

# Reconciliation with the past in Tolkien's ring trilogy



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Reconciliation with the past is a major theme throughout Tolkien's trilogy, and the gap between the powerful, undying beings of the past and the mortal men of the present and future is starkly evident when the characteristics of the ancient domains are held up against the kingdoms of men. In the first book of *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien creates a rhythmic fluctuation between pleasure and disquietude, which gives the novel an almost serial quality as the characters go back and forth from imminent danger to homely safety. As the story progresses beyond the breaking of the Fellowship in the next two novels, however, the distinction between peril and safety becomes increasingly blurred. The havens of western Middle Earth described in *The Fellowship of the Ring* are maintained by ancient, well-established beings like Tom Bombadil, Elrond and Galadriel whose power is strong within their own respective lands, but these figures of the past are only remnants of a dying age. Bombadil is at the extremity of natural history while Elrond and Galadriel represent the original adversaries of the Enemy, and the preeminence of all three, especially the elves, is destined to fade with the coming of the Fourth Age, the Age of Man. When the Fellowship is intact, the elder havens that provide respite from their perilous journey are undisputed strongholds which no evil can penetrate, but the bastions farther east that the broken Fellowship encounters are much more unstable and guarded by mortal men rather than the ancient, powerful beings. At this point, the story enters fully into the world of men, where elves are viewed with suspicion and the balance between good and evil is in perpetual physical contention. The two great kingdoms of mankind, Gondor and Rohan, are susceptible to the evil powers of Middle Earth as their rulers, Denethor and Theoden, are indirectly influenced by Sauron and Saruman respectively.

Compared to the Eden-like Lorien and Rivendell, “the Last Homely House east of the Sea,” (I, 272) the bastions of man seem pitiful, but they are to be the bulwarks of the new age. The relative inactivity of the archaic guardians is indicative of the fact that the past must be left behind so that the men of the future can forge ahead unfettered by atavistic nostalgia. Tom Bombadil is the self-proclaimed eldest denizen of Middle Earth, “Mark my words my friends: Tom was here before the river and the trees; Tom remembers the first raindrop and the first acorn,” (I, 168) and his power is demonstrated by his ability to compel Old Man Willow to release the hobbits and the fact that he is unaffected by the Ring. At the Council of Elrond, Gandalf explains that Tom’s unique place in history does not give him power over the Ring, it is just that, “the Ring has no power over him,” (I, 318). Since Tom existed before the forging of the Ring, and even before Sauron himself, he is essentially a remnant of a long forgotten past. Even Elrond must jog his memory to recall the many names of the cheery creature who never took part in the wars against the Enemy. Bombadil provides an element to the story that goes back farther than the Elder Days, and he is, therefore, not an active participant in the War of the Ring, as he only helps the four hobbits while they are within the borders of his land. After Tom leaves the hobbits, they find themselves pursued by the Nine Riders, and protection from this danger comes at Rivendell, which is protected by the aged half-elven Elrond. Elrond, who is one of the select few beings to have faced Sauron directly, is ancient by any mortal measure, but he is not primeval like Bombadil. Having already taken part in a physical assault on Mordor in the Second Age, Elrond’s place in the War of the Ring is as an advisor, not a fighter. His years on Middle Earth have given him a Ring of Power and the ability to maintain a

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bastion against evil in the shadow of the Misty Mountains, but his power beyond his domain goes only in the form of advice. Despite his extensive wisdom and prowess, when asked if he or any of the other Elf-lords have the strength to withstand Sauron, Elrond's response is, "I have not the strength...neither have they," (I, 319). These powerful Elf-lords, who had defeated Sauron and his master in the past, are no longer able to contend with him directly, because the age of their power is passing and the future is in the hands of men and the little men as Elrond states, "This is the hour of the Shire-folk, when they arise from their quiet fields to shake the towers and counsels of the great," (I, 324). Galadriel, whose haven and power is even more lustrous than Elrond's, is still in essentially the same position as the half-elven. Tolkien's descriptions of Galadriel's Lorien on which "no shadow lay" (I, 413) make it a veritable Eden, "a timeless land that did not fade or change or fall into forgetfulness," (I, 415). Frodo's observations are not wholly accurate, however, as he himself recognizes the fact that this land is from the distant past, "it seemed to him that he had stepped over a bridge of time into a corner of the Elder Days, and was now walking in a world that was no more," (I, 413). With her ring and ancient knowledge of the Eldar, Galadriel is able to preserve the unstained glory of the forest, but the Ring-bearer's ominous perception hints at the fact that the blissful stasis of Lorien is doomed to fade with the destruction of the One Ring. Even though her power is comparable to Sauron's, Galadriel herself knows that Frodo's quest signifies the end of her forest kingdom, and she accepts this fate with dignity, "I will diminish, and go into the West, and remain Galadriel," (I, 432). After this last and greatest haven, the Fellowship breaks and the survivors go their separate routes into the precarious kingdoms of <https://assignbuster.com/reconciliation-with-the-past-in-tolkiens-ring-trilogy/>

men. A noble kingdom over 500 years old, Rohan has endured for a long time in the eyes of men, while to elves like Legolas it has been "but a little while," (II, 132). Although Wormtongue impedes the muster of the Riders of Rohan, once Theoden's army is fully mobilized, it is a force to be reckoned with and probably outclasses any other army of men besides that of Gondor. From the vantage of the ancient elves, a culture and kingdom were established only a short while ago that gained ascendancy almost immediately. The slow progression of elvish time is already giving way to the short lives and generations of mankind. With a powerful army, Theoden is able to hold Helm's Deep against Saruman's larger army, but the mortal man is unable to bar evil from his kingdom like Bombadil and the Elf-lords. Men, who are destined to rule Middle Earth with the passing of the elves, cannot isolate themselves like the ancient beings and must directly face the elements of their environment be they good or evil. While Rohan is young in elvish time, the men of Gondor can trace their lineage back to the Numenoreans at the beginning of the Second Age, which precedes the initial forging of the Rings of Power. When Pippin first sees the inner circles of Minas Tirith, he is overawed by its splendor, but the impressionable hobbit does not realize that the city is depopulated and "in truth falling year by year into decay," (III, 25). The men of Gondor, under the shadow of Sauron's growing power, desperately cling to their noble past and heritage that is now in the ancient past. Faramir expresses his own patriotism with nostalgia for the past, "I would see the White Tree in flower again in the courts of the kings, and the Silver Crown return...The city of the men of Numenor...I would have loved her for her memory, her ancientry, her beauty," (II, 331).

Unfortunately, the truth of the matter is that Gondor will never be what it

once was, because the past is irrecoverable, and as Gandalf says, "Whatever betides, you have come to the end of the Gondor that you have known," (III, 24). Since the memory of Numenor reaches almost as far back as the Elder Days, it is doomed to fade with the passing of the other ancient elements and beings of Middle Earth. The Numenoreans were the last men to form an alliance with the elves, and this close relationship ties the fate of the men of Westeros in with this archaic race. Although Aragorn plants a new sapling from the White Tree and brings glory to Gondor with his kingship and victory over Sauron, it is a glory of the present triumph over evil, not a longing for the grandeur of the past. The reign of King Elessar stretches across Middle Earth with an overarching influence that had not existed in the past. Soldiers of Gondor and Rohan protect previously dangerous roads, and the two kingdoms themselves form an alliance that was impossible in the suspicious environment of the past. As a further sign of the changing times, Galadriel, Celeborn and Elrond leave their dominions for the first time in an Age in order to greet the new king. Aragorn is able to expand and change the nature of his kingdom, because he looks toward the future, while Bombadil, Galadriel and Elrond were simply holding on to the remains of what were once vast and powerful domains. Slowly fading and shrinking, the Old Forest, Rivendell and Lorien must give way in the end to the new, expanding kingdom of men. Even though Aragorn's kingship is ensured by his ancient heredity, the wise king does not rely on the past for legitimacy as he almost immediately begins to administer his kingdom justly, which gives him prestige through merit. As wise, benevolent beings, the Elf-lords know that their time has passed and depart from the Grey Havens into the West with quiet dignity. Remembrance of the past is important to all of the

cultures and races of Middle Earth, but an excess of nostalgia like that of Gondor before Aragorn is detrimental to the progress of the present and future. Heritage contributes to the richness of life, but one must not live in the past or else the present will be lost. Tolkien ends his epic with the future generation sitting on Sam's lap, and little Elanor Gamgee is a view of hope towards an unknown future built on the foundation of the past.