

A group of World War I soldiers in khaki uniforms and helmets, some kneeling and some standing, in a field with sandbags.

# Mythopoeic Responses to the Great War: Escape, Recovery, and Consolation in the Postwar Fantasy of Lord Dunsany, J. R. R. Tolkien, and C. S. Lewis

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# Introduction: Mythopoeic Literature as an Unexpected Response to War

- The Great War as ghastly reduction of the human soldier
- Many artists questioning cultural grand narratives
- General rejection of traditional literary motifs
- Mythopoeic counter revolution: epic narrative, quest romance, mythic fantasy
- Lord Dunsany, J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis
  - Questioning postwar cynicism
  - Challenging assumptions of materialism
  - Correctives to spiritual and moral malaise

# Disillusionment and Despair Following the Great War

- The Great War as final violent break from Edwardian past
- Darkly cynical antiwar literature: fear, loathing, disillusionment, apathy, despair
- Rejection of Christianity and dismissal of belief in an omnipotent, benevolent God
- Mythopoeic writers resisting this Modernist revolution of despair
- Fantasy as antidote to Modernist dismay, philosophical disillusionment, and materialist skepticism

# Lord Dunsany: Challenging Modernist Materialism

- Military service did not alter Dunsany's literary tastes and preferences
- Comprehended the necessity of war to oppose the expansion of evil
- Myth and fantasy as constructive ways to confront disillusionment
- Engaging false dichotomy between rationalism and imagination, reason and faith, realism and fantasy
- Naturalism and materialism as reductive worldviews
- Critiquing blind faith in naturalism and materialism

# J. R. R. Tolkien: Escape vs. Escapism

- Tolkien commanded troops on the front lines
- Remained Christian through the war and throughout his academic career
- Tragedy and loss in war caused a lifelong sadness
- Wrote fragments of myths during the war laying foundation for later Middle-Earth epics
- Revolution for Tolkien meant appealing to the old, the tried, and the true which can be found and expressed in myth
- Writing against the critical stream of his day
- Importance of escape, recovery, and consolation

## C. S. Lewis: Narnia and the Evangelium of Escape

- Lewis becomes an atheist early in life—death of his mother and tutelage of William T. Kirkpatrick
- Publishes *Spirits in Bondage* (1919)—marching down road to postwar disillusionment, irony, and cynicism
- Imagination baptized by George MacDonald's *Phantastes*
- Narnia a creative product of Lewis's conversion to Christianity
- Narnia as imaginative realm of Christian evangelism

# Conclusion: Postwar Function of Mythopoeic Literature

- Postwar disillusioned writers engaging literary experimentation
- Tolkien: escape the trap of disillusionment, recover lost truths, experience consolation of eucatastrophe
- Dunsany: dissolving false dichotomies dividing faith and reason to reveal a broader epistemology to comprehend the fullness of reality
- Lewis: mythopoeic tales of spiritual awakening and Christian evangelium