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Title	Liberation from Circulation : The Lord of the Rings and the Vanquishing of Tolkien's Agony
Author(s)	Ichinose, Shimpei
Citation	Journal of the Graduate School of Letters, 11, 67-74
Issue Date	2016-03
DOI	https://doi.org/10.14943/jgsl.11.67
Doc URL	https://hdl.handle.net/2115/61095
Type	departmental bulletin paper
File Information	11_05_ichinose.pdf



Liberation from Circulation: *The Lord of the Rings* and the Vanquishing of Tolkien's Agony

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Abstract: The concept of “return” is considered significant in J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*; this paper aims to illuminate the perspective afforded by Tolkien’s personal experiences with the concept, and to explain its role in his trilogy. Tolkien endured various traumatic experiences where some of the people closest to him never came back. In his childhood, Tolkien’s father died in Bloemfontein in the Orange Free State, far away from his homeland of Britain. During Tolkien’s youth, close friends and numerous fellow soldiers died overseas in World War I. Because of these experiences, Tolkien seems to have adhered strongly to the concept of return and/or circulation while writing his work. *The Lord of the Rings* has a structure in which many characters return somewhere or other through disappearance or death. The characters’ departures and returns create an image of circulation, which brings to mind the Ring — the trilogy’s central theme. Tolkien is as obsessed with circulation as his characters are with the Ring. Yet, this story’s circulating structure collapses at the final scene, where Frodo and other characters are willing to choose departure without return. This paper interprets the collapse as Tolkien’s trial to overcome his emotional shock. By writing this trilogy, Tolkien is liberated from the traumatic “no return” experience, thus ending the constantly circulating journey of repeated departures and returns.

(Received on October 30, 2015)

Introduction

The concept of “return” deserves attention in *The Lord of the Rings*, as the title of its final volume, *The Return of the King*, suggests. Jane Chance comments on the nature of returning, focusing on the four hobbits: “Joseph Campbell, in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, has designated “Departure” and “Return” the significant phases in the monomyth of the hero’s quest. So, too, do they mark the beginning and end of Tolkien’s epic-romance” (128). Yet, Tolkien’s genuine human feelings for his father and friendship are also fundamental in successfully analyzing the returns taking place in *The Lord of the Rings*. This paper claims that the adherence to returns in this trilogy is rooted in Tolkien’s emotional shock over his father, soldier

fellows and friends dying overseas, never to return to Britain.

For Tolkien, “no return” is closely entwined with death. Tolkien’s family was British; yet, in his childhood, he and his family lived in Bloemfontein in the Orange Free State because of his father’s career.¹ When he was three, Tolkien went to Britain with his mother and brother for a long family visit, but his father decided to remain in Bloemfontein despite wishing to join his family. During that time, his father died of rheumatic fever before he could follow them. His body was buried in the Anglican at Bloemfontein, five thousand miles away from Britain.

In Tolkien’s soldier days, similar experiences followed during World War I. When war broke out, Tolkien was commissioned by the British Army and dispatched to the European Continent. Tolkien served as the battalion-signaling officer at the Battle of Somme, one of the greatest battles of the War. On this occasion, Tolkien saw many fellow soldiers die. After the battle, he came down with trench fever, which forced him to return to Britain. Although he came back alive, many who remained in Europe perished, never to return home to Britain.

Tolkien also lost many of his close hometown friends in this War. While he lived in Birmingham, he had three soul mates - Rob Gilson, Geoffrey Smith and Christopher Wiseman - and together they formed a semi-secret society called ‘the T.C.B.S.’ They kept in close touch with one other for a long time, even during World War I (*A Biography* 90, 92, 94). Sadly, Gilson and Smith, who joined the British Army, were killed on the European Continent. Tolkien once expressed his sorrow about the war in “The Forward to the Second Edition,” reminding readers that World War I was no less tragic than World War II:

One has indeed personally to come under the shadow of war to feel fully its oppression; but as the years go by it seems now often forgotten that to be caught in youth by 1914 was no less hideous an experience than to be involved in 1939 and the following years. By 1918 all but one of my close friends were dead. (*FR*, xviii)

The death of his friends may have affected Tolkien’s writing of *The Lord of the Rings*.²

It seems that, because of his traumatic experience with loved ones never coming back, Tolkien was traumatized by the idea of “no return” while writing *The Lord of the Rings*. Therefore, this story adheres strongly to the concept of return, or circulation (which consists of departures and returns). It has the structure in which characters are doomed to come back to somewhere through disappearance or death. On the other hand, this paper also acknowledges that this structure collapses at the final stage of the trilogy. Tolkien describes the scene where Frodo and others sail from the Grey Havens on a ship that will never return to Middle-earth. I suggest that this scene expresses Tolkien finally letting go of the traumatic experience of “no return” and liberating himself from his obsession with circulation.

1 This paper consulted Carpenter Humphrey’ *J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biography* for Tolkien’s biographical information.

2 Tom Shippey said that Tolkien’s preoccupation with the theme of death is rooted in World War I (*Authorship* 248). About analysis of the relationship between this war and the work, for instance, Roger Sale suggests that the trilogy is a delayed yet important reply to this war (193–240), and Mark T. Hooker examines how Sam is projected by a batman in the Great War (125–36).

1. Obsession with Return or Circulation

The 'return of the dead' in this story is relevant to our discussion, as Tolkien had both his father and his close friends buried overseas. Due to his sad experiences, Tolkien desired to describe a scene wherein the dead return to their homeland, as shown with King Théoden's return: he dies far away from his homeland, Rohan, but his body is brought back and buried next to his ancestors' graves.

The return of the dead's bodies can be seen most impressively in the case of Boromir. He is the only member of 'the Fellowship of the Ring' to die during the story, but his body returns to his home after death in a mystical way. When he dies in Tol Brandir, his fellows place him on a boat, and, after many days, his brother Faramir sees him by chance on the boat at Osgiliath.

I saw, or it seemed that I saw, a boat floating on the water, glimmering grey, a small boat of a strange fashion with a high prow, and there was none to row or steer it...it (the boat) was almost filled with clear water, from which came the light; and lapped in the water a warrior lay asleep...It was Boromir, my brother, dead. I knew his gear, his sword, his beloved face...Dreamlike it was, and yet no dream, for there was no waking. (*TT*, 338–39)

Osgiliath, where Faramir saw Boromir, exists in their hometown of Gondor. Furthermore, Boromir was once a commander of the troops that defended Osgiliath from its enemies (*RK*, 96). Therefore, it is possible to say that he comes back in the way the boat with him flows into this city.

Boromir's return to Osgiliath from Tol Brandir is unbelievable, taking the configuration into consideration. Frodo's comment shows his surprise at the boat's journey: "How could such a thing have happened in truth...For no boat could have been carried over the stony hills from Tol Brandir; and Boromir purposed to go home across the Entwash and fields of Rohan. And yet how could any vessel ride the foam of the great falls and not founder in the boiling pools, though laden with water" (*TT*, 340). The way of this boat's mystical journey from Tol Brandir to Osgiliath is never revealed, yet one thing is certain — that, in this story, beyond our comprehension, people can return to some place. In this way, through characters and events of his own making, Tolkien guides the dead bodies of those close to him back to their homeland.

Tolkien's agony over 'no return' is also expressed in the connection between characters' resurrections and returns. In this story, principle characters die or almost die during the journey, parallel to Tolkien's experiences in which his father and friends died far away from their homeland. However, contrasted with Tolkien's experience, characters believed to be dead and unable to return revive and come back.

In *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Gandalf fell into the abyss and vanished from Middle-earth, leading his fellows to believe him dead, and to grieve for his disappearance. Yet, his sudden reappearance later in Fangorn Forest strongly pleases his companions. Aragorn says "Beyond all hope you return to us in our need!" (*TT*, 113). The appendix refers to his return to the earth as "Gandalf *returns to life*" (*RK*, 462, emphasis added). The story emphatically relates his

disappearance and return with death and rebirth. This pattern of heroes once thought to have vanished coming back thorough death also applies to Aragorn's return, hence the final volume's title. He is next in line to rule Minas Tirith, but conceals the fact that he is a descendant in a direct line of kings and becomes 'Strider.' Therefore, for a long time, Minas Tirith has no king, leading the inhabitants of the city as well as most others in Middle-earth to believe that their king no longer exists and that any direct line from the kingship is lost. When Minas Tirith is in danger of downfall at the hands of Sauron's army, Aragorn decides to return to Minas Tirith as king to save the city. The point is that he does not return to this city directly, but via 'the Paths of the Dead' (*RK*, 137). Symbolically, he returns through death.

The main journey of the four hobbits — Frodo, Sam, Pippin and Merry — is also a story of death and return. They set off through the gate between the Shire and the Old Forest. For them, the Shire is the only world they have ever known, and their map shows nothing outside the Shire. Therefore, leaving the Shire means death for the hobbits; in fact, they are regarded as dead by all accounts. When they succeed in returning to the Shire, the other hobbits see these four as if they are ghosts. At the gate on the bridge to the Shire, Hob Hayward, the gatekeeper, and first witness to their return, is surprised to see them over the gate: "Why, they said you was dead! Lost in the Old Forest by all accounts. I'm pleased to see you alive after all" (*RK*, 334). Furthermore, when Sam visits Cotton's house and says, "I've come back" (*RK*, 346), Cotton replies "The voice is right, and your face is no worse than it was...you've been in foreign parts, seemingly. We feared you were dead" (*RK*, 346). When Sam meets Rosie again, she says: "Where've you been? They said you were dead" (*RK*, 347).

It is noteworthy that not only were they regarded as dead by their fellow hobbits, but they actually almost died once during the journey. Walking with Sam, Pippin, and Merry in the Old Forest, Frodo suddenly loses them. Then he approaches a barrow and loses consciousness. Getting a hold of himself, he finds that he is in the barrow with his three friends lying around him. "They were on their backs, and their faces looked deathly pale; and they were clad in white. About them lay many treasures, of gold maybe, though in that light they looked cold and unlovely" (*FR*, 185). When Frodo brought his fellows out of the barrow, they revived. Moreover, Frodo himself almost dies in Shelob's cave when she attacks him. Sam, thinking Frodo is dead, laments over leaving his friend's body unburied in a strange land and returning home alone: "Not leave Mr. Frodo dead, unburied on the top of the mountain, and go home?" (*RK*, 424). Afterwards, overhearing the Orcs' conversation, Sam learns that Frodo is alive. Due to Tolkien's pattern of departures and returns, the hobbits will inevitably follow that pattern by experiencing a close brush with death but still manage to get home safely.

Tolkien's adherence to return is noticeably insistent when we heed the details. Gimli and Legolas are the only ones among the Fellowship of the Ring not to engage in the act of returning to a place during the War of the Ring. However, they begin another journey after parting from the fellowship. As a result, their place of return is the place at which they start their new journey, and *The Return of the King* describes their return: "Then Legolas repaid his promise to Gimli and went with him to the Glittering Caves: and when they *returned* he was silent, and would say only that Gimli find fit words to speak of them" (*RK*, 309, emphasis added). In the context of the larger story of *The Lord of the Rings*, Gimli and Legolas's journey is not very significant.

but, as if to give all members of 'the Fellowship of the Ring' an act of return, this story adds another journey for Gimli and Legolas, described in only six sentences.³

The structure consisting of repeated departures and returns reminds one of the image of circulation, bringing to mind the form of the story's main theme: the Ring. In fact, for the Ring, return and circulation are key concepts. *The Lord of the Rings* is a story of destroying the Ring, but can also be interpreted as one wherein the Ring returns to its place of birth. In this story, to save Middle-earth from Sauron, the Ring must be thrown into the Cracks of Mount Doom, where it was forged. In short, Frodo's mission to destroy the Ring can be interpreted as returning it to its birthplace. Critics have analyzed the meaning of the Ring, and Tom Shippey suggests that the Ring is addictive in the story, and this addictiveness offers the image of drug-addictiveness (*Road* 139).⁴ Yet, given the discussion above, it also can be said that the characters' obsession with the Ring (which resonates with the nuance of the circulation of departures and returns) is reflected by Tolkien's adherence to return, based on his tragic experiences.⁵

The Lord of the Rings starts with Bilbo returning from a journey, after being considered missing by all his fellow hobbits in the Shire. He goes on to write about his journey in the earlier chapters of the Red Book, a journey he calls "*There and Back Again*" (1). *The Lord of the Rings* is the continuation of Bilbo's return from his journey outside the Shire. The Ring he brought from this journey brings about the story *The Lord of the Rings*, which starts with the other hobbits' departure and also depicts their coming back. Bilbo and the four hobbits' repeated departures and returns follow a circular path with not necessarily the same origin and end points.

2. Liberation from Circulation

Despite his adherence to the concept of return or circulation as mentioned above, Tolkien attempted to vanquish this adherence. In one sense, this exertion may be an analogy to Frodo's will to overcome his obsession with the Ring and destroy it. So as to understand Tolkien's trial, we should note that his adherence is broken in the final scene, where characters, including Frodo, depart over the sea from the Grey Havens, and the ship they board never returns. Although this

3 Legolas and Gimli's journey is not mentioned in detail; yet, it should be noted that the place to which they travel is a cave—for their friends' deaths or near-deaths occurred in caves or similar places in their returning journey. Three hobbits 'died' in the barrow, Frodo 'died' in Shelob's tunnel, Gandalf falls into the abyss in the underground mountain, and the Paths of the Dead through which Aragorn passes are also in a cave. Given this pattern, it is conceivable that the cave which Gimli and Legolas go through implies a kind of death. In short, it seems to be implied that they return through death.

4 For the other interpretations of the Ring, for instance, William Blisset refers to the Ring as an absolute weapon, claiming this story is a parable for the atomic age (450). Chance, in comparing Tolkien with Michel Foucault as they share similar thoughts about power, suggests that the Ring echoes Panopticon in that the two are the same model of power (21).

5 The Ring represents circulation, and characters are obsessed with it, yet on the other hand, the Ring must be destroyed. The struggle to overcome obsession seems to be important for Tolkien's conflict with "return," which will be explored in the next chapter.

is parallel to Tolkien's experience in which his father and friends went overseas and never came back, Tolkien's characters were willing to leave from the Grey Havens.

Frodo, who is fond of his homeland, finally succeeds in returning to the Shire after overcoming his difficult journey. However, in the climax of *The Return of the King*, he abandons his home, departs for the Grey Havens and boards a ship with Bilbo, Gandalf, and the Elves. Ships sailing from the Grey Havens never come back, as emphasized in *The Fellowship of the Ring*:

It was an old tradition that away over there stood the Grey Havens from which at times elven-ships set sail, never to return. 'They are sailing, sailing, sailing over the Sea, they are going into the West and leaving us,' said Sam... (FR, 59)

Given this, Frodo chooses to depart without returning. Sam, Merry and Pippin deplore his departure as they return to the Shire without speaking after seeing their friends off. However, for those leaving, the departure has positive meaning.

And the Ship went out into the High Sea and Passed on into the West, until at last on a night of rain Frodo smelled a sweet fragrance on the air and heard the sound of singing that came over the water. And then it seems to him that as in his dream in the house of Bombadil, the grey rain-curtain turned all to silver glass and was rolled back, and he beheld white shores and beyond them a far green country under a swift sunrise. (RK, 377-78)

In this scene, departure without the possibility of return is delightful for those departing, but saddening for those seeing them off. There is tension here between whether or not 'no return' is positive.

Considering Bilbo's comment, this departure suggests death. When he departs from the Grey Havens, he says "well, I have passed the Old Took today! So that's settled. And now I think I am quite ready to go on another journey" (RK, 375). Bilbo's satisfaction that he is old enough and its nuance that he will no longer age imply he will not live another year after leaving the Grey Havens, which virtually means his death in Middle-earth. Further, leaving the Grey Havens symbolizes death to the people of Middle-earth, as those who leave never return. It is worth noting that Tolkien never directly addresses the concept of "no return" in *The Lord of the Rings* until the story's end.

At the end of *The Lord of the Rings*, main characters can be divided into two groups: those who return, such as Sam, Pippin and Merry, and those who do not, such as Frodo. After seeing Frodo off, Sam returns to the Shire with Merry and Pippin, and the story ends with Sam returning home: "Well, I'm back" (RK, 378). Although this story's end describes Sam's return, the novel implies that their story did not end, and there is a continuation. Tolkien adds an appendix to *The Lord of the Rings*, listing events after the story's end. According to this, after returning to the Shire, Sam repeats depart and return, but he finally leaves the Shire and chooses the same fate as Frodo, the path of 'no return': "Among them the tradition is handed down from Elanor that

Samwise passed the Tower, and went to the Grey Havens, and passed over Sea" (RK, 470). Although he has great affection for the Shire, Sam chooses to depart for the Grey Havens and sail west as Frodo did, never to return. Moreover, according to the appendix, Merry and Pippin also choose to disappear from the Shire, and die not in their homeland: "He (Merry) took counsel with his friend the Thain (Pippin), and soon after they handed over their goods and offices to their sons and rode away over the Sarn Ford, and they were not seen again in the Shire" (RK, 470). It is also notable that the appendix's record of the date ends with Gimli and Legolas's departure: "Then Legolas built a grey ship in Ithilien, and sailed down Anduin and so over Sea; and with him, it is said, went Gimli the Dwarf. And when that ship passed an end was come in Middle-earth of the Fellowship of the Ring" (RK, 471). In this way, characters finally accepted the idea of no return.

No one knows the events following Frodo, Merry, and Pippin's departures. Linda Greenwood says: "Tolkien leaves his conclusion without true closure...His (Frodo's) future is still cloaked in mystery, and although he has hope, it is a hope deferred. The land he sets out for is a place he cannot truly belong to or rest in; a place he cannot truly go to" (193). Yet, as long as readers of *The Lord of the Rings* know, one thing is certain: Tolkien used the idea of 'no return' at the story's end in spite of his obsession with the idea of returns. It can be interpreted that Tolkien, through writing the trilogy, is liberated from the traumatic experience of having loved ones never return, ending the circulating journeys of repeated departures and returns.

Conclusion

This paper compares the relationship between 'return events' around Tolkien and those in *The Lord of the Rings*. His former novel, *The Hobbit*, is the story that ends with Bilbo's return from a mystical journey. This also shows that Tolkien was obsessed with return. Superficially, *The Lord of the Rings* has the same pattern of ending in Sam's return home, but this story no longer has adherence to return as mentioned above. This story describes many characters never returning at the final scene. This contrast indicates that Tolkien changed his position, from one obsessed by the idea of return to one who accepted 'no return.' In order to reach this state, Tolkien must have had considerable inner conflict to overcome. Tolkien did not escape the concept of 'no return,' but did confront it squarely. I suggest that the reason he tried to do so is that as a writer he had to create, for his beloved family and friends who did not come back, the myth of heroes never returning.

The Lord of the Rings was completed in 1955, a period characterized by many wars and specifically by the aftermath of World War II with countless people around the world deploring the concept of 'no return,' for their loved ones who would never return from the war, in one or the other sense. Tolkien denied that *The Lord of the Rings* is a parable about the war; however, this story rooted in Tolkien's inner conflict with 'no return' had the potential effect of healing those who shared Tolkien's sadness, making it a popular story throughout the world.

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