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# Oral Tradition in Tolkien

Oral tradition is a form of relating information that has been around since practically the beginning of time. Written texts have also been around but were really dependent on the level of literacy of the individual wishing to record the specific event. Oral tradition simply meant the passing on of information through a spoken medium from one person to another. R. C. Culley in his essay "An Approach To The Problem of Oral Tradition" says, "The very simple question might be asked, what is oral tradition? Now, of course, the term itself implies something passed on by word of mouth" (113). The passing of information and stories orally does not require any special learning or type of apparatus. All one needs to know how to do is speak the language of the people and have a fairly good memory.

The concept of oral tradition can also be divided into two separate theories. Culley suggests, "On the one hand, oral tradition implies a letter-perfect handing on from person to person; on the other hand, oral tradition implies changes occurring in the material" (114). The first theory, or letter-perfect, suggests that this would be an oral tradition based on the memorization of a story or history and then passing that piece on to others as a near perfect replica of the original story. This would also suggest that there may have been some form of written version available. This style of oral tradition is very similar to the Greek's use of story and argument. In many of the Greek schools the students were taught various speeches in a word for word fashion. The students would memorize these speeches and be able to recite them

verbatim.

The second theory suggests more of a retelling of a telling of a story that a person heard and wants others to know about it. This style is more fluid and allows for the imagination of the teller to play with the various aspects of the story. Many scholars believe that Homer's epics The Odyssey and Iliad were done in this fashion. In theory, the epic stories were initially told to people and then through the years people told and retold the stories to others. The Anglo-Saxons had their own version of an oral epic poem as well. Beowulf, scholars believe, was an epic poem that had been told over several years, possibly even hundreds of years. Like The Odyssey and The Iliad, Beowulf eventually was written down and given a more concrete version that people could learn. Each of these examples, if they were in deed passed orally first, may have been initially told with specific plots and themes but since a written version was not available the addition or changing of parts of the story may have occurred.

Whether oral tradition followed one theory or the other is not really an issue. The fact that an oral tradition existed is important. Oral tradition must then have had a purpose for the people and more importantly for the storyteller. Nora Chadwick breaks down oral tradition into three main classes, "(1) literature composed for the purpose of entertainment; (2) literature of instruction (religious, moral, and intellectual); and (3) literature of celebration, including ritual (both religious and social)" (80). Entertainment stories, such as ones told in the mead hall or around a campfire, were used for simple pleasure. This class of oral tradition is one that is still used even today. The second class was a style that was used in the past but is no longer really used. Instructional oral literature would include such stories as a culture's mythology. Norse, Celtic, or Greek mythology was, many times, used as an instructional medium. Usually it was a

lesson in what would happen to a person if they defied the gods or what kinds of rewards the gods would give them for their loyalty. Celebrational oral literature is closely related to the instructional oral literature and would have been used in the say way.

With this information about oral tradition in mind, Tolkien incorporates an oral tradition in the form of songs to pass information from one generation to another. Whether it is the elves, dwarves or men they use their songs and poems to tell stories of passed events, heroic persons or aspects of the creation of Middle-Earth. Because Tolkien was attempting to create a pre-Arthurian history, Tolkien knew that there was little to no literature in the world during the time frame of his tales of Middle-Earth so the inclusion of an oral tradition is not only a normal idea but it is almost expected. In addition, an oral tradition would give the story a more credible feel since oral traditions can be found in almost all cultures on the earth.

The Ents, being some of the oldest creatures of Middle-Earth, gives them a special take on the history that they would create and keep. Treebeard relates this poem to Merry and Pippin as he is taking care of them in Fangorn Forest:

> In the willow-meads in Tasarinian I walked in the Spring.
>
> Ah! the sight and smell of the Spring in Nan-tararion!
>
> And I said the was good.
>
> I wandered in Summer in the elm-woods of Ossiriand.
>
> Ah! the light and the music in the Summer by the Seven Rivers of
>
> Ossir!
>
> And I thought that was best.
>
> To the beeches of Neldoreth I came in the Autumn.

Ah! the gold and the red and the sighing of the leaves in the

Autumn in Taur-na-neldor!

It was more that my desire.

To the pine-trees upon the highland of Dorthonion I climbed in the

Winter (Tolkien, "Rings" 469)

This part of Treebeard's song references the passing of time with the passing of the seasons. The spring is the beginning of his journey and passes through summer, autumn and eventually ends on winter and remains in Fangorn from this point on. He also uses a specific description of each of the "times" that he is telling Merry and Pippin. Each of the descriptions is also specific sights or sounds that are associated with the specific season of his journey. He uses terms such as "sight and smell" to describe spring. "Light and music" are used to tell about summer. Autumn is described with the colors of the leaves, "the gold and red." Finally, winter is summed up in the words "the wind and the whiteness and the black branches." Treebeard's song follows in a tradition of his own making, namely that of nature. Using nature as a framework for his history also gives himself and other Ents a way to relate to their history.

Treebeard continues his poem:

Ah! the wind and the whiteness and the black branches of Winter

upon Orod-na-Thôn!

My voice went up and sang in the sky.

And now all those lands lie under the wave,

And I walk in Ambaróna, in Tauremorna, in Aldalómë,

In my own land, in the country of Fangorn,

Where the roots are long,

And the years lie thicker than the leaves

In Tauremornalómë (Tolkien, "Rings" 469).

Treebeard describes to Merry and Pippin some of his history since his waking in Middle-Earth. We learn that he has been to many parts of Middle-Earth from the names of locations that he makes particular mention. In line 17, Treebeard's song explains that these different locations are all gone and have been buried under the waves. This would suggest that long before the beginning of *The Lord of the Rings* these areas were sunk in the ocean for one reason or another. Treebeard further explains that the forest that makes up Fangorn is merely the east end of what was once a much larger forest that he and other Ents would walk.

The Elves of *The Lord of the Rings* have the most lore and song of any of the Middle-Earthen races. Many of their songs pertain mostly to current situations or in situations of the near future, but there are many instances where a small piece the past makes its way into the song. Such an example occurs when Frodo and Sam hear the high elves singing during their departure from the shire.

O stars that in the Sunless Year

With shining hand by her were sown,

In windy fields now bright and clear

We see your silver blossom blown! (Tolkien, "Rings" 79)

This song the elves are singing carries a double meaning. The song on one level is a telling of how there were two sets of lights created during the early times of Middle-Earth. The lights were an organic creation, hence words such as sown. Eventually the stars in the night's sky were added to help shed light on Middle-Earth and the elves that were present at the time describe them as silver blossom being blown around. It is much like during the spring time when blossoms are blown off of trees and they seem to dot the sky all over and the blossoms are as abundant as the stars.

Also, the elves that are singing this song are on their way to return to their true home which is away from Middle-Earth. When the elves sing of the sunless year they could be referring to their time on Middle-Earth. The elves had experienced a terrible time of death, war and strife bringing about a darkness upon their own kind and upon Middle-Earth in general. As the elves receive the word that they can leave Middle-Earth to live with the gods as they once did, the path before them is once again "bright and clear." They will be amongst the eternal spring where "silver blossoms" blow.

The Elves often sing the tales of heroes and heroines, including "The Lay of Luthien," the song of Nimrodel and the song of Eärendil. Each of these songs ends tragically and serves as a lesson to other Elves who might think to follow in the footsteps of their ancestors. Particularly, "The Lay of Luthien" and the song of Eärendil represent historic tragedies involving a mortal and an elf. This relationship between mortals and elves is unwise simply from the fact that elves are immortal and mortals are mortal. There is nothing wrong with a love relationship between an elf and a human except that elves cannot stay in the mortal world forever and humans are not

allowed to live in the elven realm. Chadwick would classify these songs as instructional. They are told and recorded as reminders of the consequences of elf and human relations.

Elves not only use song for keeping their history and lore, but the dwarves have their fair share of songs in both *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*. For instance, this song about the early dwarves appears in *The Lord of the Rings*:

> The world was young, the mountains green,
>
> No stain yet on the Moon was seen,
>
> No words were laid on stream or stone
>
> When Durin woke and walked alone.
>
> He named the nameless hills and dells;
>
> He drank from yet untasted wells;
>
> He stooped and looked in Mirrormere,
>
> And saw a crown of stars appear,
>
> As gems upon a silver thread,
>
> Above the shadow of his head (Tolkien, "Rings" 315).

This passage is about Durin the first dwarves. For the dwarves, this is a core belief of their creation with Durin being the first and the one to organize the dwarves. He is the one that established names and passed them from one generation to the next. This explains why much of Middle-Earth has dwarvish names along with the elvish names, because to the dwarves Durin was the first on Middle-Earth and therefore responsible for naming what he saw. Durin's song is much like the lore and history of many religious theologies of today. Many cultures, modern and ancient, have some form of a creation story that they believe and are taught. The Christians, for

example, have accounts in *The Bible* of Adam being the first man and having responsibility for naming the creatures and things that were found on this planet. Tolkien being a very religious person himself knew the Adam creation story from *The Bible*. Since one of Tolkien's main focuses for the tales of Middle-Earth was to create a pre-Arthurian history for England, he would need to have some sort of creation myth for the living creatures of his world. Tolkien would have easily adjusted the Adam story for his own purposes. Plus, much of Tolkien's audience would most likely have been Christian of some type and familiar with the biblical creation myth. This familiarity between the story and the audience would give the audience an instantaneous identification with this part of the text.

In *The Hobbit*, we see much more of the dwarves and their songs. Most of the songs serve to keep their minds on their task and to annoy Bilbo, but some passages talk of the old dwarves and their time.

> The dwarves of yore made mighty spells,
> While hammers fell like ringing bells
> In places deep, where dark things sleep,
> In hollow halls beneath the fells.
> For ancient king and elvish lord
> There many a gleaming golden hoard
> They shaped and wrought, and light they caught
> To hide in gems on hilt of sword (Tolkien, "Hobbit" 17).

Here, the dwarves are reminisce about a time long gone. While they still value their work and accomplishments, the dwarves seem to want times to return to the good old days. The song

makes reference to the old dwarves making mighty things and working their might on the materials of the earth. In the lore and history of the dwarves, they use their craftsmanship and works that they have wrought as prominent pieces in their songs. They are proud of what they are able to do with the materials of the earth and it would be a dishonor for them not to relate their pride of the dwarves of old.

Song is very important to the texts that we read concerning Middle-Earth. Without the songs much of lore that surrounds *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* would be lost as well as the connection that a contemporary read may have with the text. Tolkien's effort to create a history would be meaningless if he had not, in some way, attempted to include lore in his text. The songs give the text a further validation of being more like the world in which we live today and therefore gives us something to relate. The world is full of history. Whether it directly pertains to a particular culture or not does not change the fact that history is important to all people. Tolkien knew and understood this simple fact of human nature, which is why he takes a fair amount of time and space in his books to not only tell the history of Middle-Earth but teach the reader about Middle-Earth. This telling and teaching is done in the same fashion that cultures over the years have used oral tradition to strengthen their people.

Citations

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