



Ant Similes in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* – an Analysis of Literary Technologies

Juha-Pekka Alarauhio

Abstract: This article investigates the use of similes in J.R.R. Tolkien's writing as literary-technological design that partakes in traditional means for narrative meaning-making repurposed for his fantasy in *The Lord of the Rings*. I argue that by focusing intensely on these features in Tolkien's textual design, it is possible to support ongoing scholarship on the literary influences and sources of Tolkien's legendarium with a less directly comparative method. This approach can illuminate, on one hand, Tolkien's strategies in deploying traditional literary technologies, and on the other hand, the purposive redesign of these technologies for the specific storytelling needs of his fantasy writing. My analysis focuses on a series of similes in *The Lord of the Rings* that compare orcs to ants, showing that the similes are applied with a consistent overall strategy that highlights an important thematic strand in Tolkien's legendarium. Through this analysis, I demonstrate how the adaptive use of similes exemplifies the idea of purposive design. On a more interpretive level, I explore the functional envelope of the simile as a narrative technology, and its implications for meaning-making within Tolkien's storyworld and beyond.

Keywords: epic simile, classical tradition, literary technologies, *The Lord of the Rings*

1. Introduction

Taken the rhetorical prominence of extended similes in epic poetry and later applications in prose, finding the device in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the*

Rings (1954–55; *LotR*) should not be altogether surprising. Nevertheless, such encounters have not received closer attention yet, possibly because the verbal composition in Tolkien's work is only occasionally connected to structures of classical epic poetry (for exceptions, see Fimi *A Homeric Simile*; Jensen; Korpua; Stevens; Walker). Even when the connection is drawn, detailed analyses rarely follow. Furthermore, on a more general level, the attitude towards research into Tolkien's literary models has been understandably prudent. As scholars (Drout and Wynne; Williams; Fisher; Shippey *The Road to Middle Earth*) have routinely stated, the study of the sources and influences for Tolkien's fiction has been a road shadowed, on one hand, by Tolkien's own vivid denunciations and, on the other hand, by overly strong assertions based on analogies leading to interpretive dead ends. Additionally, the very idea of literary influence involves the problematics of authorial intention – whether a textual model has been *intentionally* imitated or not and what the author *intended* to achieve by their imitations. The study of Tolkien's adaptation of classical epic composition patterns thus starts at a junction where a “stylistic gap” (Reid 518; also Walker) still lingers in the scholarship. This gap is further stretched by a scarcity of practical analyses of classical composition in Tolkien's work, as well as source study approaches that are often oriented towards the Northern European languages and literatures (Livingston 77–78), in spite of the author's upbringing in the Classics (Letters 172).

However, instead of pursuing direct, verifiable paths of transmission from classical epic to *LotR*, I propose a switch of perspective from the study of literary influences to a process of adaptation of *literary technologies*, such as epic similes, through *purposive design*. This view prioritizes the assembly of specific means of literary communication deployed in the text. Simultaneously, it acknowledges, for analytical purposes, the application of comparable means in other texts. With this focus on the medium, I also wish to contribute to what Michael Livesey has recently described as a “descent to word” in Tolkien scholarship (3), calling for “micro-level tools and mechanisms that tell us how the composition took shape, at word- or sentence-level – as much as why, and to what end” (5). In this article I apply such a tool, not only for microscopic observation but also a more sustained and communicatively pragmatic exploration of the ways words bring fantasy worlds into being in the reader's experience.

My response to Livesey's proposition is a slight reorientation in the study of Tolkien's sources. I argue that, by exploring Tolkien's use of language and narrative means as technologies designed to produce a range of effects, it is possible to study the author's meaning-making strategies without claiming direct imitation of or dependencies on specific model texts. The notion of *purposive design*, as formulated by Jarkko Toikkanen, helps clarify the goals of this inquiry. Placing poetic compositions in the domain of technologies because they result from applied knowledge of “the formal and generic elements of poetry,” Toikkanen suggests that

To design a verbal poem, the poet employs words with knowledge of producing effects by this technology. Their act of designing is purposive in the sense of writing a poem, and it requires employing the resources of the medium of poetry for its execution. This medial condition persists objectively, although it differs from one instance to the next what those resources are, how an individual agentively employs them, and which effects and meanings they may wish to produce. (64)

Viewing the simile in this way, it can be said that its verbal components and organizing principles are purposively designed to facilitate certain kinds of readerly interactions, experiences, and interpretations. In other words, the use of a technology shows that the author is familiar with it and knows how to apply it in their own work¹.

The notions of purposive design and the technological structure of a literary text can be further clarified by discussing the relations between a design, its component parts, and the user function it provides. According to Brian Arthur, “all technologies are combinations” constructed “from components or assemblies or subsystems at hand” (23). Because the purposive design of a written simile constitutes a technological solution that uses the resources of the written verbal medium, these assemblies manifest in the linguistic hierarchy on the pragmatic, semantic, syntactic, morphological, and graphological levels. Yet, as I will demonstrate below, this linguistic paradigm alone is not enough to fully account for the technological solution of similes, which I consider to be literary technologies – that is, expansions on the basic technologies of verbal language.

2. Similes as literary technologies

In *LotR*, similes number in the hundreds, their functions as diverse as their forms and contexts². In many cases, they are used formulaically, recurring in similar contexts so often that, in his pioneering study, Colin Manlove (165–6) deemed them excessively repetitive. To address this observation, I will examine a series of ant similes in *LotR* with an analytical eye on recurrence, yet without the assumption that they are functionally identical. Therefore, I will prepare the investigation by introducing a notion of similes as literary technologies. I build this view on Daniel Dor's theory of language as technology in order to highlight the ways in which this technology, by its design, fulfils a purpose. Since my aim is to specify the effects of the technology, I apply Dor's concept of the *functional envelope*, which refers to what the technology “can do with high levels of efficiency, where its efficiency declines, where it collapses, and what it cannot do to begin with” (2). The functional envelope of a simile is defined by its

¹ When discussing traditional models for composition, I refer to technologies that authors have adopted from their predecessors and adapted for meaning-making in their own works. In this technological sense, the notion of the tradition of the classical epic is thus limited to identifiable recurrence of specific technologies. For example, it is possible to trace a tradition of classical epic similes in which the Homeric poems and works by Vergil, Lucan, Ovid, Torquato Tasso, Edmund Spenser, John Milton, Herman Melville, Tolkien, and many others partake. By comparison, there is no classical epic tradition of, for instance, stream-of-consciousness writing extending back to the Homeric poems from James Joyce's *Ulysses*.

² This is well demonstrated in Emma Hawkins' exploration of dogs in Tolkien's similes.

linguistic (lexical, syntactic) and textual (narrative, descriptive, intertextual) means as actualized in its context of use. In the analysis, I will consider the simile a structural design, a platform that affords the assembly of diverse components drawn from the technologies of language and literature.

My formulation of the technological constant in verbal similes is that it is a linguistic protocol serving the basic function of bringing two or more verbal segments to comparison through an explicit juxtaposition. These segments are scalable components and may include references to existents, ideas, or processes expressed through linguistic units ranging from single words to complex sentences. Simplest forms of similes thus juxtapose ideas by single words, whereas more extended similes can do the same on the scale of short narratives. Since this arrangement is an objective condition for subjectively actualized readerly experience, it can be regarded as the *functional core* of a simile. By this design, the simile triggers its effects: it introduces a degree of experiential dissonance, or the sense that an ongoing reading experience is intruded upon by imagery, details, or entire scenes and ideas that appear, to a varying degree, absent from the surrounding narrative or its setting.

The effect of experiential dissonance that similes elicit can be further described with the help of Lars Elleström's concept of the virtual sphere as "a mental sphere, created by communicative semiosis" ("Coherence and Truthfulness" 430). The virtual sphere, in other words, is an imaginative construct that results from interpretive engagement with a media product such as a written text. Virtual spheres may include represented time, space, and "materialities and sensory perceptions" (Elleström "Beyond Media Borders" xii). They thus contain whatever the reader of a novel, for example, can imaginatively perceive as existing in a particular spatiotemporal setting. This imaginative experience of "worldness" amounts to what Marie-Laure Ryan defines as "storyworld," in that such worlds are "... totalities that encompass space, time, and individuated existents that undergo transformations as the result of events" (62). That the storyworld becomes present to the reader in this way – as something that exists on its own terms – is, of course, necessary for the experience of a fantasy world.

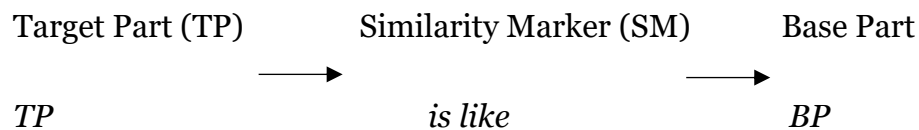
Using similes as literary technology highlights how the experiential connections between the lived experience in the actual world and any storyworld constitute a complex interactional relationship. This is because a simile, and an extended simile in particular, introduces a semantic domain from outside the ongoing narrative that feeds the reader's experience with information from outside the storyworld. The simile thus offers the reader's perception a separate virtual sphere for comparison. It causes an interruption to the narration, as the reader is invited to take in what the parallel virtual sphere holds and how it relates to the action in the main narrative. The resulting juxtaposition between the two virtual spheres always presents a demand for interpretive action for the sake of communicative coherence. The reader must discover some relevant semiotic or experiential connections between the two spheres to be able to gauge the import of the simile within the ongoing experience of the storyworld, all the while maintaining a sense of integrity for the storyworld despite the import from the actual world. I argue that the set of communicative resources that the simile presents to the reader – the logical, figurative, aesthetic, experiential or affective import – not only facilitate such

an outcome from the reader's engagement with the simile but also modify that outcome in important ways.

The technological perspective accounts for the means that facilitate the readerly outcomes of similes. I analyze these similes as formed with two main components. Firstly, the *simile protocol*, which is a formalized syntax or a "grammatical nexus" (Whaler "Grammatical Nexus" 327–328) determines the sequential and referential coordination of the parts of the simile and its context. The second component is the semantic content that is placed in the grammatically appointed slots in the simile. To give a consistent coding of the components in different simile types, I apply Ben-Porat's structural description of the classical epic simile as an expansion of what is termed the *nuclear simile*.

In all similes, the outward signs that inform the reader of an intended comparison are explicit and selected from a set of suitable similarity markers or grammatical signals such as those used by John Milton in *Paradise Lost* (1667): "as," "as if," "as when," "so," "such," or "such as." These similarity markers (SM) signal a pattern of comparison by connecting the target part (TP), which is the primary phrase set up for comparison, to the base part (BP), which is the phrase introduced for the comparison (Ben-Porat 738–740). Together, these three component types form the simile protocol by providing the "structural slots" (Ben Porat 740) for the semantic content.

The prototypical parts of the simile protocol – Ben-Porat's nuclear simile (739) – can be formalized as a sequence as follows:



As Ben-Porat has shown, this protocol can be reordered and expanded for each simile, but despite this flexibility, the basic role of each component must remain recognizable. When this is the case, the simile protocol guides the reader to interpret in the comparative mode. The simile's lexical content, then, provides not only the semantic domains for the target part and the base part, but the resource of intertextuality that facilitates linking the simile to any other semantic domains within and without the storyworld. This analysis of the basic components of all similes suggests that further technological elaboration expands the potential effects and therefore uses of the simile. To put it simply, I will differentiate here between three main types of similes: 1) a very basic type that consist of the components of the nuclear simile, 2) a more complex simile that extends one or more of the basic components, and 3) the most complex simile type of the fully realized epic simile that follows the patterns that emerge in classical epic poetry. Next, I will show how the simile protocol provides a simple yet flexible and scalable framework for assembling similes with highly variable functions and effects.

3. A review of ant similes in *LoTR*

Overall, *LoTR* employs a variety of structures of comparison. The majority of these are simple, such as those that employ the similarity marker “like.” However, as can be seen in Table 1., the ant similes are of the more complex type, and present comparisons between actions and events rather than single attributes. This is achieved via various kinds of extensions in the simile structure.

Simile		Structural Type	Discourse Mode	Focalizer	Protocol Components
1	I came to Buckland and found it in uproar, as busy as a hive of ants that has been stirred with a stick. (I, 276) ³	extended	direct speech representation	Gandalf	implied TP, TP + SM + expanded BP
2	But everywhere he looked he saw the signs of war. The Misty Mountains were crawling <u>like</u> anthills: orcs were issuing out of a thousand holes. (I, 416)	parabole	narration	Frodo	expanded TP + SM + BP + antapodosis
3	'We loosed every arrow that we had, and filled the Dike with Orcs. But it will not halt them long. Already they are scaling the bank at many points, thick as marching ants.' (II, 137)	extended	direct speech representation	a warrior of Rohan	expanded TP + SM + BP
4	Beneath the hills on either side the rock was bored into a hundred caves and maggot-holes: there a host of orcs lurked, ready at a signal to issue forth <u>like</u> black ants going to war. (II, 244)	extended	narration	impersonal narrator	TP + SM + expanded BP
5	Busy as ants hurrying orcs were digging, digging lines of deep trenches in a huge ring ... (III, 95)	parabole	narration	impersonal narrator	TP + SM + BP + antapodosis

Table 1. Ant similes in *LoTR*

³ The numbering in this article refers to a three-volume edition of *Lord of the Rings* by Roman numerals followed by the page number in the specified volume: I “The Fellowship of the Ring,” II “The Two Towers,” III “The Return of the King.”

According to the protocol criteria, it can be said that the similes in Table 1 are moderately complex, adding some expansions to the nuclear simile in the target part or the base part, or by *antapodosis*, “a phrase which follows the parable and connects it with the action” (Nünlist 284) (“were issuing,” “were digging”). These similes expand beyond a single attribute comparison, yet much like Vergil’s epic ant simile in *The Aeneid*⁴, underline two main ideas: massed movement and unified action. The notable exception to this is Simile 1, which refers to temporary disarray caused by a disturbance in the ant hive, yet this limited spectrum of associations is apt since the simile describes the behavior of hobbits, who are also compared to bees (III, 302). After this single comparison involving hobbits, ants are consistently and exclusively evoked in similes depicting orcs.

Specific attributes connecting orcs to ants include subterranean habitation, vast numbers, and fervent activity. Not distinguishing between individuals, the similes show the orcs as a faceless, relentless threat. In each simile, the narrative perspective places the orcs at a distance, introducing a miniaturizing effect that further motivates the comparison to small insects. In some cases, the spatial distance is due to focalization; in Simile 2, the experiencer is Frodo who, by the power of the ring and the Seat of Seeing on Amon Hen, has attained the divine perspective of a mountaintop observer and is thus able to witness events from afar. In Similes 1 and 3, direct speech representation designates a focalizer, a speaker narrating their own perceptions. It is worth noting that since the sources of the two similes are characters in the storyworld, the distancing effect in them does not occur between the reader and the storyworld, but establishes ant similes as native to the storyworld parlance. The later instances, Similes 4 and 5, on the other hand, are delivered by an impersonal narrator depicting the scenes. While employing a similarly distanced view on the orcs and repeating their now established association with ants, the similes thus keep reinforcing the analogy between ants and orcs. To sum up, while each simile provides their individual effects, they have a collective function as well: through the repeated association, the image of the ant swarm becomes emblematic for masses of orcs. This process sets the stage for the effects of the fully realized epic simile.

4. Analyzing a fully realized epic simile

Being a structure for even more extended and complex comparisons than those in the similes discussed so far, the fully realized epic simile introduces a notable digression that alerts the reader to shift into the kind of interpretive action described earlier. By this design, the simile’s functional envelope is amended with a wide range of possible expansions. For example, instead of indicating a

⁴ You could see [Trojans] swarming all over the city:
like ants, when they pillage a huge heap of grain,
mindful of the winter, and store it in their home:
a long black stream hauls plunder through a narrow
pathway in the grass. Some roll giant grains,
pushing with their shoulders; others mind the line
and chastise stragglers. The pathway teems with work.
Vergil (4.401–406)

single attribute present in two different domains, the epic simile can present an elaborate description of sensory experience or a sequence of actions, or a combination of the two. In addition, the effect span of an epic simile becomes more far-reaching, since the form enables more elaborate types of intertextual referencing.

In *LoTR*, there is only one simile structure that fully realizes the classical epic simile protocol. The narrative context of the simile is the culmination of the battle at the gates of Morannon:

The Captains bowed their heads; and when they looked up again, behold! their enemies were flying and the power of Mordor was scattering like dust in the wind. As when death smites the swollen brooding thing that inhabits their crawling hill and holds them all in sway, ants will wander witless and purposeless and then feebly die, so the creatures of Sauron, orc or troll or beast spell-enslaved, ran hither and thither mindless; and some slew themselves, or cast themselves in pits, or fled wailing back to hide in holes and dark lightless places far from hope. (III, 227)

The simile realizes all the components of the epic simile in Ben-Porat's (744) typology: it employs the split connective "as when"/ "so" as similarity markers and expands beyond the individual noun or noun group in both the target part and the base part. Yet, since Vergil already often disposed of the second similarity marker (Beck), this structure stands out as markedly Homeric – one clearly separated from the surrounding narrative. Furthermore, the simile also delivers an implied target part, which even includes a simple simile, "like dust in the wind". This target part functions by implication since, in the fully realized classical simile, the simile protocol places the base part before the target part, ensuring that whatever the target part refers to should already be known from the narrative that precedes it.

While the simile protocol provides signposts for readerly engagement, a linguistic protocol informs the structures that make up the similes' content; an intricately designed syntactic parallelism provides further cues for identifying semiotic correspondences. The first clause in the BP sets up the comparison and does not correspond with any part of the TP, but rather with the implied TP, which is the initial reference point to the simile. The most significant syntactic parallelism, however, emerges between the syntactic roles in the latter part of the BP and the first clauses of the TP, as can be seen in Figure 1.

STAGE 1: SYNTACTIC PARALLELISM					
BP	SUBJECT	PREDICATOR	ADJUNCT	ADJUNCT	CONJ.
	ants	will wander	witless	and purposeless	and
TP	SUBJECT (+apposition)	PREDICATOR	ADJUNCT	ADJUNCT	CONJ.
	the creatures of Sauron, orc or troll or beast spell- enslaved,	ran	hither and thither	mindless	and

Figure 1.

Initially, the elements in the BP and the TP correspond semantically as well as syntactically: the grammatical subject “ants” is parallel to that of “the creatures of Sauron,” whereas the BP predicators “will wander” and “die” are semantically parallel to TP predicators “ran,” “slew,” and “cast.”

However, there are also signs of an expanding TP: as illustrated in Figure 2, the syntactic parallelism begins to unravel towards the end of the TP. While the first sentence elements are arranged in close syntactic parallels, they are loosened after the first conjunction.

STAGE 2: WEAKENING SYNTACTIC PARALLELISM					
BP	ADJUNCT	*SUBJECT	ADJUNCT	PREDICATOR	-
	then	*ants (implied)	feebly	die	-
TP	-	SUBJECT	-	PREDICATOR	OBJECT
	-	some	-	slew	themselves

Figure 2.

In Stage 2, the syntax is similar only in the broadest sense, yet even here, the semantic parallels suggest an analogy. The implication in the BP is that the ants will perish, being unable to function individually, whereas the TP begins to differentiate between various outcomes caused by a comparable lack of purpose in the creatures of Sauron. At this point, the TP continues to accumulate constituents that have no counterparts in the BP. The parallelism completely unravels as the TP introduces a third and a fourth predicator, as well as a long string of adjuncts towards the end of the sentence, none of which have equivalents in the BP.

STAGE 3: SYNTACTIC DIVERGENCE	
BP	-
TP	or fled wailing back to hide in holes and dark lightless places far from hope.

Figure 3.

In Stage 3, there are no points of connection to the BP, which signals the limits of the analysis of the simile protocol. Here, the reader is led away from interpretation for correspondence and returns fully to the context of the storyworld. To sum up the purposive design of the simile as a literary technology, it could be said that the simile protocol arranges the selected input from the symbolic landscape into parallel patterns, which the reader is invited to experience within two different semantic domains. Simultaneously, and quite inevitably, the simile guides the reader to engage in further interpretation of what the juxtaposition of these experienced images entails for their understanding of the main narrative. Yet a complication emerges when the TP

expands to a point in which close comparisons to the BP must end – there, questions arise about the extent to which “the abundance of superfluous or even disturbing objects and attributes in the relational comparison hinders the clear mapping of objects and relations from the BD onto the TD” (Ben-Porat 742). Furthermore, I argue that this feature of the simile design has special significance regarding the experience of an autonomous fantasy storyworld. Describing what takes place at this crucial moment requires a closer investigation of the interactions between the simile protocol and the symbolic landscape.

While the protocol of the epic simile provides an essential structuring principle, the corresponding parallelism between items in the symbolic landscape is crucial for readerly meaning-making. In other words, while the protocol of the simile leads the reader to focus on comparing the two domains, the grammatical and semantic parallelisms help the reader in forming interpretations of what the potential similarities could mean. What is particularly interesting in Tolkien’s application of extended similes in *LotR* is how the fantasy storyworld implies an increased distance between the domains of experience from which meanings emerge: one rooted within the experienced fantasy storyworld, the other outside it. As a technology for eliciting experience, the extended simile can be regarded as designed to exploit the simultaneous experience of these separate domains. This, of course, may pose a challenge to the notion of the autonomous storyworld.

5. Synthesis: similes and the storyworld

One factor in the simile design that seems to mitigate its effect of distancing from the storyworld is that the juxtaposition reveals some crucial differences between the objects of comparison. Admittedly, the initial semantic parallels are clear: Sauron is related to an ant queen (“the swollen brooding thing”), his creatures to ants. The semantic overlap can be understood as a monarch holding absolute power over their subjects. In both domains, the unravelling of the bond between the master and the servants results in the disorientation and destruction of the latter. However, in semantic terms, an expansion appears along with the syntactic divergences, in the action after the first predicator: while the ants “feebly die” like automatons, the servants of Sauron become suicidal or flee to places “far from hope,” expressing sentience and awareness of their fate. The syntactically divergent section in the target part thus adds further semantic content that no longer corresponds syntactically with the base part, although it seems clear that the two “or” connectors merely elaborate on the given description, suggesting various “feeble” ends to Sauron’s servants that could still be considered comparable to the ants’ demise. Here, we witness a shift in focus that leads away from the comparison and back to the storyworld. The symbolic landscape can be further explored to highlight the simile’s connections to the narrative, or the storyworld as a large-scale frame of reference.

I have already suggested that the base domain, the ant-likeness of Sauron’s creatures, is repeated to the extent that the two semantic domains are already connected by multiple similarities before the fully extended simile. Based on this, the ant similes can be considered subassemblies in a purposive

design that employs repetition to the effect of identifying orcs with ants. While the similes and their contexts vary slightly, each case emphasizing some aspect of the orcs' behavior or appearance, the repeating act of associating ants and orcs instructs the reader to employ relevant aspects of their experience of ants to construct in their imagination the experience of what orcs are like. When the classical epic simile arrives, its effects build on existing experiences within the relevant domains, evoking the earlier images of the single-minded, war-like swarms.

That final simile, however, is used at a moment when the creatures' determination is abruptly lost, and the epic simile thus collects the semantic momentum of the brief similes only to reverse the implication of an unstoppable swarm. Simultaneously, it also introduces a set of spatiotemporal effects to create a change in narrative perspective and pace at a climactic point in the story. In terms of narrative space, the animal simile is, according to Helen Lovatt (43), a traditional way of presenting the perspective of a divine audience; this seems to be the case with Tolkien's simile as well. The perspective becomes omniscient gradually. First, there is the miniaturization of Sauron and his creatures achieved via the image of the ants, but when the simile ends, the perspective continues to expand, and not only in space. In Homeric Greek, tense in similes conventionally switches to the present (Bakker) as a further digressive modulation of narrative time. In Tolkien's ant simile, however, the tense is also partially in the future, which adds an appeal to the reader's experience of how ants generally behave, and their ideas of logical consequences of what will happen afterwards.

Bakker argues that in Greek, the use of the present tense produces a closeness and "immediacy" (Bakker 21); by contrast, Tolkien's use of the English future tense evokes a sense of prognosis and underlines the inevitability of what results from the ant queen's death. The most obvious temporal effect is the narrative pause that the rhetorical diversion creates, but what results from it is not a leisurely description. In fact, the language of the simile is far less descriptive when compared to Tolkien's Lórien similes (I, 393)⁵. These similes create spatiotemporal effects through subjective focalization and retardation of narrative pace for the very purpose of description. In other words, as narration is favored over description, there is less an impression of a lingering gaze than an expanding vista. The subjective sensory experience is exchanged for a less detailed and more distanced, interpretive account of events as the simile swiftly telescopes into a vision of large-scale events in a future that is rapidly narrated with broad strokes.

The placement of the simile in the narrative further underlines its function as a "transition shot", as Martin describes it (147): the simile occurs at the end of an episodic boundary that marks the end of the War of the Ring. This is a Homeric application of the kind of simile that is often used in the *Iliad* for "moving the listener out to a panoramic perspective, before taking them back in to a different part of the action" (Lovatt 39), in this case the last stand of the

⁵ Two extended similes appear in the scene of departure from Lórien, the first depicting the location: "For so it seemed to them: Lórien was slipping backward, like a bright ship masted with enchanted trees, sailing on to forgotten shores, while they sat helpless upon the margin of the grey and leafless world" (I, 393). The second simile describes Galadriel: "She shone like a window of glass upon a far hill in the westering sun, or as a remote lake seen from a mountain: a crystal fallen in the lap of the land" (I, 393).

“Men of Rhûn and of Harad” (III, 227). The strong sense of reframing makes a cinematic description fitting, as the depicted scene moves from the narrated here-and-now to an altogether different spatiotemporal perspective in which consequences of the narrated events can be reported. In this sense, the simile functions like an epilogue in miniature – at least as far as the fate of Sauron’s servants are concerned. This impression is further underlined by the traditional, impersonal narration of the classical epic simile.

Yet, while the ant similes in *LotR* form a consistent relationship with the narrative, their connection to the storyworld is not, perhaps, as simple as it seems. In epic poetry, as Bakker has suggested, “similes are set apart from narrative as a different register, as a way of speaking in which the performer adopts a different tone and stance and communicates more directly with the audience” and carry a “different experiential load” with “semantic and communicative consequences” (23). While similes can be effective in illustrating the unfamiliar through images of the familiar, problems may arise when the frame of reference is not a familiar world, but one of fantasy. What is at stake here, once more, is the diegetic integrity of the storyworld: if the narrator sets itself apart from the narrative to present images for comparison, the reader is likely to take note if the images do not belong in the same world.

However, the recurrence of the ant simile grounds it back into the storyworld on both stylistic and symbolic levels. The repeated use of the simile, with slight variations, can be seen as a strategy for achieving what Dor describes as “symbolic control” (44) over the depiction of orcs and their relationship with Sauron. Once the reader becomes accustomed to identifying orcs with ants, these connected attributes not only embed themselves into the storyworld but also enable further associations with each new variation. The sustained use of ant imagery and the detached narrative perspective thus shift the story from its immediate context to a more thematic exploration. This practice of ascribing moral qualities through animal similes, as discussed by Whaler in “Animal Simile in *Paradise Lost*,” aligns with classical and medieval symbolic traditions. While medieval symbolism preserves the classical depiction of the ant as a model of thrift, tenacity, and diligence, it also incorporates Christian moral virtues (Ermacora 340)⁶. In Tolkien’s similes, however, these attributes are repurposed for the context of his storyworld, imbuing the orcs with radically different associations.

While Shippey (“Orcs, Wraiths, Wights”) has demonstrated how the moral state of individual orcs can be discerned through dialogue, action, and description, Tolkien’s use of the ant simile also constructs a collective image of the orcs. The ents, who catalogue life in Middle-earth, refer to orcs as “flint-hearted” and highlight their immense endurance in marching, running, and climbing (*The Nature of Middle-earth*, 176). Yet, the collectivizing imagery of ants emphasizes the orcs’ mindless servitude – a corrupted form of labor that connects specific narrative events to broader ideas about evil in Tolkien’s world. In an unsent letter from 1954, Tolkien describes orcs as “more like puppets

⁶ Tolkien’s use of the ant as a potent symbol may have been further charged by the cultural fascination with ants and insects in general in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As Natacha Vas-Deyres and Patrick Bergeron (160–163) have shown, the society of insects became a popular motif in science fiction writing. Against this literary backdrop, where the ant society was reimagined as a threatening empire, Tolkien’s view of the ant gains markedly dystopian significance.

filled (only at a distance) with their maker's mind and will, or ant-like, operating under the direction of a queen-centre" (*Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, Letter 153), exemplifying the behavior of masses controlled by tyranny. A later essay reiterates this idea, asserting that it was not an essential quality of the orcs but their "servitude to a central will" that reduced them to an ant-like existence ("Morgoth's Ring," 419). This framework underscores the glimpses of individual orc agency as reminders of their victimization. In a contrasting choice, Tolkien employs a bee simile for hobbits: "Hobbits can work like bees when the mood and the need comes on them" (III, 302). This comparison implies that hobbits' industriousness is rooted in their agency and does not define their entire existence. The bee, as a symbol of labor, stands in opposition to the ant, suggesting a form of value accumulation that is free from aggression and exploitation.

Yet simultaneously, and despite the design effort of domesticating the classical epic simile for Middle-earth, the device nevertheless keeps the door ajar to the actual world and becomes a vantage point between two worlds, inviting interpretations of the ant similes as applicable to phenomena in our everyday reality. This effect is further intensified by the change in the narrative voice that brings about the "semantic and communicative consequences" Bakker (23) suggested. In this case, the reader is encouraged to engage in a kind of double reading that results in what Cecire describes as "Fantasy's ability to cast "proof" of enchantment back onto reality" (79). The purposive design of the ant similes as a connected series exemplifies this, as it enables a process of meaning attachment where classical and medieval animal symbolism is appropriated and imbued with meanings that resonate not only with Tolkien's fantasy world, but also the reader's world.

The two-way implications Tolkien's use of the ant similes can be further assessed in connection to ongoing discussions about language, power, ideology, and race in Tolkien's works, particularly in connection to the representation of orcs (e. g. Stuart; Mills). At the very least, analysis of the technologies of narrative can provide further evidence on the degree (both qualitatively and quantitatively) of the author's purposive rhetorical investment in their representations. The collective representation of orcs via similes may encourage the reader to prioritize the symbolic value of this representation. This may contribute to a failure – of the kind Fimi has pointed out in a response to a collective reading of orcs – in differentiating

between an author's urge to communicate with his contemporaries via his own (very successful) imaginative creations, and the inner logic of his invented secondary world, in which the Orcs aren't (only, in some cases) symbols, but actual characters with agency that drive elements of plot and dialogue. ("Tolkien, Race, and Racism" 4)

As I have shown in the analyses, Tolkien's sustained use of ant similes does appear to characterize the kind of communicative urge Fimi discusses. The rhetorical persuasiveness attained through the ant similes, however, also runs the risk of leading the reader to bypass the glimpses of orc individuality that Tolkien nevertheless offers, in exchange of actual-world relevance that becomes available from a more abstracted interpretation. This serves to illustrate how

the autonomy of the storyworld may become compromised in the reader's experience.

It is, however, also a salient example of the difference between purposive design and authorial intention. While the author's intentions remain a subject for guesswork, the effects of the purposive design of the similes can be observed as it guides the reader to experience the analogies (if not fusion) between the storyworld and the actual world. It is, however, at the reader's discretion to decide what this amounts to in their own interpretation. Seeing Tolkien's writing as technology – for the purpose of imaginatively experiencing the stories and storyworlds – thus places a counterbalance on the user's end: in taking up the technology for their use, the reader also agentively engages in the process of meaning-making and bears the responsibility for maintaining awareness of its effects on themselves. Thus, the reader may also note that, even with its collectivizing images, the epic simile ultimately diverges from the comparison with ants, returning the creatures of Sauron a degree of subjectivity and awareness of their own plight as they “hide in holes and dark lightless places far from hope” (III, 227).

6. Conclusion

From the perspective of purposive technological design, I have demonstrated here how similes function as flexible platforms for a range of functionalities, some of which Tolkien develops into a meaning-making strategy in his application of the ant similes. In their variable yet sustained use, the ant similes illustrate the technological adaptability of the simile for cumulative impact: the first instances are comparisons with some elaboration on the details, but the final simile is extended into a fully realized epic simile that hinges on the meanings established in preceding similes. This design can also be seen as an extension of the functional envelope of similes as they are used to gain symbolic control over the collective representation of imagined existents in an imagined world. Such control is attained by instructing the reader to imagine the creatures in a particular way that further resonates with multiple levels of interpretation and symbolism.

By the ant similes, and via the narrative perspective and voice of the final simile in particular, Tolkien communicates ideas about evil in a universalizing manner that does not seem to appear to the same degree anywhere else in the *Lord of the Rings*. The impact of this short narrative moment is amplified by the preceding ant similes that persuade the reader to perceive orcs as a collective. At the point of the story's culmination, the fully extended simile purposively shifts the narrative into an epic scale, further charged by the accumulated vision of evil and the universalizing logic provided by the similes' design. Thus, the epic simile contributes to how the downfall of that collective evil is rationalized and justified in a grand, proleptic vision presented to the reader looking on as if from a great distance. In redesigning and expanding the functional envelope of the classical epic simile, Tolkien creates a powerful rhetorical device. The effects of this device, however, are bound to raise questions about the way his narrative relates to his storyworld as well as the actual world. There, the meaning-making can be seen as a two-way street: the

story is constructed in the imagination of the reader on the foundation of their lived experience, which then becomes enriched by the experience of fantasy.

Biography: Juha-Pekka Alarauhio is a University Lecturer in English at the University of Oulu. He has previously published on the epic poems of Matthew Arnold and Johan Ludvig Runeberg. His current research work focuses on developing an approach to literature and other narrative media as experience technologies.

Email: juha-pekka.alarauhio@oulu.fi

Works Cited

- Ambühl, Annemarie. "Intergeneric Influences and Interactions." *Structures of Epic Poetry: Vol. I: Foundations*, edited by Christiane Reitz and Simone Finkmann. De Gruyter, 2020, pp. 167–192.
- Arthur, Brian. *The Nature of Technology: What It Is and How It Evolves*. Free Press, 2009.
- Bakker, Egbert J. "Similes, Augment, and the Language of Immediacy." *Speaking Volumes: Orality and Literacy in the Greek and Roman World*, edited by J. Watson, Brill, 2001, pp. 1–23.
- Beck, Deborah. "Simile Structure in Homeric Epic and Vergil's Aeneid." *Between Orality and Literacy: Communication and Adaptation in Antiquity*, edited by Ruth Scodel, vol. 10, Brill, 2014, pp. 244–266.
- Ben-Porat, Ziva. "Poetics of the Homeric Simile and the Theory of (Poetic) Simile." *Poetics Today*, vol. 13, no. 4, 1992, pp. 737–769.
- Cecire, Maria Sachiko. *Re-Enchanted: The Rise of Children's Fantasy Literature in the Twentieth Century*. 1 ed. University of Minnesota Press, 2019.
- Dor, Daniel. *The Instruction of Imagination: Language as a Social Communication Technology*. Oxford UP, 2015.
- Drout, Michael D.C. and Hilary Wynne. "Tom Shippey's J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century and a Look Back at Tolkien Criticism since 1982." *Envoi* vol. 9, no. 2, 2000, pp. 101–66.
- Elleström, Lars. *Beyond Media Borders, Volume 1: Intermedial Relations among Multimodal Media*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2021.
- . "Coherence and Truthfulness in Communication: Intracommunicational and Extracommunicational Indexicality." *Semiotica*, vol. 2018, no. 225, 2018, pp. 423–446.

- Ermacora, Davide. "The Ant and the Lion: Reassessing Philological-Folklore Approaches to Reinhart Fuchs." *Fabula* vol. 61, no. 3–4, 2020, pp. 335–377.
- Fimi, Dimitra "Tolkien, Race, and Racism in Middle-earth (2022) by Robert Stuart." *Journal of Tolkien Research*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2022, n-pag.
- . "A Homeric Simile in J.R.R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings and Philip Pullman's His Dark Materials." 2019,
<https://dimitrafimi.com/2019/12/15/a-homeric-simile-in-j-r-r-tolkienes-the-lord-of-the-rings-and-pullmans-his-dark-materials/>,
Accessed May 20, 2024.
- Fisher, Jason (ed.). *Tolkien and the Study of His Sources: Critical Essays*. McFarland & Company Inc., 2011.
- Hawkins, Emma. "Tolkien and Dogs, Just Dogs: in Metaphor and Simile." *Mythlore*, Vol. 27, No. 3, 2009, pp. 144–157.
- Jensen, Todd. "Elements of the Classical Epic in The Lord of the Rings." *Beyond Bree*, 1990, pp. 1–3.
- Korpua, Jyrki. *The Mythopoeic Code of Tolkien: A Christian Platonic Reading of the Legendarium*. McFarland, 2021.
- Livesey, Michael. "The Ring Cycle: Journeying Through the Language of Tolkien's Third Age with Corpus Linguistics." *Journal of Tolkien Research*, vol. 18, no. 1, 2023, n-pag.
- Livingston, Michael. "Troy and the Rings: Homer, Tolkien, and the Medieval Myth of England." *Mythlore*, vol. 32, no. 1, 2013, pp. 73–91.
- Lovatt, Helen. *The Epic Gaze: Vision, Gender, and Narrative in Ancient Epic*. Cambridge UP, 2013.
- Manlove, Colin N. *Modern Fantasy: Five Studies*. Cambridge UP, 1975.
- Martin, Richard P. "Similes and Performance." *Written Voices, Spoken Signs: Tradition, Performance, and the Epic Text*, edited by Egbert J. Bakker and Ahuvia Kahane, Harvard UP, 1997, pp. 138–166.
- Mills, Charles W. "The Wretched of Middle-Earth: An Orkish Manifesto." *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* vol. 60, no. 1, 2022, pp. 105–135.
- Nünlist, René. *The Ancient Critic at Work: Terms and Concepts of Literary Criticism in Greek Scholia*. Cambridge UP, 2009.
- Reid, Robin Anne. "Mythology and History: A Stylistic Analysis of The Lord of the Rings." *Style*, vol. 43, no. 4, 2009, pp. 517–538.

- Ryan, Marie-Laure. "From Possible Worlds to Storyworlds: On the Worldness of Narrative Representation." *Possible Worlds Theory and Contemporary Narratology*, edited by Alice Bell and Marie-Laure Ryan, University of Nebraska Press, 2019, pp. 62–87.
- Shippey, Tom. *The Road to Middle Earth: How Tolkien Created a New Mythology*. Houghton Mifflin Company, 2003.
- . "Orcs, Wraiths, Wights: Tolkien's Images of Evil." *J.R.R. Tolkien and His Literary Resonances: Views of Middle-earth*, edited by George Clark and Daniel Timmons, Greenwood Press, 2000, pp. 183–198.
- Stevens, Benjamin Eldon. "Underworlds in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*." *Classical Traditions in Modern Fantasy*, edited by Brett M. Rogers and Benjamin Eldon Stevens. Oxford UP, 2017.
- Stuart, Robert. *Tolkien, Race, and Racism in Middle-earth*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2022.
- Toikkanen, Jarkko. "Vanishing Intermedialities in Wallace Stevens's 'The Idea of Order at Key West.'" *Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics*, vol. 47, no. 2, 2024, pp. 63–70.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings*. Houghton Mifflin, 1987.
- . "Morgoth's Ring". In *The History of The Lord of The Rings*. Part 3, edited by Christopher Tolkien. London: Harper Collins Publishers. 2002.
- . *Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, edited by Humphrey Carpenter and Christopher Tolkien. Harper Collins, 2006.
- . *The Nature of Middle Earth*, edited by Carl F. Hostetter, Harper Collins, 2021, pp. 175–176.
- Vas-Deyres, Natacha and Patrick Bergeron. "Of Ants and Men: An Entomological Journey to the Heart of Proto-Science Fiction (1890–1950)." *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, vol. 30, no. 2, 2019, pp. 157–75.
- Vergil. *The Aeneid*, translated by Shadi Bartsch, Random House, 2021.
- Walker, Steve. *The Power of Tolkien's Prose: Middle-Earth's Magical Style*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.
- Whaler, James. "Animal Simile in *Paradise Lost*." *PMLA*, vol. 47, 1932, pp. 534–553.
- . "The Miltonic Simile." *PMLA*, vol. 46, no. 4, 1931, pp. 1034–1074.

---. "Grammatical Nexus of the Miltonic Simile." *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, vol. 30, no. 3, 1931, pp. 327–334, University of Illinois Press.

Williams, Hamish (ed.). *Tolkien and the Classical World*. Walking Tree Publishers, 2021.