



BOOK REVIEW:

*Tolkien, Enchantment, and Loss: Steps on the  
Developmental Journey*

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Rosegrant, John. *Tolkien, Enchantment, and Loss: Steps on the Developmental Journey*. The Kent State UP, 2022. ISBN 978-1-60635-435-3.

John Rosegrant argues that a consistent coupling of enchantment and loss fundamentally shapes Tolkien's mind and art. Rosegrant locates Tolkien's most important definition of *enchantment* in his essay "On Fairy-Stories" where, while he doesn't use the exact word, Tolkien writes: "the primal desire at the heart of Faërie [is] the realization, independent of the conceiving mind, of imagined wonder" (qtd. in Rosegrant 112). This passage in Tolkien's essay, with its description of a desire for wonder that is both imagined and independently realized, becomes crucial to how Rosegrant's book is not only *about* Tolkien, but also situates Tolkien as a *critical partner* to psychoanalytic theories of human development. Himself a practicing psychoanalyst, literary critic, and fiction writer, Rosegrant has been publishing articles on Tolkien for a decade, and about half of his book draws upon such previous work. Readers coming to the book may have encountered his deft essay on enchantment in *The Hobbit*. Perhaps they have seen Rosegrant's argument that Tolkien gave artistic form in "The Music of Ainur" to his infant and childhood experiences of loss and renewed closeness with his mother or with another primary caregiver. However, *Tolkien, Enchantment, and Loss: Steps on the Developmental Journey* will also provide readers rich additional thematic and theoretical context on Tolkien's life and work.

Rosegrant's methodology is dominated by D. W. Winnicott's developmental theories of infant, child, and adult experiences of "transitional space" and "transitional phenomena" – experiences involving an intermediate

mental state that integrates the Me (subjectivity) and the Not-me (objectivity). Winnicott's theory holds that transitional experiences change in content and awareness as a person grows and matures, and that they form a necessary component to lifelong emotional growth and creative living. For example, as a toddler, a person has a beloved toy that functions as a transitional object. Conversely, as an adult, a person may participate in activities like art and religion, which grant opportunities to have experiences that can exceed the everyday rational, external environment and provide occasions for experiencing a state of mind that mingles the subjective and objective. Rosegrant argues that Tolkien's explanation of the desire of and for Faerie, quoted above, is a sophisticated description of a transitional mental state of artistic creativity and receptivity. In Rosegrant's references to *enchantment* throughout the book, the term connotes both this intermediate mental state and also the wonder, beauty, and danger that Tolkien posits as components of the enchantment of Faerie.

In addition to Winnicott's theories of transitionality, Rosegrant's psychoanalytic synthesis is informed by Sigmund Freud, and in some sections by Julia Kristeva's theories on the abject. In addition, he uses psychoanalytic concepts, such as splitting and idealization/degradation, as well as the psychoanalytic concept of complexes that are unique to an individual and that group together repressed or partially repressed desires and memories of an individual. Rosegrant puts his arguments in dialogue with Tolkien critics that include Patrick Curry, Tom Shippey, John Garth, and Verlyn Flieger. He also makes careful use of Tolkien's letters and other biographical materials, even as he acknowledges how some of his hypotheses must remain speculative. Each chapter shows Rosegrant as an engaging and insightful close reader who also ranges widely and makes rich connections within Tolkien's oeuvre. Throughout, Rosegrant maintains that a continual and ambiguous interplay of loss and enchantment characterizes Tolkien's oeuvre. He argues that the inseparability of these themes points to Tolkien's distinctive creativity. Through writing fantasy and writing analytically about fairy-stories, Tolkien dealt creatively both with his deeply personal losses and with his temperamental and philosophical refusal to fully accept "the disenchantment of the [modern]world" (Weber qtd. in Rosegrant 2) as sociologist Max Weber described the exclusively rational way that humans are situated to understand reality in modernity.

In keeping with his psychoanalytic method, which posits that the whole of a mind includes powerful unconscious elements, Rosegrant's analysis of Tolkien's fiction is fluid. Two dominant strands shape his blended literary and biographical analysis. In one, he constructs an intricate and compelling literary interpretation that he presents as evidence for a psychological reading that makes very personal connections to Tolkien's possible experiences of grief and trauma. The enduring effects of the deaths of Tolkien's parents – of his father when Tolkien was four and of his mother when he was twelve – are fundamental to Rosegrant's insightful interpretations of *The Lord of the Rings* (LOTR) and other works. Chapters 6 and 7 (both first published in the book) exemplify this strand and make major contributions both to studies of the Galadriel/Shelob split symbol and to interpretations and intertextual resonances regarding Galadriel's Mirror. Specifically, in Chapter 6, "The Man-Maiden and the Spider with Horns," Rosegrant argues that the dichotomy of Galadriel and Shelob,

sometimes regarded as representing how Tolkien's female characters tend to be idealized or degraded figures, may more accurately be understood as Tolkien processing his grief over the death of both parents. Rosegrant elaborates how Galadriel and Shelob each embody male as well as female and motherly traits, explaining that their dominant femaleness may result from how Tolkien's mother died eight years after his father did. He argues that these characters suggest psychological splitting of Tolkien's positive and negative feelings about his parents. This leads him to further suggest that the way Tolkien's narration links Shelob's attack on Frodo and Sam with their memories of Galadriel may be seen as Tolkien memorializing both parents in an episode resonant with loss, danger, love, and enchantment. Similarly, Chapter 7, "Seeing the Self in the Mirror of Galadriel," provides superb literary analysis that takes readers through an explanation of Winnicott's and Lacan's contrasting theories of mirroring as it situates Galadriel's mirror, the Mirrormere, and the death of Gandalf in an ever-widening set of examples from Tolkien's oeuvre that bring together stars, still water, grief, loss, and enchantment. The analysis suggests again an underlying theme of Tolkien memorializing his parents. As such, this chapter is the most sustained and persuasive presentation of Rosegrant's insistence that Tolkien recurrently insists on ambiguity and never resolves the tension between loss and enchantment.

A second major arc of Rosegrant's argument involves the enchantment and loss in Tolkien's experiences with his creativity, whether inspired or blocked. Here, Rosegrant's entry point is how Tolkien, in his essay "On Fairy Stories," described an adult transitional experience by naming a desire for wonder in Faerie that is imagined, but is also experienced as independent of the imaginer: "the primal desire at the heart of Faërie [is] the realization, independent of the conceiving mind, of imagined wonder" (qtd. in Rosegrant 112). In Chapter 8, "From the Ineluctable Wave to the Realization of Imagined Wonder," Rosegrant argues that Tolkien's letters and oeuvre support the hypothesis that Tolkien suffered from a psychological complex that seems to have started in early childhood after his father died. It contained fears and guilt connected to destructive hubris. Rosegrant's evidence for positing this psychological complex includes Tolkien's letters that describe a nearly lifelong recurring nightmare of being caught and drowned in a huge ocean wave. Also key are Tolkien's own words that this dream could be called his "Atlantis complex" and that he mostly "exorcised" the nightmare by "writing about it" (qtd. in Rosegrant 115). In conjunction with this, Rosegrant studies Tolkien's progress in writing *LOTR*, connecting times that Tolkien went from suffering from writer's block to crafting versions of the Fall of Númenor between 1936 and 1948 that include one unpublished draft and others that became part of the Silmarillion papers and the appendices to *LOTR*. As an important part of this discussion, Rosegrant argues that Tolkien's concept of recovery from "On Fairy-Stories" exemplifies a mature version of transitional experience through its loving perception of an Other. Rosegrant shows how details in the Fall of Númenor narratives emphasize this loving perception of an Other, arguing that this theme plays a role in Tolkien's artistic freeing of himself from the wave dream symbol (118). Rosegrant also notes that in his concept of sub-creation, Tolkien copes with the wave complex by explaining legitimate, non-hubristic creativity. Later in the book, Rosegrant turns to times when Tolkien seemed to lose the freedom that he had forged for his creativity, and the wave complex

that blocks invention seems to return. For example, Rosegrant explores Tolkien's late life experiences when his access to a transitional/enchanted state of mind was apparently blocked, and he was considering many revisions to his oeuvre that sometimes involved changes that scaled back fantastical elements.

Rosegrant seems to be the first critic to offer sustained application of D. W. Winnicott's psychoanalytic theories to Tolkien's oeuvre, and for that work alone, this volume is valuable for scholars of fantasy, science fiction, and related genres, while it is of special interest for Tolkien scholars and aficionados. He consistently frames his most biographically-based arguments as either involving speculations or as bringing additional meanings to those that readers glean from powerful episodes like Frodo's and Sam's encounters with Shelob. Just as importantly, *Tolkien, Enchantment, and Loss* is always in dialogue with other scholarly work on Tolkien. Rosegrant makes clear and thorough arguments for his psychoanalytic claims, and they are provocative and instructive. Most persuasive for me, though, is Rosegrant's literary as well as psychoanalytic illumination of Tolkien's myth-making – of those elements of his world-building that create through suggestion and connection, building enchantment with imagery, word choice, and story.

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