The Mirror Crack'd
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INTRODUCTION

LYNN FOREST-HILL

This collection of essays addresses two of the most prominent and interrelated themes in the major works of J.R.R. Tolkien—fear and horror. The foundation of the collection was the session sponsored by the UK Tolkien Society at the 2006 Leeds International Medieval Congress, which shared the title of collection. The papers presented at that session are included here in extended form, together with those of other established scholars and researchers specialising in Tolkien studies.

Monstrous creations evoking fear and horror participate in many of the most important and memorable episodes in The Lord of the Rings, The Silmarillion, and The Hobbit. But fear and horror are also associated with sympathetic characters, and benign objects and landscapes that become monstrous in various ways and for a variety of reasons. Similar evocations of fear and horror can be found in the medieval works that are known to have influenced Tolkien’s writing.

The title of this collection, The Mirror Crack’d, acknowledges the well-known medievalism of Tolkien’s works. He deploys causes of fear and aspects of horror drawn from sources such as the Norse sagas, Anglo-Saxon myths and legends, and the Northern European folk beliefs of the Middle Ages, as well as from nineteenth-century medievalism and Gothic horror. In all cases, the source material is reflected and refracted through his masterly narrative techniques. That material contributes to the distinctive tone and rich detail of his storytelling. It touches at the same time on deeply rooted human fears, engages with ethical issues, and resonates with medieval morality and aesthetics, while asserting a positive cultural link with the narrative traditions and forms of a shared past.

The essays in this volume discuss and analyse the depiction and functions of fear and horror in Tolkien’s major works with reference to his known medieval sources, but they highlight the significance of other medieval sources that have remained obscure as hermeneutic tools. In addition several of the essays presented here draw on modern science, psychology, and anthropology to offer additional insights into the many
dimensions of Tolkien’s depiction of fear and horror. Links between fear, horror, and evil are thematic but in the light of these fresh approaches they are frequently challenged and rethought. While giving full weight to the social, philosophical, philological and ethical significance which Tolkien’s texts develop from their sources, the essays also draw attention to the entertainment and excitement that characterises Tolkien’s handling of those sources and makes his work so universally popular and so eminently transferable to audio-visual media.

The contributors to this volume confirm the continuing world-wide interest in Tolkien. They represent academic institutions in South Africa, Italy, Germany, North America and the UK. They include established writers as well as a new generation of researchers in the field of Tolkien studies. The range of their contributions indicates the scope of continuing scholarship, and offers new and stimulating readings which, while acknowledging the work of earlier scholars, achieves a degree of erudition that maintains the standards already set, and may be said to improve on that of a number of early, and more recent, studies of Tolkien work.

Maria Raffaella Benvenuto and Jessica Burke both return to Tolkien’s seminal relationship with Beowulf but with differing intentions. Benvenuto’s essay provides an insightful introduction and overview of the genealogy of some of Tolkien’s most fearful creations, setting them in the context of acknowledged sources and recent criticism. Jessica Burke offers a detailed discussion of fear and horror, adding terror and monstrosity to the mix, before applying these differentiated categories to Tolkien’s storytelling. She moves on Beowulf and close analysis of the fear associated with excluded and marginalised characters, the fear of becoming a monster, and the processes by which societies make the monsters they need from marginal figures.

Reno Lauro takes one of Tolkien’s most monstrous creations—the spider-like Shelob as a focus for his discussion of Tolkien’s philosophy of creation, turning to medieval theories of light to inform his analysis of Tolkien’s visualisation of horror and evil. Rainer Nagel too analyses the fearsome Shelob, this time with an etymologist’s precision and concludes that the naming of spiders in Tolkien’s Middle-earth imparts an unexpected Christian morality that has wider significance than simply to denote these horrifying monsters.

Shandi Stevenson evokes the particularly bleak landscape and atmosphere associated with pre-Christian northern European myths and their pessimism, and analyses Tolkien’s blending of fears of the natural world taken from these sources with a distinctively Christian theory of evil that can be overcome. Coming from a different perspective, Michael
Cunningham also discusses landscapes associated with fear, horror, and death in the Third Age of Middle-earth, defining a “topography of fear” which has its roots in prehistoric burial practices.

Tolkien’s debt to Icelandic literature is well established and Amy Amendt-Raduege considers how the culturally unspecific fear of entombment may be better understood in Tolkien’s depiction of barrows and Barrow-wights through Icelandic folk-myths of the undead.

Romuald Lakowski turns his attention to Tolkien’s dragons, particularly the monstrous Glaurung in *The Silmarillion*. This essay includes a comparative analysis of the complex genealogy of the evil fire-drake from his earliest incarnation in the Silmarillion texts to his latest manifestation in Christopher Tolkien’s 2007 edition of *The Children of Húrin*.

This focus on *The Silmarillion* continues with a geographically and socially sensitive reading by Kristine Larsen, who examines Tolkien’s depiction of mythological events from the perspective of the ancient fear and horror of natural events such as comets and meteorite strikes. She introduces the concept of geomythology as an interpretive tool with which to investigate the etiological myths of the Elves.

Finally, Julie Pridmore provides a detailed review of Tolkien’s fearsome and often unnatural wolves. She sets this in the context of traditional attitudes to these predators before illustrating the complex development of wolves and wolf-like creatures in all the tales of Middle-earth, and especially in the many versions of the tale of Beren and Lúthien.

The essays in this volume offer a variety of interpretive approaches, exploring a number of important themes from more than one perspective, and adding to the range of contexts within which Tolkien’s creation of fear and horror can be understood. Together they develop the major theme of fear and horror, locating their sources in ancient but universal human experience, defining their ongoing fascination; and revealing the essential contribution made by fear and horror, their variants, their stimuli, and their moral associations, to the depth and impact of Tolkien’s mythology.

The essays in this volume have generally avoided the jargon and obscurity of conventional literary criticism, preferring a more accessible approach, except where scholarly rigour has demanded the use of specialist terminology. Nevertheless, the research presented here contributes substantially to the still-developing field of Tolkien scholarship. In the wake of the film version of *The Lord of the Rings*, academic interest in Tolkien studies received a considerable boost. With the controversy currently surrounding the projected filming of *The Hobbit*, interest in Tolkien’s work will certainly continue. As a complement and a corrective to the films, this volume offers valuable insights into his narrative
techniques and the subtle use of sources that contribute to the uniqueness of his depiction of fear and horror.
CHAPTER ONE

FROM BEOWULF TO THE BALROGS:
THE ROOTS OF FANTASTIC HORROR
IN THE LORD OF THE RINGS

MARIA RAFFAELLA BENVENUTO

For many readers, the ethereal, almost heavenly beauty of such creations as the Elven realms or the Undying Lands of Valinor seems to be by far the most distinctive feature associated with Tolkien’s work. Not surprisingly, it has also provided an endless source of inspiration for many artists and illustrators. However, the darker side of his output, often embodied by frankly terrifying characters and situations, is almost as frequently neglected, though its role and relevance cannot be denied by anyone who has read and studied Tolkien’s work in a more than superficial manner.

The Lord of the Rings: a Gothic masterpiece?

Some time ago I found a rather intriguing remark, tucked away in a note in Lucie Armitt’s Fantasy Fiction: An Introduction, and therefore very easy to overlook. It seems that, on the occasion of the sixth Gothic Association Conference, held in Liverpool in 2003, two of the plenary speakers chose The Lord of the Rings as their key Gothic text (Armitt 2005, 191, n. 21). As surprising as this may sound, I have to admit that the situations that most attracted me in Tolkien’s masterpiece, from the very beginning of my experience as a reader of his works, were indeed more related to feelings of fear and horror than to an appreciation of ethereal, Elvish beauty. To this day, the whole episode of the Mines of Moria, tragically culminating in the Fellowship’s encounter with the Balrog, remains one of my favourite moments in the whole book. The sinister, claustrophobic
atmosphere, with its slow build-up of suspense unfolding into outright terror, are real strokes of genius on the author’s part; as are the introduction and development of the menace of the Black Riders in the first few chapters of *The Fellowship of the Ring*. As Leslie Ellen Jones points out,

The gradual revelation of what the Nazgûl are and what they are capable of is one of Tolkien’s most artful narrative devices...Although Tolkien is forever branded as a fantasy writer, his treatment of the Nazgûl outshines the technique of most horror writers (Jones 2002, 168).

Tolkien’s debt to the enduring literary tradition of supernatural horror in English-speaking and northern European countries comes clearly to the fore in *The Lord of the Rings*. Both *The Silmarillion* and *The Hobbit*—odd as the latter may seem, considering its status as a children’s classic—also offer numerous opportunities for exploration of the weird, disturbing aspects present in their narratives. However, such episodes as the Barrowdowns, the already mentioned journey through the Mines of Moria, the Dead Marshes, the Paths of the Dead and Shelob’s lair—not to mention what I consider to be Tolkien’s most striking creation, the Ringwraiths—reveal a personal reinterpretation of a number of recurring features of the literature of terror, such as ghosts, vampires and other monsters and disturbing creatures.

Even though most of these motifs were extensively reworked and reinterpreted throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, their origins can be found in the folklore and literary heritage of the Middle Ages, as one of the foremost critics and practitioners of the genre, the American writer H.P. Lovecraft, points out in his seminal essay on *Supernatural Horror in Literature*. Medieval literature from north-western Europe abounds in examples of fantastic horror: interestingly, among those mentioned by Lovecraft there are some of Tolkien’s major sources, such as the *Eddas*, the Norse sagas, and obviously *Beowulf*. Though it could be stated that most supernatural fiction has its roots in the Middle Ages, this was even more true for a writer like Tolkien, for whom this much-maligned and the same time idealised historical period was the main, though not the only source of inspiration, as well as his field of professional expertise.

In the initial part of his essay, in the section titled “The Dawn of the Horror Tale”, Lovecraft writes:

throughout the period [the Middle Ages]...there existed amongst educated and uneducated alike a most unquestioning faith in every form of the
supernatural; from the gentlest of Christian doctrines to the most monstrous morbidities of witchcraft and black magic….In this fertile soil were nourished types and characters of sombre myth and legend which persist in weird literature to this day, more or less disguised or altered by modern technique. Many of them were taken from the earliest oral sources, and form part of mankind’s permanent heritage. The shade which appears and demands the burial of its bones, the daemon lover who comes to bear away his still-living bride, the death-fiend or psychopomp riding the night-wind, the man-wolf, the sealed chamber, the deathless sorcerer (Lovecraft 2000, 24-25).

Lovecraft even suggests that what he calls the “mystic Northern blood” may be more inclined towards the tale of terror, seen as the peoples of Latin origin have a touch of rationality that tends to deprive these superstitions of glamour. The latter consideration, even though it can be argued upon, does have some merit: the cultural heritage of northern European countries shows a much stronger inclination towards the darker side of life, which results in a richer tradition as far as ‘supernatural’ literature is concerned.

In any case, Lovecraft was quite right in emphasising the enduring fascination of many disturbing, frightening motifs of folk origin. Even if Tolkien was not concerned with the anthropological implications of the presence of these elements in fairy-tales, in his essay “On Fairy-Stories” he could not fail to recognise both the importance and the attraction of weird, even outright horrifying themes—such as the ones to be found in a well-known tale from the Brothers Grimm’s collection, The Juniper Tree. That brief mention, often overlooked in the wider context of the essay, clearly proves that Tolkien was himself fascinated by the “dark side”, as well as recognising its appeal for many readers. He even dared to declare those elements suitable for children’s consumption, going completely against the grain of contemporary opinion, though anticipating the trend of later works of children’s literature like the successful Harry Potter series.

**A world under siege**

Obviously, in Tolkien’s case the above-mentioned elements and motifs are not embedded in the narrative with the sole purpose of evoking reactions of fear from the readers, as in the classic tale of terror. However, it could safely be said that their removal, or even their downplaying, would be strongly detrimental to the whole fabric of the story. It should not be forgotten that, as Tolkien himself aptly put it in the Beowulf essay, The Lord of the Rings depicts a world besieged by the forces of evil, made up
of a series of small circles of light. Out of these the main characters must
venture to face the “offspring of darkness”, knowing that—as illustrated
by what was to be the sequel to The Lord of the Rings, The New Shadow—
even victory will only be temporary (Peoples 1996).

Many of the motifs listed by Lovecraft in his essay do appear, in one
form or the other, in Tolkien’s major works. As the American writer
mentions Beowulf amongst the examples of medieval cosmic horror, I
would like to take Tolkien’s essay on the Anglo-Saxon poem as a starting
point. In that seminal piece of criticism he puts the emphasis on the major
role played by the monsters, which he sees as the real protagonists of the
story. He interprets this role in a religious, Christian key, stressing the
differences between paganism and Christianity and the futility of man’s
struggle against evil on this Earth.

Even without removing the religious implications evident in the
Tolkien essay, it is undeniable that many of the situations presented in the
novel come across as frankly terrifying. It would be enough to think of the
hobbits being pursued by the unknown gradually unfolding threat of the
Ringwraiths, or the horror of their experience when trapped underground
by the Barrow-wight. To quote Tolkien’s words,

A light starts…and there is a sound of music; but the outer darkness and its
hostile offspring lie ever in wait for the torches to fail and the voices to
cease (Monsters 1997, 33).

After a while, even the protection of the “circle of light” of places like the
Shire, Tom Bombadil’s house, or the Elvish realms, will not be enough to
stem the tide of darkness threatening to engulf Middle-earth.

However, that single image of the heroes forced to leave their small
circle of light to engage in a desperate battle with the offspring of darkness
is both powerful and disturbing. It also reflects the setting of stories such
as The Silmarillion, The Lord of the Rings and even The Hobbit. The scene
in which the army led by the Lord of the Nazgûl departs the spectral
fortress of Minas Morgul is certainly one of the most memorable moments
in the whole of The Lord of the Rings, perfectly conveying the desperate
situation of Middle-earth during the War of the Ring. While the earth
shakes and lighting streaks the sky, Frodo, Sam and Gollum witness the
mouth-like gate of the city spew forth a “host...clad in sable, dark as the
night” (LotR 691)—a vision that is enough to make Frodo lose every hope.
**Demons and monsters**

Like its Old Norse namesake, Middle-earth is threatened by the forces of evil and darkness. In many respects, Tolkien’s depiction of the evil host leaving the cursed citadel of the Ringwraiths echoes the blood-chilling description of the hordes of darkness marching towards the Valhalla, as presented in both the *Völuspá* and Snorri Sturluson’s *Prose Edda*. It was from those sources that Tolkien took, at least in part, the imagery of the Balrog, a creature quite clearly reminiscent of the fire-giant Surtr, who will set fire to the world at the end of the *Ragnarök*, the Twilight of the Gods. In the *Völuspá* he is mentioned but briefly:

> Surt from the south comes with flickering flame; shines from his sword the Val-god’s sun (Thorpe 1866).

The image in Snorri’s *Gylfaginning* is even more impressive:

> In this din shall the heaven be cloven, and the Sons of Múspell ride thence: Surt shall ride first, and both before him and after him burning fire; his sword is exceeding good: from it radiance shines brighter than from the sun; when they ride over Bifröst, then the bridge shall break, as has been told before (Sturluson 1923).

However, unlike the Balrogs in Tolkien’s *legendarium*, Surtr (whose name means ‘The Black’) and the fire-giants, the dwellers of the fire-realm of Múspellsheim, which reflect Iceland’s dual nature as a land of fire and ice, are very vague figures in Norse mythology, rarely mentioned in the ancient texts. In his essay titled “Sigelwara Land”, Tolkien himself elaborated on the isolated word *Sigelwara* (usually translated as “Ethiopians” in ancient texts) to suggest that those beings had more in common with the sons of Múspell than the sons of Ham. According to Shippey, Tolkien’s speculation on the word had contributed to naturalising the Balrog in Northern tradition (Shippey 2005, 48-49).

On the other hand, as other scholars have observed, the creation of the powerful, awe-inspiring Balrogs may owe as much to the influence of other folk beliefs, ancient or relatively modern. The Saxons believed that spirits from the underworld were disturbed by people (in this particular instance, the Romans) delving or building, especially in close proximity to sacred places like burial mounds (Bates 2003, 66). Another, more recent, though widespread belief held the firedamp-demon who haunted mines
responsible for sudden collapses and death in the underground tunnels (Lewis and Currie 2002, 55-57). Tolkien clearly took those diverse influences and merged them in a wholly original creation, which can be interpreted in many different ways: the Balrog could even be seen as a sort of vengeful nature spirit retaliating against the Dwarves for their rape of the mountains (Brisbois 2005, 212-13). In any case, Tolkien managed to create an extremely powerful episode, in which the menace of the fire-demon is first intimated, then slowly and relentlessly revealed.

Other monstrous beings in *The Lord of the Rings* seem to owe more to nineteenth-century science and adventure fiction than they do to medieval tradition. The archetypal medieval monster, the dragon (for Tolkien as much an object of admiration as of fear), is conspicuous for its absence in the book, especially considering its prominent role in most of his other works. However, even though creatures like Shelob and the Watcher in the Water suggest the influence of both popular fiction and B-movies (giant spiders and many-tentacled creatures being a fixture of both in the first half of the twentieth century), it should not be forgotten that medieval and Renaissance bestiaries abound in descriptions of fanciful monsters. There are also connections with Greek mythology to be found: Marina Warner suggests a kinship between Shelob and Scylla, a tentacled, half-female sea monster girded with voracious dogs’ heads, which attacks Ulysses’ ship in Homer’s *Odyssey* (Warner 2007, 92).

Going back to *Beowulf*, it is impossible not to mention what is probably Tolkien’s most brilliant character, the loathsome, pitiable Gollum. It has already been maintained that Tolkien’s creation of the fallen hobbit may owe much to the figure of Grendel (Chance 2001, 15).

As Verlyn Flieger points out both Gollum and Grendel are outcasts, wanderers in the waste (Flieger 2004, 141). Grendel, who belongs to the “race of Cain”, is clearly defined as an evil demon, an enemy of mankind. On the other hand, Gollum, originally a rather ordinary, hobbit-like creature, though with an odd inclination for delving underground, has killed his closest relative and friend out of greed, and has been subsequently rejected by his family. Both creatures live in a deep place, connected with water: according to Philip Cardew, the figure of Grendel could in fact be based on the English and German folk belief in “hostile
human-like creatures who live in fresh water, rivers or fens. They come out to attack particular places, like mills, and they are cannibalistic” (Cardew 2005, 205). Grendel haunts lonely, desolate fens and moors (Heaney 2002, lines 103-4). His lair at the bottom of a sinister lake is described with distinctly Gothic touches, like the frost-stiffened wood and the roiling waters where no hunter wants to dive. Gollum lives on an island in the middle of an underground lake, in a lightless cavern at the roots of the Misty Mountains. Both hate beauty and light: as Tolkien remarks, Grendel is “maddened by the sound of harps” (Monsters 33); while Gollum cannot stand the light of day, and chokes upon trying to eat lembas. When Beowulf cuts Grendel’s head off, the blade melts, as does Merry’s sword upon stabbing the Witch-king of Angmar, proving the utterly demonic nature of the creature.3

Vampires and sorcerers

Defined by Leslie Ellen Jones as Tolkien’s most modern villains (Jones 2002, 172), the Ringwraiths are yet another masterful example of Tolkien’s skill in reinterpreting traditional sources and motifs. In medieval literary and folk tradition, the figure of the vampire, or revenant, is far from infrequent, though it often lacks the features of the bloodsucking predator attributed to these creatures from Polidori onwards. “Vampire” episodes are to be found in medieval sources, such as Saxo Grammaticus’ Historia Danica, and even in classical literature; one of the folktale types in the Aarne-Thompson classification is called “The vampire” (AT 363). On the other hand, as Jones points out, the vampires of European folklore are not “incapable of really dying, but…are quite definitely dead—they are still moving around, and they want company” (Jones 2002, 172).

In this instance, Tolkien once again proves his creative approach to the re-elaboration of traditional sources, merging different motives in order to produce something completely original. The Nazgûl share some of the characteristics of nineteenth-century vampires: their very appearance, with their all-enveloping black capes hiding their nothingness, cannot but remind the reader of Bram Stoker’s Dracula, or his Gothic predecessors. As Gandalf explains to Frodo in Rivendell after the attack on Weathertop, they can also turn their victims into wraiths like themselves by means of a “Morgul-knife”, a shard of which remains in the wound until it reaches the victim’s heart (LotR 216). Earlier in the story, Aragorn tells the hobbits that the Nazgûl “smell the blood of living things, hating and desiring it” (LotR 185). As Armitt points out, the Black Riders can be considered as Tolkien’s version of Dracula: just like vampires, they shun daylight, and
track their victims by feeling the warmth of their blood. Furthermore, the stab of the Nazgul’s sorcerous blades, which will never fully heal, is clearly an equivalent of the traditional vampire bite (Armitt 2005, 80-81).

The Ringwraiths can also be seen as a variation on the motif of the deathless sorcerer, which is also featured in the Lovecraft essay. In Tolkien’s work, Sauron is probably the best embodiment of this common figure of myth and fairy-tale tradition. He is the all-powerful magician who transfers most of his power, or even his life force, to an external object, using it to dominate and enslave others, but at the same time placing himself in jeopardy in case of capture or destruction of the object in question. Such a motif is central to the fairy-tale type known as AT302 (“The ogre’s or devil’s heart in an egg”) in the Aarne-Thompson classification. Tolkien himself, in a letter written in 1958 to Rhona Beare, explained that his treatment of the Ring of Sauron was a variation of this widespread mythical motif (Letters 211).

Even though, as a semi-divine being, Sauron is not subjected to death like other creatures, his fate after the destruction of the Ring does amount to a death of sorts. On the other hand, the Nazgûl, being human, cannot help but remind the reader of those Faustian figures who have entered into a pact with a demonic figure in exchange for power, riches, and an unnaturally long life. Tolkien gives a new twist to the traditional tale, which is of later origin than the Middle Ages, probably dating back from the sixteenth century (Brewer 1993, 93-94). The demonic pact literally consumes the men who will later become Ringwraiths, taking away all that is human about them, their physical nature first of all, and transforming them into shadows of fear. Though they are nominally still alive, their life, (as Bilbo puts it in the first chapter of The Lord of the Rings) is stretched thin, almost to breaking point—so much that it cannot even be called a life any longer, but just a grotesque parody of it.

**Conclusion**

As I hope to have shown in the previous paragraphs, The Lord of the Rings provides a rich supply of material for those who are keen on exploring the darker aspects of Tolkien’s fictional work. Drawing upon various medieval, as well as more recent sources, he succeeded in creating a series of episodes which can be easily numbered among the masterpieces of the literature of terror. Although this fascinating issue is certainly deserving of a more thorough analysis, I hope this brief overview will nevertheless provide a valid starting point for further development.
Notes

1. Tom Shippey comments on how the dangers of Moria and the menace of the Balrog are built up slowly, before the latter actually appears on the scene (Shippey 2000, 6-7).
2. In the same essay, Flieger compares Gollum to a dragon, just like Fáfnir, because of his obsessive greed for the One Ring. He therefore combines both of the Beowulf monsters in one figure.
3. In *The Lord of the Rings: A Reader’s Companion*, Wayne G. Hammond and Christina Scull quote a letter written by Tolkien in 1963, in which he states that there is undoubtedly a historical connection between the two episodes, though it remains mainly a fact of his personal biography, since he had read Beowulf before he started to write The Lord of the Rings (Hammond and Scull 2005, 182).
4. The episode in question is the story of two friends, Arwid and Asmund, in which the former dies, but comes back from the grave in order to attack his friend, who is then forced to cut off his head and pierce his heart with a stake.

Works Cited


CHAPTER TWO

FEAR AND HORROR:
MONSTERS IN TOLKIEN AND Beowulf

JESSICA BURKE

Monsters, by their very nature, evoke fear and horror, but fear and horror are reactions that require a stimulus—either external or internal—triggered by something monstrous—be it in form or act, in order to be evoked. These reactions may derive from the unknown, but all too often they are born from the known made unreal, unnatural, the grotesque which causes an imbalance in the very fibres of being.

This discussion endeavors to explore the nature of fear—what it is and how it relates to horror—as well as asking what causes monstrosity, and are monsters borne from fear or to it? I seek to examine what the monster is and how it exists in relation to appetite, corruption, the quest for power, and the nature of evil in both the Old English poem Beowulf and J.R.R. Tolkien’s Middle-earth.

Tolkien’s monsters were very much inspired by those in Beowulf. Like Grendel the monsters in Middle-earth result in some imbalance in the natural order. Tolkien’s creatures—from Ungoliant to Melkor to Shelob—were born into horror. However, there is a second form of monster: the adulterated “human” (that which serves as the “natural order” or the social norm perverted). In some ways, this creature—the Fallen, the twisted creation of evil—causes a more extreme reaction, a more lasting one. For both types of monster—whether outside the realm of nature, or an adulterated part of it, monstrosity is a result of corruption and some form of unbridled appetite.

Fear and the nature of horror

One of my first reactions to Tolkien was horror, but the horror I experienced actually had very little to do with Tolkien’s text, but with the awful Barbara Remington editions of The Lord of the Rings and The Hobbit published by Ballantine Books in 1965. They were a gift to my
brothers and me from my aunt—a devoted Tolkien fan. My father had tucked them away for one reason only: at the very sight of the “bulbous fruit”\(^1\) and horrendous serpentine creations of Remington’s imagination, my childhood self resorted to a quivering mass of shrieks, snivels, and general hysterics. My fear was not overcome until some time during an adolescent summer when, deprived of anything new to read and confined to bed with a cold, I seized the Ballantine volumes and never let go.

Yet the moment I found myself within the confines of Middle-earth I felt fear. Granted, I honestly do not recall ever having experienced pure terror or horror during my first reading of *The Hobbit*, and certainly have not in my subsequent readings; but there is a kind of fear—we feel it when Bilbo creeps up to steal the troll’s purse. We sense it when the dwarves are kidnapped and held captive by the Wood-elves, it is with us in the labyrinthine tunnels of the goblins, and we certainly are afraid in Gollum’s lair. Yet, with each of these evocations of fear, Tolkien never fails to impart the element of the fairy story, nor does he stray too far from a path of bizarre humour. We have comedy in the purest sense at Burglar Bilbo’s antics, at the wry sarcasm of Gandalf, and even at the Riddle Game. And because of all that, terror and horror are not present in *The Hobbit*.

What then are terror and horror? Are they shades of fear? What, then, is fear and how does it function in Middle-earth? In *Tolkien in the Land of Heroes*, Anne Petty discusses “The Persistence of Evil.” In a telling statement of the importance of evil in Tolkien’s work, she states that “To say that evil is one of the major themes of Tolkien’s fiction is to state that water is wet” (Petty 2003, 99). The same can be said of fear, and, of course, fear can be extrapolated from evil. It can also be said that fear is evil internalised. When discussing the evil of Melkor and Sauron—two of the paramount forces of evil in the realm of Middle-earth—Petty seeks to define their attributes. She says:

The brute strength of trolls and massed armies of Orcs buffer an obvious physical advantage, but there are more subtle ways in which evil can assail the forces of good. Discarnate spirits employ words, emotions, and mental images instead of spears and arrows to evoke responses of fear. Like the fellowship members as they creep through the shadows of Moria, readers also know what it’s like to be afraid of unseen terrors that lurk out of sight, but which could attack at any moment. Often what’s not described in gory detail or explained in rational terminology can be the most frightening. It’s one thing to combat an opponent when you can see and estimate its strength. It’s another situation entirely to combat something you can’t see and therefore don’t know what to expect: fear of the unknown may be more paralysing than the physical threat itself. (Petty 2003, 105)
Tolkien’s monsters employ the physical fear of being threatened—as exemplified in the Orcs, trolls, dragons, goblins, spiders, wicked men, and other intrusions of the physical kind on the protagonists in all of Tolkien’s tales of Middle-earth from *The Hobbit* to *The Lord of the Rings* to the entire *Silmarillion*. Yet, as Petty states, certain of the monsters—a harking back to Grendel—employ a more subtle and terrible means of attack: the paralysis of fear. Despite Petty’s insight, we have not answered the question: what is fear?

For a “vague” sense of what the term means, and what physical responses it may invoke, we can turn to *The Book of Job*:

> In thoughts from the visions of the night,  
when deep sleep falleth on men,  
Fear came upon me, and trembling, which  
made all my bones to shake. 
Then a spirit passed before my face; the  
hair of my flesh stood up:  
It stood still, but I could not discern the form  
thereof: an image was before mine eyes, there  
was silence, and I heard a voice saying,  
Shall mortal man be more just than God?  
shall a man be more pure than his maker?  
Behold, he put no trust in his servants; and  
his angels he charged with folly:  
How much less in them that dwell in houses  
of clay, whose foundation is in the dust, which  
are crushed before the moth?  
They are destroyed from morning to evening:  
They perish for ever without any regarding it.  
Doth not their excellency which is in them go away?  
They die, even without wisdom. (Job iv: 13-21)

This is fear in a Biblical sense—the most primitive and primeval of fears—one which is as essential to Tolkien’s work as is the notion of evil: the fear of death. In his “Introduction” to *The Thrill of Fear: 250 Years of Scary Entertainment*, Walter Kendrick plumbs the depths of horror and surfaces with this same keynote: the fear of death. But, more precisely, Kendrick fathoms what I term a “malady of mortality”. In describing the terrified reaction of an insane woman to an injection of morphine, from Darwin’s *Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, Kendrick narrows the collective fear of death to a more specific horror of our own flesh rotting:
The wellspring of horror remains...the fear of death—or rather the fear of being dead, of the body’s losing form, turning slimy, melting away. This source shows no sign of abatement; it seems so self-evident and natural that it has come to be regarded as eternal, part of the universal human inheritance. Perhaps our remotest ancestors feared death much as we do; perhaps it is uniquely human to know that death will come and to brood on it. Our ancestors certainly feared dying, and they often feared the dead, as old tales of vengeful ghosts amply testify. If they feared being dead, however, if the very idea of a corpse, especially a rotting one, made their healthy flesh creep, they left no evidence (Kendrick 1991, 260).

Kendrick certainly has a point: this fear of death, the fear of the grave and all the imaginings we humans can have at rotting away is unquestionably a nucleus of horror fiction. The classics from *Frankenstein* to *Dracula* are a result of this “malady of mortality”, and so too are the legion of zombie tales, so-called “slasher films”, and, of course, ghost stories. Kendrick says that “horror’s fundamental errand [is] to assure the viewer that his flesh will always remain firm and intact, that for all this display of rot and carnage, there is nothing to fear” (Kendrick 1991, xix). But there is much more than death to fear. The *Beowulf* poet grapples with this, and taking many cues from this tale of monsters and horror, Tolkien deals with more than our mortal flesh merely rotting away. What then does this make of Tolkien? Is his work a tale of horror?

*The Silmarillion* does not begin on a note of horror. However, the uncomfortable factor of fear is introduced early on and sustained throughout the text. In light of Tolkien’s own words in his letters, evil was not a pre-existing condition (*Letters* 243; Petty 2003, 104). Yet fear does arise at the dissonance and despondency that rose about Melkor and his theme (*TS* 4). This also holds true for *The Lord of the Rings*. Fear is introduced bare paragraphs into the story—the fear of the hobbits in Hobbiton and Bywater at the goings on at Bag End (*LotR* 22-24). It is this sustained sense of fear that I feel sets Tolkien’s tales of Middle-earth apart not only from the mass conglomerate of fantasy literature, but from the horror genre as well. There is a very strong contingent in our society that needs to find molds, labels and categories for any given thing. For them, Tolkien is an almost insurmountable question mark. His work is fantasy—which is undeniable. Yet it is also horror.

The label, mold, or movement predetermines our thoughts. For his critics, Tolkien’s work remains outside this narrow definition of literature, therefore taking an uncomfortable stance as a thing “unclassified” (Burke and Burdge 2006, 128). It is this unclassifiable quantity that causes the critic to look around Tolkien when considering what is horror, and it is this
same quantity that Tolkien undoubtedly owes to the *Beowulf* poet. Before going further, let us examine what is fear versus terror versus horror. While similar, the three are not the same and therefore should not be used interchangeably.

When looking to a concise definition for fear, horror, and terror, we may look to two masters in their field: Stephen King, a master of horror, and Charles Darwin, a master of life itself. In Darwin’s *Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, we have general definitions for a variety of emotions, along with categorical description and case studies. Darwin’s descriptions of fear are similar to those of extreme pain and agony: excessive trembling, perspiration, quickened pulse, impaired mental acuity, sometimes accompanied by “harsh screams or cries” (Darwin 1965, 72-73). Yet he qualifies fear as:

> the most depressing of all the emotions; and it soon induces utter, helpless prostration, as if in consequence of, or in association with, the most violent and prolonged attempts to escape from the danger, though no such attempts have actually been made. Nevertheless, even extreme fear often acts at first as a powerful stimulant (Darwin 1965, 81).

Fear incapacitates. For our intent, it comes before terror and horror, and follows after. Fear is the umbrella beneath which we find terror and horror sheltering. Darwin also hits on a key element of fear: it can be a stimulant. The kind of fear we experience at reading a work of horror, a ghost story, or at the inviolable dark of Shelob’s Lair (*LotR* 701) is not incapacitating. If anything it is exhilarating, but fear, as experienced in our daily lives, can be a depressing, devastating, unbearable thing. The fear presented by Tolkien—and that which we find in *Beowulf*—is safe. We are safely at home. That is what makes this fear stimulating and addictive.

Darwin amends his definition for fear versus terror when he moves beyond emotions as expressed in the most primitive sense, by both humans and animals, to the more complex emotions experienced by the human animal. Darwin says:

> The word “fear” seems to be derived from what is sudden and dangerous; and that of terror from the trembling of the vocal organs and body. I use the word “terror” for extreme fear; but some writers think it ought to be confined to cases in which the imagination is more particularly concerned (Darwin 1965, 289-290).

What follows is more physical description of how fear impacts the physical body (Darwin 1965, 290-291). I find it most interesting that
“terror” is used to denote “extreme fear” or “cases in which the imagination is more particularly concerned.” It can be said, therefore that fear is an emotion that requires some cause to inspire it, but terror can be evoked by the power of the mind. Tolkien plays on these elements in his work. He permeates much of it with fear, or a sense of dread, but heightens this to moments of terror and horror.

For a definition of horror, Darwin joins the terms “terror” and “horror” as synonyms. Of horror he says:

The state of the mind expressed by this term implies terror, and is in some cases almost synonymous with it. Many a man must have felt, before the blessed discovery of chloroform, great horror at the thought of an impending surgical operation. He who dreads, as well as hates a man, will feel, as Milton uses the word, a horror of him. We feel horror if we see any one, for instance a child, exposed to some instant and crushing danger. Almost every one would experience the same feeling in the highest degree in witnessing a man being tortured or going to be tortured. In these cases there is not danger to ourselves; but from the power of the imagination and of sympathy we put ourselves in the position of the sufferer, and feel something akin to fear (Darwin 1965, 304).

Here Darwin describes a very personal thing. However, the line may be too fine to delineate terror from horror, or may have been imperceptible to Darwin and his time. For me, terror is an intermediary point between the undulating introduction of fear and the frenetic level of horror. Fear is the reaction to the unknown. The human animal at an unconscious level cannot register a “monster” or something that is “other”—outside the so-called societal norm. Therefore our brain has an adverse reaction to this grotesque, this monstrous thing—and depending on one’s own personal stance, this adverse reaction is labelled as fear, horror, or terror. Were we to actually register and understand this element—the grotesque, the deformed, the monster—would we have the same reaction? Would we fear it? Were we faced with Grendel, and a complete understanding of what he is, what he represents—would we fear him?

Darwin introduces the idea of personal or individual horror thereby leading us on to Stephen King for a more precise sense of the term. In Danse Macabre, a “layman’s guide” to horror from Frankenstein to Invasion of the Body Snatchers, King explores the many levels of fear, terror, and horror. Often criticised for being “careless...convoluted...and unorganised,” he does not fail to deliver a functional meaning for the terms terror and horror (Magistrale 1992, 20). He does link the terms, but he does so through a unique element that goes beyond Kendrick’s fear of death and rotting flesh. King’s definition also brings out a wonderful
aspect of both Tolkien and Beowulf: the fear of being alone, of being unmade. He says:

Terror—what Hunter Thompson calls “fear and loathing”—often arises from a pervasive sense of disestablishment; that things are in the unmaking. If that sense of unmaking is sudden and seems personal—if it hits you around the heart—then it lodges in the memory as a complete set (King 1982, 22).

For all his so-called clumsy approach to horror, King has hit the target dead center. He takes Darwin’s sense of a personal fear one step further. This sense of being unmade goes beyond death. It harks back to what Galadriel calls the long defeat (LotR 348). This motif of things being unmade runs throughout Tolkien’s tales of Middle-earth, and primarily in The Lord of the Rings. Frodo and the Fellowship embark upon a quest of unmaking. The success of future generations depends upon the glory of the past being unmade, erased, and forgotten. This unmaking is also personal, for readers, for Tolkien’s characters, as well as for his monsters, not the least being Gollum. Perhaps herein lies the fear and resulting horror experienced by Gollum. Unconsciously he fears the Ring being unmade—for who would he be without it?

King further hones his definitions and draws even finer lines of demarcation. He says that both tales of horror and the horror genre as a whole “exists on three more or less separate levels, each one a little less fine than the one before it. The finest emotion is terror” (King 1982, 34). King takes his cue from Darwin and exemplifies terror as something of the mind: “what the mind sees” or the “unpleasant speculation called to mind” (ibid). Terror is what we imagine lies under the hood of the Ringwraiths, the thought of Shelob slinking away blind and defeated but not dead. Horror is the second level on King’s scale. According to King, terror is the ultimate, finest, most Byzantine of the emotions of fear. Horror is less refined. It is physical on two levels—on the personal level of a physical reaction added to the shock that that something evoking the physical reaction is wrong. “Horror is the amorphous but very physical ‘thing’” (King 1982, 35). This places horror in a different perspective than I, or Darwin, had initially hypothesised. The third level is the “gag-reflex of revulsion” (King 1982, 36-37). In regards to his own writing and what can be called critical analysis of the element of horror, King imparts sage-like warning:

My own philosophy as a sometime writer of horror fiction is to recognise these distinctions because they are sometimes useful, but to avoid any
preference for one over the other on the grounds that one effect is somehow better than another....I recognise terror as the finest emotion...and so I will try to terrorise the reader. But if I find I cannot terrify him/her, I will try to horrify; and if I find I cannot horrify, I’ll go for the gross-out. I’m not proud (King 1982, 37).

These are all elements pervasive in Tolkien’s works. Terror is the most widespread in both The Lord of the Rings and The Silmarillion from Melkor’s theme (TS 4-6), to Sauron’s escape from the Battle of the Powers (TS 52), to Fëanor’s betrayal of the Valar by denying the light of the Silmarils to Yavanna (TS 86-88), to Saruman’s betrayal of Gandalf (LotR 250-254), and even to Boromir’s betrayal of Frodo and the Fellowship (LotR 388-390). Horror is the reaction at the kidnapping of the Quendi and the creation of the Orcs (TS 49-50), the acceptance that the Trees have been destroyed and lost to us (TS 81-88), and the realisation of what the Black Riders really are (LotR 214). Revulsion may not be as common in Tolkien’s work, for I believe while the monsters are at the heart of his tales, he was not rightly concerned with King’s “gross-out” factor. However, we certainly do have moments of utter revulsion—at Ungoliant’s presence and the devouring of the Trees (TS 82-84), at the emergence of Shelob (LotR 704-713), the Watcher in the Water (LotR 300-301), and of all the myriad instances of Gollum.

There is another interesting aspect to the horror, fear, and terror as represented in Tolkien’s tales: they are not restricted to the monsters. We can feel fear so very often from a character purported to be good. In much of the horror genre—nineteenth century horror in particular—there is a black and white depiction of horror. The good guys are most often altogether good, and the bad guys are all-together bad. This is often a misconception of Tolkien. All too often those making this assumption have either never read Tolkien or have read his works but have missed the point entirely. In “The Portrait of Evil in The Lord of the Rings” Michael Torre makes the tired and seemingly habitual speculation that the elves are the happy songsters presented in Rankin-Bass’ version of The Hobbit and just tra-lá-lá throughout the hills and dales of Middle-earth. Torre says:

It seems to me that the elves are who we would have been had we not fallen from paradise and into death. At least in The Ring, the elves are entirely positive in feel: fair, filled with the genius of song and laughter, with a deep wisdom and a high glory. They have a slightly different cast from their portrait in The Hobbit—where some appear a little small-minded and testy—or in The Silmarillion—where some succumb to unreasoning pride. In The Ring, however, they are only heroic. Like Sam,