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# Father Knows Best: The Narrator's Oral Performance as Paternal Protector in The Hobbit

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# **INKLINGS FOREVER, Volume VIII**

A Collection of Essays Presented at the Joint Meeting of

The Eighth

FRANCES WHITE EW BANK COLLOQUIUM ON C.S. LEWIS & FRIENDS

and

THE C.S. LEWIS AND THE INKLINGS SOCIETY CONFERENCE

Taylor University 2012

Upland, Indiana

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## **Father Knows Best:**

### **The Narrator's Oral Performance as Paternal Protector in *The Hobbit***

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# **Father Knows Best: The Narrator's Oral Performance as Paternal Protector in *The Hobbit***

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The importance of the narrator in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* has been recognized for a number of decades. In 1979, Jane Chance-Nitzsche (later just Jane Chance) in *Tolkien's Art* includes extensive commentary in a chapter "The King Under the Mountain" in which she argues for the independent nature of the narrator, writing that "The narrator, like a tale-telling [Canterbury] pilgrim, must be regarded as one additional character" (Chance 60).<sup>1</sup> Later Paul Thomas in "Some of Tolkien's Narrators" makes a similar claim:

Thus the narrator is, from one perspective, just as much a character as Bard, Balin and Bilbo. And yet the narrator is a special character: as a third-person narrator, he is merely a voice, and he is in the story but not in the plot. (Thomas 162-163)

What remains in debate, therefore, is not the narrator's importance but rather his qualities. And this is especially important in light of the fact that there are, and will soon be more, versions of *The Hobbit* in which the narrator apparently is absent.

Many find the narrator charming. In a published seminar paper "The Voice of the Narrator in Tolkien's *Hobbit*" Nadja Litschko concludes by noting that the narrator is a "delight to adult readers" (28). This is confirmed within a discussion board about *The Hobbit's*

narrator on the web forum *Tolkien's Ring* when one thirty five year old reader—clearly an adult—writes: "I love the way the narrator talks to me. It always makes me feel like I am sitting right there. I also think that the way this is done gives the story a Hobbit feeling!" (Desi). Yet there are many who find the voice which tells the story of *The Hobbit* problematic—many of them are scholars and one seems to be the author himself.

Jane Chance says that the narrator's practice of "intrusions—direct addresses to children, use of the first person singular, foreshadowing of later events, joking tone, plot clarifications, and sound effects intended for entertain children—have annoyed readers and critics" (73). She claims that the narrator "patronizes his audience. . .prides himself of his superior wisdom and status as an adult. . .and behaves more like a critic when he laughs at or disapproves of his characters, expressing neither pity nor terror at the plights that he relives vicariously" (74). The "arrogant, unimaginative, and very 'adult' narrator assumes this story about little Hobbits must be relegated to an audience of little creatures—children" (Chance 60). Chance does not, however, see this as a flaw in the book since she interprets the narrating voice as belonging to a purposefully flawed figure created by Tolkien to stand in contrast to the true moral center of the work, Gandalf. Yet it is clear that she is bothered by the very

tone in which others have delighted. She is not alone.

Litschko writes that “due to his frequent comments and reader addresses, he [the Narrator] can be perceived as rather patronizing” (179). Tolkien’s authorized biographer, Humphrey Carpenter, while presenting the facts of *The Hobbit’s* composition, adds his own negative opinion about the narrator whose purpose he sees as being there to address children:

Indeed he [Tolkien] did this too consciously and deliberately at time in the readers’ remarks such as “Now you know quite enough to get on with” and “as we shall see in the end.” He later removed many of these, but some remain in the published text—to his regret, for he came to dislike them and even to believe that any deliberate talking down to children is a great mistake in a story” (Carpenter 179).

Carpenter will also later refer to “the patronizing ‘asides’ to juvenile readers” which he says Tolkien did not remove because he was so busy with the many other complications associated with the initial publication of the book. But clearly he sees these elements as problematic, a position which, it should be noted, was later challenged by Thomas in “Some of Tolkien’s Narrators” (167).

Finally *The J.R.R. Tolkien Encyclopedia Scholarship and Assessment* in its “discussion and analysis” portion of its entry on “The Hobbit” notes that much “of the novel’s flavor also derives from the voice of the narrator, which contrasts the grandeur of ancient epic with the cozy, even patronizing asides of the Victorian children’s tale. *Tolkien regretted this later feature, yet he never fully edited it out*” (Scoville 277-278 Emphasis Mine).

As the last two sources indicate, there is evidence that Tolkien himself regretted the tone of his narrator. In a *New York Times* interview by Philip

Norman, “The Prevalence of Hobbits,” Tolkien presents his most withering criticism:

“The Hobbit’ was written in what I should now regard as bad style, as if one were talking to children. There’s nothing my children loathed more. They taught me a lesson. Anything that in any way marked out ‘The Hobbit’ as for children instead of just for people, they disliked--instinctively. I did too, now that I think about it. All this ‘I won’t tell you any more, you think about it’ stuff. Oh no, they loathe it; it’s awful. (qtd. in Norman)

That would appear to end the conversation; not only scholars but the very author himself seems to see the narrator as a flaw within *The Hobbit*. But it isn’t the end—neither of the conversation, nor as the final word on the nature of the narrator.

First, as important as Tolkien’s own words are, he had a tendency to speak in sweeping terms with sometimes a less than clear memory. For example, he gave little credence that the source of the multiple giant spiders that turn up in his work, specifically in *The Hobbit*, *Lord of the Rings* and even *The Silmarillion*, had anything to do with the bite he received from a tarantula as a small child in South Africa—a bite which resulted with him running “in terror across the garden until the nurse snatched him up and sucked out the poison” (Carpenter 13). In a letter to Auden he claimed the following:

If it [the importance of spiders] has anything to do with my being stung by a tarantula as a small child, people are welcome to the notion. I can only say I remember nothing about it, should not know it if I had not been told and I do not dislike spiders particularly and have no urge to kill them. I usually rescue

those whom I find in the bath  
(*Letters* 217).

In fact Tolkien came to blame the villainess role of spiders in *The Hobbit* on his first listeners, his children.

I put in the spiders largely because this was, you remember, primarily written for my children (at least I had them in mind) and one of my sons in particular dislikes spiders with a great intensity. I did it to thoroughly frighten him, and it did. (qtd. in Anderson 169, note 7).

In fairness, Anderson also notes that “throughout his life, Tolkien’s son Michael had what he called ‘a deep rooted abhorrence to spiders’” (Anderson 169, note 7). It is not that Michael’s fears were not true motivators in the creative process; it is Tolkien’s inability to consider his own past self—his own fears—as he made those denials which is the issue. He certainly remembered enough, “a hot day and running in fear through long, dead grass” (Carpenter 13). But somehow he assumed that since he could not recall the actual spider that it had no place in his nature. He apparently did not consider C S Lewis’ observation that it is impossible to please a child with a material which the author views “with indifference or contempt” (“On Three Ways of Writing for Children” 32). In other words, Tolkien may have zeroed in on his son’s fears because they found a resounding chord in his own heart, but he did not see it. Thus, Tolkien did not always, when making judgments, consider the levels of experience which made-up his own memory. As Carpenter writes, Tolkien was guilty of the “habit (and it is not an uncommon Oxford habit) of making dogmatic assertions. . .” (236).

Another example of a contradictory perspective in memory found in the Norman interview—the same one in which he makes those devastating critical comments about his

narrative voice—is Tolkien’s claim that *The Hobbit* is not a children’s story:

“The Hobbit” wasn’t written for children, and it certainly wasn’t done just for the amusement of Tolkien’s three sons and one daughter, as is generally reported. “That’s all sob stuff. No, of course, I didn’t. If you’re a youngish man and you don’t want to be made fun of, you say you’re writing for children. At any rate, children are your immediate audience and you write or tell them stories, for which they are mildly grateful: long rambling stories at bedtime. (Norman)

This sounds as if Tolkien, afraid of censor from peers, hid his own adult enjoyment of fairy tales under the excuse of writing for his children. But as multiple quotes given earlier and later make clear, it was his children for whom he wrote and whose response he judged the success of his work. Furthermore, *The Hobbit* was not the only children’s story he wrote at that time in his life; there was *Roverandom* (based on a toy dog lost by Michael, his second son), *The Adventures of Tom Bomadil* (based on a favorite Dutch doll also owned by Michael) *Mr. Bliss*, and of course the illustrated *Father Christmas Letters*. (Carpenter 161-162). Thus, to say that *The Hobbit* was not intended for children makes one wonder what Tolkien was thinking.

There is also the point that, in spite of all these claims on how much Tolkien publically did not like the narrative voice in *The Hobbit*, the fact remains that he retained it even though he reworked *the Hobbit* for three editions—requiring more editing than he did for *The Lord of the Rings*. As was quoted from Carpenter earlier even after such extensive editing “some [elements of the chatty narrator] remain in the published text” (179). Thomas concurs even more, basing his conclusion on Anderson’s review of Tolkien’s changes in

the multiple editions included in *The Annotated Hobbit* (Anderson 322-328), and says that “although Tolkien in his revisions made several changes in the details of what the narrator says, he made almost no changes in the qualities of the narrator’s voice” (162).

Furthermore, it is not as if Tolkien were reluctant to rework a text he found problematic. When faced with criticism, C. S. Lewis notes, “Either he [Tolkien] begins the whole work over again from the beginning or else takes no notice at all” (qtd. in Carpenter 145). In fact, it is partly Tolkien’s “habitual insistence on perfection” (Carpenter 195) which may be partly blamed for the limited canon that makes up his finished work. So, that being the case, why did Tolkien not remove the narrator from *The Hobbit*?

The answer for this has been raised already in earlier quotes, *The Hobbit* is a story for children—not that Hobbits or Middle Earth are childish—but that this specific narrative was designed for children. The narrator is appropriate for children, specifically for Tolkien’s children and even more specifically for Tolkien’s *young* children. Again, this ties into Tolkien’s limitations with memory. When he made his comments in the Norman interview denigrating the narrative voice of *The Hobbit* and denying its purpose as being for children, the year was 1957. At that time his children were all adults: John was 40, Michael 37, Christopher 33, and Priscilla was 29. (This probably explains their negative perspective as well.) However, in 1930, twenty seven years earlier, when according to Carpenter his children first remembered him reading or just telling them portions of *The Hobbit*, John was 13, Michael 10, Christopher 6, and Priscilla only 2.<sup>2</sup> All were young and, in fact, some so young they were not reading yet. Thus, their whole early experience in relation to *The Hobbit* came to them orally. An oral performance was always part of Tolkien’s story telling.

Even as late as the Norman interview, Tolkien revealed his preference for oral delivery even of *The Lord of the Rings*: “Tolkien would rather enjoy making a recording of his work, doing all the different voices; rustic ones for the hobbits and a horrid, high, hissing one for Gollum, the creature who slithers after them, trying to win back the Dark Lord’s ring for himself” (Norman). Furthermore, it is notable that in *The Two Towers*, Frodo and Sam, while having their discussion of important stories, envision the passing on of great songs and tales as being done by a father orally to his children:

Still, I wonder if we shall ever be put into songs or tales. We’re in one, or course; but I mean: put into words, you know, told by the fireside, or read out of a great big book with red and black letters, years and years afterwards. And people will say: “Let’s hear about Frodo and the Ring!” And they’ll say: “Yes, that’s one of my favorite stories. Frodo was very brave. wasn’t he, dad?” “Yes, my boy, the famousest of the hobbits, and that’s saying a lot.” (*Two Towers* 321)

Tolkien, therefore, even though he usually wrote out or typed his manuscripts, always presented his stories to his first audience— to his children—as an oral performance. The thing about oral performances is that they are listened to by anyone within earshot, both the old and the very young. This awareness actually shaped Charles Dickens’ narratives since he knew that reading out loud was a family activity in his day and that children would certainly be part of his audience. Thus when he wrote, even about dark social issues, he did so with a guardianship of the young in mind, possible because he was himself a father. The same can be said about Tolkien.

Carpenter affirms the Tolkien children’s experience as listeners,

sometimes to stories that had only an oral existence. He records that they were “not certain that what they were listening to at the time was necessarily a *written* story; they believe that it may have well have been a number of impromptu tales which were later absorbed into *The Hobbit* proper” (177). So when describing *The Hobbit* as a tale appropriate for children, it is vital to stress that Tolkien recreates within the novel the same audio voice which first entertained his children. He did so because the speaker fulfills qualities which fit the needs of a young person’s narrative.

Carpenter emphasizes the book’s place as intended for the young: “For it [*The Hobbit*] is a children’s story. Despite the fact that it had been drawn into his mythology, Tolkien did not allow it to become overwhelmingly serious or even adult in tone, but stuck to his original intention of amusing his own and perhaps other people’s children” (Carpenter 179). The oral narrator is part of the organic quality of *The Hobbit* as a children’s story. This is a central fact.

The difficulty for some, like Chance and Carpenter, is that a children’s narrative is seen as somehow incompatible with profound content. Instead, for Chance deep material has to be hidden. She affirms that *The Hobbit* is an important narrative, but that “the explicit children’s story framework of *The Hobbit* masks a more ‘adult’ and serious purpose” (62). This, however, fails to recognize that a children’s narrative can be profound by itself. However, her perspective has been the norm for years.

It is impossible to be certain, but perhaps this general prejudice explains Tolkien’s strange claim in the 1957 Norman interview that *The Hobbit* was not a children’s text. As quoted earlier, Tolkien explained his appearance of writing for children as a cover-up: “If you’re a youngish man and you don’t want to be made fun of, you say you’re writing for children” (Norman). The

disapproval of the so called “literary elite” is hard for an author to bear. As Joseph Pearce notes, in the opening of his *Tolkien Man and Myth*, there was, even in 1997, strong critical dissatisfaction when Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* was voted as “the greatest book of the [twentieth] century” in the Waterstone poll, a position confirmed in multiple polls afterwards, (1). At the base of much of this complaining was the fact that the book was perceived as being too juvenile (5). The critic Barnes, bemoaning the childish tastes of readers, wrote in *Independent Education* the following:

Are we really so hooked on fantasy as the list suggests? What is it that we . . . are so hell bent on escaping from that we look back for solace to *The Wind and the Willows* and *Winnie the Pooh* or to elaborate sagas about imaginary creatures (*Tolkien’s Lord of the Rings* came top) to find expressions of our lives in the twentieth century? (qtd. Pearce 4)<sup>3</sup>

(As shall be seen in this paper later, the juvenile perception of *LOR* is profoundly wrong, but it is the prejudice of the critical environment which is the point here.) Many serious readers even today consider texts created for children as unimportant. So maybe in 1957 Tolkien did not want readers to dismiss *The Hobbit*, which he knew was an important work, just because it was a children’s book. But Tolkien’s fellow scholar and children’s author, C.S. Lewis, notes that contemporary critics are mistaken when they “use ‘adult’ as a term of approval” (“On Three Ways of Writing for Children” 33). In fact, Lewis says, sometimes the best way for a story to be told is to tell it as to children:

Where the children’s story is simply the right form for what the author has to say, then of course readers who want to hear that will read the

story or re-read it, at any age. . . a children's story which is enjoyed only by children is a bad children's story. (Lewis 33)

In this same essay Lewis brings up a point helpful in understanding the nature of the narrator in *The Hobbit*. He claims that there are three motivations for writing children's books: to make money, to fit an idea which best fits children's narrative, and to entertain specific children. He especially notes that Tolkien motivation is part of the last (32). Furthermore, he suggests that in the process of the adult and child experiencing the story together a new voice is created:

The writer will "become slightly different than you were talking to a child and the child would become slightly different because it is being talked to by an adult. A community, a composite personality, is created and out of that the story grows" (32).

So to repeat, and in spite of some of Tolkien's own claims, *The Hobbit's* narrative voice is unique because it was shaped by the mind of a father involved the act of oral story-telling with his young children. Those who dislike the narrative voice may in fact be embarrassed in that they have been caught standing at the door of the study eavesdropping on dad's story-time.

Thomas does not emphasize the paternal quality of *The Hobbit's* narrator, but he does note that the story teller's voice "has a much closer relationship to Tolkien's voice than that of any other character" (163). This is not to say that Tolkien and the narrator are the same "because Tolkien stands both inside and outside the novel. Tolkien permeates the whole of the words of the text, so that every voice within it is his, and yet Tolkien also looked upon this text objectively" (162). The narrator,

therefore, while not Tolkien, is very much like him with some of the same fatherly concerns.<sup>4</sup> And he is based in part on the experience of Tolkien telling his own young children a story.

The narrator of *The Hobbit* must be understood as presenting a story orally to his listeners, because the oral presentation would by its nature include the very young, and the youthfulness of the audience shapes the material presented. Therefore, some of the issues which have been raised against *The Hobbit's* narrator can be explained. It has been claimed that he is. . .

- Too Condescending, shows off his knowledge
- Too Chatty reminds the listeners that he is there
- Too Present and gets in the way of the action

However anyone who has ever told stories to young children knows that many of them seem to need the following:

- Definitions followed by often repeated explanation
- Engagement with listeners, sometimes using humor to interacting with the children.
- Assurance that things will turn out all right.

For the young, this kind of care usually does not occur when they read a book; instead it occurs when a story *is told to them*. However, to achieve the same experience within the text, Tolkien creates the illusion of an oral narrator. For the reader it literally as if he or she is sitting within a room with a group of other listeners to someone telling a great story. Tolkien's text helps this sense in several ways.

One of the experiences listeners to an oral story have is the occasional interaction of the speaker with other voices. This is precisely what occurs in the book. For example consider this

passage in which one can almost hear a small voice interrupting the narrator, forcing the speaker to give further information:

The mother of our particular hobbit—what is a hobbit? I suppose hobbits need some description nowadays since they have become rare and shy of the Big People as they call us. They are (or were) a little people about half our height, and smaller than dwarves. Hobbits have no beards (*Annotated Hobbit* 10).

Another interrupted moment in *The Hobbit* occurs with the introduction of Gandalf:

Gandalf came by. Gandalf! If you had heard only a quarter of what I have heard about him, and I have only heard very little of all there is to hear, you would be prepared for any sort of remarkable tale. Tales and adventures sprouted up all over the place wherever he went, in the most extraordinary fashion. He had not been down that way under The Hill for ages and ages, not since his friend the Old Took died, in fact, and the hobbits had almost forgotten what he looked like. (11)

Thus, included in the text is the illusion that the narrator is responding to oral queues that request more information.

Another quality in *The Hobbit* that adds to the sense that the reader is listening to an oral performance is that the speaker admits at different times that he does not know everything—even if he does know a lot. Such humility, by the way, seems hardly to fit the narrator “who patronizes his audience” which Chance and others suggest (Chance 74). In a regular book, one would expect the writer to know all there is to know, but *The Hobbit’s* narrator periodically does not. As illustrated above he knows a good amount about Gandalf, but in fact there is

a great deal more that he does not know. Later the speaker confirms his limitations when describing Bilbo’s own inability to take action “I do not know how long he kept on like this, hating to go on, not daring to stop” (81). And just further on when speaking of Gollum, he says: “I don’t know where he came from nor who or what he was” (82).

One of the ways to interpret these comments is to understand them as portraying for the reader the story-teller’s oral responses, or even preemptive responses, to inquiries made by young listeners—answering questions the narrator receives or knows he is likely to receive. Telling children ahead of time what is not known, often helps an experienced narrator avoid becoming bogged down with detailed minutia. It also adds to the sense of the speaker’s honesty, and therefore makes him appear even more trustworthy. All of these are qualities desirable for the reader to feel about the speaker in *The Hobbit*.

Interestingly this lack of information about Middle Earth admitted to by the narrator actually fits Tolkien’s true condition when he first presented his children some of the adventures from *The Hobbit*.

A vital quality in understanding how the narrator speaks in *The Hobbit* is to realize that Tolkien did not see himself as creating his tale as much as discovering his narrative. For example, years earlier, when asked about the meaning of one of his first elfish works by a school friend, G B Smith, Tolkien said “I do not know. I’ll try to find out” (qtd. Carpenter 75). Carpenter emphasizes this point: “Not try to invent; *try to find out*. He [Tolkien] did not see himself as an inventor of story, but as a discoverer of legend” (75). In a letter written to Milton Waldman around 1951, Tolkien says “always I had the sense of recording what was already ‘there’, somewhere: not of inventing” (*Letters* 145). Thus, the narrator of *The Hobbit* is not necessarily being coy or

even skillful as a story teller as Thomas suggests when he praises speaker for his art (164). He may be doing this, but he is also telling the children the truth. This will be important to remember when considering profound quality to Tolkien of the world his speaker describes.

Meanwhile, when Tolkien first wrote *The Hobbit*, the narrator's ignorance matched his own. At that point Tolkien had not "discovered" all there was to know about Middle Earth's third age. Even after the publication of *The Lord of the Rings* when Tolkien certainly knew a lot more about Gandalf, Gollum and the relation of the shire to the rest of Middle Earth, he kept the narrator's original honest ignorance. It also seems likely that he did so because the chatty ignorance of the narrator helped serve Tolkien's greater purpose of reminding young readers of the narrator's presence. He wanted children to know they had a companion.

The speaker is, as Litschko observes "self-aware" (16) or as Thomas puts it "self conscious" (165) and that makes him intrusive. Besides admitting that there is information he does not know there are also times when the narrator indicates he has more information that he can give at a given moment. This occurred in the Gandalf quote when he indicated he knew more than the listeners did about the wizard. It also occurs when Thorin and company are visiting Rivendell: "I wish I had time to tell you even a few of the tales or one or two of the songs that they heard in house" (*Hobbit* 61) as an example of being a "revealing but unrevealing teaser" (164). Thomas notes that this adds to the readers' perception that the narrator is indeed knowledgeable, but I would also note that it suggests a wider world for the young listener. Furthermore it augments the reality of the oral narrator since it adds the element of the pressure of time. Readers don't care about such things, but

those who listen know that bedtime does come.

Why is the narrator's presence, described by Chance, Thomas and Litschko as "intrusive" so important? Because he exists as a buffer between the young reader and the often harsh and frightening reality which Tolkien was discovering. And even though he knew this other place has disturbing and unpleasant elements, its quality of truth made the narrative something which Tolkien grew to believe was of worth both for his children, other children, and even other adults to experience.

There are three zones suggested in *The Hobbit*, the place where the reader sits, the imaged room where a parental voice is speaking to a group of listeners, and the world of action where Bilbo and the dwarves are making their way. It would be a mistake to call this last place imaginary since for Tolkien, as indicated by the earlier cited comments of discovering history, that other place has a reality just as overt as the physical one in which the reader sits. In fact if one thinks about it, when he wrote *The Hobbit* for publication, the sitting reader was as much an imaginary construction for Tolkien as the speaker within the text and Bilbo and his fellowship.

Thus a question for the reader is whether the speaker-narrator (of whom Tolkien took artistic steps for us to be aware of) is worth listening to. Chance does not think so, but both Litschko and Thomas do, and this author believes so too. The narrator presents enough information so that he can be viewed as a trusted speaker. Again this is of vital importance because trust plays a major role in his function as story-teller. *The Hobbit's* narrator, in fact, establishes his knowledge even before he has settled down to present his tale. Readers first meet him within the text of the preface. There his professorial voice—appropriate for the professor father author—is clear: "This is a story of long ago. At that time

the languages and letters were quite different from ours of today. English is used to represent the languages" (*The Annotated Hobbit* 8). Functioning as a literary authority, he gives a quick explanation of the unique spelling of dwarves in *The Hobbit*, about the nature of runes found in the included map, and about some of the other details of the map. The knowledge the speaker shows helps him become all the more believable to his audience when he gives information about the lore of hobbits in the actual story.<sup>5</sup>

One of the best examples of the narrator's knowledge of shire-lore occurs when he gently modifies Gandalf's claim that Bilbo is "As fierce as a dragon in a pinch" (26).

If you have ever seen a dragon in a pinch, you will realize that this was only poetical exaggeration applied to any hobbit, even to Old Took's great-granduncle Bullroarer, who was so huge (for a hobbit) that he could ride a horse. He charged the ranks of the goblins of Mount Gram in the Battle of the Green Fields, and knocked their king Gol-firnbul's head clean off with a wooden club. It sailed a hundred yards through the air and went down a rabbit hole, and in this way the battle was won and the game of Golf invented at the same moment. (26)

Besides the wealth of information, notice the element of humor provided here, both in the aside the speaker gives, qualifying the term "huge" with the phrase "for a hobbit" and the comic image of a marshal victory being the source of a game, a game which the narrator knows connects the shire world with that of the reader-listener while also undermining the grim reality of war.

Having reliable information gives the speaker the right to give personal commentary as well. There is, for example, the slight disapproval of the

narrator of the Troll behavior which follows Troll-Bill's response to the criticism of his fellows:

"Yer can't expect folk to stop here for ever just to be et by you and Bert. You've et a village and a half between yer, since we come down from the mountains. How much more d'yer want? And time's been up our way, when yer'd have said 'thank yer Bill' for a nice bit o' fat valley mutton like what this is." He took a big bite off a sheep's leg he was toasting, and wiped his lips on his sleeve. *Yes, I am afraid trolls do behave like that, even those with only one head each.* (44 Emphasis Mine)

Here there is the fatherly recognition of parlor manners in the narrator (almost as if mother has put her head in for a moment), but there is also the wink of great fun to have included the trolls in the first place. Many who have found the narrator wanting somehow failed to recognize the wink. But anyone who is telling children a story knows that humor is so very important to keep a listening young (and old for that matter) audience engaged.

The need for a sense of humor, especially humor at one's own expense, is illustrated in the encounter the dwarves have with the elves of Rivendell, and once again the narrator adds an extra comment after presenting to the listeners a few lines of elfish song:

So they laughed and sang in the trees; and pretty fair nonsense I daresay you think it. Not that they would care they would only laugh all the more if you told them so. They were elves of course. . . . Dwarves don't get on well with them. Even decent enough dwarves like Thorin and his friends think them foolish (*which is a very foolish thing to think*), or get annoyed with

them. For some elves tease them and laugh at them, and most of all at their beards. (59)

Here the narrator seems to contradict himself for initially he suggests that the elves songs are “foolish,” but it is clear that he has in tongue ironically in his own cheek, for he then turns about and comments that the Dwarves are in fact foolish themselves to not recognize the wisdom of laughter. And when speaker goes on to note that the elves continued their singing with this observation: “Then off they went into another song as ridiculous as the one I have written down in full” (59), there is the sense that he knows that he is being as ridiculous as the dwarves. Thus the narrator emulates self-laughter.

There are also places when the narrator seems to stop a muse:

Now it is a strange thing, but things that are good to have and days that are good to spend are soon told about, and not much to listen to; while things that are uncomfortable, palpitating, and even gruesome, may make a good tale, and take a deal of telling anyway. They stayed long in that good house, fourteen days at least, and they found it hard to leave. Bilbo would gladly have stopped there for ever and ever—even supposing a wish would have taken him right back to his hobbit-hole without trouble. Yet there is little to tell about their stay. (*Hobbit* 61)

Here the narrator is speaking about the art of story telling. He is also giving an excuse as why he is not going to tell more about the stay than he perceives is needed (no matter what the unheard young voices may say) and he is also giving a insightful truth as a sage father, and if some think he is being paternal, one wonders who else but a father has the right to be so?

This sage quality is even apparent from the very beginning. The narrator’s famous opening lines which have been analyzed by Paul Thomas show that he not only gives information “In a hole there lived a hobbit” but that the speaker assumes that his listeners will need direction since they will have preconceived ideas about what a hole might be like and so use uses “not” to clarify: “Not a nasty, dirty, wet hole, filled with the ends of worms and an oozy smell, nor yet a dry, bare, sandy hole with nothing in it to sit down on or to eat: it was a hobbit-hole, and that means comfort” (9) This is an example of what Thomas calls “an interpretive nature. . . [that] often appear in brief utterances that give emphasis to points in the story” (163).

When Bilbo finds the ring, Tolkien’s narrator makes certain that the readers note the significance of the moment by telling us. “It was a turning point in his career, but he did not know it” (*H.* 79). . . When Bilbo stops to muster his courage during his approach to the sleeping dragon, the narrator says “Going on from there was the bravest thing he ever did” (226-227). These sentences show the narrator as a guide who wants the readers to comprehend the story in particular way. (163)<sup>6</sup>

Young readers and young listeners want to know that the person who is speaking to them is able to provide information and direction.

So if a reader accepts the parental nature of the narrator of *The Hobbit* much of the complaints about tone of the speaker can be answered. Although the actions of the speaker stay the same, the motivations behind those actions change. What for Chance is a condescending tone is seen by Thomas as “an interpretive guide” (163), what was patronizing in

Chance's view is instead "an attentive companion" (165).

Although they do not see the oral nature of *The Hobbit's* narrator, both Thomas and Litschko give extensive examples of the working of the narrator which are very insightful and far more detailed than space here allows. Also while Thomas strongly ties the speaker of *The Hobbit* with Tolkien himself, neither of he nor Litschko perceive the importance of the oral speaker also being a father.

As a paternal oral story teller, the speaker, similar to the author Tolkien, knows that in his audience there are some—some who can not yet even read—who will need protection and sometimes comfort even if the narrative is of worth to hear. And he sometimes does this overtly. For example, when Bilbo finds himself at the roots of the mountain, in the blackest of places, the narrator steps in:

Now certainly Bilbo was in what is called a tight place. But you must remember it was not quite so tight for him as it would have been for me or for you. Hobbits are not quite like ordinary people; and after all if their holes are nice cheery places and properly aired, quite different from the tunnels of the goblins, still they are more used to tunneling than we are, and they do not easily lose their sense of direction underground - not when their heads have recovered from being bumped (80-81).

There is almost a sense of "there, there, everything will be fine." Older readers may find this annoying, in fact older children listening may also find it so. But the responsibility of the father is not to just the one but to all. In another portion of the tale, when describing Frodo's encounter with the giant spiders the narrator says "

In the end he made as good a guess as he could at the direction from which the cries for help had come in the night - and by luck (he was born with a good share of it) he guessed more or less right, as you will see. Having made up his mind he crept along as cleverly as he could. Hobbits are clever at quietness, especially in woods, as I have already told you (*Hobbit* 167)

Here again the listener is comforted by the overt narrator's affirmation of Bilbo's luck as well as the promise that the story is not over.

Now while these examples illustrate the narrator's overt intention to reduce listener worry, they also show the intentional disconnect which is part of the speaker's role. It is not that the speaker "lacks compassion" as Chance claims (75), but rather—to state it again—his presence serves as a bulwark between the action and the audience. Nadja Litschko is especially helpful here when she notes that "in moments where the characters have to face dangerous or other difficult situation, this detachment of the narrator can be a great relief for the readers—especially the younger ones" (15). She specifically points to the struggle in Mirkwood between Bilbo and the dwarves against the giant spiders in which the speaker "stands outside the story" (15) and therefore places a barrier of words between the young listeners and the violent action:

The narrator speaks straight to the readers, commenting on what is happening and on the way Bilbo fends off the attack of the spiders and thereby rescues his companions. Especially in moments when the narrator speaks to readers for example with comments like "Actually, as I have told you, they were not far off the edge of the forest[. . .]"(140), as well as small remarks like "as you will

see” (146) . . . or he throws in comments like “I don’t suppose he would have managed it, if the spider had not luckily left a rope hanging down [. . .]the narrator almost constantly reminds the readers of his presence between the fictional world and the world of the readers. (15)<sup>7</sup>

So what some have called intrusive is actually a technique used by Tolkien within his creation of the story teller to allow the young listener to experience the excitement of the struggle while still drawing comfort by being safe by the fireside.

The last quality of the narrator which illustrates his role as paternal protector is dependent on the understanding that Tolkien had discovered a world with terrible elements which paralleled some of the terrible experiences he had endured in World War I. Tolkien knew what blood and gore looked like. Yet, in this story, his narrator glosses over some of the especially unpleasant elements within the story which might prove too difficult for younger listeners / readers. Hopefully it is unnecessary to explain to those who find the narrator condescending that not exposing children to carnage is not patronizing act. Certainly any father knows that children do not need to be exposed in the name of honesty to the hideous qualities of ruin. Some very difficult events occur in *The Hobbit*. And while Trolls, Goblins, Wargs and Spiders are threatening enough, war and its carnage is far more hideous. Smaug’s devastation is included in the war elements because, although a single being, he wages war on both the dwarves and the lakemen. A comparison of the voice of the narrator in *The Hobbit* and that of *The Lord of the Rings* is helpful here.

The fact that the narrating voice of *The Hobbit* is essentially the same one which years later introduces the

*Fellowship of the Ring*-- first of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy—must be established because many treat these voices as utterly different when they are in fact fundamentally the same. In the opening of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, the narrator, in fact, uses the same sentence structure he used in the first pages of *The Hobbit*, describing how Hobbits “were, as a rule, shy of the ‘Big Folk’ as they call us, and now they avoid us with dismay, and are becoming hard to find” (10). Like the narrator of *The Hobbit*, the speaker in the *LOR* is a modern human. This is also apparent in appendix D, (“The Calendars”) when he says “I have used our modern names for both months and weekdays” (*Return of the King* 387). And it is notable that in appendix F, II (“On Translation”) he admits to censoring himself even in this more adult text:

Both Orcs and Trolls spoke as they would, without love of words or things, and their language was actually more degraded and filthy than I have shown it. I do not suppose that any would wish for a closer rendering though models are easy to find. Much of that same talk can still be heard among the Orc minded. (*Return of the King* 412)

Thus in human status, academic knowledge of lore and even morals, the narrator reveals himself to be the same one who chatted away to children years earlier. However the interrupted quality is no longer there indicating that speaker may be the same but he has a different audience.

The fact that the audience intended is different is made especially clear from a letter written as Tolkien was composing what had originally been thought would be the sequel to *The Hobbit*. In a letter addressed to Sir Stanely Unwin Tolkien notes that the sequel was “running its course, and forgetting ‘children’ and becoming more terrifying than *the Hobbit*.” “It may prove

quite unsuitable. It is more 'adult'--but my own children who criticize it as it appears are older. . ." (*Letters*. 41). It is notable that he again references his children to whom he is again orally reading the action of the new narrative.

Now do not misunderstand, the speaker in the *Hobbit* and *the Lord of the Rings* is capable of full and striking description. It is the audience that alters their presentation. In fact the narrator in the later work is hardly intrusive at all because Tolkien correctly determined that he was no longer needed. But in the first when depicting horror for children the narrator holds back.

Compare these two images of natural devastation, that of the "Desolation of Smaug" and the "Desolation of Mordor." The first is the narrator's description of Bilbo and his company's arrival at the gate near the dwarves' home under the mountain:

They knew that they were drawing near to the end of their journey, and that it might be a very horrible end. The land about them grew bleak and barren, though once, as Thorin told them, it had been green and fair. There was little grass, and before long there was neither bush nor tree, and only broken and blackened stumps to speak of ones long vanished. They were come to the Desolation of the Dragon, and they were come at the waning of the year. . . They marched under the grey and silent cliffs to the feet of Ravenhill. There the river, after winding a wide loop over the valley of Dale, turned from the Mountain on its road to the Lake, flowing swift and noisily. Its bank was bare and rocky, tall and steep above the stream; and gazing out from it over the narrow water, foaming and splashing among many boulders, they could see in the wide valley shadowed by the Mountain's arms

the grey ruins of ancient houses, towers, and walls. (*The Hobbit*

"There lies all that is left of Dale," said Balin. "The mountain's sides were green with woods and all the sheltered valley rich and pleasant in the days when the bells rang in that town." (216-217)

This is pretty awful stuff, but compare the above description with a similarly blasted landscape in the *Two Towers* in which the narrator feels free to use his full descriptive powers:

Frodo looked round in horror. Dreadful as the Dead Marshes had been, and the arid moors of the Noman-lands, more loathsome far was the country that the crawling day now slowly unveiled to his shrinking eyes. Even to the Mere of Dead Faces some haggard phantom of green spring would come; but here neither spring nor summer would ever come again. Here nothing lived, not even the leprous growths that feed on rotteness. The gasping pools were choked with ash and crawling muds, sickly white and grey, as if the mountains had vomited the filth of their entrails upon the lands about. High mounds of crushed and powdered rock, great cones of earth fire-blasted and poison-stained, stood like an obscene graveyard in endless rows, slowly revealed in the reluctant light. They had come to the desolation that lay before Mordor: the lasting monument to the dark labour of its slaves that should endure when all their purposes were made void; a land defiled, diseased beyond all healing unless the Great Sea should enter in and wash it with oblivion. 'I feel sick,' said Sam. Frodo did not speak (239).

Here the speaker, the same speaker as *the Hobbit*, describes a landscape so utterly devastated that the images contain elements of organic decay. Now look how a difference of audiences shapes the portrayal of war.

In *The Hobbit*, the battle of the five armies is described but at arm's length:

So began a battle that none had expected; and it was called the Battle of Five Armies, and it was very terrible. Upon one side were the Goblins and the Wild Wolves, and upon the other were Elves and Men and Dwarves. This is how it fell out. . . .(292)

There is no close detail here. Armies are described from a distance with explanation of forces and tactics, but there is, thankfully, no horror of spilt blood. And furthermore Bilbo's part in the whole battle is tempered first with humor and his use of the ring.

It was a terrible battle. The most dreadful of all Bilbo's experiences, and the one which at the time he hated most – which is to say it was the one he was most proud of, and most fond of recalling long afterwards although he was quite unimportant in it. Actually I must say he put on his ring early in the business, and vanished from sight, if not from all danger. (294).

Did the narrator really have to say that Bilbo's role was unimportant or that instead of fighting, he put the ring on? Here the story teller surely invokes the wrath of some readers, but again he is tempering the battle for young listeners even as he describes it. It is noteworthy that he does not wish to romanticize war, recording Bilbo's lament that battles are not really the stuff of songs: "I have always understood that defeat may be glorious. It seems very uncomfortable, not to say distressing" (294). However, the father-narrator does not want to

overwhelm the young senses either. So, after seeing the coming of the eagles, Bilbo is knocked unconscious. Thus the narrator can have him get all the battle details second hand in the next chapter. "All that had happened after he was stunned, Bilbo learned later; but it gave him more sorrow than joy, and he was now weary of his adventure" (301). There is no need for the child to witness directly the deaths of several beloved characters, nor view the terrible and violent onslaught of the man-bear Beorn.

Compare that battle narrative with that from *The Two Towers* at Helm's Deep:

At that moment some dozen Orcs that had lain motionless among the slain leaped to their feet, and came silently and swiftly behind. Two flung themselves to the ground at Eomer's heels, tripped him, and in a moment they were on top of him. But a small dark figure that none had observed sprang out of the shadows and gave a hoarse shout: Baruk Khazad! Khazad ai-menu! An axe swung and swept back. Two Orcs fell headless. The rest fled. . . .The assault on the gates was redoubled. Against the Deeping Wall the hosts of Isengard roared like a sea. Orcs and hillmen swarmed about its feet from end to end. Ropes with grappling hooks were hurled over the parapet faster than men could cut them or fling them back. Hundreds of long ladders were lifted up. Many were cast down in ruin, but many more replaced them, and Orcs sprang up them like apes in the dark forests of the South. Before the wall's foot the dead and broken were piled like shingle in a storm; ever higher rose the hideous mounds, and still the enemy came on (*The Two Towers* 139-140).

Children do not need to see heads cut off or piles of dead so great that they seem hills on the battlefield.

Is *The Hobbit* less because it does not show these terrible details in what surely is part of the terrible events that Bilbo experienced? No, the narrator faithfully presents the effects of war—its senselessness which leads to Thorin's death and the awareness of being powerless to alter its outcome:

Then Bilbo turned away, and he went by himself, and sat alone wrapped in a blanket, and, whether you believe it or not, he wept until his eyes were red and his voice was hoarse. He was a kindly little soul. Indeed it was long before he had the heart to make a joke again. (*Hobbit* 301)

Again some may see this as being condescending, but could the phrase “whether you believe it or not” also not be a cue to the listeners that it is permissible for them to weep too? And is there anything wrong in being “a kindly little soul”? In fact one of the truths in Tolkien's discovered world is that there is great value in being kindly little souls.

Now that it has been clearly demonstrated that the paternal oral narrator of *The Hobbit* fulfills a central quality in making the adventure of Bilbo Baggins appropriate for children, one might ask should Tolkien have re-written his story for adults? The answer is no. One of the aspects of stories found in scripture as well as in myth and folk tales is that they are not always safe or healthful for all ages. Authors, therefore, at different times have felt the need to present to young readers texts drawn from those sources that were appropriate for their age filled with material which in its original form might have been too harsh or terrifying to be appreciated. Authors like Ingri and Edgar D'Aulaires, Andrew Lang, Charles Dickens, and Nathaniel Hawthorne have transformed

scripture, myth and folk tales into narratives for children not because stories of the supernatural belong only in undeveloped minds but because their power to stimulate the imagination and moral development make such works possible channels to fulfilling lives. This is why adults read them too. And this is why adults should read *The Hobbit*. If an adult wishes to experience Middle Earth without the narrator's protective presentation then *The Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings* await.

For those who wonder what *The Hobbit* would be like without such protective buffers it is notable there does not seem to be any narrator in the upcoming film *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey* directed by Peter Jackson, due out this December. In it Jackson intends to not only tell of Bilbo's adventures with Thorin and company but to also draw from the material in the appendixes found at the end of *The Return of the King*. He plans to include the conflict of the White Council against the Necromancer (later revealed as Sauron) as well as Gandalf's journey in the Necromancer's tower, Dol Guldur, where he finds Thorin's father Thráin II—broken and witless. Much of this, Tolkien and his oral narrator would have felt was not within the appropriate range for children. In fact, it is interesting that Gandalf, who is the other major father figure in the novel, actually stands in the way of Thorin when he considers avenging himself on the Necromancer for his father's death: “We have long ago paid the goblins of Moria,” said Thorin; “we must give a thought to the Necromancer.” “Don't be absurd! He is an enemy quite beyond the powers of all the dwarves put together. . . The dragon and the Mountain are more than big enough tasks for you!” (*Hobbit* 34-35). And so, although he exists, Sauron is expunged from the children's narrative of *The Hobbit*, but he will be in the new film.

Thus the story which was originally a children's narrative will be

presented in a form appropriate for adults. In fact—if the trailers are accurate—rather than being a story for children, the new *Hobbit* will be based on Frodo “coming of age.” The opening comments by Bilbo make it clear that the time for protection is over.

My dear Frodo, you asked me once if I had told you everything there was to know about my adventures. While I can honestly say what I told you was the truth, I may not have told you all of it” (Jackson)

Therefore, this version of *The Hobbit* is, unlike the original, NOT a child’s version of the discovered history of Tolkien but is instead a revelation given to one who has come of age. That being the case, the paternal oral narrator is no longer needed.

Would this new interpretation have bothered Tolkien? Impossible to tell, but probably not. Years earlier when he first began to lay out the idea of this sub-creation (the term he would come to use for the fantasy setting he’d discovered) he said this:

I would draw some of the great tales in fullness, and leave many only placed in the scheme, and sketched. The cycles should be linked to a majestic whole and yet leave scope for other minds and hands, wielding paint, music, and drama. Absurd. (*Letters* 145).

Absurd then; prophetic now. And so, as Gandalf leaves Bilbo on his own just outside Mirkwood because he knows like a father that eventually the child must stand on his own, so the story of *The Hobbit* most now stand without a father’s voice. May it remain true to its father’s spirit.

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<sup>1</sup> Although the 1979 text is clearly the original, for the purposes of this paper Jane Chance's comments will be taken from her article in the more current anthology *Bloom's Modern Critical Views: J.R.R. Tolkien* (2008) edited by the ubiquitous Harold Bloom.

<sup>2</sup> These calculations were made by the author using public information available online of the birth dates of the Tolkien children and the dates given by Carpenter (177) for the first appearances of the story [1930] and the publication date of the Norman interview [1957].

<sup>3</sup> If the juvenile *Lord of the Rings* top scoring bothered Barnes, how much more must have it also been for her to know that the even overtly child-intended *The Hobbit* made nineteen within the top twenty most important works in the same Waterstone poll.

<sup>4</sup> In spite of Thomas' claim that the narrator has "a masculine voice" (162) there is no evidence within the text that suggests the narrator's gender. In fact the audio of the book sent out by *Tapes for the Blind* is read by a woman. It works just fine. Far more important is the fact that the narrator is an elder speaking to children. However for sanity's sake and because Thomas is probably right to align the speaker with Tolkien himself, the male pronoun will be used for the rest of the paper.

<sup>5</sup> One could speculate that the voice here is actually just an editor, a different voice than the narrator. But there is no evidence one way or the other and authors often present prologues.

<sup>6</sup> The references used by Thomas within the citation to *The Hobbit* are all taken from *The Annotated Hobbit* edited by Douglas Anderson and therefore match all other references found in this article.

<sup>7</sup> Nadja Litschko is using the HarperCollins, four edition, of Tolkien's *The Hobbit or There and Back Again* 1999. In *the Annotated Hobbit* those page numbers are 160, 167 and 172 respectfully.