
A Sense of History "I Desired Dragons"

By Angelica

"The dragon has the trademark Of Faërie written plain upon him. In whatever world he has his being it was an Other-world. Fantasy, the making or glimpsing of Other-worlds, was the heart of the desire of Faërie. I desired dragons with a profound desire." J.R.R. Tolkien, *On Fairy-Stories* ([1](#))

And so there are many Dragons in Middle-earth: from Glaurung Father of Dragons to Smaug who chatted with Bilbo Baggins. There are many dragons in our Primary Universe too: huge or tiny, winged or wingless, spirits of good (in the East) or symbols of evil, all remarkably similar in their looks and their stories. Most human cultures have at some point or other feared, worshipped or sacrificed to dragons. Their common origin may have to do with our primeval fear of snakes and indeed dragons are usually depicted with elements of creatures that people fear: poison, fire, the stealth and speed of reptiles, the legs of lizards, the claws and wings of bats or birds of prey. Their presence is strong even in places too cold for snakes and other reptiles to be a threat: the Vikings, who might have been attacked by wolves and bears, still put dragon heads in their ships. Remarkably similar monsters are found in Aztec and Maya legends.

The first dragon story in the Western canon is about the serpent Tiamat who fought with the god Marduk in the Babylonian Creation myth and set the pattern for the successive dragon tales: the dragon, one of the forces of creation that had to be defeated by a god to symbolize the triumph of order over chaos. This conflict between dragon and dragon slayer is found in legends of countless lands: from Thor the Nordic god to saints, with St. George the favourite, all earned their reputation after overcoming a dragon.

A change in the status of dragons occurred in Greek and Roman legends: instead of being a unique monster, divine and mystical, dragons started to proliferate and became animals, strange, but not impossible and no less believable than giraffes or elephants whose descriptions were brought by traders. The dragon slayers also multiplied and heroes replaced gods in this role. By the early Middle Ages, dragons had become terrifying monsters who played a malevolent and frightening role in men's lives as heralds of damnation. These were perhaps Tolkien's inspiration for Glaurung and his breed that terrorized Elves and Men in Beleriand.

Dragons do not participate in the creation of Arda but at the end of the First Age they play a role heavy with eschatological references. When the Host of the West attacks Angband, Morgoth sends out his last weapon, winged dragons led by Ancalagon the Black who are defeated by Earendil and the eagles and thrown on to the towers of Thangorodrim. Morgoth is taken prisoner, chained with the chain Angainor and cast into the Void. These images of destruction recall St John's vision as set in the Book of Revelations, the Christian myth of the end of the world: a red dragon is defeated by St. Michael and the angels and cast out of heavens to the earth, then the Beast of the Apocalypse, another dragon, appears. St John goes on: "*...And I saw an angel come down from heaven, having the key from the bottomless pit and a great chain in his hand. And he laid hold on the dragon, that old serpent, which is the Devil and Satan, and*

bound him a thousand years and cast him into the bottomless pit, and shut him up, and set a seal on him, that he should deceive the nations no more, till a thousand years should be fulfilled." (2)

The War of Wrath as the Apocalypse, Earendil as St Michael, the eagles as angels, Morgoth as Satan: Tolkien's Christian inspiration reinforced his imagination and dragons came to play their mystical roles in Faerie in accordance with their historical models.

Works Cited

1. J.R.R. Tolkien, "On Fairy Stories" in *Tree and Leaf, Smith of Wooton Major and The Homecoming of Beorhnoth Beorhelm's Son*.
2. St. John, *The Book of Revelations*, quoted in *Dragons* by Peter Hogarth with Val Clery.

Bibliography

1. Day, David, *Il Bestiario di Tolkien*, Bompiani, Milano, 1979.
2. Hogarth, Peter with Clery, Val, *Dragons*, a Jonathan-James Book, Toronto, 1979.
3. Huxley, Francis, *The Dragon: Nature of Spirit Spirit of Nature*, Thames and Hudson, 1979.
4. Tolkien J.R.R., *The Silmarillion*, Unwin Paperbacks, London, 1979.
5. J.R.R. Tolkien, "On Fairy Stories" in *Tree and Leaf, Smith of Wooton Major and The Homecoming of Beorhnoth Beorhelm's Son*, Unwin Paperbacks, London, 1979.