention paid to, and is scolded and shunned by Ilúvatar (Tolkien, *Silmarillion* 4-6). When another Valar, Aulë, creates without Ilúvatar's permission, he defends himself by arguing that he does not wish to mock or imitate Ilúvatar's creation; instead, he desires to create because, by being Ilúvatar's creation, Aulë has inherited the need to create (Tolkien, *Silmarillion* 37-38). Ilúvatar is moved to "compassion upon Aulë and his desire, because of his humility", and allows Aulë's sub-creations to live (Tolkien, *Silmarillion* 37-38).

If we apply this to the real-world discussion around subjectivity and literal sense, there are obvious similarities and differences. Readers, like Aulë and Melkor, can be inspired by created fiction to create themselves, even going as far as extending upon the already created fiction, but would err in claiming their creation is the author's creation

or in attempting to 'alter' the work to fit their perceptions. In trying to make a creation into a pure reflection of oneself, one is also denying other readers their interpretation of said creation. Readers who acknowledge the original creation and how it affected them should be offered sympathy by the author. A reader who does not consider their own perceptions to be 'truth', but who acknowledges themselves as creating when meeting what is already created, shows respect for the creator of said thing and is shown respect in kind. At the same time, the differences, such as the supernatural aspects, still inhabit *The Silmarillion* and are not lessened or constrained by such a comparison. This is because, while not necessary to this interpretation, we as readers are not dismissing them as less important in how the work was created, but as less relevant in the comparison to subjectivity and literal sense.

7. Conclusion

When meeting an opposing theory, especially concerning literature, it is essential to understand how this opposition understands and defines literature. In addition, one should actively interrogate the language one uses concerning literature, and what it implies about both the literature and oneself. By not considering themselves, readers can end up imposing their views on both author and work, but more dangerously, make the author an object of ideology without any sort of nuance. While it may be difficult to adjust one's vocabulary to reflect the applicability-approach, simply because we do not have the language to do so just yet, the intent of actively changing one's language and thinking of literature in an applicable sense are ideals that a reader should perform to the best of their abilities. In addition, as interpretations are made in communities of interpreters, applicability offers a clear, substantial method of 'checking' other readers and what they have brought to the work.

Works Cited

Brljak, Vladimir. "Introduction". *Allegory Studies: contemporary perspectives*, edited by Vladimir Brljak, Routledge, 2021, pp. 41-65.

Cilli, Oronzo. *Tolkien's Library: An Annotated Checklist*. Luna Press Publishing, 2019.

Eco, Umberto. *The Limits of Interpretation*. Indiana University Press, 1994.

Ossa-Richardson, Anthony. "Allegory, Ambiguity, Accomodation" *Allegory Studies: contemporary perspectives*, edited by Vladimir Brljak, Routledge, 2021, pp. 128-145.

Gulya, Jason J. ""[C]osigned to a Florida for tropes": Theorizing Enlightenment Allegory" *Allegory Studies: contemporary perspectives*, edited by Vladimir Brljak, Routledge, 2021, pp. 146-163.

Saxton, Benjamin. "J.R.R Tolkien, Sub-creation, and Theories of Authorship," *Mythlore*, Volume 31.3, Issue 121/122, 2013, pp. 47-59.

Silk, Michael. "Invoking the Other: Allegory in Theory, from Demetrius to de Man," *Allegory Studies: contemporary perspectives*, edited by Vladimir Brljak, Routledge, 2021, pp. 41-65.

Sontag, Susan. "Against Interpretation". *Against Interpretation and other essays*. 1961. Penguin Classics, 2009, pp. 3-14.

Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, edited by Humphrey Carpenter with the assistance of Christopher Tolkien, HarperCollins, 2006.

–––. Foreword to the second edition. *The Lord of The Rings*. 1968. HarperCollins, 2004.

–––. *The Lord of The Rings*. 1968. HarperCollins, 2004.

–––. “The Monsters and the Critics”, *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*, edited by Christopher Tolkien, Houghton Mifflin, 1984, pp. 5-48.

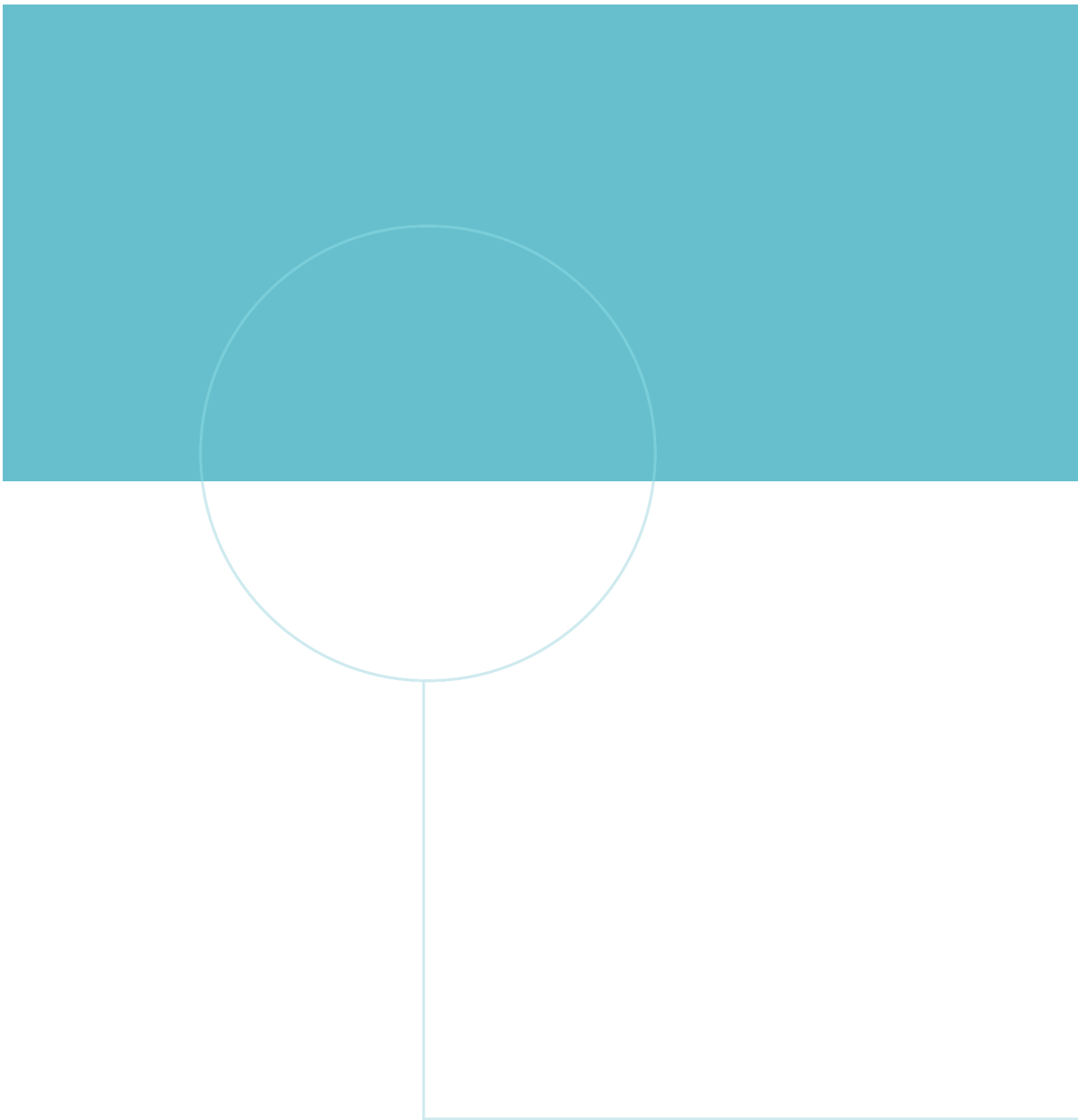
–––. “On Fairy-Stories”, *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*, edited by Christopher Tolkien, Houghton Mifflin, 1984, pp. 109-162.

–––. *The Silmarillion,* edited by Christopher Tolkien, HarperCollins, 1999.

Upstone, Sara. "Applicability and Truth in The Hobbit, The Lord of the Rings, and The Silmarillion: Readers, Fantasy, and Canonicity," *Mythlore*, Vol. 90, 2002, pp. 50-66.

Weidner, Brian N. “Middle-earth: The Real World of J.R.R. Tolkien,” *Mythlore*, Vol. 90, 2002, pp. 75-86.

Zhang Longxi. *Allegoresis: Reading Canonical East and West*. Cornell University Press, 2005.



NTNU

Norwegian University of
Science and Technology