

Poetry in *The Hobbit*

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J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* is a novel and not an anthology of poetry, yet it contains dozens of poems within the text, supporting the plot, providing humor, and enriching the overall themes and mythos of the work. The text, poems, and illustrations are all Tolkien's work and appeal particularly to young readers for their simplicity, rhythm and humor. None of these poems are constructed haphazardly or without purpose; rather each word was carefully chosen by the linguist, scholar and poet for very specific reasons.

Not one chapter goes by without a song or poem. Chapter One, "An Unexpected Party," illustrates the humor of the situation when a bewildered Bilbo Baggins is visited by twelve uninvited dwarves, who quickly make themselves at home and have a large feast. Kindly, they offer to clean up, but Bilbo grows anxious over the careless treatment of his beloved dishes. The dwarves respond by singing:

*Chip the glasses and crack the plates!
Blunt the knives and bend the forks!
That's what Bilbo Baggins hates –
Smash the bottles and burn the corks!*

It's difficult to tell whether the dwarves are mocking Bilbo or trying to do as he asks. Perhaps they are doing both. The lyrics perform several plot functions at once: humor, character development, and reader interaction. The construction of the poem teases by giving opposite instructions. We learn that the dwarves are crazy, playful, or both, and that Bilbo is made anxious by having his nice quiet home disturbed. The reader is also presented with the opportunity to compose their own tune for the silly song.

The poetry in *The Hobbit* highlights the enormous differences between the various races of Middle-Earth and how they choose to express themselves. Dwarves use a simple eight-syllable pattern in their poetry, with four lines to each stanza. No complicated metaphors are used and the subject matter is realistic and practical. The rhythm echoes the effect of marching and pickaxes, a sound well suited for a race that loves mining and wealth and is known for its sturdiness and simplicity. Dwarvish poetry is concerned with ancient heritage, traditions, reclaiming lost inheritance, and delving the depths of the earth:

*Far over the misty mountains cold
To dungeons deep and caverns old
We must away ere break of day
To seek the pale enchanted gold*

The Elves, on the other hand, have a more free structure in their poems, using rich adjectives and metaphors. Their rhythm is a lilting jig in contrast with the Dwarves' march, a reflection on the physical appearance of the Elves themselves. Their poetry describes beauty, peace, and joy, rather than material objects. But that doesn't mean it's always serious. Sometimes Elvish poetry is downright silly:

*O! What are you doing
And where are you going?
Your ponies need shoeing!
The river is flowing!
O! tra-la-la-lally
Here down in the valley!*

Whether the song is skipping and sing-song or elegant and lyrical, the sound is rolling and the effect is light and lyrical:

*The King beneath the mountains
The King of carven stone,
The lord of silver fountains
Shall come into his own!
His crown shall be upholden,
His harp shall be restrung,
His halls shall echo golden
To songs of yore re-sung.*

The Orcs, polar opposites to the Elves in beauty and goodness, can produce only nasty sounding poetry. A race created through the deformation of Elves, Orcs are interested only in destruction, domination, and killing. Goblin poetry sounds like the smacking of lips and the clash of jaws, and the themes are hunting, killing, abusing creatures, and threatening enemies. The sounds Tolkien uses in their poems are deliberately harsh, sharp, monosyllabic, and abrupt, to reflect the nature of the loathsome creatures who sing them:

*Clap! Snap! the black crack!
Grip, grab! Pinch, nab!
And down down to Goblin-town
You go, my lad!*

The contrast between the language choices of the Orcs and Elves offers euphonic support to the imagery of the appearance and behavior of the characters. Where the Elves are lilting, smooth, and alliterative, the Orcs' words cannot be formed without gnashing the teeth and opening and closing the mouth abruptly. Language as part of a character seems intuitive, but readers are very rarely given such direct connections between the sound of speech and the personality of the speaker.

Some of the poetry of *The Hobbit* is, appropriately enough, sung by a Hobbit. Bilbo Baggins is at the heart of the story, and his songs borrow heavily from the rhythmic of traditional English slang:

*Old Tomnoddy, all big body,
Old Tomnoddy can't spy me!
Attercop! Attercop!
Down you drop!
You'll never catch me up your tree!*

Bilbo's early efforts at composing are rough and silly, with little lyricism and much literalism. But there is a pleasant simplicity to it. The rolling, rhythmic sound of The Shire is best displayed by the riddles he offers to Gollum while trapped in the caves with him:

*An eye in a blue face
Saw an eye in a green face.
"That eye is like to this eye"
Said the first eye,
"But in low place
Not in high place."*

The answer to the riddle — sun shining on daisies — is much less important than the sounds and rhythms the riddle provides, as well as its plot function as Bilbo's only means to stay alive. It is through the riddle game that two critical characters are introduced to Tolkien's world — Gollum and the Ring. These two catalyze the beginning of Bilbo's remarkable adventures, and fall together into the fires of Mount Doom at the climax of *The Lord of the Rings*. As Bilbo and Gollum attempt to stump one another, the reader has the chance to try to solve the riddles first. This distracting game shows how little either of the antagonists comprehend the importance and danger of the Ring.

For all the diversity of the poems and songs that Bilbo hears, Tolkien reserves his finest creation for the end of the tale. Having seen the wide world and survived many dangers, Bilbo utters lines more worthy of the rich heritage of English poetry:

*Roads go ever ever on,
Over rock and under tree,
By caves where never sun has shone,
By streams that never find the sea;
Over snow by winter sown,
And through the merry flowers of June,
Over grass and over stone,
And under mountains in the moon.*

Gandalf pauses in surprise at this newfound eloquence. “My dear Bilbo!” the wizard cries out, “Something is the matter with you! You are not the hobbit that you were.”

The poetry of *The Hobbit* is unique from many other kinds of children’s poetry in that it is part of a larger narrative, rather than a collection of separate, disjointed poems in an anthology. They provide rhythm and variety to the tale, and provide examples of the speech, customs, and behavior of the cultures that create it. Young readers can have the opportunity to observe these differences, extending these stylistic motifs in the tunes to the physical appearance and behavior of each race as they imagine Elves, Dwarves, Orcs and Hobbits singing.

Discussion ideas for teachers, parents, and students:

Read contrasting examples of poetry aloud. Discuss how the sound of the language that a person uses can affect how we think about that character’s behavior and personality. Does the language we use in our everyday behavior reflect this way upon us?

What words sound smooth and elegant? What words sound rough and clunky? How can these words be used in poems and songs to create different feelings?

Describe the differences in language between Elves, Orcs, Dwarves, and Hobbits. What does the language and word choice say about what is important and unimportant to each culture?

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