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Stolen Language, Cosmic Models: Myth and Mythology in Tolkien

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Stolen Language, Cosmic Models: Myth and Mythology in Tolkien

Margaret Hiley (bio)

Much has been written about J. R. R. Tolkien's mythology, and an article on "Tolkien and Myth" might seem to run the risk of simply repeating what has been said many times before. The roots of Tolkien's mythology in Northern myth and linguistic study, as well as the traces of Christianity in his work, have been the subject of many articles and books, as have his personal statements about his desire to create a mythology for England (see Tolkien, *Letters* 144-45). But not only the question of *how* Tolkien's mythology was created should be attended to; surely equally important is the question of *why* and *to what end*. Myth's function both in Tolkien's secondary world and beyond it should become the subject of scrutiny. The study of myth, and indeed what is understood by that term, has changed enormously in the fifty years since the publication of *The Lord of the Rings*, and many influential critics have provided us with new and fascinating ways to analyze myth and its position in literature. This study will focus mainly upon theoretical structuralist perspectives and relate them to Tolkien's work. The question of why the use of myth in literature became so popular in the twentieth century will also be addressed and Tolkien's use of it compared to that made by other twentieth-century writers, particularly some of the modernists. A glance at modernism's "mythical method" (Eliot, *Selected Prose* 177), relating them to Tolkien's work, reveals some surprising similarities [End Page 838] between these writers, who have hitherto not been associated with one another. Such a comparison shows that Tolkien is not, as many scholars claim, essentially a Victorian writer who happened to be born a few decades too late; he was indeed, as Tom Shippey states, an "'author of the century,' the twentieth century, responding to the issues and anxieties of that century" (*J. R. R. Tolkien* xxvii).

Myth: Theoretical Background

Before embarking on my analysis of Tolkien, I want to clarify what is understood by the rather confusing term "myth" and its functions. Generally, a myth is "one story in a mythology—a system of hereditary stories of ancient origin which were once believed to be true by a particular cultural group, and which served to explain (in terms of the

intentions and actions of deities and other supernatural beings) why the world is as it is and things happen as they do" (Abrams 170).

The points that should be stressed here are the aura of truth and timelessness that surround myth and, above all, its attempt to explain the world, trying to provide a type of world-formula, a cosmic model in story. In the words of Nietzsche, myth is "the contracted image of the world, [the] abbreviation of appearances" (108)—the world reduced to its essentials. This characteristic leads to the tendency to claim universal validity, to exclude from its picture of the world anything pointing beyond the myth itself.

A fundamental change in the study and analysis of myth, previously the domain of cultural anthropologists, was brought about by the French structuralist Claude Lévi-Strauss, whose seminal work *Structural Anthropology* (first published in 1958) treated myths as signifying systems. Lévi-Strauss was the first to point out that "myth is language: to be known, myth has to be told; it is a part of human speech" (209). It can thus be interpreted according to the linguistic model of Saussure, with the difference that myth, while starting off from the basic differentiation between *langue* and *parole*, progresses to a third level that belongs "to a higher and more complex order," and that lies "above the ordinary linguistic level" (211, 210). Myth thus becomes timeless, a type of language "where meaning succeeds practically at 'taking off' from the linguistic ground on which it keeps rolling" (210).

Lévi-Strauss's theories are developed further by Roland Barthes in the latter's book *Mythologies*. Barthes posits that myth, far from being a concept or idea as is generally supposed, is in fact a system of communication and...

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