The Monsters and the Humans. The Hobbit, the Monster's Godfather

Dina Khapaeva, Georgia Institute of Technology
THE CELEBRATION OF DEATH IN CONTEMPORARY CULTURE

Dina Khapaeva

University of Michigan Press
Ann Arbor
Contents

Introduction: The Paradoxes of Death  1

ONE  The Intellectual Origins of the Cult of Death  23

TWO  The Commodification of Death: The Social and Historical Perspectives  47

THREE  The Monsters and the Humans  81

FOUR  Harry Potter, Tanya Grotter, and Death in the Coming-of-Age Novel  125

Conclusion  175

Notes  183

Selected Bibliography  241

Index  253
We will focus now on the new cultural role of the monster. We will analyze how the adoration of undead monsters has affected our understanding of humanity, placed our most important food taboo in question, and promoted the cult of death. Using vampires as a case study but also with an eye to zombies, cannibals, serial killers, and ghosts, we will compare contemporary monsters with their nineteenth-century predecessors to evaluate the novelty of present-day thinking about monsters and humans. We will examine representations of nonhumans and violent death through the lens of human exceptionalism.

**The Hobbit, the Monster’s Godfather**

Among the several contributions to the evolution of monsters to the lofty status of a new ideal, John Ronald Ruel Tolkien’s works are in a class of their own. In a profound sense, Tolkien’s writings did more to change globally the attitudes toward monsters and our understanding of their cultural role than Bram Stoker’s prototypical Dracula had done for the image of the vampire. Tolkien was preparing his anti-human revolution and laying the foundations of Gothic Aesthetic in the 1930s, while still a professor at Oxford and not yet famous as the author of *The Lord of the Rings*.

The first impression from a tour of Tolkien’s creative laboratory is that his writings are perplexing, with oddly dismissive and even offensive remarks regarding fellow scholars in the field of medieval English litera-
Tolkien seemed skeptical about science in general and had deep reservations about current literary scholarship in particular. He was eager to point out that the understanding of *Beowulf*, a medieval English epic that he studied and greatly admired, had been “killed by Latin learning” and that the banality was “so often the last revelation of analytical study.”

Tolkien’s discontent with his fellow academics is clearly explained in his writings, where he reproaches his peers, among all else, for not giving the dragon the respect it was due. That viewpoint, he held, rendered them unable to penetrate into the world of the epic poem and hence incapable to interpret *Beowulf* in any meaningful way. Arguing the importance of the dragon, he compared his fellow academics’ inability to comprehend the intent of *Beowulf*’s poet to the approach of a zoologist: “He [the author of *Beowulf*—D.K.] esteemed dragons, as rare as they are dire, as some do still. He liked them—as a poet, not as a sober zoologist; and he had good reason.”

Certainly, Tolkien was fundamentally correct in criticizing his fellow academics in medieval studies for their lack of appreciation for dragons. He could actually have said the same of art historians. Even Erwin Panofsky, in his *Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism*, pays so little attention to chimeras that he might as well have been studying not Gothic cathedrals but edifices designed by Le Corbusier.

Why is the dragon so important to Tolkien? He responds clearly and thoughtfully to that question in his scholarly works: the dragon is needed to communicate a universal, transcendent meaning to the narrative. But more than that, as he states in his “Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics”:

> It is just because the main foes in *Beowulf* are inhuman that the story is larger and more significant than this imaginary poem of a great king’s fall (. . .) [I]t stands amid but above the petty wars of princes, and surpasses the dates and limits of historical periods, however important.

How should we interpret this statement? Is Tolkien claiming that the human res gestae and human history acquire their true significance from nonhuman feelings or forces? Is he arguing against anthropocentrism? In any event, a serious attitude toward the dragon as the nonhuman monster par excellence was actually made a foundational principle of the new aesthetic canon that Tolkien laid out in his academic writings.

According to Tolkien, the dragon animates in the reader a distinct spectrum of emotions, its presence producing what might be called “the plea-
sure of reading.” “There could be no good poem without a dragon,” he concludes. And:

As for the poem, one dragon, however hot, does not make a summer, or a host; and a man might well exchange for one good dragon what he would not sell for a wilderness. And dragons, real dragons, essential both to the machinery and the ideas of a poem or tale, are actually rare.⁶

Leaving aside other possible interpretations of Tolkien’s attitude toward dragons, let us focus on the one that is most germane to our purposes. He happens to have been the first to recognize the newly emerging demand for monsters in Western culture and the desire to have them as subjects of literature and the arts. “There are in any case many heroes but very few good dragons,” Tolkien observes, in yet another broadside against human-centered fiction. It should be mentioned that the literature of modernity almost totally deprived readers of the pleasure of meeting monsters on its pages. Monsters were limited to the “low genres,” such as the fairy tale or the Gothic novel. The rational aesthetics of the Enlightenment and modernity had created a firewall to protect serious literature and art from them.

Tolkien’s ardent criticism of scientism in studies of medieval literature, as well as his fledgling career as a writer of fiction, could suggest that he already decided to pen an epic that would showcase a truly spectacular dragon and render all the rules of scientific rationality redundant.

The Dragon’s Gift

Tolkien lays the foundations of Gothic Aesthetic in his “Beowulf” article, in which he maintains that the “illusion of historical truth” could be produced in literature and the other arts, even if their heroes are hobbits and dragons:

The illusion of historical truth and perspective, that has made Beowulf seem such an attractive quarry, is largely a product of art. The author has used an instinctive historical sense—a part indeed of the ancient English temper (and not unconnected with its reputed melancholy), of which Beowulf is a supreme expression; but he has used it with a poetical and not an historical object.⁷
The elements of Gothic Aesthetic that he discovered stem from a deep disenchantment with humanity and human civilization, which he traces back to the medieval epic he so admired. Analyzing *Beowulf*, Tolkien shows that the central element of its poetics is based on the idea of defeat: downfall is the destiny of kings, heroes, and simple mortals: “The monsters had been the foes of the gods, the captains of men, and within Time the monsters would win.”

People have no chance of controlling their destiny, while the only reward for heroic resistance is death, Tolkien pessimistically concludes: “Disaster is foreboded. Defeat is the theme. Triumph over the foes of man’s precarious fortress is over, and we approach slowly and reluctantly the inevitable victory of death.”

Tolkien’s main aesthetic principle is a disregard for human beings, who are, according to him, no longer the measure of all things. By the 1990s, this new aesthetic would inject new life into vampires, zombies, were-wolves, and witches, the true masters of contemporary culture.

There are obvious reasons why the medieval English epic was such an important source of inspiration for Tolkien. He had been deeply affected by his service in World War I. He wrote his articles between two wars, in the bleak atmosphere portrayed by Erich Maria Remarque and Evelyn Waugh. And for this reason alone, the profound cultural pessimism of the medieval epic may have sat well with him. Deeply disappointed with humans for their inability to meet his high moral standards, Tolkien decided to replace them with hobbits, elves, and so forth, thus creating a universe that readily accommodated dragons. For the first time since the dawn of modernity, an epic appeared whose principal protagonists and positive heroes were non-humans. Monsters became the focal point of interest and attraction that had earlier been reserved for people. In Tolkien’s writings, hobbits further his advocacy of the dragon in literature because, no less than the dragon, the hobbit too negates human subjectivity and the significance of people as ideal of art.

Tolkien summarized this idea as follows: “He is a man, and that for him and many is sufficient tragedy.” But he is not referring here to the vicissitudes of human existence in the sense of ancient Greek tragedy or Shakespearean drama. He is, rather, implying that humans are inferior and imperfect creatures. Contrary to the admiration for the perfection of human nature inspired by the Enlightenment and the core belief of the aesthetics of modernity—which consistently presented people as the victors, even if only spiritually—Tolkien radically challenges that aesthetic canon. A determined denial of anthropocentrism, which had been moder-
nity’s uncontested ideal, becomes a necessary part of his aesthetic system. Hobbits and dragons take over from people in Tolkien’s writings and inhabit a new universe in which humans, their history, and their culture have no role to play. Hobbits, a nonhuman species and therefore categorizable as monsters (although they have high morals and do not drink human blood), oust people from the focus of the writer’s and the reader’s attention and sympathies. Curiously enough, aside from their shared symbolic role, Dracula and hobbits have one morphological feature in common: Dracula has hairy palms, while hobbits have hairy feet.

Yet critics have consistently overlooked this antihumanist aspect of Tolkien’s work; on the contrary, they stress the anthropomorphism and humanism of his protagonists. A common reading of Tolkien’s prose is that of a coming-of-age novel that offers sublime moral lessons to children and even teaches them Christian morality. When speaking of “nonhumans,” critics generally mean elves, dragons, and so forth, but not hobbits, whom they consider human by default. Clearly, the critics are still underestimating the dragon and his kin!

Another important secret that the dragon offers Tolkien in exchange for his future popularity is that the dragon, an incarnation of evil, is a concrete and personified horror. But the source and origins of this evil remain as mysterious and enigmatic in Tolkien’s epic as they were in Beowulf.

Certainly, Tolkien, a devout Roman Catholic, endows hobbits with the strong moral compass that humans clearly lack in his eyes. Yet he obviously misjudged the dragon’s influence on morality, and it is interesting to watch him negotiating the differences between his own morality and the moral maxims that prevail in Beowulf. Sometimes he feels uncomfortable about the moral norms of medieval England that he observes there and even criticizes them eventually. Yet he still strives to reconcile his beloved protagonists’ moral judgments with his own. For example, he is initially repulsed by the treatment of vassals in Beowulf, which is characterized by utter ignorance and irresponsibility that the vassals are required to repay with undivided loyalty. Later in his discussion of Beowulf, however, this principle is translated into a romantic ideal of “heroic love and obedience.” In other words, the aesthetic system Tolkien created in consequence of his admiration of the medieval epic has a strong potential to impact moral judgments. The nonhuman universe of Middle-earth, with its nonhuman population, is hardly an ideal environment for the preservation of a human morality. Can moral judgments even exist in a world where people, and their lives and dignity, are disregarded and humanity is not the highest value?