

THE ETHICAL ECOLOGY OF MIDDLE-EARTH: WHAT THE ANIMALS OF J. R. R.  
TOLKIEN'S *THE HOBBIT* HAVE TO TEACH US

by

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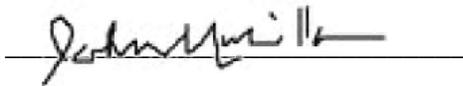
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## ABSTRACT

KATELYN IRIS VAUSE. The Ethical Ecology of Middle-earth: What the Animals of J. R. R.

Tolkien's *The Hobbit* Have to Teach Us. (Under the direction of Professor John Morillo.)

This research investigates J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, with particular interest in the intersection of the text as a children's book, Tolkien's ethics and love for the environment, and animal studies. I propose that the animals of *The Hobbit* are not as simplistic in terms of morality or representation as people may think, and that they teach young readers how to deal with different people they will encounter in their life journeys. Tolkien's book teaches these readers the values of hospitality, loyalty, and courage, and warns them against the corrupting powers of greed and cruelty, both within themselves and in others. Additionally, the book teaches that it is rare to find individuals who are purely evil for evil's sake, and that even good individuals can have their own agendas and ferocity. The animals in this story, however, are not mere allegorical stand-ins for the values Tolkien wanted to teach. They are fully fleshed out characters, with their own motivations and desires that have real impacts on their behavior. Tolkien gives them agency in decision making, personality traits that represent complexity beyond a standard good or evil dynamic, and, in the cases of animals that appear in groups, their own cultures and customs that are treated as legitimate and normal. Additionally, though characters such as Smaug are very prominent, it is not the most prominent animals that are in the most important, which is also part of Tolkien's lesson; indeed, the humble thrush is key to the outcome of the entire book. This furthers Tolkien's desire to prepare his readers both for unexpected encounters and for unexpected nuance in whomever they meet, as well as privileges the autonomy of the environment and its creatures.

## Introduction

J. R. R. Tolkien is widely considered to be the father of modern fantasy, and is most famous for his trilogy *The Lord of the Rings*. In addition to the trilogy, he is the author of several other works of fiction set in the same universe as *The Lord of the Rings*, including *The Hobbit*, a very popular shorter work written for children and published in 1937. The interesting situation of *The Hobbit* as both a children's story and a prequel to *The Lord of the Rings* provides room for an examination of the unique features of this book and the impact of its details. In particular, I am interested in Tolkien's representations of animals in *The Hobbit* and how these portrayals relate to the book's situation both in terms of genre and Tolkien's own views on the world. Tolkien's Catholic faith was both important throughout his life and present in his writing. His ethics are largely centered on a traditional Judeo-Christian perspective that ultimately sees good conquering after sacrifice; however, this particular element of Tolkien's life intersects with his love for nature to create an ethical ecology that, if not privileges, certainly respects and prioritizes the untouched environment. Tolkien had four children, and, likely wanted to pass on these perspectives to *The Hobbit*'s original audience. However, before I discuss how Tolkien achieves this goal, it is important to set up parameters of my scope for this project.

### *Definitions*

It is important that I clarify my definition of animal within the text. In the case of my analysis, I will consider a character an animal if it is explicitly called an animal (bird, bear, etc.) by itself or by other characters, or if it has the appearance of what we would consider to be an animal in the real world; if it is a mythical creature that has a real world animal analog; and/or if it is not bipedal. Additionally, given that Middle-earth contains humans but also elves, dwarves, and similar beings, I will try to avoid using the word "human" and instead use the word

“humanoid” when describing characteristics or characters that exhibit behaviors and appearances similar to what the real world would consider to be human-like and are outside of the scope of my animal definition. I will discuss creatures that do not quite fit this framework later in the paper, but for now I will turn to previous scholars and how they approached Tolkien and *The Hobbit*.

### *Animal Studies*

Animal studies is an emerging line of inquiry within the humanities, gaining popularity as scholars give new consideration to post-humanism, anthropocentrism, and literature’s treatment of non-human beings. Several scholars give particular consideration to animals and British literature and culture in their writing, including Richard Ryder and John Morillo. Ryder’s book, *Animal Revolution: Changing Attitudes Towards Speciesism*, discusses the nation’s history with animal rights and activism, noting that the Victorian era in particular was a landmark time for species protections that would continue to grow as a movement. Morillo’s book, *The Rise of Animals and Descent of Man, 1660-1800: Toward Posthumanism in British Literature between Descartes and Darwin*, contains a chapter discussing the power of the clergy and the image of and protection of animals, which grew to prominence in the eighteenth century with Anglican pastors such as Humphrey Primatt and John Toogood (69-71). As I will discuss below, Tolkien’s Christian faith was incredibly important to him, and it seems that a sense of Christian stewardship is also injected into his work and into how he creates and portrays his animal characters, as well as his very British sense of self.

When considering animal representation in literature in particular, a few key concerns come to mind. What agency, if any, do the animals have? Are they merely tools for humans or stand-ins for otherwise human characters? What do the animals have to contribute to the story,

and how do they do so? When looking at Tolkien's work and *The Hobbit* in particular, many of his animal characters are just as fleshed out as his human ones. Though I cannot claim Tolkien is what today's scholars would call a post-humanist, his work does explore questions of the benefits of being animal, and his animals do not seem to be simple stand-ins for what could have just been humanoid characters, despite this being a children's book.

### *Children's Literature*

Tolkien wrote an essay titled "On Fairy Stories" that explains his entire philosophy about this particular genre, defining firmly what it is and is not, from the name to the contents. Presented in 1939 as part of a lecture, it is important to acknowledge that this essay comes two years after *The Hobbit's* publication. Important because, as will be shown below, Tolkien's views and awareness about writing for children evolved after the book's publication.

In the essay, Tolkien explains his views on children and fairy stories, stating that children are simply immature human beings, not some special sort of creature, and that they are just as capable of having diverse tastes (including disliking fairy stories) as any adult (130-131). Interestingly, Tolkien did seem to expect children to get something other than amusement out of these stories, writing, "Children are meant to grow up, and not to become Peter Pans. Not to lose innocence and wonder; but to proceed on the appointed journey: that journey upon which it is certainly not better to travel hopefully than to arrive, though we must travel hopefully if we are to arrive. But it is one of the lessons of fairy-stories (if we can speak of the lessons of things that do not lecture) that on callow, lumpish, and selfish youth – Peril, sorrow, and the shadow of death can bestow dignity, and even sometimes wisdom" (137). His opinion on children proceeding into the appointed journey—adulthood—is an important consideration for my project. Though we cannot say with absolute certainty that Tolkien held this particular opinion

when writing *The Hobbit*, the lessons and nuance of the different creatures Bilbo interacts with seems to indicate a desire to teach his readers about the world, just as Bilbo had to learn through his own journey.

With this essay undoubtedly in mind, Tolkien would write in a 1955 letter that he regretted the way he wrote certain parts of *The Hobbit*, seemingly because they contradict the views about fairy stories from the essay: “It was unhappily really meant, as far as I was conscious, as a ‘children’s story’, and as I had not learned sense then, and my children were not quite old enough to correct me, it has some of the sillinesses of manner caught unthinkingly from the kind of stuff I had had served to me, as Chaucer may catch a minstrel tag. I deeply regret them. So do intelligent children” (Tolkien *Letters* 215). Though Tolkien would later make sure not to direct his work at children with a specific level of intent, the fact remains that *The Hobbit*’s unique situation means it can be examined with the genre of children’s literature in mind.

I would be remiss if I did not discuss Tolkien’s view on allegory, as he famously pushed back against his work being categorized as such. These views, held in concert with *The Hobbit*’s status as a children’s book, help to explain Tolkien’s goals when writing the book. He would write in a 1951 letter: “I dislike Allegory—the conscious and intentional allegory—yet any attempt to explain the purport of myth or fairytale must use allegorical language” (Tolkien *Letters* 145). In a 1955 letter Tolkien would explain his thoughts further: “In a larger sense, it is I suppose impossible to write any ‘story’ that is not allegorical in proportion as it ‘comes to life’; since each of us is an allegory, embodying in a particular tale and clothed in the garments of time and place, universal truth and everlasting life” (Tolkien *Letters* 212). Tolkien, then, did not believe in stories that were written with the intent of being an allegory. For him, he was simply

trying to get the truth as he understood it on paper. However, in a 1957 letter he would clarify that this does not mean his stories are meaningless, stating, “That there is no allegory does not, of course, say there is no applicability. There always is” (Tolkien *Letters* 262). Readers can learn from Tolkien’s work about good and evil, power and weakness, truth and lies, and can do so simply from reading the story and seeing where they find applicability.

Scholars who examine Tolkien as a children’s author typically note two things: his commitment to reviving a strong, English-based folklore rooted in medieval literature and the teachings he wanted to pass on, particularly a love for simplicity and the environment. Rebecca Knuth and Maria Cecire both discuss the strong presence of a desire to teach and pass on this English pride and connection. Janet Brennan Croft looks at Tolkien’s children’s literature beyond *The Hobbit* to trace a long history of concern over humanity’s misuse of the natural world. Tolkien’s commitment to the environment (a particularly British one at that) leads to questions of how exactly he would represent not just the natural world, but its animal inhabitants. For someone with such a strong respect for nature, it only makes sense that Tolkien would take that level of respect to his portrayal of animals too; it seems to be a part of Tolkien’s personal moral compass to do so.

### *Tolkien and Ethics*

Conversations about Tolkien and ethics abound, given his famously strong Catholic faith. However, I am particularly interested in scholars that discuss how that intersects with children’s literature and the environment. According to Kris Swank, the stories written by Tolkien, as well as C.S. Lewis and Phillip Pullman, mimic aspects of the Irish water voyage story, known as an *immrama*: “For Christian authors Lewis and Tolkien, the *immrama* were not only to delight their child readers with visions of wonder, but also guide them toward correct behavior and spiritual

transformation” (94). Tolkien intended to teach through his writing, and it is this desire to teach a specific audience about the world that drives at least part of the narrative. Michael C. Morris describes the connection between morality and animals in multiple fantasy settings directed at children, including Middle-earth, in his article “Middle Earth, Narnia, Hogwarts, and Animals: A Review of the Treatment of Nonhuman Animals and Other Sentient Beings in Christian-Based Fantasy Fiction.” According to Morris, behavior toward animals in Tolkien’s setting is sometimes quite simple: “In Middle Earth, kindness to animals is also seen as a virtue and cruelty to animals is a defect of character” (349). Additionally, “Middle Earth is inhabited by talking beasts, as well as long-lived humanlike races such as dwarves and hobbits, immortal high elves, and intelligent immortal trees (ents). Like humans, these all have good and evil aspects, and they are shown respect as members of the moral community” (351-352). This spectrum is important to my argument, for I see Tolkien’s animals as possessing a level of nuance that may be missed if one doesn’t look too closely. This spectrum is key not only to Tolkien and animals, but Tolkien as a children’s author. With the drive to teach I mentioned above, there comes the question of what exactly he wanted to teach. The specific moral values Tolkien wanted to impart on his child readers are influenced both by his Christianity and his love for classical writings and lore.

It is no secret that religion played a major role in Tolkien’s life and worldviews. As observed by his biographer, Humphrey Carpenter, “[Some] have found it difficult to understand how a devout Roman Catholic could write with such conviction about a world where God is not worshiped...[His work] does not contradict Christianity but complements it. There is in the legends no worship of God, yet God is indeed there, more explicitly in *The Silmarillion* than in the work that grew out of it, *The Lord of the Rings*” (99). Carpenter goes on to explain how this

affected Tolkien's writing: "He wanted the mythological and legendary stories to express his own moral view of the universe; and as a Christian he could not place this view in a cosmos without the God that he worshiped" (99). Tolkien's Christianity influenced his morals and his views on the existence of good and evil in the world, which was then translated over into Middle-earth. In a draft of an unpublished note written in 1956 in response to a review of *The Return of the King*, Tolkien wrote "In my story I do not deal in Absolute Evil. I do not think there is such a thing, since that is Zero. I do not think that at any rate any 'rational being' is wholly evil" (Tolkien *Letters* 243). This belief is crucial to my argument. Tolkien believed in salvation and nuance, and he believed in a spectrum of behaviors, even if certain beings' behaviors skewed toward evil. This is true, I argue, not just for humanoid beings, but for Tolkien's animals as well.

#### *Tolkien and the Environment*

Tolkien's fondness for nature is extremely prominent in his writing. Understanding his love for the natural world can be traced back to his childhood, when he was orphaned and sent to live with his aunt in the city. As his biographer explains, "[Tolkien] hated the view of almost unbroken rooftops with the factory chimneys beyond. The green countryside was just visible in the distance, but it now belonged to a remote past that could not be regained... This love for the memory of the countryside of his youth was later to become a central part of his writing, and it was intimately bound up with his love for the memory of his mother" (Carpenter 40). Tolkien privileges nature and preindustrial society because it has a deep emotional connection for him, and as someone who described himself as a hobbit, it is no wonder his protagonist characters share that connection.

Though not much scholarship exists that discusses Tolkien's representation of animals specifically, there is scholarship that examines the way Tolkien writes about the environment. Scholarship tends to give more attention to how nature is portrayed in *The Lord of the Rings*. For example, Ina Habermann and Nikolaus Kuhn argue that Tolkien presents a fantasy version of sustainability, writing, "The novel relates the end of the Third Age of Middle-earth which is also the end of magic, of wizards and the elves and their forest culture, and the new age belongs to men (and hobbits), who must create cultural landscapes based on the right kind of equilibrium between the needs of the natural world and the needs of humans, or rather there must be a recognition of the ways in which humans are part of the natural world. Despite this clearly ecological agenda, however, *The Lord of the Rings* escapes being a propaganda piece in the spirit of preservationist allegory through its sense of place, topographical specificity and localness" (272). This is an interesting reading of the text, and goes to show how Tolkien carefully crafted a landscape that wasn't just lived in, but one that breathed and had real, meaningful impact on the characters.

Character and landscape are also interconnected in *The Lord of the Rings*, according to Susan Jeffers' book *Arda Inhabited: Environmental Relationships in The Lord of the Rings*: "As evidenced by *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien felt that a connection to one's environment was an important character marker. The heroes of the trilogy all connect in some positive fashion to the world around them, while the villains all disregard it or attempt to exploit that connection" (119). Michael Brisbois connects ecological responsibility with a Christian obligation in *The Lord of the Rings*, arguing that Tolkien advocates for environmental stewardship throughout his writing (207). As I have already discussed above, Tolkien's love for the environment shows constantly

through his writing, and I believe it motivates him to do not only the trees and flowers justice, but the animals too.

### *My Project*

My project seeks to address the intersection of the gaps that I have outlined above. Namely, I will examine Tolkien's portrayal of animals in *The Hobbit* and discuss how his representation of these creatures not only speaks to how he views creatures, but the morals he sought to impart on those who read the book. I argue that Tolkien respects, and in many cases, even privileges, the insight and abilities of animals over those of humanoid beings, and through their actions, teaches readers that loyalty, courage, and hospitality are valued traits that will help them as they move through the world. It is dangerous business to go out one's front door, and there are those along the way, namely the greedy and cruel, who would seek to do harm to the unsuspecting individual, so this book prepares the young for their lifetime adventures.

### **Beorn**

Beorn is a unique creature in *The Hobbit*; a man who can turn into a bear, Beorn is a shapechanger who rules over a peaceful, animal filled domain that can be considered one of the last safe spaces on the edge of Mirkwood. The source of his power and where exactly he comes from is a mystery in the text, though Tolkien would later clarify one particular element of Beorn's identity. In response to a letter he received in 1954, Tolkien explained that Beorn had in fact died by the time *The Lord of the Rings* began, stating, "Though a skin-changer and no doubt a bit of a magician, Beorn was a Man" ("To Naomi Mitchison" 178). Little scholarship exists that focuses on Beorn specifically, but his being a man is important to the extant scholarship. Scholar John Walsh discusses Beorn in terms of his parallels with Beowulf, who was also a mighty warrior, and in terms of his connection to nature as yet another hallmark of Tolkien's

environmentally centered writing and beliefs (56). Eleanor Simpson uses Beorn's limited relationship with his animal servants (and their limited speaking ability) as support for her argument that Tolkien had a less complex view of animals and speciesism in his earlier works, though she does observe that Beorn's loving relationship with his ponies in particular marks Beorn's views as anti-speciesist (73, 80). Paul Lewis argues that Beorn was a predecessor to the more fleshed out character of Tom Bombadil in *The Lord of the Rings* and observes that "Beorn and Tom Bombadil highlight a significant theme in LotR, that is that there is both evil in the world independent of Sauron (e.g. Shelob [Letters 228]), and good independent of the Fellowship of the Ring. Not only are Beorn and Bombadil elements of good, they are not essential to the plot of the story, but they are essential to Middle-earth" (157). Beorn is certainly a force for good within the book, but I believe he teaches readers lessons about different types of good.

I believe that Beorn's abilities and his actions within the book offer up lessons beyond the existence of good outside of expected areas, though that is certainly significant. He is the only shapechanger the company encounters in the book, and the only human-animal hybrid. This hybridity and unique power makes Beorn stand out, and they offer a literal representation of how one person can have multiple dimensions to their personality. Beorn represents the nuances that portrayls of good have in the book, and he teaches readers that kindness does not equal weakness, nor does a formidable nature equal a cold heart. This is shown through the way the party has to approach his house, his hospitality, his goblin hunt, and his love for his ponies.

After being dropped off by the eagles, the company sets out to Beorn's house with Gandalf in the lead, as they are in desperate need of supplies. Bilbo and the dwarves pester Gandalf for details of who they're going to see, and finally he tells them a bit about Beorn:

“[Y]ou must be careful not to annoy him, or heaven knows what will happen. He can be appalling when is angry, though he is kind enough if humored” (Tolkien 164). This is the first indication of nuance readers get about Beorn’s character. You have to know how to talk to him, and he is the not the kind of individual you want as an enemy. Gandalf also tells them of Beorn’s diet, which is unusual for a bear or man. Though he can turn in to a powerful bear and hypothetically kill almost anything he wants, he instead “lives most on cream and honey” (165). His love for his animals supersedes his hunger, and this diet adds an unexpected gentleness to his nature. This demonstrates that Beorn is someone who doesn’t use his power for cruelty or out of wantonness. As will be discussed later, he mostly uses his power for the sake of protecting what he cares about.

When Beorn is first introduced, he is in his human form, which is still formidable, but makes him more approachable. Gandalf distracts Beorn with the story of the company’s recent travels, which allows them to all approach the house without annoying Beorn (Tolkien 167-175). Beorn is amused and shows the party hospitality by agreeing to let them come into his home and eat supper, which is unusual for him, as he “never invited people into his house, if he could help it. He had very few friends and they lived a good way away; and he never invited more than a couple of these to his house at a time” (Tolkien 174). He likes his privacy, and he likes to be in control of visitors. This is neither described as good nor bad, but rather a matter of personal preference. Though isolation may imply a moody, broodish sort of quality, it does not mean that Beorn is a bad host. Indeed, he is shown to be a good host, as the food is excellent and he informs the party with “tales of the wild lands on this side of the mountains, and especially of the dark and dangerous wood, that lay outstretched far to the North and South a day’s ride before them...” (Tolkien 176). Though this intimidates them, given that this is the next stretch of the

journey, it is both entertaining and useful for them to know. The dwarves then begin to speak of gold, jewels, and blacksmithing, which causes Beorn to quickly lose interest, as he doesn't care for such things (Tolkien 177). If anything, this shows that he was being a better host than the dwarves were guests, as they began talking about something that was boring to their host and very focused on material possessions.

The night that the party arrives, Beorn departs for reasons he doesn't disclose, and Gandalf reminds them "you must not stray outside until the sun is up, on your peril" (Tolkien 178). That night Bilbo hears loud noises outside and becomes frightened, and this is the first hint of Beorn's ferocity (Tolkien 179). This is more clearly outlined upon Beorn's return when he tells them about his interrogation of a Warg (a kind of wolf) and goblin and Bilbo asks what he did with them. Bilbo walks outside and sees that "A goblin's head was stuck outside the gate and a warg-skin was nailed to a tree just beyond. Beorn was a fierce enemy. But now he was their friend" (Tolkien 182). Beorn is able to single-handedly take down a Warg and a goblin, and he delights in discovering that Gandalf was telling the truth about the company's fight with the goblins. This reveals that he is not afraid to fight when he feels the cause is just (in this case, removing evil from the area) and that he is a powerful, capable warrior.

Beorn also teaches readers about believing appearances as well. Though the dwarves, Bilbo, and Gandalf appear relatively harmless and tell him that they fought Wargs and goblins, Beorn makes it clear that he doesn't believe them right away just because they had a good story (Tolkien 175). Though he ventured out and confirmed their story, he tells the party, "You must forgive my not taking your word. If you lived near the edge of Mirkwood, you would take the word of no one that you did not know as well as your brother or better" (182). This is a warning about believing everything you hear and assuming that people are good based on how they look.

The same can be said for Beorn; though he has a fierce, terrifying side, he is not without good in his heart. This is probably at least partially influenced by Tolkien's wartime experiences, especially to concerns about spies, but it is also a good message for children who are getting out into the world for the first time.

Another, more obvious lesson has to do with hospitality and promises, and ties to the greedy tendencies of the dwarves. Before they leave to continue on their journey, the party receives gifts of food and water from Beorn, an invitation to visit his house again when they return to his realm, and, most significantly, a short term loan of his ponies (Tolkien 185-186). This generosity is indicative of his kindness and loyalty to his friends, though there is a limit to that benevolence. When the party reaches the edge of Mirkwood, the dwarves complain about having to give up the ponies Beorn let them borrow (Tolkien 186). Gandalf sternly warns them to let the ponies go home, saying, "Beorn may be your friend, but he loves his animals as his children. You do not guess what kindness he has shown you in letting dwarves ride them so far and so fast, nor what would happen to you, if you tried to take them into the forest" (Tolkien 186). Gandalf knew that Beorn would kill them if they attempted to steal his ponies, and Beorn would be morally right for doing so. To abuse hospitality is to invite trouble for oneself, and that is putting it lightly. This also warns against a kind of greed, a message that Tolkien will repeat later with Smaug.

Beorn escorts Gandalf and Bilbo home at the end of the book, but otherwise only appears in one other chapter of the book to conduct two acts that can only be described as heroic. During the Battle of the Five Armies, Beorn arrives in bear form at the last moment to save the day. He acts as a reinforcement unit all by himself, and he "tossed wolves and goblins from his path like straws and feathers. He fell upon their rear, and broke like a clap of thunder through the

ring...Then Beorn stooped and lifted Thorin, who had fallen pierced with spears, and bore him out of the fray” (Tolkien 349). This is Beorn once again showing his loyalty to his friends; the dwarves earned his respect earlier, and he is repaying them through attempting to save Thorin’s life. The battle also allows him to have his full power on display for the sake of saving people he cares about and fighting to get rid of the goblins. Next, Beorn killed the goblin Blog, which broke the morale of the other goblins and sent them running, leading to victory in the battle (Tolkien 349). In killing Blog, Beorn removes a creature of great evil from the land, ultimately for the safety and prosperity of all inhabitants. This relates back to his ferocity; he will fight against threats and against creatures that he knows seek to do bad.

Tolkien does not dull Beorn’s animal nature for the sake of making him a friendly sage in an unexpected place (this is a departure from the Bombadil argument presented by Paul Lewis, and an important one). Indeed, part of Beorn’s power and capability is in his bearishness; to take this away is to take away a key part of his character. Tolkien preserves this element and makes Beorn something more than a man with a unique ability, for he shows up to battle as a bear, revealing that ferocity has its uses and place. This adds to Beorn’s more gray stance in the book, and his prominence demonstrates a commitment to nuance.

Beorn is, on the whole, a “good” character, but one who does things on his own terms. He hates the Wargs and goblins that terrorize the land, and is willing to help the dwarves on their quest, especially once he finds out that they killed the Great Goblin and did the whole area a favor. However, Beorn is not the kind of individual to be all kindness and no ferocity. Beorn is a nuanced character, one that protects his own above all else. Like the eagles, Beorn ultimately plays a positive role in the story, but interacting with him is not a completely safe task. The lessons of Beorn are ones that will serve children well wherever they go in the world. They may

meet people who frighten them but have a kind heart if they will persist in building a relationship, and they need to know that not everyone is as honest as those at home. Unexpected kindness can be found with other individuals as well, as shown by Tolkien's portrayals of birds in *The Hobbit*.

## **Birds**

### *The Thrush*

When one thinks of winged creatures of consequence to the story of *The Hobbit*, one likely thinks of Smaug, and perhaps even the eagles that fly the company to safety when all seems lost. Scholarship does not tend to focus on Tolkien's portrayal of birds in particular, though Eleanor Simpson does include a discussion of the eagles in her article, noting that Tolkien makes them more fleshed out in *The Hobbit* and preserves their animalistic qualities without marking them as lesser or subservient because Gandalf helped them once previously (84-85). Lara Soko argues that the eagles are shown to have the most self-awareness and intelligence, though the special ravens of the Lonely Mountain are also intelligent—for Soko, everything comes down to intelligence in terms of representation of animals in Tolkien's writing (20-21). Though the eagles are certainly interesting, they are not, I would argue, the most important winged creatures in the book. The animal most significant to *The Hobbit* is none other than the humble thrush.

There is a lot of meaning in this, as it is important to note that the thrush is small, not particularly pretty, and is unable to speak to the company (though it clearly possess an understanding of Common, the universal language of the setting). It is not a gigantic, larger than life figure like Smaug, nor is it a formidable, noble being like an eagle. Even the raven he fetches is able to speak to the party, and the thrush does not have a name, or at least, does not have a

name that the readers learn in the story. Despite all of this, the thrush is the key to the adventure's success, and the reason that Smaug was slain.

The first significant act of the thrush is a silent one. When he appears, Bilbo is sitting near the door that the company cannot open on the side of the Lonely Mountain, and all are anxiously attempting to figure out how to gain entry (Tolkien 264). Suddenly, Bilbo notices the thrush: "There on the grey stone in the grass was an enormous thrush, nearly coal black, its pale yellow breast freckled with dark spots. Crack! It had caught a snail and was knocking it on the stone. Crack! Crack! Suddenly, Bilbo understood" (Tolkien 264). Though the thrush could not communicate through words, he was smart enough to figure out how to tell Bilbo how to open the door. Indeed, the silent wisdom of this animal surpassed the puzzling of thirteen humanoid beings.

The second important action of the thrush does involve speaking, and a unique, ancient relationship. Even though Bard is the one who actually kills Smaug, he would not have been able to do so without the thrush's help. Bard, a man of the lake town Esgaroth, had been shooting at Smaug during his rampage, but Bard's arrows couldn't pierce the dragon's thick hide (Tolkien 307). Suddenly, the thrush appears at his shoulder and tells him, "The moon is rising. Look for the hollow of the left breast as he flies and turns above you!" (Tolkien 307). Though the thrush doesn't speak Common, Bard is able to understand the thrush because of his Dale ancestry, and he shoots Smaug in his weak spot, killing him (Tolkien 307-308). Once again, we see this animal being superior to a humanoid creature. His wisdom is that of looking close and timing things just right, and of making the most of connections. And just as Bilbo could not have opened the door without the thrush, Bard could not have slain Smaug.

The third major act of assistance that the thrush performs is that of fetching the ancient raven king. The day after Smaug is killed, the thrush returns to the company, who do not know that Smaug is dead (Tolkien 314). Balin states that he wishes the thrush were a raven, and explains that there used to be flocks of ravens around the Lonely Mountain who lived extremely long lives and had a working relationship with the dwarves (Tolkien 315). The thrush listens to Balin's words, then flies off and returns with one of the ravens Balin was speaking of (Tolkien 315-316). The raven will be discussed further below, but he also plays a significant role in the story. The thrush seems to almost intuitively know what people need and how to get them help. The three acts of the thrush can be easily missed when reading *The Hobbit*, but without them, the story would have a very different outcome.

What readers learn from the thrush is that you do not have to be huge and mighty to be important, nor do you have to be particularly adept at anything other than paying attention to what's going on around you. Additionally, the thrush seems to demonstrate the importance of waiting for the right moment to act. After all, he seemed to know to wait to show Bilbo how to open the door, and he encouraged Bard to wait for the right angle to strike. The thrush also demonstrates a kind of loyalty and bravery, for he still assists those who descend from Dale and those who are trying to free the area from Smaug's wrath, even at the risk of his own life. All of these values get portrayed in a positive light, one that also connects to the thrush's moments of quiet superiority. This animal displays an intelligence that is both impressive and helpful, and the values he lives out (courage, loyalty) appear to be by his own choice. After all, nobody compelled him to help the company at multiple points throughout the story, yet without him this tale would have a very different ending. In terms of saving the party and impacting the outcome of the story, yet another type of bird also plays a key role in the story: the eagles.

*The Eagles*

The eagles appear briefly in *The Hobbit*, but their role as saviors of the company cannot be overlooked. Like many other animals in this book, they are able to speak Common, but they answer to no human. The eagles are quite literally members of their own kingdom, separate from the humanoid affairs of Middle-Earth, with their own language, customs, and royalty. Because of their autonomy, they possess agency, and like Beorn, they are a force for good within the world that is not necessarily pledged to one “side” or the other.

The eagles rescue the company from the Wargs and goblins and take them to their eyrie, and all the while Bilbo is frightened both of being harmed by the eagles and of offending the eagles (Tolkien 156). During Bilbo’s series of worries, the narrative voice of the story interjects to say, “You ought not to be rude to an eagle, when you are only the size of a hobbit, and are up in his eyrie at night!” (Tolkien 156). This is very similar to how it is recommended that you approach and interact with Beorn, and it is obviously for the same reason: they have a formidable nature, but also would not take kindly to people not respecting their helpful acts. This sentence also gives the eagles agency, as they are written as having ownership of a specific place, which is very similar to a human owning a home. This relatable aspect makes the eagles more likeable, and it helps to frame their actions as that of nobly protecting those they love, something that would have rang familiar to readers.

Another way in which the eagles and Beorn are similar is their approach to both interacting with Gandalf and their hospitality. Bilbo’s fears of being eaten are soon taken away, as he sees Gandalf and the king of the eagles having a conversation, allowing Bilbo to observe that “[t]he wizard and the eagle-lord appeared to know one another slightly, and even to be on friendly terms. As a matter of fact Gandalf, who had often been in the mountains, had once

rendered a service to the eagles and healed their lord from an arrow-wound” (Tolkien 157). This teaches readers, and especially young children, that a kindness will often be repaid with kindness. It also, once again through Gandalf, demonstrates that knowing how to interact with someone in specific situations it is very important; if you are nothing else, you should be socially aware. This social awareness is also demonstrated on the part of the eagles. After the company states that they are hungry, the eagles offer to help, playing the role of good hosts, as shown by their actions that night: “The eagles had brought up dry boughs for fuel, and they had brought rabbits, hares, and a small sheep” (Tolkien 159). Eagles would obviously eat their food raw, but they thought to get kindling so that the party could make a fire in order to cook their food and stay warm. Like Beorn, they are considerate of their guests and their needs.

The eagles also have a limit to how much they’re willing to help the company. Their assistance is on their own terms, which furthers their agency. Though they do return to help in the Battle of the Five Armies, that was, as far as readers can tell, by their own choice. When the eagles drop the party off, there is an exchange of formalities between the eagles and Gandalf: “ ‘Farewell!’ they cried, ‘wherever you fare, till your eyries receive you at the journey’s end!’ That is the polite thing to say among eagles. ‘May the wind under your wings bear you where the sun sails and the moon walks,’ answered Gandalf, who knew the correct reply” (Tolkien 162). Gandalf knowing the customs of the eagles further legitimizes their independence and agency, as this means that their customs are worth knowing, and that their court is just as valuable as any humanoid one. Indeed, the fact that they even have such specific farewells is all the more impressive.

The eagles teach lessons that are very similar to Beorn in that powerful people are not inherently dangerous, but you also cannot abuse their kindness either. This reinforces the value

of hospitality within the book, and the eagles rescuing the company reinforces the value of timeliness and courage. It also shows that there are people in the world who are willing to be helpful, but only to a certain point. From an animal studies perspective, the eagles appear to be on par with any human court with everything from their customs to their hospitality, if not superior given their thoughtfulness despite cultural differences, such as the preparation of the food. Superiority is a theme that Tolkien carries over to the last bird I discuss: the raven.

### *The Raven*

Splitting the difference between the noble stature of the eagles and the commonness of the thrush is the raven. The raven mentioned above is named Roäc, and he returns with the thrush to greet the company and bring them news, exclaiming, “ ‘O Thorin son of Thrain, and Balin son of Fundin,’ he croaked (and Bilbo could understand what he said, for he used ordinary language and not bird-speech)” (Tolkien 316). Roäc being able to speak Common differentiates him from the thrush, and puts him closer to the eagles in terms of his abilities to interact with humanoid beings. He is also a king in his own right, though he is ancient and the numbers of his flock few now. The old raven continues with his formal speech when he tells them that he heard from the thrush that Smaug is dead: “ ‘The thrush, may his feathers never fall, saw him die, and we may trust his words’ ” (Tolkien 317). Like the eagles, the raven and his kind seem to have their own figures of speech and courtly phrases that are unique to bird culture. This makes them distinct from humanoid beings, as the birds are not simply copying what they hear.

Roäc also distinguishes himself through the way he interacts with the company, and Thorin in particular. Almost as though no time has passed since the heyday of the dwarves, the raven proceeds to share his thoughts with Thorin about what the party should do, “ ‘Your own wisdom must decide your course; but thirteen is small remnant of the great folk of Durin that

once dwelt here, and now are scattered far. If you will listen to my counsel, you will not trust the Master of the Lake-men... We would see peace once more among dwarves and men and elves after the long desolation...' ” (Tolkien 317-318). Roäc is advocating for peace, whereas Thorin ultimately chooses himself and his own desires over achieving that peace simply, and his decisions are part of what leads up to the Battle of the Five Armies. Roäc still appears to feel a sense of duty to the dwarves despite the long years, but this duty has a limit.

The raven appears to at first be unwilling to state that Thorin's plan to hole up in the mountain and keep all of the treasure is a bad idea, saying, “ ‘I will not say if this counsel be good or bad,’ croaked Roäc, ‘but I will do what can be done’ ” (Tolkien 318). His loyalty to Thorin's family supersedes his own opinions on the matter, and he does as Thorin wishes. Later, however, Roäc is bold enough to criticize Thorin whenever the rest of the company is scared to do so: “ ‘I do not call this counsel good... How shall you be fed without the friendship and goodwill of the lands about you? The treasure is likely to be your death, though the dragon is no more!’ ” (Tolkien 326-327). Roäc draws a direct parallel between the greed and rage of Smaug that led to his death, and the greed and rage that Thorin is showing. Roäc and his flock also presumably lost much due to the desolation, yet he came advocating for peace and unity among the people of the area, displaying maturity and a willingness to be cooperative and forgiving. This is a moment of superiority for the raven, as he is both braver than the company, and wiser than Thorin. Like Beorn and the eagles, he has his limits, and he will make them known.

Despite his going along with the plan, Roäc displays agency and independent thinking through sharing his opinion of Thorin's ideas. This bird is not exactly equal to Thorin, but he is akin to a respected advisor, one who holds his own sort of power though he is largely bound to and relied upon for his loyalty. Though *The Hobbit* largely praises loyalty, Roäc's disapproval

scene demonstrates a moment where loyalty is not always the best path. Bilbo would later betray Thorin and take the Arkenstone to the opposing forces, but Bilbo did it not out of greed or for a desire for his own wealth, but in order to prevent a massive fight and to save his friends. Roäc also counsels Thorin against being greedy, a moment of superiority on the part of the bird. Roäc is able to think long-term about the benefits of peace not just for the birds, but for everyone who lives in the area. Once again, the theme of avoiding greed emerges, and the birds manage to avoid this pitfall that the humanoid beings seem so prone to. However, humans are not the only beings in the story that are victims to this undesirable trait.

### **Smaug**

Smaug is one of the most iconic characters in *The Hobbit*, if not the most iconic after Bilbo himself. A magnificently huge fire-breathing dragon that guards a pile of treasure within the Lonely Mountain, Smaug is a force to be reckoned with physically, but also intellectually. And though it is easy to miss the intellectual dangers of interacting with Smaug, given his fire breath and massive jaws, his smarts are key to making this creature uniquely treacherous and giving him more nuance than the average fairy tale dragon.

Of all of the creatures in *The Hobbit*, Smaug is one of the ones that get the most attention from scholars. According to Jack David Zipes, the portrayal of Smaug is a critique of capitalism, as shown by the prominence of Smaug's greed and the way he hoards money (171). Tolkien was a very conservative man, so while I cannot fully agree with this Marxist reading of the text, I can agree that the scenes with Smaug are meant to be a condemnation of greed, and will discuss this further below. Romauld Lakowski discusses Tolkien's treatment of dragons in the children's stories *Farmer Giles of Ham* and *Roverandom*, as well as the literary influences on these dragons. Lakowski points out that Tolkien draws a clear connection between dragons, hatred,

and greed, and notes that the protagonists of these stories, just like Bilbo, do not actually kill the dragon, and Farmer Giles actually cuts a deal with the dragon (86, 89). Building upon the idea of dragons as representations of greed and evil, Richard Angelo Bergen writes of the parallels between the dragon in *Beowulf* and Smaug, noting that “both stories have a dragon guarding an ancient treasure hoard, the theft of a gold cup, the ensuing rage of the dragon and the attacking of the nearby town, the vulnerability of the dragon in an unprotected part of his underside, and finally its death at the hands of a hero with an heirloom weapon” (105). However, Bergen asserts that Smaug is “no personification, but a fully conversant three-dimensional character” (105). It is this assertion that I find to be critical in distinguishing Smaug from many other fairytale dragons; he speaks, and he is cunning and clever as well as brutal and powerful.

An animal studies treatment of Smaug takes on a unique challenge, as he doesn't exactly have a direct analog to the real world, though one might compare him to a lizard or a snake, especially give Tolkien's medieval studies background. Smaug does behave like a hibernating snake in the sense that he sleeps in the Lonely Mountain for many years and doesn't emerge for so long that people forget that he exists, and he is carnivorous. However, the most valuable way to look at Smaug may be to treat him more like Beorn, another being who doesn't exactly have a direct analog to our world but whose characteristics divides between the “traditionally human” and “traditionally non-human” camp can provide a proper perspective.

Smaug, like many other creatures I have discussed so far, can speak Common. It's not clear what other languages he speaks, if any, but this does at least put him on par with Bilbo and the rest of the company in terms of communication through speech. And as I mentioned above, this distinguishes him from many other traditional fairytale dragons. While sometimes his clever speech is to his advantage, this typically humanoid trait can also be to his detriment. For

example, Bilbo wastes Smaug's time by cleverly not answering his questions, thus saving his hide, for as the narrator of the book shares, "No dragon can resist the fascination of riddling talk and of wasting time trying to understand it" (Tolkien 279). Readers are also informed that it is wise to never reveal your true name to a dragon and to avoid flatly refusing to answer them (Tolkien 279). A note in *The Annotated Hobbit* indicates that Tolkien likely got this idea from the ancient Norse poem "Fáfnismál;" in the poem, the hero doesn't share his name with the dragon out of fear of being cursed (279). Though Smaug's magic is powerful, Bilbo gets away from Smaug, largely, it seems, by luck and wits. Bilbo knew that the nature of dragons called for careful speech, and this protected him.

Smaug also doesn't seem to have much self-control, and he is a vengeful being. After he discovers some of his treasure has been stolen, he goes to Lake-Town and goes on a rampage, and his rage is described by Tolkien as "the sort of rage that is only seen when rich folk that have more than they can enjoy suddenly lose something that they have long had but have never before used or wanted" (Tolkien 273-274, 304). This rampage gets him killed by Bard, a man who lives in the town (308). Smaug is also behaving unethically according to the story's criteria, and these traits are fueled by his greed. While both animals and humans sometimes become volatile when angry, the difference here is the reason why Smaug is doing what he is doing. Smaug's rage has nothing to do with his own survival and everything to do with his avarice.

Dealing with individuals like Smaug requires cleverness and patience, and no small amount of luck. The obvious lesson of Smaug is that greed is an evil that will only lead to your destruction. He is even paralleled by Thorin, whose greed does, in a way, get him killed, though he is redeemed in the end with his final words, whereas Smaug is left to rot in the bottom of the

lake. However, Smaug also teaches readers about knowing when to speak and when to stay silent, and what to share when you are speaking.

When considering Smaug as an animal, what is most damning about him is that he is almost too human. This may seem illogical given his literally mythic status, but his faults, goals, and actions largely mimic that of a petty, avaricious human. Whereas most other creatures of *The Hobbit* are given more nuance or, in some cases, protect themselves either through their better personal traits or through their natural instincts, Smaug is too caught up in himself and his greed for that. To be clear, Smaug is still an animal, and Tolkien does not sacrifice his ability to make choices or even behave in animal-like ways (for example, the rampaging and the hibernation) but his animal nature is clouded by the worst humanity has to offer. However, other antagonistic creatures in the story do not make the same mistake, despite also being dangerous.

### **The Spiders**

The spiders are a collective of beings who scuttle in the darkness of Mirkwood, a mysterious forest on the edge of the Wild. Like Smaug and the Wargs, they are a force of evil in the world, though they are not always directly tied to the events of the world in the sense that they have chosen a “side.” Scholars tend to focus more on Tolkien’s representations of spiders in *The Lord of the Rings*, but some of what scholars have to say is also worth examining in concert with *The Hobbit*. Marco R.S. Post writes about the connections between traditional fairy tales and Mirkwood, noting how the forest defies expectations of sole wildness within: “one finds in Mirkwood an intricate mélange of wilderness and civilization instead” (71). Post observes that Bilbo experiences great character growth upon killing his first spider: “To begin with, one can notice here the great psychological impact the rite of passage of killing his first enemy has upon Bilbo” (75). I will discuss the implications of this below, as I agree with Post and believe this

also has significance for the spider too. Joyce Talley Lionarons argues that the spiders of Mirkwood are the opposite parallels to the elves, rather than the traditionally assumed comparison of the orcs. She cites examples, particularly similarities between Shelob, the giant spider of *The Lord of the Rings*, and Galadriel, including their powerful magic and weaving abilities, as reasons for this comparison, as well as the fact that both groups occupy the same place (Lionarons 6-9). I find this to be a fascinating reading of the spiders, and believe that putting them on the same level as the elves is a well-deserved title, especially given the structure of the spider society and their interactions with the company.

Bilbo's first encounter with one of the spiders of the forest shows how terrifying the spiders are, but also demonstrates their intelligence. This also draws a connection to Smaug, whose intelligence also makes him a more dangerous foe. A lone spider had attempted to tie Bilbo up while he was passed out, and only resorted to attempting to poison Bilbo after he woke up (Tolkien 207). The spider cautiously decided to try to first secure its prey before attempting to weaken or eat Bilbo, and though failure cost the spider its life, if it had been successful, it would have received a free, easy meal while saving energy. This is the spider Post writes about, and the fact that the spider is the first adversary Bilbo takes out on his own is quite meaningful. Though this does represent Bilbo's character growth, it also makes the arachnid significant because it was a worthy adversary and not just a simple obstacle to get past. Another way the spiders are shown to have intelligence is through their language. The spiders speak Common, though it is interesting to note that they have an "accent" of sorts. While sneaking into their hideout, Bilbo pauses and listens, and is shocked to learn that they can speak, realizing that "Their voices were a sort of thin creaking and hissing, but he could make out many of the words that they said" (Tolkien 209). Like Smaug, the spiders can speak the language of humanoid beings, and

interestingly enough, seem to choose to do so amongst themselves. Their possession of language and their intelligence mark them as adversaries not to be trifled with, and indeed, it takes some clever maneuvering on Bilbo's part in order to defeat them.

The spiders can be insulted, which gives them a very humanistic flaw. Bilbo sings an insulting song in an attempt to draw the spiders away from the nest and save the dwarves (Tolkien 211). This tactic works better than expected, as shown through the description: "They were frightfully angry. Quite apart from the stones no spider has ever liked being called Attercop, and Tomnoddy of course is insulting to anybody" (Tolkien 211–212). This also appears to be a way in which Tolkien gave them feelings; the universal statement of "nobody likes" implies that the spiders are part of a collective of beings who don't appreciate being called names, and that, of course, includes humanoid beings. The fact that they can be insulted means that they have a sense of self and dignity, and they are not just mindless, hungry monsters roving about. Indeed, the fact that it takes clever thinking on Bilbo's part to defeat them distinguishes them from a generic monster.

Though the spiders can be insulted, they are not completely blinded by rage in the midst of the insults; again, demonstrating their capacity for group work and higher thinking. While Bilbo is trying to distract them, the creatures begin to think quickly: "the spiders had run now to different of points in the glade where they lived, and were busy spending webs across all the spaces between the tree-stems. Very soon the hobbit would be caught in a thick fence of them all round him— that at least was the spiders' idea" (Tolkien 212). Though Bilbo cuts his way through the webs and frees himself, the plan was indicative of their species and intelligence. Their setting a trap for Bilbo is very much like a spider; after all, what are webs but giant traps

that hang in the air? They solve their problems in a way that lines up with their physiology and essence of being, making them less like people and more like their own creatures.

Bilbo leads the party away from the spider's nest, fighting the spiders off all the while, and nearly dying in the process, as shown by the end of the episode: "But at last, just when Bilbo felt that he could not lift his hand for a single stroke more, the spiders suddenly gave it up, and followed them no more, but went back disappointed to their dark colony" (Tolkien 216). The arachnids do not care about the quest of the company; they are simply seeking a meal in order to survive. They, like all creatures, need to eat, and the company happened to be an available option. However, they are smart enough to know when something is a lost cause, and that is why they retreat in the end. Their disappointment is because they have expended a lot of energy and received no meal at the end of it; a very animal perspective on the give and take of life. Real spiders will cut big insects and other creatures out of their webs if they know the prey presents too great of a risk, and that is very similar to what happened in this scene.

The lesson of Mirkwood's eight-legged inhabitants is twofold: do not underestimate your opponents, and remember that everyone you encounter has agendas of their own. Bilbo had to use force to lead the party to safety, but he also had to use his wits, and the necessity of wit in making one's way in the world is a recurring theme in *The Hobbit*. Bilbo gave everything he had to fight the spiders, and he only just squeaked by. The spiders were after the party simply because they needed food, and were attempting to fulfill their own desires. This lesson would help to keep readers humble but also self-aware. Bilbo is arguably at his bravest during the spider episode, so this entire chain of events also reinforces the value of courage, a trait that appears in other scenes throughout the book as well.

## **Wargs**

Warg is the term Tolkien uses for a particular group of malicious wolves in the Middle-earth universe that appear in both *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Tolkien sent a letter to Gene Wolfe in 1966 explaining his choice of the word warg: “ ‘It is an old word for wolf, which also had the sense of an outlaw or hunted criminal. This is its usual sense in surviving texts. I adopted the word, which had a good sound for the meaning, as a name for this particular brand of demonic wolf in the story’ ” (Tolkien 146). The Wargs do not generally receive scholarly attention, especially by themselves. Eleanor Simpson is very dismissive of them in her essay, arguing that that Wargs are just goblin servants that are written as not having the capacity to conduct evil deeds on their own (77-78). I understand where Simpson is coming from, but I believe there is more to the Wargs’ relationship with the goblins than her analysis suggests. Though they do not receive much scholarly attention, they do play an important role in the story, as these wolfish beings appear, usually with goblins (and later, orcs), to cause trouble for the protagonists of the story.

The Wargs are mentioned briefly during the Battle of the Five Armies, but are given much more attention in the chapter after the company escapes the goblin cave. The company has to quickly scale trees in order to get away from the angry Wargs, and are soon trapped, though they do have a moment to breathe because of a limit of the Wargs: “But even the wild Wargs (for so the evil wolves over the Edge of the Wild were named) cannot climb trees” (Tolkien 146). Like the spiders using silk webs to attempt to capture Bilbo, the Wargs are, at the end of the day, still within the limits of their traditional physiology, and still behave as canine animals do. Their pack hunting and cornering instincts are shown in the way they handle finding out that the party is watching them, as seen, for example, when “[t]hey left guards at the foot of the tree in which Dori and Bilbo were, and then went snuffling about till they had smelt out every tree that had

anyone in it. These they guarded too” (Tolkien 147). The Wargs know they can’t do anything about the company, but they aren’t going to just let them sit there and possibly sneak away undetected either. Like the spiders, the Wargs work together in order to achieve their goals and protect their own interests.

The Wargs appear to be a kind of organized society that can be paralleled to one humans are familiar with. This is shown through their ability to plan meetings and the fact that they have a recognized leader: “This glade in the ring of trees was evidently a meeting place of the wolves... in the middle of the circle was a great grey wolf” (Tolkien 147). The Wargs are not mindless beings who just kill and destroy without thinking; they plan, and even collaborate with the goblins in order to achieve their goals. And once again, language appears as an important feature in the story. It is unclear whether the Wargs speak or understand Common, but they do have their own language, as described here, “[The wolf chieftain] spoke to them in the dreadful language of the Wargs. Gandalf understood it. Bilbo did not, but it sounded terrible to him, and as if all their talk was about cruel and wicked things, as it was” (Tolkien 147). Tolkien uses the word “wicked” repeatedly when describing the Wargs, their customs, and what they do. Like Smaug, the Wargs tend to be the most blatantly evil characters with intent to harm not just for the sake of their own survival, but even their cruel deeds have methods worth examining.

The cooperation between the Wargs and goblins is quite interesting, and demonstrates that the Wargs are intelligent, though they do use that intelligence for malicious purposes. As the book describes: “The Wargs and the goblins often helped one another in wicked deeds...in those days they sometimes used to go on raids, especially to get food or slaves to work for them. Then they often got the Wargs to help and shared the plunder with them. Sometimes they rode on wolves like men do on horses” (Tolkien 147). The Wargs and goblins appear to be working

together less so in the fashion of pet and master, and more like a partnership. Though the Wargs do let goblins ride them, the Wargs also seem to be perfectly capable of causing havoc on their own, and the fact that they share the plunder means that they are seen as an equal partner and not just a tool. Additionally, nowhere in the story do we see instances of goblins keeping Wargs in cages or on ropes, which would imply a more pet-like or war hound relationship. Finally, to further contrast my reading with Simpson's, the Wargs still behave like wolves, and the emphasis on the goblins *requesting* the Wargs' help cannot be overstated. The Wargs do not say much in the story, but they do add to the company's mortal peril and are a fierce adversary.

Though Smaug, the spiders, and the Wargs all end up causing the company much grief, it may be more appropriate to label them as antagonists rather than as pure forces of evil. They all have their own goals and desires, and though these goals and desires cause pain for others, it is important to note that they are making their own decisions for their own reasons, and aren't doing so at the behest of a humanoid being. Smaug is perhaps the most petty of these; he hoards treasure because he likes it, and because he is powerful enough to do so. The spiders seem to offer the most nuance, as they are trying to eat the party not because they want to stop them from completing their quest, but because spiders need to eat just like any other creature. The Wargs, like Smaug, are perhaps the most intentionally wicked, but again, this is less about a battle of good versus evil on a grand scale and more about their relationship with the goblins and their mutual goals. From an animal studies perspective, the agency of these characters is important, but so is the fact that in many cases Tolkien wrote them in such a way that he did not sacrifice their animal natures, instincts, or physiology for ones that make them more human-like. Though they may speak Common or recognize leaders in the same way humanoid beings might recognize kings, these creatures still maintain their essences in the ecology of Middle-earth.

What these antagonists have to teach readers is largely about the kinds of evil they will encounter in the world, and how to both deal with and avoid them. According to *The Hobbit*, two of the worst things you can be are cruel and greedy. This is particularly reflected in Smaug and the Wargs. *The Hobbit* teaches readers that you will need no small amount of wits and self-awareness to make it in the world, and while intelligence makes an enemy fierce, it can also be their downfall, especially if they like to talk too much or become blinded by their emotions. Building on other traits that Tolkien represents through other animals, when dealing with friends, it is best to be loyal, hospitable, and timely, and when dealing with enemies, it is best to be reserved, clever, and courageous.

### **“Mere” Animals and Unique Humanoids**

I would be remiss if I did not mention the other animals that appear in the story; namely, the pack ponies and Beorn’s animals, which include ponies but also bees, dogs, and sheep. These “mere” animals do not speak Common and do not seem to communicate much in general, apart from the understanding between Beorn and his animals. They do not have their own dwellings and exist in the context of humanoid beings. Indeed, the role of these animals largely seems to be one of handling burdens and assisting either the party or Beorn. Though they are useful in the story, they do not fit within my analysis in the same way that even the humble thrush does.

However, the particular state of these animals can nonetheless be explained. Tolkien is well known for disliking allegory, and I cannot help but wonder if the reason not all animals are magical or have a unique connection to the story is because he didn’t want to cross into allegory territory. Related to this, perhaps Tolkien’s commitment to reality and avoiding condescension is at work here: sometimes a pony is just a pony. These creatures span from insect to large mammal, so he does not appear to be making a statement through a specific type of animal here.

Additionally, these mere animals are traditional companions of humans, and if Tolkien is making a statement at all with them, I read it as a message about how you should look carefully at how someone treats those who rely upon them. Beorn is good to his animals, and they love and serve him well. It demonstrates Beorn's hidden kindness under all of his fierce appearance, as well as his connection to nature, which Tolkien would view positively in his own life. In the end, though I cannot say for certain why exactly Tolkien makes a division here, I can say that, based on Tolkien's own life as well as the traits he praises throughout *The Hobbit*, these animals are at least an opportunity to reflect upon how individuals take care of those around them.

The "unique humanoids" included in the title above is intended to address three creatures that my examination has also omitted: the trolls, goblins, and Gollum. I did not include these characters because I believe that they are outside of my scope when it comes to defining animals within the story. Beorn, though a man, is explicitly also part animal. Gollum, the goblins, and the trolls are not explicitly in total, or even part, animal. Though Tolkien would not reveal this until *The Lord of the Rings*, Gollum is a hobbit corrupted by the One Ring. Trolls and goblins, like dwarves and elves, are a variety of fantasy humanoid being. Indeed, goblins, which Tolkien would later change to orcs, are revealed to be corrupted elves in his later writings. Trolls can also be simply viewed as monstrous humanoids, with the distinction between other creatures I discuss in this paper being their basis in being humanoid.

## **Conclusion**

My project centers on the animals in *The Hobbit* to reveal connections between Tolkien's environmental and moral perspectives and how that shaped his writing of children's literature. This analysis is significant partially because of Tolkien's enduring popularity and therefore wide reach of messaging; the lessons he taught his young readers, no matter how explicit or implicit,

have engaged generations' worth of audiences. The morals of Tolkien's animals have implications for readers' treatment of animals, the natural world, and also their fellow human beings. From the perspective of research and scholarship, the significance of this research is that it pushes the boundaries of Tolkien research into new and emerging avenues of inquiry. Additionally, it combines common subjects within the field of Tolkien studies and demonstrates how they work together to create a unique text and meaning. Though scholars have started investigating his work within the realm of animal studies, there is still much to examine and learn from this book.

My project is an in-depth look at a particular intersection within Tolkien studies, though I anticipate future research in this significant, emerging field. Another area of inquiry within this arena would be to examine how class plays a role in Tolkien's portrayals. Though some of my analysis examines this dimension tangentially, class undoubtedly appears in many ways throughout the text, especially given Tolkien's numerous references to royalty and variety in speech amongst his animals and humanoid characters. Additionally, as outlined above, there are characters within the text that do not meet my criteria or fit within my framework. Future scholars may seek to examine the role of these characters further, and investigate deeper into Tolkien's rationale for the distinctions he makes with these characters.

Though my project has many dimensions, doing so only further connects to the complicated web Tolkien weaved through his work. What appears to be a "simple" children's story on the surface is a tale that seeks to instruct both in terms of morals and stewardship, and does so through animals who are their own entities, not just stand-ins. Indeed, this nuance is critical to understanding *The Hobbit* and the lessons Tolkien wanted to teach all children. Though there are some characters who largely represent good and light and those that represent

evil and darkness, even these characters have their own shades and cannot be underestimated. If anything, the analysis of these animal characters demonstrates that Tolkien knew children would be dealing with shades of gray more than anything else in life, and they needed to be prepared for that complexity and for how to handle the challenges associated with encountering these traits. Tolkien's love for classical literature appears in the highly esteemed values of courage, hospitality, and timeliness, and his warnings about greed and cruelty. His love for the environment is present in the fleshed out characters that are his animals, and even in the complexities of those animals. His Christian morality binds these two together, producing a text that all at once prepares children for the world they're preparing to enter, celebrates the natural world, and emphasizes ethics grounded in bravery and kindness.

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