J.R.R. Tolkien was revolutionary in terms of fantasy fiction. After *The Lord of the Rings* was first published in 1954, it took the world by storm, and many more fantasy works followed. However, despite their immense and enduring popularity, Tolkien’s fantasy works are at their very core, racist. This flaw in Tolkien’s most famous works, *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, is one found in many works in the fantasy genre. Even today, many ethnic readers of fantasy complain about both the lack of diversity as well as by the representation of the diversity that is included (Young). In Middle-earth, races, such as the Elves, are inherently good, or are inherently bad, like the Orcs. In *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, specifically, different races are not simply different, but are placed on a hierarchy in which some are clearly superior to others. More damning is that those races at the lower rungs of Tolkien’s hierarchy are given the physical characteristics of existing races in the real world, specifically African and Mongol. In addition representing each specific race in a stereotypical way, Tolkien places these races within a hierarchy that reinforce a strict dichotomy between good and evil, beautiful and ugly, strong and weak, etc. *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* are works that cater directly to young readers. Young readers who are drawn to these works thus enter into a world in which racism and ethnocentrism are normalized. Tolkien’s racism and ethnocentrism trains millions of young adults that read his novels or watch the film adaptation to associate good with one race and bad with another. And yet, even with these associations, many adults, who might chafe against racism and ethnocentrism, turn a blind eye to it because of their fondness instilled in childhood for
Tolkien. “Tolkien establishes elaborate hierarchies based upon bloodlines and familial heritage among and within the races of Elves, Men, Dwarves, and Hobbits, not to mention in distinguishing them from the ‘evil’ races of Orcs, Trolls, Dragons, and so on” (Tally 5). It is clear that Aragorn and the Gondorians are the preferential race among humans while the Southrons and Easterlings were much worse than the average human. Tolkien’s racist depiction of both the ‘good’ races and the ‘bad’ races is problematic and hints at deeper issues of race in Middle-earth. His representation of the non-white human races as inferior to the white human races also interjects racist undertones into his beloved works. These racist undertones condition young readers as well as adults who love and read The Lord of the Rings to absorb Tolkien’s racist views.

Orcs and Elves

Tolkien’s Orcs are the ultimate enemy in The Lord of the Rings. As a race they are evil creatures who kill without thinking and mindlessly serve the sorcerer, Sauron. “The Orcs are a black mass that doesn’t speak the languages and are desecrating the cathedrals” (Rearick 865). Orcs are clearly evil and stupid in Middle-earth, but these are not their only characteristics. Not only are Orcs evil, but they are incapable of anything more or less than evil. The entire race can be categorized as flat characters. In battle, Orcs have no drive for anything other than slaying as many of the enemy as possible. They slay hundreds in disregard for their lives and the lives of their brethren. In the battle with the Gondorians and Rohirrim, when all is lost for the forces of Sauron, the Easterlings and Southrons flee for their lives. However, the Orcs are much too stupid for that. In complete indifference to their own lives, they continue to fight and to kill. Parallel to this, the armies of ‘good,’ the armies of the alliance, continue to brutally slay the Orcs. Tolkien does not consider these Orcs worthy of sympathy. Additionally, Tolkien depicts them as consumed with bloodlust so strong they willingly risk their lives to satisfy it. One Orc says to Pippin when Merry and Pippin are
captive of a band of Orcs, “‘If I’d have my way, you’d wish you were dead now . . . I’d make you squeak, you miserable rat.’ . . . He had a black knife with a long jagged blade in his hand.

‘Lie quiet, or I’ll tickle you with this’” (II.III.47). The Orc wishes to be able to kill Pippin for pleasure and hopes for an opportunity to do so. In the final battle, the Alliance begins to take hostage, rather than kill, humans who put down their weapons. They show no such kindness to the Orcs. Sam, a Hobbit, shows compassion for a slain Southron that was killed while running away. “He wondered what the man’s name was and where he came from; and if he was really evil at heart, or what lies or threats had led him on his long march from home; and if he would not rather stayed there in peace” (Tolkien, IV.IV.661). Sam can envision this man’s life outside of war and even has sympathy for him. This empathy would not have been a stretch for Tolkien, a veteran of World War I. He might have had these exact feelings of sympathy for his German opponents. However, Sam’s compassion is not the issue; the focus of that compassion is the issue because Sam understandingly feels empathy for the Southron man, but he is able to watch thousands of Orcs cut down and feels nothing. “Orcs in Tolkien’s world are not viewed as a subordinate or inferior race of humans, but as entirely inhuman” (Tally 6). Orcs, as subhuman, do not arouse any sympathy because Tolkien views them as completely unworthy of sympathy and depicts them as incapably of extending it to others.

Significantly, Orcs are a very real representation of a specific human race. In The Two Towers, Orcs are described as a “grim, dark band . . . swart, slant-eyed.” The description is really a monstrous description of one of Asian lineage. In this way, Tolkien is aligning this terrible race of Orcs, with no redeemable qualities, to the very real race of Asians, and in particular, Mongolians. In one of Tolkien’s letters, he wrote:

The Orcs are definitely stated to be corruptions of the human form seen in Elves and Men. They are squat, broad, flat-nosed, sallow-skinned, with wide
mouths and slant eyes: in fact degraded and repulsive versions of the (to Europeans) least lovely Mongol-types (Letters 274).

J.R.R. Tolkien’s letter speaks for itself. Not only are Orcs corrupted versions of the perfect Elves, or near-perfect humans, but Tolkien consciously compares them to ‘Mongol-types’ to appeal to his own and fellow European prejudices against their race. It would be less problematic that Tolkien relates the Orcs to the Mongolians if the Orcs had some favorable qualities. However, as Helen Young states in her article, “Diversity and Difference: Cosmopolitanism and The Lord of the Rings,” “Orcs cannot be considered in the same way as the other species; they were specifically created for malicious purposes” (para. 23). The “malicious purposes” the author refers to are the fact that the Orcs were created by Tolkien to be puppets of evil. Orcs first appear in Middle-earth after Melkor, the first Dark Lord and master of Sauron, created them to serve his will. In her essay, Young dissects the different species in Tolkien’s Middle-earth, arguing that Tolkien places the Orcs in a completely different category because they were created for no other purpose than as malevolent puppets of Sauron. These evil puppets are compared, by the author himself, to the very real race of Mongolians. In Tolkien’s mind, Mongolians, like the Orcs, are evil, ugly, will-doing puppets of bigger and better players.

It is important to mention here that Tolkien was a devote Catholic as well as an expert of medieval romances. This may seem simply an interesting tidbit rather than relevant to my central argument, but these two facts may explain Tolkien’s seeming hatred towards Mongols. “Moreover, the romances that Tolkien knew so well were written during and after the time of the Crusades and commonly featured Saracens - Islamic peoples of the Middle East, North Africa, and Spain – as the enemy” (Young para. 26). Tolkien may have seen it as his Catholic duty to present the enemy in the same light as the enemies in the medieval romances he studied. Muslims have been the ‘enemies’ of Christians for centuries. Tolkien
was simply inserting that cultural bias common amongst his peers into his novels. C.S. Lewis, another expert on medieval works of literature, was a good friend of Tolkien’s. In time, Tolkien helped convert Lewis to Catholicism. It is well know that Catholic theology influenced C.S. Lewis’s greatest work, *The Chronicles of Narnia*. This influence can be traced back to Tolkien’s friendship and encouragement of Lewis to convert. Both *The Chronicles of Narnia* and *The Lord of the Rings* use Catholic theology as a base of their works. In *The Chronicles of Narnia*, Lewis uses allegories and symbolism of Christianity in his books. Tolkien used his faith differently. Rather than having his faith show overtly through his works, he created Middle-earth as an act of divine praise. While Lewis and Tolkien showed their faith differently, they both let Christianity influence their work. Because of this, both authors have the ancient Christian enemies, the Muslims as the enemy. Tolkien’s devout Catholicism and his tendency to encourage others to join his way of thinking explain Tolkien’s apparent hatred of “Mongol-types” as he so eloquently put it.

On the other end of the spectrum or good and evil are the Elves. Elves are clearly the favored race in *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. The Elves are the superior race in Middle-earth, and all character seems to accept this. In fact, it is confirmed by many characters. The Hobbits as well as Gandalf himself are in awe of these amazing Elves. In Niels Werber’s essay on geo- and biopolitics of Middle-earth, he writes, “The races are either hereditarily good and wise like the Elves or genetically evil and dumb like Orcs, and therefore they make ‘natural-born’ enemies” (228). Elves are the complete opposite of Orcs. They are all light and goodness where the Orcs are dark and evil. Tolkien draws on the historical binary that associates light with virtue from dark and evil. He also drew heavily on medieval works, *Beowulf*, in particular. Tolkien uses light in such a manner “so that light is constantly related to goodness, divinity, and creation, while the absence of light is associated with evil and sterility” (Lionarons, para. 2). In every way, the Elves are good and light. Galadriel, the Lady
of Lothlorien, is the quintessential female, and her name even directly translates into “lady of light,” in Sindarin, one of Tolkien’s Elvish languages. When the Fellowship first meets Lady Galadriel and Lord Celeborn, the description fits the ideas of good, light, and intelligence.

They were clad wholly in white; and the hair of the Lady was of deep gold, and the hair of Lord Celeborn was of silver, long and bright; but no sign of age was upon them, unless it in the depths of their eyes; for these were keen as lances in the starlight, and yet profound, the wells of deep memory (I.II.465).

They are not only the most powerful race, with the ability to wield some sort of mysterious magic, but they are also the most beautiful, intelligent, and they have the ability to live and die as and when they choose. Elves are not subject to the ugly and often brutal death of mortals; they choose to leave Middle-earth gracefully on a ship to the Grey Havens, the Elf version of heaven. The Elves exist on a pedestal that no other race can reach.

One of Tolkien’s passions throughout life was language. He knew four languages before he reached high school, and he invented a couple of languages before he was a teenager. By the end of his career, he invented at least twelve more. In his adult life, he served as an assistant editor on the Oxford English Dictionary (Stanton 5). It is arguable that at its core, The Lord of the Rings is about language. When analyzing the languages that appear in The Lord of the Rings, it is clear that they follow the same rules as light and dark in Tolkien literature. Elvish is graceful and melodious while Orkish, or Black Speech, is unforgiving and guttural. There are many different Elvish tongues, but Sindarin is the most common. “Lasto beth lammen!” is an Elvish phrase that means, “Listen to the words of my tongue.” It is meant to be pronounced in a singsong voice, and is framed after the Romantic Languages. Elvish is created to sound pleasing more so than Orkish or even Common Speech (English). At one point, Legolas the Elf says, “[The song] is a fair song in our woodland
tongue; but this is how it runs in [Common Speech]” (I.II.444). Legolas is insinuating here that the song he is about to perform is much less beautiful in Common Speech than it is in Elvish, a language that is created for its beauty. On the other hand, Orkish sound harshs, very much like the guttural, Anglo-Saxon and Germanic languages Tolkien was an expert in. One phrase used by an Orc in *The Two Towers* is left untranslated; however this phrase was used by an Orc to express contempt at carrying the Hobbit prisoners of Merry and Pippin. “Uglúk u bagronk sha pushdug Saruman-glob búb-hosh skai” (II.III.47). This guttural, ugly sounding phrase is full of anger. Pippin thinks even when the Orcs use Common Speech, it is still unpleasing to the ear. “[He spoke to Pippin in Common Speech] which he made almost as hideous as his own language” (II.III.47). Tolkien uses language to convey aesthetic worth in the same way he uses beauty and knowledge.

The relationship between great moral worth and beauty of speech is implicitly casual: the Elves have done and suffered much in the long ages of Middle-earth; they have acquired wisdom and nobility and poetry, and thus their languages have developed into instruments of great expressiveness. The Orcs, twisted creatures made in the dark, have no more intelligence than cunning amounts to, and are brutal and treacherous to boot; their grating tongue expresses these qualities (Stanton 5).

It is not merely appearances that determine whether a creature represents good or evil; each group’s language is a representation of their moral worth. The Elves are full of light, beauty, intelligence, and their language reflects this. It is notable that Tolkien gave the Elves such a beautiful language while at the same time gave the Orcs such a harsh-sounding one. Tolkien did not just make the Elves better than the Orcs in their abilities, appearance, and moral capacities, but also in language.
While Tolkien gives each race distinct, determining physical characteristics, he also employs class-based hierarchies. Tolkien represents the nation of Gondor as the ultimate race of humans, superior in every way. The Rohirrim are next on the hierarchy. They will never be as good as Gondor because they are inferior in lineage, but they are so much better than those who sided with Sauron. Finally, there are those weak and stupid races that side with Sauron. They are lesser in all ways to Gondor and Rohan. These Southrons and Easterlings are weaker and lesser beings that cannot match up to the other races in Middle-earth. This hierarchy is based on the races’ ancestry. The Gondorians are of highest blood. They were founded by Elendil the Tall after he fled from Númenor. The Gondorians have Elvish blood that traces back to Elendil and the land of Númenor. Rohan is a rung lower on Tolkien’s hierarchy because they do not have any Elvish blood like the Gondorians. While Rohan lacked Elvish blood, they were still a good and mighty race in Middle-earth. The Complete Tolkien Companion explains them as such,

The Rohirrim were a Northern race, whose arrival in the southlands had proved fortunate for Gondor on one conspicuous occasion, and the ‘Riders of Rohan’ were spoken of with admiration and a good deal of respect: for the horses of Rohan were the finest then to be found in Middle-earth, and their riders were fully their match (Tyler 540).

The Southrons or Haradrim lived in the land of Harad. These people, along with the Easterlings, sided with Sauron in the War of the Ring and occupied the lowest rung of the hierarchy of humans in Tolkien’s world. The Southrons were divided into tribes and were a fierce, belligerent people. The Southrons had a history of fighting with Gondorians over land. They have dark skin, hair, and eyes, and they are even, on occasion, referred to as the Black
Númenoreans (Tyler 308). Easterlings lived in the lands east of Gondor. They also had a history of warring with Gondor. They were traditionally a nation who lived in tribes and migrated. The Easterlings typically have dark, straight hair, dark eyes, and brown skin.

Tolkien’s hierarchy of humans is quite easy to understand once the history of people is explained, even slightly. Gondor is the best nation because they have some Elvish blood in them. Elves are the quintessential race in Middle-earth so it follows that humans with an Elvish heritage would be the quintessential humans. Rohan is the next favored race because although they do not have any Elvish blood, they are a race with many redeemable qualities, but even more than that, they are a race that made the correct decision and became allies with Gondor. Both the Easterlings and Southrons are the worst race because they have both been enemies of Gondor for centuries. They are primitive, warlike races who live in tribes and migrate. They also side with Sauron in the war. The color of their skin also has something to do with their low social standing. Tolkien’s hierarchy has everything to do with bloodlines and history. The history is complicated, but the result is not. In Middle-earth, some races are clearly superior to others.

Eugenics is embedded in Tolkien’s work. Eugenics was a popular theory in the early 20th century when Tolkien was writing The Lord of the Rings. Defined by the Oxford Dictionary eugenics is, “the science of improving a human population by controlled breeding to increase the occurrence of desirable heritable characteristics.” This idea was becoming quite popular while Tolkien was writing in the early 20th century and was adopted by Nazi Germany in the 1930s. From 1932-1934 the Britain government even created a committee, called the Brock Committee to discuss the issue of eugenics and propose policies to the government. They discussed all issues surrounding eugenics and even the sterilization of ‘feeble-minded’ citizens (King & Hansen 79). The Oxford Dictionary goes on to say, “Developed largely by Francis Galton as a method of improving the human race, it fell into
disfavor only after the perversion of its doctrines by the Nazis.” In his letters, Tolkien adamantly denounces Nazi Germany’s stance on eugenics, but he seems to object to the Nazi Regime’s obliteration of the Jews rather than the core of eugenics in general. Tolkien’s response to a German editor makes it clear that he had no hatred for Jewish people.

Thank you for your letter... I regret that I am not clear as to what you intend by ariech. I am not of Aryan extraction: that is Indo-Iranian; as far as I am aware none of my ancestors spoke Hindustani, Persian, Gypsy, or any related dialects. But if I am to understand that you are enquiring whether I am of Jewish origin, I can only reply that I regret that I appear to have no ancestors of that gifted people (Letters 30).

Tolkien may have been using the “perverted” version of eugenics associated with Nazi Germany; however, he clearly presents some races in Middle-earth as superior to others. “The fellowship is portrayed as über-Aryan, very white and there is the notion that they are a vanishing group under the advent of the other evil ethnic groups” (Werber 865). The Fellowship, or the Alliance, of the free people of Middle-earth is a very white alliance that fights against the dark-skinned ‘other.’ The Alliance of the free people of Middle-earth include the Gondorians, a white people, the Rohirrim, also white, the Elves who are constantly described as white throughout all of Tolkien’s works, and a few Hobbits and Dwarves who are both white. In contrast, the forces of Sauron consist of the black mass of Orcs, the Easterlings, a human race that has many characteristics of Asian people, and the Southrons, a human race that is similar to Africans. Smeagol, one antagonist in The Lord of the Rings and The Hobbit says of the Southrons, “Not nice; very cruel wicked Men they look. Almost as bad as Orcs, and much bigger” (IV.III.68). Even Smeagol can see that the Southrons are evil, not as bad as Orcs, but still evil. Clearly, the races and people of the Alliance are superior to the forces of Sauron in The Lord of the Rings. While the theory of
eugenics that informs *The Lord of the Rings* may not have been unusual when he wrote, today’s readers can recognize how it adds to an already problematic representation of race.

For example, the Gondorians are the ultimate race in *The Lord of the Rings*. They are entrusted with the duty of protecting the rest of Middle-earth from Sauron’s dark power. Once, they were the mightiest of all the nations, and other nations looked to them for guidance, but now, they are diminished to a mere shadow of what they once were.

After the first war with Sauron, their king and his kin went into hiding because it was prophesied that only one of the King Isildur’s line could lead Gondor to victory. Thus, now Gondor is king-less, money-less, and almost hopeless. However, despite all these flaws, Gondor is still the mightiest country of men in Middle-earth. Gondor was founded by Isildur and Anárion, brothers, sons of Elendil, and exiles from Númenor. To one unfamiliar with Middle-earth, these are just a list of names, but in Middle-earth, these are the names of the highest pedigree. Elendil was an Elf, and it is his lineage that sat on the throne of Gondor for centuries. Gondorians are of the highest pedigree, and their kings of even higher pedigree.

When it is discovered that one of the Fellowship of the Ring, Aragorn, is a descendent of Elendil, it is expected that he should rise to reclaim the empty throne of Gondor. He is of Elvish blood, he practices some sort of magic (due in part to his Elvish heritage), and he is clearly a leader; he has proven as much with his travels with the Fellowship. Niels Werber, a German literature, media and cultural studies scholar and professor, states it like this,

“Aragorn is a super-human of purest blood and a born leader? Well, he should reign as a king and wipe the maggot folk of subhuman creatures out of Middle-earth. That’s quite natural isn’t it?” (Werber 229). Aragorn is a leader and Tolkien presents his rise to the throne as the obvious consequence of his superior bloodline. Aragorn has led the Fellowship all over Middle-earth, he has presented bold and successful war strategies multiple times, he successfully brought together individuals of all different heritages and races, and he fought in
multiple battles. However, through Tolkien’s eyes, Aragorn does not rise to the throne because of all his accomplishments, but rather, because it is his birthright. “To return from exile as victorious, for instance, is Aragorn’s fate because it is his heritage, passed down from his ancestors to him through thousands of years of strict intra-ethnic, ‘pure’ breeding” (230). Tolkien does not seem to value Aragorn’s accomplishments so much as the purity of his bloodline.

Rohan, the country that lies to the north of Gondor, can be seen as the ‘average’ in terms of eugenics. They are known as the Rohirrim, or ‘horse-lords’ to the people of Gondor, but they call themselves Eorlingas after their first king, Eorl the Young. They have been the greatest allies of the Gondorians for generations. The Rohirrim are not descendants of Elves, but rather, they are from the line of the Northmen, who are believed to be descendants of the Edain who crossed into Middle-earth in the First Age. The Rohirrim are mostly thought of as Middle Men. They are not like Gondor, but they did not side with Sauron either. In The Two Towers, Aragorn describes the Rohirrim as such, “They are proud and willful, but they are true-hearted, generous in thought and deed; bold but not cruel; wise but unlearned, writing no books but singing many songs, after the manner of the children of Men before the Dark Years” (II.III.28). It is clear in this passage that Aragorn respects the people of Rohan in spite of their being child-like and "unlearned," but they are not seen as equal to the men of Gondor. They are good, kind, intelligent, and good allies, but they lack the ability to be all that Gondor can be. Tolkien makes Rohan Gondor’s sidekick, the Robin to Gondor’s Batman. The Rohirrim are the result of inferior breeding and therefore they have inferior intellect and substandard physicality. Rohan is a helpful ally to Gondor, but not one to be feared. The Rohirrim come riding in on their magnificent horses to assist, but it is Gondor and Aragorn who get the glory. It is Aragorn who ascends to the throne and rebuilds his wonderful country
while Rohan exists only as an ally. Tolkien gives Gondor a higher social status than Rohan simply because of their differing heritages.

The Gondorians are the favored human race, and the Rohirrim are considered the ‘middle’ race, but neither are the only human races in Middle-earth. Many groups of humans sided with Sauron in the War of the Ring. A few of these are the Easterlings, Southrons (or Haradrim), and Dunlendings. Tolkien treats these races with disdain. They are quite inferior to both the Rohirrim and the Gondorians because they succumb to Sauron’s dark force and sided with him in the war. Eugenics in The Lord of the Rings is apparent once again in the case of the Easterlings and the Southrons. While they are inferior in many ways to the other races of men, they are still regarded in a higher sense than the Orcs as seen through Sam’s eyes for the slain Southron in The Two Towers.

It was Sam’s first view of a battle of Men against Men, and he did not like it much. He was glad that he could not see the dead face. He wondered what the man’s name was and where he came from; and if he was really evil at heart, or what lies or threats had led him on his long march from home; and if he would have not rather stayed there in peace (II.IV.332)

This slain Southron man receives neither the sympathy nor rights that a man from Rohan or Gondor would, but he is still seen as mostly human, and his death generates some remorse. The Orcs are never granted that honor. When all is lost for the armies of Sauron in the final battle, the Fellowship army begins to take some prisoners of the Southrons and Easterlings. This is not the case with the Orcs. Orcs continue to be slain in cold blood. While the races of men that joined Sauron such as the Southrons and Easterlings, are seen as inferior to the Gondorians and Rohirrim, they are still more highly regarded than the Orcs.
The most problematic issue with the Southrons and Easterlings, however, is once again Tolkien’s depiction. The Southrons are a race of tall, dark-skinned people with dark eyes and black hair. They are described as primitive and aggressive. In battle, they are decorated in golden earrings and collars. To the Hobbits’ continual amazement, they ride giant Oliphaunts, described as similar to giant primitive elephants, to battle. The Complete Tolkien Companion says about the Southrons, “Their soldiers were armed with spear and shield, helm and scimitar, all adorned with gold and much ornament. They were also reportedly darker-skinned than the Dúnedain of Gondor” (308). It is not difficult to envision this warrior. Tolkien is clearly envisioning and describing one of African descent. The very real, tall, dark-skinned people, who are geographically placed south of Tolkien’s home, England, are evidently the inspiration for the Southrons of Middle-earth. Subsequently, the Easterlings are described in a way that is eerily similar to another human race of Tolkien’s world. Easterlings are described as having sallow skin, dark eyes, and long, black, straight hair. The Easterlings could be nearly interchangeable with Asian people. Again, Asia is east of England. Tolkien did not have to stretch his linguistic skills to create a name for the Easterlings who have the same characteristics of Asians. Tolkien uses two very real ethnicities to base his inferior humans on while his superior races of Gondor and Rohan are based on Europeans. “Yellow is their hair, and bright are their spears. Their leader is very tall” (II.III.27). The descriptions of the Easterlings and Southrons aligning with Asian and African descriptions, along with their status as the inferior races in Middle-earth are troubling in many ways. It seems as if Tolkien sees the races that the Easterlings and Southrons represent as being inferior to the race the Gondorians and Rohirrim represent.

Some critics argue that Tolkien’s novels do not embody or normalize racism. However, their arguments are flawed. First, the main argument against Tolkien’s racism is that the Fellowship is the very definition of interracial alliance since the races work together
to defeat evil. Elves, humans, Dwarves, Hobbits, and Wizards come together to vanquish the forces of Sauron. “Inter-group and inter-species cooperation gives The Lord of the Rings a strong flavor of diversity” (Young para. 9). It is also argued that The Lord of the Rings is not racist, “it provides a model of society in which common ground and a united purpose not only allow diversity, but require it” (Young para. 4). However, these arguments ignore the ‘other’ in Middle-earth; there are many races in Middle-earth that are not a part of the Fellowship. The argument focuses on the success of the Fellowship rather than the alliance under Sauron. Sauron’s army was also one in which different races unite to fight. There were men, Orcs, Trolls, and the half-men, half-Orc creation, Uruk-hai. Young, however, does not deny racism evident in Tolkien’s representation of the Orcs.

Orcs cannot be considered in the same way as the other species of Middle-earth; they were specifically created for malicious purposes and are, when they appear in The Lord of the Rings, under the domination of Sauron’s malevolent will (para. 23).

Young suggests that because of Sauron’s domination of the Orcs, they cannot be viewed in the same light as the rest of the races in The Lord of the Rings because they are dominated by Sauron. Young completely overlooks the fact that the Easterlings and Southrons are also “under the domination of Sauron’s malevolent will.” In all these cases, readers cannot get a full sense of these races due to Sauron’s control. Tolkien’s works can be seen as racist due to the treatment, representation, and negligence or the races that serve Sauron.

Why It Matters

Tolkien is arguably one of the most influential fantasy authors of the twentieth century. The Lord of the Rings has been translated into dozens of different languages, sold over 50 million copies and been read by over 100 million people (Barker & Marthijs 3). That
figure does not even take into account the number of people who have watched the films but not read the books. *The Lord of the Rings* has affected so many people. The initial success of Tolkien took the world by storm. People quickly became obsessed with *The Lord of the Rings*. Multiple groups were formed in the 1960s to analyze the books. A group called the Tolkien Society began publishing the *Tolkien Journal*. A journal called *Mythlore* also has numerous articles devoted to the world of Middle-earth. The obsession with Tolkien’s works only continues and grew. This is in part due to the fact that the fantasy genre has been the dominant form of media in the past century both literary and, in more recent years, cinematic forms. Three of the top seven films that have grossed over $800,000,000 worldwide were fantasy films. These films were *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*, *Spiderman*, and *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (Thompson). This popularity is not all good; the racism found in Tolkien is not reserved to Tolkien’s works; it is a flaw found in many works of fantasy. “A common perception is that most fantasy, like its sister genre, science fiction, rarely addresses issues of racism and that minority readers are often not interested in it because it generally play lip service at best to such questions” (Young para. 2). Many fantastical works just brush off accusations of racism while the works blatantly confirm racist tendencies. Other novels that have racism are the *Artemis Fowl* series, the *Inheritance Cycle*, and the *Harry Potter* series. In all these series, the different races at the very least have false prejudices against each other, and at the most, hate each other. There are even fantasy movies that are racist. *Avatar*, *Men in Black*, and *X-Men* each have instances where one race is prejudice to another. Tolkien as one of the forerunners of modern fantasy is partially to blame for this.

Significantly, *The Lord of the Rings* is primarily a series read by young adults. The young adults may absorb racist tendencies in Tolkien’s works oftentimes without being aware
they are doing so. They might even begin to believe just as Tolkien does that dark is bad and light is good. One review of *The Lord of the Rings* after it was published put it like this,

This is not a work that many adults will read right through more than once; though even a single reading will not be quickly forgotten. In the schoolroom it may be read more avidly, perhaps again and again. If that comes to pass its influence will be immeasurable (Hall 12).

This review proved to be almost prophetic. The immense popularity of Tolkien among young people has guaranteed that his influence last generations. Then, *The Lord of the Rings* films have ensured that a new generation of readers continues to read these long and complicated texts. Some new editions of the book have a cover based on the movie to grasp the attention of this new readership. In a recent study done to see what young adults were reading, *The Hobbit* was the only novel that appeared on the list through the decades. What’s more, Tolkien is the second most read author of adolescents, behind J.K. Rowling. Both boys and girls read Tolkien. He is the second most popular author for boys and third most popular for girls. This is particularly interesting because the majority of the authors on the list were recent authors. Tolkien was published 75 years ago, a full generation before these adolescents were even born. Tolkien’s ideologies and works span generations, countries, and languages. Because Tolkien’s works have reached wide and far, and in particular, to young adults, we must be careful in making him a hero. His works are laced with racism as well as sexism and even lookism. Middle-earth is a man’s world where the attractive, white men are the superior characters in every way. Young adults must be made to think about the issues apparent in his works rather than to just take them as they are.

The racism in Tolkien’s novels negatively affects readers no matter what their race. A recent study published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, shows the
correlation of racism and substance abuse and the lack of self-control. Young adults who perceive they are discriminated are much more likely to turn to substance use. They are also more likely to lose self-control (Gibbons et al.). The study suggests that this is because an adolescent’s first response to racism is anger and hostility. This often escalates over time into substance abuse. Another study published in the *American Journal of Public Health*, demonstrates that racism influences health inequities. They state, “From crib to coffin, race is invented, recorded, and reported. The classification of people’s race on their birth certificates, college applications, medical charts, and death certificates highlights the central role of racial stratification in US society” (Gee et al. para. 2). Race affects so many aspects of an adolescent’s life. It can affect their education, employment, health, stress levels, and even life expectancy (Gee et al.). Racism is a very real aspect of many adolescents’ lives. They see and face it every day. The racism evident in Tolkien’s novels merely reinforces what racism minority readers face every day. For white readers of Tolkien, the racism is harmful as well. These young readers are unknowingly absorbing Tolkien’s racism. They may live out the racism they have observed in *The Lord of the Rings* without even knowing they are doing so. It is important for the racism in Tolkien’s works to be unmasked so adolescents reading *The Lord of the Rings* can be aware of the affect this racism has. It is potentially harmful to adolescents who read Tolkien without first confronting the racism laced throughout his works.

Tolkien very much was the writer of a century; authors in the fantasy genre, and debatably in other genres, cannot escape Tolkien’s influence. His novels, followed by the movies that were inspired by the novels, have been enjoyed by many. Tolkien’s works have spanned three generations. However, racism has a major role in his works. Tolkien’s Orcs in particular are considered as the scum of Middle-earth. They are evil puppets of the sorcerer, Sauron, with next to no redeemable qualities. What is worse, Tolkien even compares them in
one of his personal letters to “Mongol-types.” One the other hand is the Elves. These Elves are all light and beauty. They are intelligent and near perfect. Elves have blonde hair, are tall, and can be described as über-Aryan. Also, the races of humans are placed in a hierarchy. The Gondorians, with Aragorn as their leader, are the highest race of humans. Long distant relatives of the Elves, they are the elite human race. Next, the Rohirrim are good humans, but ultimately nothing more than a good ally to Gondor. They are described by Aragorn himself as “wise, but unlearned,” suggesting that they have potential, but have yet to reach it. Both the Gondorians and Rohirrim are described as European looking. Finally, the Easterlings and Southrons are the races that are on the lowest rung of the hierarchy. They are evil, once again servants of Sauron, like the Orcs. However, unlike the Orcs, they seem to have some freewill, and even receive sympathy from the other races in Middle-earth. The Easterlings are clearly described by Tolkien as a race like Asians, specifically, Mongols. The Southrons are decidedly similar to Africans. Conveniently, Asia is located east of Europe, and Africa is located south of Europe. Tolkien got inspiration for both their appearance and names from very real people. While Tolkien is unarguably one of the most influential and widely read authors of the past 75 years, one should be hesitant to put him on a pedestal due to the unabashed racism evident in his novels.
Works Cited


