

The Many Faces of Trolls in Middle-earth

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J.R.R. Tolkien had a fascination with trolls. From the comical adventures of the trolls in *The Hobbit* to the poem “Troll Sat Alone on His Seat of Stone” and to the battle with the Cave Troll in the mines of Moria it is clear that trolls were an important part of his narrative world-building. However, Tolkien seemed unsure about the origins of these creatures. Tolkien himself admitted, “I am not sure about Trolls” (*The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, No. 153, dated 1954). Given the different portrayals of trolls throughout Tolkien’s writings it is easy to agree with this statement. Obviously the trolls in Middle-earth seem to suffer an identity crisis at the hands of their creator. So which version of the troll is correct? The short answer – all of them. But where did they come from?

In order to understand how trolls came to inhabit Middle-earth, we first need to understand their role in our world mythologies. Etymologically, trolls can be traced to Old Norse, as seen here from the Online Etymology Dictionary:

Troll (n.)

- "ugly dwarf or giant," 1610s, from O.N. troll "giant, fiend, demon."
- Some speculate that it originally meant "creature that walks clumsily," and derives from P.Gmc. *truzlan, from *truzlanan (see troll (v)).
- Swed. trolla "to charm, bewitch;" O.N. trolldomr "witchcraft." The old sagas tell of the troll-bull, a supernatural being in the form of a bull, as well as boar-trolls. There were troll-maidens, troll-wives, and troll-women; the trollman, a magician or wizard, and the troll-drum, used in Lappish magic rites.
- The word has been current in the Shetlands and Orkneys since Viking times. The first record of it is from a court document from the Shetlands, regarding a certain Catherine, who, among other things, was accused of "airt and pairt of witchcraft

and sorcerie, in hanting and seeing the Trollis ryse out of the kyrk yeard of Hildiswick."

- Originally conceived as a race of giants, they have suffered the same fate as the Celtic Danann and are now regarded in Denmark and Sweden as dwarfs and imps supposed to live in caves or under the ground (OED).

As Douglas Anderson writes in *The Annotated Hobbit* Tolkien was certainly exposed to Old Norse language, mythology and stories from a young age:

While a student at King Edward's School, Tolkien read *Beowulf*, first in a modern translation and then in the original Anglo-Saxon. He went from there to the Icelandic sagas, some in translations by William Morris, and to the prose Edda of Snorri Sturluson, and the Elder Edda, a collection of Old Norse mythological and heroic poems. He encountered the Finnish *Kalevala* in 1911...Tolkien read and studied the entire corpus of early Germanic languages and literatures, specializing in Old English, Old Norse, and Middle English...Tolkien's interest in sharing such enthusiasms led him to form a Viking Club at Leeds, which met to drink beer and read sagas; and back in Oxford he founded an Icelandic club, the Kolbítar, which consisted of a group of dons that met from 1926 through around 1930–31 in order to read aloud to one another Icelandic sagas, translating impromptu (AH 3-4).

Furthermore, Rateliff remarks that in his book on Teutonic Mythology "Jacob Grimm notes... 'numerous approximations and overlappings between the giant-legend and those of dwarfs...as the comprehensive name "troll" in Scandinavian tradition would itself indicate. Dwarfs of the mountains are, like giants, liable to transformation into stone, as indeed they have sprung out of stone" (104). Finally, Grimm concludes that "It would

appear...that giants, like dwarfs, have reason to dread the daylight, and if surprised by the break of day, they turn to stone” (HH 104). While Tolkien’s dwarves went onto bigger and better things, Tolkien’s trolls kept this inherent weakness. In doing so, Tolkien ignored two well-known stories concerning trolls; namely “The Three Billy Goats Gruff” and “The Troll”, a short story by T.H. White. In both stories the trolls do not suffer ill-effects from sunlight. Rateliff explains, “Despite Tolkien’s breezy addition of ‘as you know’ to the description of their petrification, he seems to have introduced the motif to English fiction” (HH 102). Here Tolkien is “strongly at variance with what an English audience of his day would have been taught to expect about trolls. In fact, he is ignoring or sidestepping a modern fairy tale tradition in favor of reviving an ancient folk-lore belief once held by people who actually believed in such creatures...When given a choice, Tolkien opts over and over again for folk-lore over fairy tale...ancient belief over artificial invention” (HH 104).

Given their root in Old Norse etymology and folklore, trolls are also encountered in *Beowulf*, which was certainly well-known to Tolkien. Grendel has long been referred to as a troll in translations of *Beowulf*, but the word is actually never used to describe him in the original text. However, Grendel’s mother is referred to as his “troll-dam” so the conclusion from the inference is a logical one. Even if Grendel is never actually called a “troll”, he exhibits many of the troll-like abilities that Tolkien applied to the trolls of Middle-earth. As Seamus Heaney tells the tale, Grendel only attacks at night:

**Then a powerful demon, a prowler through the dark,
nursed a hard grievance. It harrowed him
to hear the din of the loud banquet**

**every day in the hall, the harp being struck
and the clear song of a skilled poet
telling with mastery of man's beginnings ... (Heaney lines 86-91).**

Also, Grendel is incredibly strong; able to grab thirty men at a time:

**So, after nightfall, Grendel set out
for the lofty house, to see how the Ring-Danes
were settling into it after their drink,
and there he came upon them, a company of the best
asleep from their feasting, insensible to pain
and human sorrow. Suddenly then
the God-cursed brute was creating havoc:
greedy and grim, he grabbed thirty men
from their resting places and rushed to his lair,
flushed up and inflamed from the raid,
blundering back with the butchered corpses (Heaney lines 115-125).**

After Grendel takes the great hall, “He took over Heorot, haunted the glittering hall after dark” (Heaney lines 166-167). If Grendel is not a troll in name, he certainly is in spirit. By the time he wrote *The Hobbit*, Tolkien had long been exposed to trolls in literature, language and mythology.

Trolls in *The Hobbit*

First and foremost, *The Hobbit* is a children’s story. Specifically, it is a story written *for his children* and published in 1937. Between 1926–1930 “a series of Icelandic *au pair* girls-will live with the Tolkien family and entertain the boys with tales about

trolls” (Tolkien Companion & Guide, I:135). Presumably, Tolkien either heard his children speak of the trolls from these stories or actually listened to an au pair girl regale his children with these stories of trolls. In any event, the Tolkien children certainly enjoyed the au pair girls’ tales of trolls.

In 1926 Helen Buckhurst (an Icelandic Scholar and friend of Tolkien’s from Oxford) read a paper titled “Icelandic Folklore” to the Viking Society for Northern Research. Her paper includes this description of trolls: “The Icelandic Trolls, as depicted both in the Sagas and in more recent tales, are huge, misshapen creatures, bearing some resemblance to human form, but always hideously ugly. They make their homes among the mountains, living generally in caves among the rocks or in the lava. They are almost always malignant in disposition, and frequently descend at night upon outlying farms in order to carry off sheep and horses, children, or even grown men and women, to devour in their mountain homes.” Buckhurst further adds, “Some kinds of trolls have no power except during the hours of darkness; during the day they must remain in their caves, for the rays of the sun turn them into stone” (TC&G, 229). When Tolkien describes the trolls in *The Hobbit*, he echoes Buckhurst but with a distinctly light-hearted flair: “Three very large persons sitting round a very large fire of beech-logs. They were toasting mutton on long spits of wood, and licking the gravy off their fingers. There was a fine toothsome smell. Also there was a barrel of good drink at hand, and they were drinking out of jugs. But they were trolls. Obviously trolls. Even Bilbo, in spite of his sheltered life, could see that: from the great heavy faces of them, and their size, and the shape of their legs, not to mention their language, which was not drawing-room fashion at all, at all” (AH 70).

Speaking of their language, in *The Annotated Hobbit*, Anderson points out that Tolkien presented the trolls' speech "in a comic, lower-class dialect" (70). It is humorous to think that Tolkien had Cockney in mind when he wrote that the trolls spoke a "debased form of the Common Speech" (LotR 1132), but it's clear that he did; for we have either Tom or Bert complaining:

- "Mutton yesterday, mutton today, and blimey, if it don't look like mutton again tomorrer."
- "Never a blinking bit of manflesh have we had for long enough," said a second."
- "William choked. 'Shut yer mouth...yer can't expect folk to stop here for ever just to be et by you and Bert'" (AH 71-72).

It is highly unlikely that the Trolls found in Middle-earth spoke with Cockney accents, just as it seems unlikely that one of them would have been named "William". However, by giving the trolls names heard in the day-to-day lives of the Tolkien children and thick cockney accents which would have been a source of comedic mirth when read aloud, the trolls become hulking but harmless, tall but toothless, and scary but seriocomic.

Clearly Gandalf was concerned when he heard that there were trolls in the area, and he did return to check on Bilbo and the dwarves, but he easily tricks the trolls into staying up all night until the dawn turns them to stone. Tolkien writes:

"Dawn take you all and be stone to you!" said a voice that sounded like William's. But it wasn't. For just at that moment the light came over the hill, and there was a mighty twitter in the branches. William never spoke for he stood turned to stone as he stooped; and Bert and Tom were stuck like rocks as they looked at him. And there they stand to this day, all alone, unless the birds perch on them; for trolls, as

you probably know, must be underground before dawn, or they go back to the stuff of the mountains they are made of, and never move again. That is what happened to Bert and Tom and William” (AH 80).

I find it hard to believe that these trolls are the elite of the Dark Lord’s army. Instead, these are but caricatures of the trolls found in *The Lord of the Rings*. Yet, they had their supporters. It is noted in *The Annotated Hobbit* that Tolkien’s second son, Michael, said that as children he and all of his siblings thought that *Roast Mutton* was the best chapter in *The Hobbit* at one point or another. He said, “We thought there was something rather nice about trolls, and it was a pity that they had to be turned into stone at all” (86).

Still, even in the pages of *The Hobbit* we can see glimpses of the history of Middle-earth. With these trolls defeated, Gandalf leads the group to their hideout, and they find a number of strange weapons. In the next chapter, Elrond will identify them as elvish blades that date back to Gondolin. This is a strong connection into the larger story of Middle-earth and *The Lord of the Rings*. So, while the Troll adventure in *The Hobbit* should not be taken too literally as a source of Troll-lore in Middle-earth it is clear that Tolkien believed that trolls have a place in the folklore of Middle-earth. To help put them there, he uses Sam Gamgee to reintroduce the trolls from *The Hobbit* to the reader when he recites The Troll Song (or Sam’s Song of the Troll) in *The Lord of the Rings*.

This lively song has its origin in *The Root of the Boot*, a poem written by Tolkien and which, according to Christopher Tolkien in *The Return of the Shadow*, “...goes back to his time at the University of Leeds” (142), Christopher also notes that, “My father was extremely fond of this song, which went to the tune of *The fox went out on a winter’s*

night" (142) which is a traditional English folktale thought to date from the fifteenth century. By reworking and adding an English folktale to the legendarium of Middle-earth Tolkien uses the echoes of the English poem to give the reader a sense of their own historical past while also crafting a rich, parallel history in Middle-earth.

The trolls so expertly dispatched by Gandalf in *The Hobbit* are rediscovered by the four hobbits and Aragorn in *The Lord of the Rings* during *Flight to the Ford*:

'There are trolls!' Pippin panted. 'Down in a clearing in the woods not far below.

We got a sight of them through the tree trunks. They are very large!'

'We will come and look at them,' said Strider, picking up a stick. Frodo said nothing, but Sam looked scared.

The sun was now high, and it shone down through the half-stripped branches of the trees, and lit the clearing with bright patches of light. They halted suddenly on the edge, and peered through the tree-trunks, holding their breath. There stood the trolls: three large trolls. One was stooping, and the other two stood staring at him. Strider walked forward unconcernedly. 'Get up, old stone!' he said, and broke his stick upon the stooping troll.

Nothing happened. There was a gasp of astonishment from the hobbits, and then even Frodo laughed. 'Well!' he said. 'We are forgetting our family history! These must be the very three that were caught by Gandalf, quarrelling over the right way to cook thirteen dwarves and one hobbit.'

'I had no idea we were anywhere near the place!' said Pippin. He knew the story well. Bilbo and Frodo had told it often; but as a matter of fact he had never more

than half believed it. Even now he looked at the stone trolls with suspicion, wondering if some magic might not suddenly bring them to life again.

'You are forgetting not only your family history, but all you ever knew about trolls,' said Strider. 'It is broad daylight with a bright sun, and yet you come back trying to scare me with a tale of live trolls waiting for us in this glade! In any case you might have noticed that one of them has an old bird's nest behind his ear. That would be a most unusual ornament for a live troll!' (LotR 205-206).

Clearly Aragorn remembers his troll lore. This is only proper, as Arador (Aragorn's grandfather) was "taken by trolls and slain in the Coldfells" (PoME 263). After the meal, Merry calls for a song to be sung. After some reluctance, Sam recites the "Troll Song":

Standing up, with his hands behind his back, as if he was at school, he began to sing an old tune.

*Troll sat alone on his seat of stone,
And munched and mumbled a bare old bone;
For many a year he had gnawed it near,
For meat was hard to come by.
Done by! Gum by!
In a cave in the hills he dwelt alone,
And meat was hard to come by.*

*Up came Tom with his big boots on.
Says he to Troll: 'Pray, what is yon?
For it looks like the shin o' my nuncle Tim,
As should be a-lyin' in graveyard.
Caveyard! Paveyard!
This many a year has Tim been gone,
And I thought he were lyin' in graveyard.'*

*'My lad,' said Troll, 'this bone I stole.
But what be bones that lie in a hole?
Thy nuncle was dead as a lump o' lead,
Afore I found his shinbone.*

*Tinbone! Thinbone!
He can spare a share for a poor old troll,
He's got no use for his shinbone.'*

*Said Tom: 'I don't see why the likes o' thee
Without axin' leave should go makin' free
With the shank or the shin o' my father's kin;
So hand the old bone over!
Rover! Trover!
Though dead he be, it belongs to he;
So hand the old bone over!'*

*'For a couple o' pins,' says Troll, and grins,
'I'll eat thee too, and gnaw thy shins.
A bit o' fresh meat will go down sweet!
I'll try my teeth on thee now.
Hee now! See now!
I'm tired of gnawing old bones and skins;
I've a mind to dine on thee now.'*

*But just as he thought his dinner was caught,
He found his hands had hold of naught;
Before he could mind, Tom slipped behind
And gave him the boot to larn him.
Warn him! Darn him!
A bump o' the boot on the seat, Tom thought,
Would be the way to larn him.*

*But harder than stone is the flesh and bone
Of a troll that sits in the hills alone.
As well set your boot to the mountain's root,
For the seat of a troll don't feel it.
Peel it! Heal it!
Old Troll laughed, when he heard Tom groan,
And he knew his toes could feel it.*

*Tom's leg is game, since home he came,
And his bootless foot is lasting lame;
But Troll don't care, and he's still there
With the bone he boned from its owner.
Doner! Boner!
Troll's old seat is still the same,
And the bone he boned from its owner! (LoTR 206-208).*

Much like in *The Hobbit*, this troll is also a figure of some amusement - insofar as a troll that is gnawing on someone's femur can be found 'amusing'. "Troll Sat Alone on His Seat of Stone" is brought to life in *The Lord of the Rings* from within the shadow of the troll adventure from *The Hobbit*. In doing so, Tolkien creates a literary bridge for the trolls to cross over between *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. However, these are not the trolls of Tolkien's children and their Icelandic au pairs. No, these trolls are something else entirely.

Trolls in *The Lord of the Rings*:

Right from the start trolls are established as a clear and present threat in *The Lord of the Rings*: "The Dark Tower had been rebuilt, it was said. From there the power was spreading far and wide, and away far east and south there were wars and growing fear. Orcs were multiplying again in the mountains. Trolls were abroad, no longer dull-witted, but cunning and armed with dreadful weapons" (LoTR 44). Trolls are also to be watched out for on the road: "The lands ahead were empty of all save birds and beasts, unfriendly places deserted by all the races of the world. Rangers passed at times beyond the hills, but they were few and did not stay. Other wanderers were rare, and of the evil sort: trolls might stray down at times out of the northern valleys of the Misty Mountains" (LoTR 190). Yet through his dialogue Tolkien gives us subtle clues as to the aspect of trolls in Middle-earth: "'Who lives in this land?' he asked. 'And who built these towers? Is this troll-country?'"

'No!' said Strider. '*Trolls do not build*'" (LoTR 201).

Trolls may not build, but they are certainly part of Sauron's army. Gandalf explains to Frodo that, "Not all of his servants and chattels are wraiths! There are orcs

and trolls, there are wargs and werewolves; and there have been and still are many Men, warriors and kings, that walk alive under the Sun, and yet are under his sway. And their number is growing daily” (LoTR 222). The trolls are also present in the Mines of Moria. In *The Bridge of Khazad-dûm*, Tolkien wrote: “. . . For the moment they are hanging back, but there is something else there. A great cave-troll, I think, or more than one. There is no hope of escape that way” (LoTR 324). The fact that Gandalf was able to recognize this creature specifically as a cave-troll strongly suggests that this appearance was shared by others of the kind. The cave-trolls of Moria were clearly described, too: “There was a blow to the door that made it quiver; and then it began to grind slowly open, driving back the wedges. *A huge arm and shoulder, with a dark skin of greenish scales, was thrust through the widening gap. Then a great, flat, toeless foot* was forced through below. There was a dead silence outside. Boromir leaped forward and hewed at the arm with all his might; but his sword rang, glanced aside, and fell from his shaken hand. The blade was notched” (LoTR 324). We learn even more about trolls during the battle:

“Suddenly, and to his own surprise, Frodo felt a hot wrath blaze up in his heart. ‘The Shire!’ he cried, and springing beside Boromir, he stooped, and stabbed with Sting at the hideous foot. There was a bellow, and the foot jerked back, nearly wrenching Sting from Frodo’s arm. *Black drops dripped from the blade and smoked on the floor*” (LoTR 324).

The trolls would be seen one more time in the Mines of Moria: “Legolas turned...He gave a cry of dismay and fear. Two great trolls appeared; they bore great slabs of stone, and flung them down to serve as gangways over the fire” (LoTR 329).

Ultimately, it wasn't the trolls that gave Legolas pause; but their inclusion in aiding the Balrog serves to legitimize the troll's place alongside the great evils of Middle-earth.

In "The Black Gate Opens", we read firsthand of the trolls in Sauron's army: The orcs hindered by the mires that lay before the hills halted and poured their arrows into the defending ranks. But through them there came striding up, *roaring like beasts*, a great company of hill-trolls out of Gorgoroth. *Taller and broader than Men* they were, and they were *clad only in close-fitting mesh of horny scales, or maybe that was their hideous hide*; but they bore round bucklers huge and black and wielded heavy hammers in their knotted hands. Reckless they sprang into the pools and waded across, *bellowing* as they came. Like a storm they broke upon the line of the men of Gondor, and beat upon helm and head, and arm and shield as smiths hewing the hot bending iron. At Pippin's side Beregon was stunned and overborne, and he fell; and *the great troll-chief* that smote him down bent over him, reaching out *a clutching claw*; for these fell creatures would bite the throats of those that they threw down (LoTR 892).

Tolkien rethought his depiction of the Trolls in *The Hobbit* in a 1954 letter to Peter Hastings, an Oxford bookshop manager. He observed that: "I do not know about Trolls. I think they are mere 'counterfeits', and hence...they return to mere stone images when not in the dark. But there are other sorts of Trolls beside these rather ridiculous, if brutal, Stone-trolls, for which other origins are suggested" (Letter # 153, 191). Tolkien also had Treebeard echo his sentiment about trolls as counterfeit beings: "But Trolls are only counterfeits, made by the Enemy in the Great Darkness, in mockery of Ents, as Orcs were of Elves" (486).

Tolkien outlined his thoughts on trolls in Appendix F of *The Lord of the Rings*. When he describes them as “creatures of dull and lumpish nature” we can clearly hear the echoes first heard in Icelandic lore. We also see Tolkien expanding on the role of trolls in Middle-earth when he details that Sauron “made use of them, teaching them what little they could learn, and increasing their wits with wickedness. Trolls therefore took such language as they could master from the Orcs; and in the Westlands the Stone-trolls spoke a debased form of the Common Speech.” Of course, language was all-important to Tolkien and he explained the speech of orcs and trolls thusly: "But 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" (LoTR 1134). All of this is far removed from the cockney speech of Tom, Bert and William from *The Hobbit*. Tolkien continued to outline the differences in his trolls. During the end of the Third Age “a troll-race not before seen appeared in southern Mirkwood and in the mountain borders of Mordor. Olog-hai they were called in the Black Speech. That Sauron bred them none doubted, though from what stock was not known.” We are told that “the Olog-hai were in fashion of body and mind quite unlike even the largest of Orc-kind, whom they far surpassed in size and power. Trolls they were, but filled with the evil will of their master: a fell race, strong, agile, fierce and cunning, but harder than stone.” Tolkien has improved upon the trolls first encountered in *The Hobbit*. The Olog-hai have been crafted so that they are immune to the sun’s effects and will not turn to stone. Instead, their skin is now “harder than stone”. Here Tolkien has brilliantly maintained the existence of the Stone Trolls in *The Hobbit* while simultaneously putting them on the sideline; to be replaced by a better,

stronger, fiercer and more wicked type of troll as befits the dangers found in *The Lord of the Rings*.

In conclusion, one cannot help but notice the differences between the trolls from *The Hobbit* and from *The Lord of the Rings*. Part of this is due to the difference in the tone of the stories. *The Hobbit* is a much lighter tale, when compared to *The Lord of the Rings*. *The Hobbit* draws its form in part from folktales--we know from the start that (most) everyone will live happily ever after, even if frightening things may happen before then. The narrator's voice in *The Hobbit* gives the novel a story book feel that insulates the reader from the darker aspects of the larger narrative of Middle-earth. Using "Troll Sat Alone on His Seat of Stone" as a narrative bridge between *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* allowed for a continuity of myth and idea that subtly yet effectively brings the more innocent world of Bilbo Baggins into the darker world of Frodo Baggins. As Tolkien crafted the history of Middle-earth revealed in *The Lord of the Rings* he arranged for the trolls of *The Hobbit* to claim a place in the mythology of Middle-earth. This allowed for the expansion of the race of trolls so that they become a serious threat to the peoples of Middle-earth as well as a viable part of Sauron's army. Yet, even as Tolkien sought to define and redefine the trolls of Middle-earth he did so according to the folklore and mythology of our world and the stories first crafted over a millennia ago in Northern Europe. In doing so he allowed the ancient tales of trolls from our world history to echo into the bestiary of Middle-earth.

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