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'C S Lewis wrote of his friend and academic colleague J R R Tolkien praising his "unique insight at once into the language of poetry and into the poetry of language". Generations of readers have responded to the power, precision, and delicacy of J R R Tolkien's linguistic imagination. This absorbing new study of *The Hobbit* brings a philologist's eye to that work's creation, structure, and expression, positioning it within the broader development of Tolkien's professional thinking about philology and the evolving mythography of his creative writings. Mark Atherton, himself what Tolkien calls "a scholar of gramarye", imaginatively shows how Tolkien's academic interests in philology, linguistic-aesthetic and in reconstructive philology spilled over into the crucible of his own mythography, and was catalysed by the alchemy of his own reading in myths and contemporary fairy stories by writers such as William Morris, Edward Thomas, Francis Thompson and Robert Graves. This book gives them new ways of appreciating the interplay between his narratives and the linguistic enchantment of their imaginative world. Atherton's insights bring to mind Tolkien's own comment: "How those old words smite one out of the dark antiquity!"'

Vincent Gillespie,
J R R Tolkien Professor of English Literature and Language,
University of Oxford

'There and Back Again is essential reading for all Tolkien fans – and also for anyone interested more broadly in medievalism, or the ways in which later writers have responded to the culture of the Middle Ages. Mark Atherton is that ideal combination: a reader and critic deeply appreciative of Tolkien's literary artistry, his imaginative scope and his linguistic invention, who is also, like Tolkien himself, a distinguished scholar of medieval language and literature. In this highly readable and accessible study, Atherton brings his own scholarship to bear on Tolkien's sources for *The Hobbit*, and in the process illuminates the whole of Tolkien's remarkable oeuvre.'

Heather O'Donoghue,
Vigfusson Rausing Reader in Ancient Icelandic Literature &
Antiquities, University of Oxford

'Mark Atherton's treatment of one of the most famous books of the twentieth century is timely and welcome. On the face of it, *The Hobbit* appears an engaging fantasy adventure for young readers; but, as it later transpired, Mr Bilbo Baggins' exploits "there and back again" were simply a prelude to the apocalyptic drama that was to unfold in *The Lord of the Rings*. One reason for the enduring appeal of both of these works is that J R R Tolkien imbued his tales of a fictional realm with resonances of ancient themes and universal truths. In this detailed exploration, Mark Atherton provides the reader with a comprehensive understanding of the many origins, influences and inspirations – biographical, historical, geographical and literary – that, combined with a unique imagination, resulted in the crafting of a new mythology.'

Brian Sibley,
author of *The Lord of the Rings: The Making of the Movie Trilogy*
and of *Peter Jackson: A Film-maker's Journey*

MARK A THERTON

THERE AND
BACK AGAIN

J R R TOLKIEN AND THE ORIGINS OF THE HOBBIT

I.B. TAURIS

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Abbreviations

- EDD* Joseph Wright, *The English Dialect Dictionary*, 6 vols (London: Henry Frowde, 1898–1905)
- FR* J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Part I of *LOTR* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1954)
- LOTR* J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*; the novel consists of three volumes (*FR*, *TT* and *RK*) and six books (because the *LOTR* exists in many printed editions, citations are by book and chapter rather than by page)
- NED* *New English Dictionary* (the older preferred title for the multi-volume *Oxford English Dictionary*)
- OE* Old English
- OF* Old French
- ON* Old Norse
- RK* J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, Part III of *LOTR* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1955)
- SGGK* *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*
- TCBS* Tea Club, Barrovian Society
- TT* J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Two Towers*, Part II of *LOTR* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1954)



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Fig. 1a Dragon circle

PART ONE



Shaping the plot

J.R.R. TOLKIEN OFTEN regarded his moments of creative inspiration as epiphanies that came to him unexpectedly during moments of concentration, when his mind was elsewhere, engaged in the intricacies of philological scholarship or carrying out his duties as a university teacher. The making of *The Hobbit* is no exception; it fits the pattern neatly. According to how Tolkien remembered it, he was marking secondary school examination papers some time in 1930 in order to earn extra money to supplement his university income – although he held the prestigious professorship of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford University he nevertheless had four children to bring up and educate. The marking was not his favourite task, and to help keep his sanity, as he saw it, he had a habit of doodling on the examination scripts, which of course was quite possible to do, since the scripts were never returned to the candidates themselves. In a moment of distraction or boredom, then, he wrote the following much-quoted sentence on a spare page of examination paper:

In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit.¹

This account is one of a number of different and even slightly contradictory reports as to how *The Hobbit* first came into being. John D. Rateliff has discussed these in full, and the conclusion seems to be that although Tolkien did not finish writing *The Hobbit* until 1933 and did not publish it until 1937, it began life as a spoken tale told to his children.² Tolkien was an enthusiastic and actively involved father, and in the mid- to late 1920s,

with his four children to occupy and entertain, he began to tell stories to them. For material he used an eclectic mix: scenes from his own childhood, events in the daily lives of his children, his reading of both general fiction and children's literature. To this he added his private interest in mythology and in the writing of poetry, and his professional concern with 'the literature of the middle ages, philology, the history of stories, words, and languages'.³ All this derived – as will be seen in the course of this book – from his work as a university professor of English language and literature.

In the first part of this book the emphasis will be on the plot, theme and setting of *The Hobbit*. The plot is a quest, well summed up by Tolkien's subtitle 'there and back again', though the narrative mostly covers the going *there* and only briefly touches on the coming *back*. It will be argued that it begins as a children's story, in the manner of an oral tale told by a narrator to a listening audience. At this stage it is also a comedy, written in a lively humorous style. But that style shifts markedly as the journey reaches its end, and it veers towards the serious and tragic. At the centre of the narrative is the twofold purpose or goal of the quest: first to recover a treasure, a goldhoard and a marvellous jewel; and then to overcome a danger, in the form of the guardian of the treasure, a sophisticated and malicious red-golden dragon. Both the goldhoard and the dragon are archetypes. They correspond quite closely to many fundamental myths in European literature and help to explain the appeal that this story has held on the imagination of its readers. The theme of the novel is closely tied to the quest; the desire for red gold and white gemstone becomes symbolic of the lust for wealth of Thorin, one of the principal characters, who becomes at the end a kind of tragic hero.

The setting of the story forms the other major theme of this novel. England is re-imagined as a western land on the edge of a large and unexplored continent. The protagonist Bilbo Baggins harks back to his little England on many occasions on his journey and it becomes the measure or perspective by which he judges all the events that happen to him on his quest through the Wild. In some ways the novel can be seen as a fantasy of travel literature; a reworking of the classic pattern of the intrepid traveller moving from his comfortable home and discovering the wide world beyond his door. As Laurence Durrell once suggested in an essay on the sense of place, good travel writers and novelists know how to tune in to the *rapport* of a location. What makes 'big' books is as much to do with their site as with their characters and incidents:

Shaping the plot

When they are well and truly anchored in nature they usually become classics. One can detect this quality of ‘bigness’ in most books which are so sited from *Huckleberry Finn* to *The Grapes of Wrath*. They are tuned in to the sense of place.⁴

Tolkien is a writer very finely attuned to landscape, nature and setting. The subtitle of *The Hobbit* ‘there and back again’ encapsulates not only the plot but also the twofold nature of the setting: the *there*, the goal of the journey is the Mountain, and mountains in fact dominate the journey throughout; the *back again* is the valley, whether the valley of the Water, where the hobbit has his home, or its otherworldly equivalent in the magical valley of Rivendell to which Bilbo Baggins also returns at the end of his travels. The journey there and back also suggests life-experience, a gaining in stature or wisdom. In this story Bilbo’s experience of the Mountain changes him, but at the same time he also changes and transforms the Mountain. As the end of the novel suggests, Bilbo is only a little fellow in a wide world, but he still has a hand in making the prophecies come true.



Fig. 1b The Misty Mountains in summer



Chapter One

'We must away ere break of day'

IN 'AN UNEXPECTED Party', the first chapter of *The Hobbit*, the respectable well-to-do Mr Bilbo Baggins finds himself entertaining a whole troop of vagrants who turn up for afternoon tea unexpectedly. The previous day he had made the mistake of inviting one of them, an old family friend, little suspecting that he would bring twelve of his companions with him, many of whom arrive early, in dribs and drabs, in ones or twos, demanding food and drink. And their talk scares him. It is all about 'mines and gold and troubles with the goblins, and the depredations of dragons'; and soon the plans are being made, for they 'must away ere break of day'. Night falls and eventually the outlandish visitors – they are in fact dwarves – are put up in the spare bedrooms and on chairs and sofas. Ironically the hobbit oversleeps (his long lie-in is a running joke, for he often oversleeps), and his guests are gone. But they have left a formal note of thanks in which they set their meeting for 11am at the Green Dragon Inn, Bywater. Bilbo barely makes the appointment in time. Against his better judgement he has agreed to join the expedition, and to leave his comfortable situation far behind him.

Childhood memories and the setting of *The Hobbit*

The respectable village that forms the setting of *The Hobbit* goes way back to Tolkien's childhood. For the first few years of his life after the family returned from South Africa, Tolkien lived in what was then part of

Worcestershire, in the small country hamlet of Sarehole, at 5 Gracewell, the end house in a row of brick cottages, near what was at the time the village of Moseley, in other words close to, but far enough away from, the teeming industrial city of Birmingham. According to his biographer Humphrey Carpenter, Ronald Tolkien was ‘just at the age when his imagination was opening out’ on his arrival at Sarehole with his mother Mabel and his younger brother Hilary in 1896. In an interview given seventy years later in 1966, Tolkien was to describe his country home in this period as a ‘kind of paradise’, and with good reason. Robert Blackham’s *The Roots of Tolkien’s Middle-earth* provides in loving detail a nostalgic photo-gallery of this area of Warwickshire/Worcestershire and Birmingham at the time when the Tolkiens lived there.⁵ The period photographs conjure up this lost era: the architecture of the cottages, the water-mill, the old sand-and-gravel pit, the trees, the countryside and the people. A picture in the *Tolkien Family Album* of the main thoroughfare to Moseley village shows an unmetalled road, a hedgerow and field to the left, a fenced wheat-field to the right; in the distance the half-timbered houses of Gracewell peep through the trees.⁶

If one examines a colour painting *The Hill: Hobbiton-across-the-Water* that Tolkien made in 1937–8 for the first American edition of *The Hobbit*, the analogues and similarities immediately become apparent.⁷ The picture shows the Water (i.e. the name of the river), with the wooden bridge and the yellow road winding up to the Hill, into which the house Bag End has been built. On the left as a traveller crosses the bridge is a white-painted wooden signpost (marked WEST in one direction and HILL in the other), the sort of signpost that is still to be found in outlying English country districts, although most are now manufactured in painted steel. On the right-hand side of the bridge is the Mill, a three-storey building resembling a church tower and nave done in large yellow ashlar-stones and with a red-tiled roof. Behind the Mill is another road going from left to right lined on the riverside by a redbrick wall, presumably intended to keep people from straying down to the dangerous waterwheel and the mill-race. The dwelling house on the other side of the road is a large building, complete with a white-washed outhouse and a water-butt to collect rainwater from the roof. The garden is wooden-fenced on one side, with a hen hutch in the middle of the lawn and a worked plot for vegetables and cut flowers.

From the bridge the main road winds up through farmland to the Hill; it is a wide but unmarked yellow track, the same colour as the ploughed earth of many of the cultivated fields. On the left a wooden fence protects an

orchard and a large prosperous-looking walled farmhouse with main house and outbuildings in the form of a quadrangle. Behind it are the stooks of the August hayfield, a green pasture bounded by a hedge; further back up the hillside are the round doors of some hobbit dwellings, the roundness of the doors being the only ‘alien’ feature in view, while in front of each house there is an unfenced strip of land for pasture and/or crops, a medieval or even Anglo-Saxon effect. Hobbits live in a world that resembles an idyllic version of England in about the year 1890; an ahistorical English countryside – one that never underwent the notorious enclosures of the early 1800s that so taxed rural workers and was captured in, say, the writings of the poet John Clare. It is an ordered, ‘respectable’ society with a municipal organisation (signposts), and some basic industrial production (baked tiles), but otherwise basically a pre-industrial modern world. In brief it is anachronistic, a vestige of rural England.

Tolkien uses the favourite trick of English language nomenclature: turning a concrete noun into a name simply by capitalising its initial letter. So in *The Hobbit* Bilbo lives on the Hill, and at the beginning of his journey he walks down the track past the great Mill to the river, the Water, then travels up the road alongside the Water to meet the dwarves at the Green Dragon Inn, at the village of Bywater (*The Hobbit*, chapter 2). At first as they travel they pass through ‘respectable’ hobbit country, with good roads and places to stay, and an occasional ‘dwarf or a farmer ambling by on business’. When Bilbo moves out of his familiar home country, however, the toponymy becomes unfamiliar and imprecise, all part of an otherwise unrecorded region of the Lone-lands (again capitalised as a name) in which no one lives, there are no inns and the roads are poor (*The Hobbit*, chapter 2). A respite is granted at Rivendell (chapter 3), with its sounds of running water rising from rock, the scent of trees, and ‘a light on the valley side across the water’ – here the phrase ‘the water’ could very easily have been capitalised to turn it into a place-name, though Tolkien resists the temptation. On their journey back, they at last return to ‘the country where Bilbo had been born and bred, where the shapes of the land and the trees were as well known to him as his hands and his toes’; eventually he sees ‘his own Hill’ in the distance, and ‘they crossed the bridge and passed the mill by the river and came right back to Bilbo’s own door’ (*'The Last Stage'*, *The Hobbit*, chapter 19).

Sarehole was a threatened idyll, and it lasted only four years, for in 1900 the family moved to Birmingham. And Sarehole itself was anyway far too close to the city. In 1911 it was annexed to Warwickshire (it had

originally been part of Worcestershire), and in the present day it has become part of the Hall Green suburb of Birmingham, in what is now, after the county reorganisation of 1974, the West Midlands. For Tolkien, however, Worcestershire was to remain the notional heartland. It was from the small town of Evesham in this county that his mother's family the Suffields, had originated, and Tolkien felt closely the pull of family tradition and rootedness, even if most of the Suffields now lived in Birmingham. Throughout their childhood, the two boys had close contact with their relatives, particularly with their mother's side of the family.

One character in particular is John Suffield (1833–1930), the Tolkien brothers' sprightly maternal grandfather, who had managed his own prosperous drapery business in Birmingham until it had gone bankrupt; he then worked as a travelling salesman, and lived a highly active life to a ripe old age. He was a skilled draughtsman and calligrapher (his ancestors had been engravers), able to write the entire Lord's Prayer in fine copperplate script on an area of paper the size of a sixpenny coin. Both his daughter Mabel and grandson Ronald inherited this calligraphic trait. His portrait in the *Family Album* (p. 14) shows an old man in a buttoned coat, with a long white beard, sharp nose and bright eyes. In John Suffield there is something of the Old Took, the adventurous patriarch referred to in the opening pages of *The Hobbit*, and ancestor of both Bilbo (on his mother's side) and Frodo, a family legend among the adventurous Tookes, though the respectable Bagginses look on his exploits with suspicion. As Carpenter points up the similarities, there is on the one hand Bilbo Baggins, son of 'the famous Belladonna Took, one of the three remarkable daughters of the Old Took, head of the hobbits who lived across The Water' (*The Hobbit*, chapter 1), and on the other hand John Ronald Reuel Tolkien, 'son of the enterprising Mabel Suffield, herself one of the three remarkable daughters of old John Suffield'.⁸

As for the name Bag End, this Tolkien owed to a house on an estate farmed by his enterprising aunt Jane Neave, his mother's sister. Jane Suffield, a trained teacher, was one of the first women to study science,⁹ receiving her degree from Mason College (later the University of Birmingham). She was close to her sister Mabel and acted as a go-between passing messages from Mabel to Arthur Tolkien before her father John Suffield gave his permission for the marriage. Married in the early 1900s to Edwin Neave, Jane had the misfortune to be widowed in 1909, but she was able to recover her life, and her career followed various turns. In 1911 she was among several

of the family, including Ronald Tolkien, who undertook an adventurous mountaineering holiday in the Swiss Alps organised by the Brookes-Smith family (see chapter 9). From 1912 to 1914 Jane Neave appears to have lived in Aberdeen working in a college, and it seems likely that Tolkien visited her there. By 1914 she was active as a market gardener with her nephew Hilary Tolkien, and based at Phoenix Farm at the village of Gedling near Nottingham. In the 1920s she lived on a farm that sported the unprepossessing name of 'Bag End', located at Dormston near Inkberrow in Worcestershire. It is here of course that Tolkien must have found the name for the Baggins property in his fiction. Like her nephew Hilary, who also became a fruit farmer, Jane ended up living back in the home territory of Evesham and its environs: staying in a caravan on Hilary's land and then later moving to Wales to live with her cousin Frank Suffield. Ronald visited her on many occasions, particularly in his school and university years. He wrote his poem about the sea while visiting her at Aberdeen in 1912 (see chapter 8) and his important poem on Eärendel was composed at Phoenix Farm in 1914 (see chapter 13). In later life Jane Neave was instrumental in persuading her nephew to publish his poetry anthology *The Adventures of Tom Bombadil*; these poems appeared in 1962, shortly before her death in her ninety-second year. Evidently Jane was a sort of literary mentor or encourager to her nephew Ronald.¹⁰

It is fair to say that Tolkien re-created his late Victorian childhood paradise when he invented Bag End and Hobbiton. After he had published *The Lord of the Rings* (*LOTR*), he found it disconcerting that readers and reviewers assumed that Bilbo's home in Hobbiton was somehow an analogue of the residential suburb in north Oxford in which he and his family then lived, a region of large Victorian houses built in the nineteenth century to accommodate Oxford dons and their families. In reaction to such opinions, Tolkien wrote in 1955 to his publisher Allen & Unwin that Hobbiton is essentially a Warwickshire village from the time of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee, nothing at all like the 'characterless straggle' of north Oxford, 'which has not even a postal existence'.¹¹ The latter fact (about postal existence) remains true to this very day, and although perceptions may well have changed as to the depressing character of north Oxford, the old medieval city two miles down the road is what captures the attention of the present-day visitor. It is indeed significant that Tolkien compared his then surroundings unfavourably with those of his early childhood.

Comic novels

When Tolkien became a story-teller for his own children, he turned first of all to humorous tales, especially animal fables: stories that had an animal as protagonist, or tales that featured talking animals among the main characters. These include *The Father Christmas Letters*, with one main character called Karhu or Polar Bear; *Roverandom*, the adventures of a dog; the early oral version of *Farmer Giles of Ham*, which also has the dog Garm as one of its main characters; *The Adventures of Tom Bombadil*, a story which, to judge by the poem of 1934, contained an episode with talking badgers. Against this background of animal stories told to children, we have *The Hobbit*, which, in terms of the way novels usually begin by setting a scene or getting the action moving, actually starts twice. The first page begins, rather like an animal story, with a creature in a hole, and then, a few paragraphs later, the story kick-starts again, this time rather more conventionally for a novel, with Gandalf's unexpected visit – indeed, the title of the first chapter is 'An Unexpected Party'. The double-barrelled opening offers a number of interesting comparisons with stories that Tolkien had been reading at the time, either for his own pleasure or for the enjoyment of his children.

The first opening is the famous one already cited, found now in dictionaries of quotations, about the hole in the ground. There is a balance to the rhythm and phrasing of these two opening sentences, which certainly accounts for their appeal. There is also a rhetoric of expectation and contradiction. The hobbit may live in a hole but it is not a nasty, dirty wet one nor a dry, bare, sandy one but a hobbit hole, 'and that means comfort': the assertion helps to keep the attention of reader and, given the oral origins of this story, of listener. The choice of colloquial phrases suggests an audience of children accustomed to the language of story-telling: the fact, as the narrator goes on to declare, that the hole has a '*perfectly* round' door with a '*shiny* yellow brass' doorknob or that the entrance hall has '*lots and lots* of pegs' for hats and coats because 'the hobbit was fond of visitors', the expressions here italicised being found more often in speech than in formal writing.

Since Tolkien certainly knew and admired Kenneth Grahame's writings, a likely inspiration for the opening scene of *The Hobbit* is the first paragraph of Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows*:

The Mole had been working very hard all morning, spring-cleaning his little home. First with brooms, then with dusters; then on ladders and steps and

'We must away ere break of day'

chairs, with a brush and a pail of whitewash [...] Spring was moving in the air above and in the earth below and around him, penetrating even his dark and lowly little house with its spirit of divine discontent and longing. It was small wonder, then, that he suddenly flung down his brush on the floor, said 'Bother!' and 'O blow!' and also 'hang spring-cleaning!' and bolted out of the house without even waiting to put on his coat.¹²

The industrious mole keeping a tidy burrow that resembles a late Victorian or Edwardian gentleman's bachelor dwelling: all of this is highly reminiscent of the houseproud Mr Bilbo Baggins. And the mole's exit in a hurry is not unlike Bilbo's precipitous departure from Bag End without any money, or even a pocket handkerchief, 'as fast as his furry feet could carry him' down the Hill, past the Mill and along the river to Bywater. In both stories, there is the same tension between on the one side the settled home life and on the other the pull of adventure.

But Grahame's animals are treated in part realistically. At the same time as being an anthropomorphised animal, the Mole is also really a mole, with certain characteristics – such as his scrabbling and scratching to dig his way up to the surface at the arrival of spring – that remind the reader of what moles really are like. Similarly, at first sight, the hobbit with his furry feet has been wrongly equated with a rabbit, not only by uncomprehending literary critics but even by characters in the story itself, such as the eagle who carries Bilbo to the Carrock, or one of the trolls, who wonders for a moment whether he has caught a rabbit when he apprehends Bilbo attempting to pick his pocket in the 'Roast Mutton' chapter of *The Hobbit*. In short, even though hobbits belong to the human genus, they nevertheless share some affinities with characters in animal stories and fables.



Fig. 1c No adventures

The word *hobbit* itself appears to be Tolkien's invention.¹³ It is possible but unlikely that he saw the word in a nineteenth-century folklore treatise known as the Denham Tracts. This text gives a long list of natural and supernatural creatures; the relevant part gives the following *pot pourri*: 'boggleboes, bogies, redmen, portunes, grants, hobbits, hobgoblins'.¹⁴ These diverse beings do not have much in common, except the element *hob-* in *hobbit* and *hobgoblin*. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*) distinguishes two basic meanings for *hob*. The first is a generic name for 'a rustic or clown', in which *hob* comes from Hob, a by-name for Rob, just as Hodge and Hick derive from Roger and Richard. It is to be expected of course that the first name Hob occurs in the Shire in *LOTR* (e.g. Hob Hayward the gatekeeper in book VI, chapter 8, 'The Scouring of the Shire'). The second sense listed in the *OED* is 'Robin Goodfellow or Puck; a hobgoblin, sprite, elf', and the first citation for the history of the word is from the medieval Townley plays of about the year 1500; in its Middle English spelling it reads 'Whi, who is that hob ouer the wall? We! who was that that piped so small?' A *hob* is a mischievous sprite-like creature with pan-pipes, rather like Tinfang Warble in *The Book of Lost Tales*, or perhaps Tom Bombadil in *LOTR*; such beings will be discussed further below (chapters 5, 6, 16). The *hob* of folklore is not exactly a hobbit, but perhaps the germ of an idea was planted here in Tolkien's mind.

At first sight rather surprisingly, Tolkien admitted a possible influence on *The Hobbit* from the contemporary American novelist Sinclair Lewis's similarly leporine-sounding *Babbitt*, which was published in 1922 and sold well throughout the 1920s and beyond. As also happened later with the word *hobbit*, the word *babbitt* entered the language: both words are listed for instance in the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*. And as literary historian James M. Hutchisson shows, the word was used widely and creatively: Sinclair Lewis himself wrote in August 1921 of how he was 'Babbitting away furiously'; the British sociologist C.E.M. Joad published a study of American society in 1926 entitled *The Babbitt Warren*; and the American writer H.L. Mencken popularised the term 'Babbitry'.¹⁵ Tolkien himself echoed this in his use of the word 'habbitry' when discussing critically, in his letters, whether the sections of *LOTR* focussing on hobbits and the Shire were unduly long and distracting from the main narrative of the War of the Ring.

Any surprise one might feel at Tolkien's interest in *Babbitt* is legitimate, for the plot of the story was surely alien to his concerns. George F. Babbitt is a businessman living in the medium-sized American city of Zenith,

where, as the ironically worded first sentence declares, ‘The towers of Zenith aspired above the morning mist: austere towers of steel and cement and limestone’.¹⁶ Nothing could seem more different to Tolkien’s opening scene. The surprise I think lies in the nature of the novel *Babbitt*, the epitome of the American ‘great realist novel’, intended as a satire on the conventionality of Midwestern urban society. The realist technique based on close sociological research is heavily laid on, with numerous personal and social details such as waking, washing and dressing in the opening sequence of the story. This is the kind of literature one might expect a former member of the TCBS – Tolkien’s rather purist literary set from his school days in Birmingham – to dislike and avoid. The TCBS, or ‘Tea Club, Barrovian Society’, was a kind of literary club, a circle of like-minded school friends, who met through the committee of the school library and organised illicit tea-parties inside the school library and at the tea shop in Barrow’s stores (hence the name Barrovian Society), where they read and discussed their literary work together.¹⁷ In some ways the TCBS prefigures the much more famous Inklings literary circle of which Tolkien was a key member while he was a professor of English philology at Oxford University.

Two folk-tale elements in Sinclair Lewis’s novel are used ironically in the initial setting of the scene, and they perhaps caught Tolkien’s attention. First, there is the mention of ‘giants’ in the description of the factory whistles heard across the city:

The whistles rolled out in greeting a chorus cheerful as the April dawn; the song of labor in a city built – it seemed – for giants.

The protagonist – who is pointedly called ‘unromantic’ – is an anti-hero, and Sinclair Lewis is at pains to emphasise that there is ‘nothing of the giant in the aspect of the man who was beginning to awaken on the sleeping-porch of a Dutch Colonial house in [...] Floral Heights’. This novel is evidently a satire, a far cry from the preoccupation with the Anglo-Saxon *eald enta geweorc* (the ancient work of giants) in Tolkien’s writing. Second, there is the mention of a ‘fairy child’, but only in the context of a recurrent dream that comes to Babbitt every morning as he wakens to the rattle and bang of the morning milk-truck and the slam of the basement door:

He seemed prosperous, extremely married and unromantic; and altogether unromantic appeared this sleeping-porch, which looked on one sizable elm, two respectable grass-plots, a cement driveway, and a corrugated iron garage.

There and Back Again

Yet Babbitt was again dreaming of the fairy child, a dream more romantic than scarlet pagodas by a silver sea.

For years the fairy child had come to him. Where others saw but Georgie Babbitt, she discerned gallant youth. She waited for him, in the darkness beyond mysterious groves. When at last he could slip away from the crowded house he darted to her. His wife, his clamouring friends, sought to follow, but he escaped, the girl fleet beside him, and they crouched together on a shadowy hillside. She was so slim, so white, so eager!

There is of course very little that is reminiscent of Tolkien here, except perhaps the notion of *escape*, repeated a number of times on this page and the next, for essentially escape is the theme of Sinclair Lewis's novel, a conventional man's failed attempt to escape the trammels of his confined existence – the escape leads him from domesticity to an affair and from safe conservatism to a brief flirtation with radical socialism.

For Tolkien – as he terms it in his contemporary *On Fairy-stories* lecture – escape is one of the features of the fairy-story alongside recovery and consolation. And by *escape* he seems to mean a kind of protest against the mechanical and mechanistic straitjacket that modern society has imposed on itself in the name of progress. Here then is an instance of thematic affinities between Tolkien and a modern realist writer, despite the fact that their whole method and outlook are so very different. But even on the question of style some points of contact do exist, for both Tolkien and Sinclair Lewis are clearly comic writers. The following ironic passage on Bilbo Baggins's conventionality brings this out well; if Baggins were changed to Babbitt and 'The Hill' to 'Floral Heights' the extract would fit quite well into Sinclair Lewis's novel:

The Bagginses have lived in the neighbourhood of The Hill for time out of mind, and people considered them very respectable, not only because most of them were rich, but because they never had any adventures or did anything unexpected: you could tell what a Baggins would say on any question without the bother of asking him. This is a story of how a Baggins had an adventure, and found himself doing and saying things altogether unexpected.

In a very different social world, Babbitt also has his adventure, and the novel tells of his journey there and back again. By the end of the novel, Babbitt has at least acquired greater self-awareness, and he is unexpectedly liberal

towards his son's aspirations to make his own way in the world rather than follow family tradition and expectations. The sense of being larger and wiser after many experiences surely lies behind Bilbo's loss of 'reputation' in the community after his return from abroad.

A similar theme runs through a children's novel that the Tolkien household knew well and admired, E.A. Wyke-Smith's *The Marvellous Land of Snergs*, with its main character Gorbo, 'the gem of dunderheads', who nevertheless ably helps his companions to survive their adventures.¹⁸ The consultant mining engineer Edward Augustus Wyke-Smith had begun composing fiction by telling stories to his grandchildren; he published his *Marvellous Land of Snergs* with copious illustrations by George Morrow in 1927. Tolkien was aware of it as a model for his own illustrated *Hobbit*, and he later described it to W.H. Auden as an unconscious source-book, which his children enjoyed hearing just as much as his own story about the hobbit.¹⁹ There are numerous similarities in the two plots and in certain minor themes and motifs: the Snergs are equivalent to the complacent hobbits since they are fond of feasting and rather set in their ways, while the escaped children Joe and Sylvia seem to have the resourcefulness of Tolkien's dwarves, even down to their ability to mimic bird-calls.²⁰ In some scenes, for example in the Forest Land, Wyke-Smith's descriptive style recalls that of Tolkien:

In parts where the trees were not very thick the grass was all dappled with spots of sun, and sometimes there were great shafts of light through the trees to make a guide for them, for all they had to do so far was to go as fast as they could in the direction of the sun. (p. 29)

But it was getting dark; the sky was now hidden by a roof of matted leaves, and on all sides and above them the thick smooth branches twisted and crossed and locked together. (p. 50)

There is the same attention to the perils of the wild and the need for Gorbo, the foolish Snerg, to devise ways of evading the dangers; fortunately for Joe and Sylvia, he slowly becomes less gullible and less eager to please, more suspicious and more resourceful, and he rescues them from the supposedly friendly Golithos the ogre:

It will probably occur to the thoughtful reader at this point that a change had come over the character of Gorbo. A sense of responsibility, mingled with self-reproach, had brought forth qualities hitherto unsuspected... . (p. 84)

Above all it is the change in the Snerg's character as the tale progresses that demonstrates the debt that Tolkien owed to this now little-known children's story.

Finally, a similar pattern of departure and return informs the plot of a very popular children's story, or set of stories, by the writer Hugh Lofting. The Hobbit-like plot of Hugh Lofting's *Doctor Dolittle* (published in 1922) is summarised by its lengthy subtitle *Being the History of his peculiar life at home, and astonishing adventures in foreign parts*. It begins as follows:

Once upon a time, many years ago – when our grandfathers were little children – there was a doctor; and his name was Dolittle – John Dolittle, M.D. 'M.D.' means that he was a proper doctor and knew a whole lot.

He lived in a little town called Puddleby-on-the-Marsh.²¹

Puddleby is respectable, like Floral Heights or the Hill, and its citizens do not take kindly to eccentrics, such as a doctor who keeps animals in the drawing room that also serves as a waiting room for his patients; the comically eccentric Dolittle drives first his housekeeper away and then all his patients. According to John Rateliff, Lofting based his fictional town on his own native Berkshire, and imagined a setting in early Victorian England, rather like Tolkien's locating of Hobbiton in the England of the Golden Jubilee.²² As to the place-name Puddleby, the element *on-the-Marsh* recalls the real place Morton-on-the-Marsh, whereas the *-by* suffix is Danish, and would belong better in the Danelaw of the east Midlands or Yorkshire. Apart from the obvious play on the idea of wet ground, there may be a further linguistic joke in the Puddle element, since various Dorsetshire villages with the place-name element Piddle were renamed Puddle in the nineteenth century on the occasion of Queen Victoria's visit, just in case their unrespectable names proved offensive to her royal ears.

Unlike Tolkien in *The Hobbit*, Lofting eschews verbal description of setting or place. Instead, however, he illustrates the story with line drawings at regular intervals, and it is here that some further similarities can be discerned in the figures of Dolittle and Baggins. An illustration on p. 17 of the first edition 'And she never came to see him any more' pictures the moment when a patient walks out of Dolittle's parlour, because of a hedgehog on the sofa, never to return. The small squat figure of Dolittle with his round paunch, top hat and dress coat is very hobbit-like; he is seen in profile on the left looking down the long sitting room at the retreating figure of the lady. A proud ancestral portrait on the wall adds to the effect, as do the

'We must away ere break of day'

low-slung chairs, and general air of respectability gone awry. It is tempting to speculate that Tolkien recalled the composition of the picture when he described the hobbit's dwelling and drew his own illustration of *The Hall at Bag End, Residence of B. Baggins Esquire* – with its image of Bilbo in profile, the round coffee table and low chair, the fire-place and oak panelling and portraits – which appears in classic editions of *The Hobbit*.

Lofting has a plain simple style, peppered with didactic interpolations such as the above explanation of the initials M.D. The narrative moves at a great pace as the bumbling doctor first loses all his clients, then learns the language of the animals through the Helper figure of his pet parrot, and finally goes on a medical mission to rescue sick monkeys in Africa. He returns with a kind of treasure, a rare beast known as the pushmi-pullyu, with which he earns a great fortune at the circus, before retiring to his sleepy town once more:

And one fine day, when the hollyhocks were in full bloom, he came back to Puddleby a rich man, to live in the little house with the big garden. (p. 182)

Clearly this is another case of a story of there-and-back-again, and the emphasis on the language of animals that is associated with Dolittle is surely another influence on Tolkien, to which further reference will be made below.

'By some curious chance one morning long ago in the quiet of the world'

The second beginning to *The Hobbit* actually reworks the opening formula, reintroduces the protagonist looking out of his doorway after breakfast, and at last sets the narrative in motion. In some ways this is a typical folk-tale start with its temporal adverbial 'one morning long ago', although the clause 'when there was less noise and more green' perhaps recalls the opening of Lofting's *Doctor Dolittle*. But unlike 'In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit', this is at the same time a more novelistic beginning: it sets the scene in a subordinate clause 'when ... Bilbo Baggins was standing at his door' – which tells us in detail what the protagonist was doing – and then reveals the punchline in the delayed main clause 'Gandalf came by'.

In jauntily familiar language with the exclamation 'Gandalf!' and with direct address to the child reader 'if you had only heard...', and colloquial vocabulary such as the verb *sprouted up* in 'adventures sprouted up all

over the place wherever he went', Tolkien goes on to set a tone, constantly reminding his readers that this is a tale with an adult teller and a distinctive wit, speaking to an audience of listening children. The first conversation between Bilbo and Gandalf, a witty exchange on the pragmatic meaning of the social greeting 'good morning', is worthy of Lewis Carroll in *Alice through the Looking Glass*, and that children's novel was certainly one of the ingredients that also went into the mix. The dialogue between Bilbo and his visitor follows on from the description of Gandalf with its many adjectives of size, quality and colour: 'little old man', 'tall pointed blue hat', 'long grey cloak'.²³ Interestingly this description echoes another, written by Tolkien broadly in the same period, concerning a 'bad old man', with a 'ragged old coat', 'old pipe', 'old green hat'. It comes in fact from the story *Roverandom*, in which another wizard of more suspect nature than Gandalf comes prowling up the garden path and sets an adventure in motion.

Roverandom

Like the author Hugh Lofting, who wrote letters home to his children from the front during the First World War, and like Kenneth Grahame telling his stories of the adventurous Toad to his young son Alistair, then rewriting them later as *The Wind in the Willows*, Tolkien began his *Roverandom* – and a few years later also *The Hobbit* – as a tale told to his children. The plot of *Roverandom* is picaresque: the dog Rover, later renamed Roverandom, is lost on the beach and has various magical adventures on the moon and under the sea before he returns to his family. The occasion for telling the story was the need to console his sons for the loss of a toy dog, and to keep them calm during a storm. In August 1925, Tolkien and his wife Edith were celebrating his appointment as Rawlinson and Bosworth Professor of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford University; up to this point he had been a Reader at Leeds University since 1920 and a Professor since 1924. As his duties at Oxford did not begin until October, they left Leeds for a holiday at Filey on the Yorkshire coast with their three children John, aged nearly eight, Michael, nearly five, and Christopher, aged one (their daughter Priscilla was born in 1929). It was a typical seaside holiday, and they stayed in a cottage on the cliffs overlooking the sea.

On the night of Saturday 5 September 1927, however, there was a great storm on the coast: 'the water heaved and shook and bent people's houses