

SUBCREATION: WORLD-BUILDING IN THE FANTASTIC

Issue 1 & 2

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Dennis Wilson Wise

Unraveling *The Hobbit's* Strange Publication History: A Look at Possible Worlds, Modality, and Accessibility Relations

One enduring oddity of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* is that the version of the story that made it famous, the 1937 first edition, has become a footnote to the more famous second edition. The latter edition, of course, substantially modifies the 'Riddles in the Dark' chapter where Bilbo wagers his life in a riddle contest with Gollum. While the first edition has Gollum staking his 'birthday present,' a ring of invisibility, against Bilbo's life, Tolkien realized as he wrote *The Lord of the Rings* that Gollum would never have *willingly* given up that ring. As a result, Tolkien re-wrote the chapter as an experiment, and a happy miscommunication with his publisher resulted in that new chapter transforming *The Hobbit* into a second edition. This new edition quickly achieved canonical status in Tolkien's writings, and *The Fellowship of the Ring* cleverly explains the 'erroneous' 1937 text as a ring-motivated moment of dishonesty by Bilbo. The new edition, additionally, resulted in several interpretative changes. In a classic statement on the subject, Bonniejean Christensen notes that Gollum converts "from a simply lost creature to a totally depraved one" (26). Still, it seems ironic that the first admirers of *The Hobbit* praised a version of events that would eventually become 'false'—and Christina Scull and Wayne G. Hammond make more than clear the overwhelmingly positive reception of the 1937 text. As they say, most "reviews of *The Hobbit* on its first publication welcomed it enthusiastically, not a few even immediately to the ranks of classic children's books" (Scull and Hammond, 398). Yet today critics and readers unanimously prefer the later edition over the earlier one.

For my part, I tend to favor the second edition as well. Still, motivated by *The Hobbit's* unusual publishing history, I would like to offer one major caveat. Let me introduce the caveat with a question: what should be done with the fictional world created by the 1937 text? Bilbo admits in *Fellowship* that his earlier memoirs were false, but that does not quite seem to exhaust the issue. After all, the 1937 text was construed by its readers as 'true' for seventeen years before a new generation of readers began to construe it as 'false.' It seems inappropriate to suggest that a fictional world, which is nothing but a mental construction by its readers, simply *disappears* in light of seriously delinquent new information, especially since the first edition textual world led directly to the more expansive *The Lord of the Rings* textual world. I would like to suggest in this case that the fictional world created by the first edition enjoys an ontological status on a par with the world created by the later edition. That we tend to privilege the later edition is a point of preference and history, not of logic or modality. As such,

the first edition world deserves a reading and an interpretation in its own right. This essay then is an attempt to make my caveat plausible—and my proposed solution has, I hope, some intriguing implications for the processes of world-creation.

I will begin by looking at the publication history of *The Hobbit* in more depth, where I pinpoint three main ‘fictional worlds’ created by that book. These worlds each carry their own sets of qualities and attributes, all of which affect interpretation. Following that, I turn to possible-worlds semantics, a relatively recent outgrowth of narrative theory underemployed within the literature on world-construction. My main contention, following narrative theorist Marie-Laure Ryan, will be that readers construct a new fictional world every time they encounter a text. Following Ryan’s typology of textual semantics and her concept of accessibility relations, we can begin to differentiate between the logical and modal differences between the three *Hobbit* worlds. While the textual history of *The Hobbit* is already well-known within the secondary literature, highlighting how this textual history affects world-construction can nonetheless shed some light, not only on how readers encounter fictional worlds, but also on how seemingly slight textual changes can produce wide-ranging differences in the construction of those worlds.

The Three Stages of *The Hobbit*

Although clearly a classic of children’s literature, *The Hobbit* is a book that presents a conundrum for critics and scholars. While some, such as William H. Green, treat the book as a stand-alone text (as Tolkien largely intended it to be), most nonetheless see it as a prelude or prequel to *The Lord of the Rings*. C. S. Lewis set the stage for this sort of view. Despite calling *The Hobbit* a ‘classic’ upon first publication, he later—following publication of *The Fellowship of the Ring*—called it “merely a fragment torn from the author’s huge myth and adapted for children; inevitably losing something by the adaptation” (Lewis, 84). Brian Rosebury, for example, bluntly calls *The Hobbit* a “transitional work” without “emotional or moral depth” (114), and Anne Petty, while kinder, similarly remarks that any “serious study of the fictive world of Tolkien must cast a discerning eye upon the original tale of the hobbits as an interesting and necessary prelude to the grander work of *LOTR*” (17). The irony of the prelude position, of course, is that there would never have been a *Lord of the Rings* without *The Hobbit*. Even so, when critics *do* tackle the earlier book, they invariably do so from a post-1954 lens—meaning that they read *The Hobbit* through the interpretative guide provided Bilbo’s admissions to Gandalf. Needless to say, such an interpretation could hardly have been available to the book’s first readers. Among the first to take the first edition seriously as a work in its own right is Thomas Honegger. Tellingly, though, not even Honegger looks at *The Hobbit* from a pre-1954 perspective. Instead, he suggests that the post-*Lord of the Rings* explanation of Bilbo’s diary actually offers a stronger interpretation of events *as* described in the first edition.

To my knowledge, the only critic to attempt emancipating himself from the post-*Lord* perspective is Cory Olsen. In fact, he helpfully divides the publishing history of *The Hobbit* into three stages (see Olsen, 9):

- (1) *The Solo Stage* (1937-1951)—the first edition text. Gollum is both bloodthirsty and honorable.
- (2) *The Revision Stage* (1951-1954)—the second edition text. Although the Gollum chapter has been revised, no explanation appears until *The Fellowship of the Ring* in 1954.
- (3) *The Assimilation Stage* (1955-ongoing)—the second edition of the text following *The Fellowship of the Ring*. With this publication, Tolkien fully incorporates his earlier work into the history of Middle-earth—and he explains *why* Bilbo had falsified his diary and thus had to write a ‘corrected’ account. This assimilation includes the 1966 third edition of *The Hobbit*, which differs little from the second edition and existed primarily to maintain copyright in light of the Ace Books controversy. For convenience’s sake, the assimilation stage will also include all Tolkien’s posthumously published works.

Each stage is entirely ‘autonomous,’ by which I mean that none is subordinate or a subset of the other. Thus, although the assimilation stage claims that Bilbo falsified his diary, the accuracy of his diary is not a subject for debate within the solo stage. Critics, as mentioned earlier, usually approach *The Hobbit* from the standpoint of the assimilation stage. Olsen, to his credit, attempts to read *The Hobbit* from the first two stages only, but he unfortunately provides little new or original insight. Still, his methodology does clarify what contemporary readers of the first two stages must have experienced during the course of their reading.

The solo stage text, for example, contains a much different moral ‘feel’ than later stages. Many like to quote the remark by C. S. Lewis about the ‘curious shift of tone’ towards the end of *The Hobbit* (18), but this remark better applies to the first edition text, the subject of Lewis’s review, than to the second edition text.¹ Having grown up on the second edition text myself, a tonal shift never seemed that apparent to me. To my mind, the bloodthirsty-and-evil Gollum provides a natural and steady escalation of dangers which eventually culminate in events at the Lonely Mountain. Without the stepping stone of an evil Gollum, however, the darkness of later events becomes more apparent. Rather than introducing us to pathology and violence, the honorable Gollum of the first edition reinforces a moral code of honor and uprightness common to much children’s literature of the period—be true to your word, keep your promises, and all that. Gollum, in fact, represents the best of the British public school tradition. When the honorable Gollum realizes that he cannot fulfill his end of the wager, he guides Bilbo out of the mountains as a form of apology. The moral tone of the episode actual-

1 In terms of textual history, a large gap in writing separated the death of Smaug and subsequent chapters, which might partially have affected the change in tone. Still, this tidbit of history would not have affected the *reader's* experience of the text.

ly reminds me of another classic of children's literature, one much admired by C. S. Lewis at least—E. Nesbit's *The Story of the Treasure-Seekers* (1899). The Bastable children, eager to restore the family fortunes, seek to defraud a Lord Tottenham but, having failed to hoodwink the fellow successfully, Oswald Bastable subsequently denies that they would have *really* taken Tottenham's money. We are meant to believe this confession, apparently, because the children recognize with shame (after the fact) the lowness and ungentlemanliness of their deed. Other examples of children's books teaching proper values abound. The solo stage of *The Hobbit* fits squarely within this tradition, and that makes it a book quite different from what it would later become.

With the revision stage, however, some interesting challenges come to the fore. Early reviewers who assured parents that the book was not too terrifying for children could have little suspected that a new, even more 'terrifying' version of the story would arrive in 1951. Unfortunately, the second edition does not seem to have occasioned a new round of reviews, so we can only speculate on how critics might have reacted to the changes. Yet those changes would have perplexed readers attentive enough to notice them. While the preface to the second edition notes the new material, Tolkien declines to offer any substantive explanation. In fact, Tolkien resolutely downplays the significance of Bilbo's deed. "This departure from the truth," he writes disarmingly, "does not ... concern the present story, and those who in this edition make their first acquaintance with hobbit-lore need not trouble about it" (Tolkien, *Annotated*, 28). The final result is that, despite the verbatim similarities between the text of the revision stage and the text of the assimilation stage, the earlier stage contains resonances of a different order of magnitude.

I think it is safe to say that, for most scholars, the assimilation stage will remain the most interesting version of *The Hobbit*. Still, the undeniable existence of the first two stages presents a challenge to the process of world-creation. Each stage of *The Hobbit*, I argue, creates a separate and autonomous fictional 'world.' The metaphor of 'world' to describe the semantic domain projected by a text, of course, has long been a tool of literary criticism. Let me suggest, however, that possible-worlds semantics, at least as applied by literary criticism, can help us understand this metaphor in a fresh way. Every time a book gets published, that book enables the creation of a new fictional world. These fictional worlds can be understood from a logical and modal standpoint via the 'accessibility relations' that pertain between our actual world and the relevant fictional world. All fictional worlds are equally fictional in the sense that they represent, thanks to the reader's interaction with the text, a possible (though non-actual) state of affairs. Some worlds, of course, may bear greater resemblances to the actual world than other possible worlds, and some readers may certainly prefer one fictional world to another, as they certainly prefer the assimilation *Hobbit* world to the solo and revision worlds. Nonetheless, possible-worlds semantics provides us a vocabulary with which to discuss less privileged worlds as fictive constructions in their own right.

Before proceeding to a discussion of possible worlds theory, a note on my methodology might be appropriate. Since a possible world is as much a construction by the reader as the author, I consider publication as the baseline for what to consider a 'possible' *Hobbit* world. Thus, I am excluding the host of available draft materials for *The Hobbit*, which contribute little if anything to how readers might construct *The Hobbit's* textual worlds. In addition, I also limit myself to those *Hobbit* worlds denoted by the three stages identified by Olsen. Technically, since every new printing of *The Hobbit* contains inadvertent errors as well as deliberate emendations, each new printing could plausibly be considered a new fictional world. The first two editions of *The Hobbit* saw a total of fifteen printings, resulting in potentially fifteen different fictional worlds. The differences between most of these worlds, however, are slight enough to be without interest. Hence, I focus on the three most important ones.

Possible-worlds Semantics, Accessibility Relations, and Literary Theory

Possible-worlds semantics originated in the philosophy of Gottfried Leibniz but saw a modern resurgence due to the philosopher Saul Kripke and his development of modal logic. Modal logic deals with issues of necessity and possibility. Anyone, after all, can conceive a world or state of affairs that *might* have existed but which does not, in fact, actually exist. In such cases, a possible world is a hypothetical construct where counterfactual situations can be discussed. The idea of possibility then is indicated when a state of affairs or proposition obtains in at least one possible world, and the idea of necessity is indicated when a state of affairs or proposition obtains in *all* possible worlds. What made Kripke's account especially influential, however, was his realization that not all possible worlds might share an equal epistemological access to other worlds. For example, although a proposition might have a determinate truth-value in World A, that same proposition might have an *indeterminate* truth value from the point of view of World B if the latter world has no epistemic access to World A. It did not take long for narrative theorists to grasp the potential of possible-worlds semantics for literary study. As Mark J. P. Wolf explains, possible-worlds semantics provided "a philosophical foundation for fictional worlds, and its application to narrative theory has helped to emphasize the role of the world in which a story takes place" (20). For my purposes here, narrative theorist Marie-Laure Ryan provides the best adaptation of Kripke's idea of accessibility. She proposes a host of 'accessibility relations' that can pertain between the actual world and the fictive possible world. As a result, she enables a helpful typology of fictional worlds that can be used to distinguish between different literary genres; her method also measures the degree of fictionality for any one particular fictional world.

In order to begin, some terminology must be defined. Ryan dubs *our* world, what Tolkien would have called the primary world, as the *actual world* (AW). All fictional worlds, no matter how realistic, are possible worlds. All fictional worlds, further-

more, rely on a text of some sort, and that text can make any number of specific claims about the world it creates. This fictive possible world with clearly marked claims is called by Ryan the *textual reference world* (TRW)—the text refers to such-and-such within the fiction. Thus, a sentence such as ‘In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit’ is part of *The Hobbit*’s TRW, and it establishes not only the existence of *hobbits* but also at least one attribute (i.e. living in holes) that pertains to the hobbit under discussion. No novel or book, however, can exhaustively state *everything* that exists in its world. As such, there must be a wide array of elements that receive no explicit mention by the text. Ryan dubs this the *textual actual world* (TAW). The TAW works on an analogy with the AW. Strictly speaking, all possible worlds differ logically from the actual world by being logically ‘incomplete’; that is, objects in a fictive possible world only exist insofar as they have received a description in the text, but no text (unless it be infinitely long) can list all the properties held by the objects in its world. Readers nonetheless assume that fictional objects, just like their actual world counterparts, have logical completeness. Ryan dubs this natural assumption the principle of minimum departure.² Unreliable narration occurs when the facts stated by the TRW differ from the facts that obtain in the TAW. Bilbo, for the most part, is a reliable narrator except for the 1937 ‘Riddles in the Dark’ chapter—but his partial unreliability is only a ‘fact’ from the perspective of the revision and assimilation TAWs. Within the solo stage world, the TRW and the TAW match.

With the distinction between AW and TAW firmly in place, we can now turn to Ryan’s theory of accessibility relations. These relations map the modal relations shared by the AW and the TAW—the more relations shared, the more similar the two worlds. Ryan thereby derives a taxonomy of genres according to which each genre is defined by its particular accessibility relations. These genres run the gamut from ‘accurate nonfiction’ (all accessibility relations shared) to ‘sound poetry’ (none either shared or applicable). Although many accessibility relations are possible, Ryan focuses on nine:

2 Ryan’s concept of a TRW seems to relate to what Stefan Ekman and Audrey Isabel Taylor call *readerly world-building*, where the reader engages in a relatively passive process: reconstructing a fictional world from the text. When Ryan speaks of the “phenomenology of reading,” she has readerly world-building in mind. Her concept of a TAW though seems to equate roughly to what Ekman and Taylor call *critical world-building*. As they claim, critical world-building holds that “not only the sequential presentation and implications of the details are relevant, but also the world as totality” (Ekman and Taylor). Criticism can only be done when the world as a whole is known. The prime difference between Ryan and Ekman and Taylor, as far as I can make out, is that whereas for Ryan readers make a natural host of assumptions about the TAW, critical world-building requires a much more robust role by the reader-slash-critic—that person must consult, not only the text under discussion, but also miscellaneous materials like drafts, other texts, authorial commentary, and the like.

- A. *Identity of properties*—obtains if objects common to TAW and AW have the same properties.
- B. *Identity of inventory*—obtains if TAW and AW have the exact *same* objects, such as in nonfiction works.
- C. *Compatibility of inventory (i.e., expanded inventory)*—obtains if TAW not only shares objects with AW but has additional objects as well, which fiction requires.
- D. *Chronological compatibility*—obtains if the history of TAW does not require a leap forward into the future of AW. Science fiction most often falls short of this accessibility relation.
- E. *Physical compatibility*—obtains if TAW and AW share the same natural laws.
- F. *Taxonomic compatibility*—obtains if TAW and AW have all same species and/or manufactured objects.
- G. *Logical compatibility*—obtains if the principle of non-contradiction and the law of excluded middle hold. Nonsense rhymes and sound poetry usually fail to have this accessibility relation.
- H. *Analytical compatibility*—obtains if objects designed by the same words have identical properties.
- I. *Linguistic compatibility*—obtains if the language describing TAW is understandable to inhabitants of AW. (Ryan, 34)

Per Ryan's taxonomy, the essential attribute of realistic fantasy literature—what we might call low fantasy—is *physical incompatibility* (accessibility relation E) between the TAW and the AW. In other words, the TAW has magic, and therefore it must have different natural laws from our world.³ For variability, if we lift the sanction on acces-

3 Speculative fiction scholars might note two immediate problems with equating fantasy with the presence of magic. First, some texts commonly considered fantasy—such as Mervyn Peake's *Gormenghast* books—do not have any actual magic. Indeed, Ryan acknowledges that “the taxonomic classes yielded by computing the various combinations of relations [do] not necessarily correspond to the generic labels in use in a given culture” (43). In Peake's case, his books might better be classed by Ryan as “realistic fiction in ‘no-man's land.’” Here, the TAW shares chronological and physical compatibility with the AW but lacks any compatibility of inventory (C) or the identity of properties (A)—making the TAW of the *Gormenghast* books semantically similar to the TAW of Kafka's *The Trial* or *The Castle*, a comparison which at least passes the smell test. Second, the next possible problem concerns what Jamie Williamson calls the ‘BAFS template.’ One central definition of fantasy to emerge during the Ballantine Adult Fantasy Series was to define as fantasy any book set in an entirely secondary world where magic really works. Williamson notes that this definition bestowed a misleading, ahistorical sense of generic unity on a host of writers, such as Dunsany and Tolkien, who would not have defined their own work in such a way. Nonetheless, I think we can handle this objection by observing that accessibility relations offer a taxonomic guide rather than an interpretative guide. While taxonomy and interpretation are activities that certainly influence one another, Ryan's model has the advantage of providing a working baseline from which to offer modal distinctions between genres.

sibility relation F (taxonomic compatibility), we can introduce ghosts, elves, goblins, dragons, or other fantastic beasts into the TAW. Although high fantasy is not mentioned by Ryan, it fits easily into her taxonomy. Since high fantasy (as opposed to low fantasy) occurs in a secondary world separate from the primary world, we must lift chronological compatibility (accessibility relation D). High fantasy can hardly share the same historical timeline as the actual world, after all, if it does not allegedly occur *in* the actual world. *The Lord of the Rings* or Robert E. Howard’s Conan stories actually present tricky cases on this score, since their authors set them in our world’s distant past, but a lack of any explicit historical events in common justifies categorizing them as chronologically incompatible.⁴ High fantasy also lifts accessibility relation C (compatibility of inventory), otherwise known as the ‘expanded inventory.’ Normally, this relation allows additional objects (such as characters) to be inserted into the fictional world. Since high fantasy worlds have significantly *fewer* objects (‘Paris’ or ‘France’, for example) in their TAWs in addition to *adding* objects, the expanded inventory relation fails to hold.

Thus, Ryan’s typology might categorize a high fantasy text like *The Hobbit* as follows:

FIGURE 1. Accessibility Relations Between AW and a High Fantasy TAW

A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I
(same properties)	(same inventory)	(expanded inventory)	(compatible chronology)	(physical compatibility)	(taxonomic compatibility)	(logical compatibility)	(analytical compatibility)	(linguistic compatibility)
*	–	–	–	–	+/-	+	+	+

Note: a * means non-applicable because of a – on C.

At first blush, Ryan’s use of accessibility relation holds little promise for clarifying the three *Hobbit* stages. Every edition of Tolkien’s children’s classic, after all, possesses the accessibility relations indicated by Figure 1. Nonetheless, we simply have to tweak Ryan’s typology in order to say something meaningful. This tweaking revolves around her concept of ‘recentering.’ Recentering is a mental process undertaken by readers when the ‘base world,’ the world we consider the primary world, moves from the actual world to a fictive TAW. Though readers understand that most events and characters in fiction are not real, readers nonetheless temporarily accept them as such. As Ryan writes, “For the duration of our immersion in a work of fiction, the realm of possibilities is thus recentered around the sphere which the narrator presents as the actual world. This recentering pushes the reader into a new system of actuality and possibility” (22). Things not possible or true in the actual world suddenly become possible or

4 The lack of chronological compatibility is the essential characteristic of science fiction under Ryan’s taxonomy, but it achieves that incompatibility in a manner different from high fantasy. Whereas high fantasy has an entirely separate historical timeline, science fiction only has a *partially* separate timeline—i.e. its extrapolation into the future sends it quite far beyond the present moment, but it shares our world’s past.

true within the fictional world. Scholars familiar with Tolkien should readily recognize the close kinship between the modal recentering and Tolkien's argument against 'suspension of disbelief' in "On Fairy-stories." Rather than consciously suspending a natural inclination to disbelieve a fiction, Tolkien thought that readers are irresistibly seduced into entering a well-wrought subcreation. On Tolkien's view, Secondary Belief indicates something quite a bit stronger than suspended disbelief, which he thought a mere "substitute for the genuine thing [i.e. belief], a subterfuge we use when condescending to games or make-believe" (Tolkien, *On Fairy-stories*, 52).⁵ Although apparently unaware of Tolkien's views, Ryan simply adapts Tolkien's insight to modal semantics.

To repeat: recentering occurs when the reader mentally—and temporarily—substitutes a TAW for the AW. Accessibility relations obtain between the TAW and the AW. What would happen if, having recentered the base world from the AW to a TAW, we begin looking at the accessibility relations between the newly centered TAW and other TAWs? Namely, we get a way—from the standpoint of modal semantics—to compare the assimilation *Hobbit* world to the solo and revision *Hobbit* worlds. The prime candidate for recentering would be the assimilation world, of course, given its privilege within Tolkien studies, although we could just as easily have used any other *Hobbit* world as the recentered TAW. With this framework in place, we can begin discussing the macrostructural differences between the three major worlds created through *The Hobbit's* unusual publication history.

The Possible Worlds of *The Hobbit* Explained

The assimilation stage's TAW. Most readers of Tolkien are already well acquainted with the assimilation *Hobbit* world, but highlighting a few specific features will expedite our discussion of the other *Hobbit* worlds. In the assimilation world, for example, the reader quickly recognizes that the Necromancer is 'Sauron' and that Elrond is 'Elrond the Half-Elven.' The point might seem obvious but actually is not—the character designated as Sauron is a foreboding, looming presence, a tyrannical and totalitarian entity bent on dominion, but the character designated as the Necromancer has comparably few characteristics, existing as a rather blatant excuse to have Gandalf leave Thorin's company, and certainly does not represent the apotheosis of evil. By keeping the equation (Sauron = Necromancer) in mind, the reader discovers a host of resonan-

5 Ryan, following the philosopher Kendall Walton, actually rates the game of make-believe much more highly than Tolkien. She argues that the "make-believe approach to fiction reconciles our intuitive belief in the unique character of the actual world" with the special conditions that govern fictional worlds (Ryan, 22). While I think Ryan's concept of recentering absolutely sound, I think Tolkien's notion of Secondary Belief offers a better phenomenological description of how a reader experiences fictional worlds.

ces not otherwise found in *The Hobbit* as a stand-alone text. Likewise with Elrond—the Rivendell Elves are relatively silly beings in *The Hobbit*, and Elrond merely a wise old innkeeper, but within the assimilation world Elrond becomes one of the most ancient figures of Middle-earth, an Elf instrumental in defeating the Enemy through the ages.

Of course, readers approaching *The Hobbit* without any prior knowledge of *The Lord of the Rings* (or Tolkien's posthumously published works) would construct a TAW more in keeping with the revision world than with the assimilation world. Still, historically speaking, the dominant way of approaching *The Hobbit* since 1954 has been from the assimilation stage.

Other features characterize the assimilation world as well. Being a wizard, for example, is not so much an occupation as it is a class of being. 'Goblin' and 'orc' are different names for the same race, clearing up the impression given from *The Hobbit* as a stand-alone text. The stone-giants of the Misty Mountains, which appear to be actual giants in the stand-alone text, can now—according to Douglas A. Anderson in *The Annotated Hobbit*—be constructed as "a type of troll" within the assimilation world (Tolkien, *Annotated*, 104). In addition, the assimilation world has a much stronger sense of geographic definitiveness. The Shire, a proper name which does not appear in any edition of *The Hobbit*, can now be said to denote Bilbo's homeland, and Eriador is the proper name for the Lone-lands (a name introduced into the third edition). All the maps that appear in *The Lord of the Rings* can now be assimilated as well. The ban against normal mortal access to the Undying Lands is also firmly established at this point; the third edition removes the previous reference to sailing to the 'Other Side' (i.e., the Undying Lands). Also, needless to say, the ring of invisibility that Bilbo finds now has all the properties associated with the One Ring, the ring made by Sauron to rule them all.

The revision stage's TAW. In a way, understanding how the reader constructs this possible world is both bland and highly intriguing. On one hand, excluding minor emendations and printing errors, the text of the revision stage exactly mirrors the text of the assimilation stage. It would stand to reason then that the accessibility relations between the assimilation world and the revision world should be exactly the same. Yet it is not so. Bereft of the information provided by *The Lord of the Rings*, the reader must construct the revision TAW in slightly different ways. Thus, we are presented with the highly unusual case where two textually represented worlds (TRWs) are exactly the same, yet the TAWs for each world are different.

The major difference concerns accessibility relation A (*identity of properties*). Both worlds have identical inventories, including 'Bilbo's falsified diary' as well as 'The Red Book of Westmarch,' both mentioned by the second edition preface. The properties of these trans-world objects, however, differ remarkably. Bilbo's ring of invisibility is the most obvious example—it does not yet have the darker attributes of the One

Ring from the assimilation stage.⁶ Other objects in the revision world, such as Elrond⁷ and the Necromancer, have different properties as well—the former is a figure of less reverence, the latter a figure of less evil. Some differences in properties also occur along geographical lines. The Hill and the Water do not share the predicate ‘parts of the Shire’ in the revision stage, although they will after *The Fellowship of the Ring*.

Figure 2 identifies the different accessibility relations between these two TAWs. Only the identical properties relation fails to apply. Otherwise, the two worlds share the same natural laws, the same inventory, and the same taxonomic kinds of manufactured objects, beings, and creatures (since the author’s note to the second edition clearly establishes that ‘orc’ is a Hobbit translation of goblin).

FIGURE 2. Accessibility Relations between the Assimilation World TAW and the Revision World TAW

A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I
(same properties)	(same inventory)	(compatible inventory)	(compatible chronology)	(physical compatibility)	(taxonomic compatibility)	(logical compatibility)	(analytical compatibility)	(linguistic compatibility)
–	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+

The solo stage's TAW. The world of this stage undergoes the most radical reconceptualization. Having recentered ourselves to the assimilation TAW, the solo *Hobbit* world is much more ‘fictional’ (in the sense of possessing fewer compatible accessibility relations) than the revision *Hobbit* world. Similar to the revision world, objects common to the solo and assimilation worlds—the ring, the Necromancer, Elrond, geographic locations—have different properties. To this list, in fact, we could add such things as tomatoes. The 1937 first edition makes them available in Bilbo’s homeland, but later editions removed them because they did not fit with the ‘Englishness’ of the Shire. Wizards also have different properties, at least insofar as it is natural to assume that wizardry is an occupation rather than a class of being.

In addition to identical properties, though, we must also deny accessibility relation B (same inventory), as well as accessibility relation C (compatible or expanded inventory), both on the same grounds: the solo world clearly has *fewer* objects than the revision or assimilation worlds. For one thing, neither ‘Bilbo’s falsified diary’ nor the ‘Red Book of Westmarch’ exist in the solo *Hobbit* world, nor does the solo world seem to have mithril, which Tolkien only inserted into the third edition. Intriguingly,

6 When Bilbo encounters some goblins in the Misty Mountains, the text from the 1951 edition explains (rather weakly) that the ring’s absence on Bilbo’s finger was “a last trick ... before it took a new master” (Tolkien, *Annotated*, 135). Readers, though, would be unlikely to attribute any malevolent purpose to this trick without information supplemented from *The Lord of the Rings*.

7 The place of Elrond within Tolkien’s legendarium had already been well established in Tolkien’s mind by this time, but none of this shows in the text as a reader would have seen in between 1951 and 1954.

Ryan considers the possibility of a fictional world where the “TAW’s inventory would be a subset of AW’s inventory” (269), but she declines on pragmatic grounds to posit a new accessibility relation for subset inventories. It makes little sense, after all, for writers to claim within a work, ‘This world has France but no Paris’; the reference to ‘Paris’ would be nonsensical in a world in which it did not exist. Yet the problem only occurs when comparing the accessibility relations between AW and TAW. When we recenter to the assimilation TAW, we can easily see that the solo world has fewer objects than the assimilation world. Indeed, Ryan might also have considered a problem case like Philip Pullman’s *The Golden Compass*, where its TAW has real world references (Oxford), *lacks* certain countries such as Russia, but *does* expand its inventory to include such objects as Jordan College in Oxford and the Republic of Texas. As such, we might modify accessibility relation C (compatible inventory) into accessibility relation C’ (subset inventory).

Taxonomic compatibility would have to be denied as well. The solo *Hobbit* world has quite a few different natural species and races. The TRW references both Lilliputians (from Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*) and Gnomes (Tolkien’s original name for the Noldor), both of which Tolkien removed from the second edition. Goblins also seem to be separate beings from orcs, as when the narrator claims that the Grey Mountains are “simply stiff with goblins, hobgoblins, *and* orcs” (Tolkien, *Annotated*, 188, emphasis mine).

An informal accessibility relation Ryan discusses but does not include within her main semantic typology is *psychological credibility*. This relation holds that “the mental properties of the characters could be those of members” in the actual world (Ryan, 45). We might potentially deny this relation on the basis that, from the perspective of the assimilation world, it is literally unbelievable that Gollum would willingly give up his ring upon losing the riddle contest. Still, Ryan maintains that the believability “must be generalized to all members of TAW” (Ryan, 45), and this does not seem to be the case in the solo world. Also a note on accessibility relation I (linguistic compatibility) might be appropriate. As the appendices in *The Lord of the Rings* make clear, the Red Book of Westmarch is not written in English; it has been ‘translated’ by Tolkien himself. Since this translation device did not yet exist for the 1937 *Hobbit*, we might be tempted to deny linguistic compatibility on the basis that the language employed in the solo world (English) does not correspond to any language within the assimilation world. Yet, since Ryan uses linguistic compatibility primarily to differentiate ‘Jabberwockism’ and sound poetry (where recognizable words fail to have comprehensible reference) from other literary genres, it seems reasonable to leave linguistic compatibility alone.

Otherwise, all accessibility relations between the solo world and the assimilation world would remain the same. We are thus presented with Figure 3:

FIGURE 3. Accessibility Relations between the Assimilation World TAW and the Solo World TAW

A	B	C'	D	E	F	G	H	I
(same properties)	(same inventory)	(subset inventory)	(compatible chronology)	(physical compatibility)	(taxonomic compatibility)	(logical compatibility)	(analytical compatibility)	(linguistic compatibility)
–	–	+	+	+	–	+	+	+

The solo world then lacks quite a number of features common within the other two *Hobbit* worlds. In the minds of many readers and critics, these differences make it an ‘inferior’ world, at least in terms of being less interesting or, in Tolkien’s terminology, less successful in terms of subcreation. Tolkien himself disliked aspects of the 1937 text, one of which is more rhetorical than modal—i.e. all the direct narratorial addresses to the reader which Tolkien considered ‘talking down’ to the audience. Like the consensus privileging of the assimilation world, however, the issue of intrusive narration is largely a matter of preference. Paul Edmund Thomas, for example, suggests that the “novel would have been the poorer” if the direct addresses had been completely removed (167).

Indeed, the matter of preferences introduces an intriguing corollary to the possible-worlds approach for world-construction. Although possible-worlds semantics involve the *logical construction* of a fictional world by the reader, it completely dispenses with reader response *to* that world. Many consider a central element of fantasy to be the evocation of wonder, but wonder does not have a role to play within possible-worlds semantics; the success or failure of the author’s subcreation makes no difference.⁸ World-construction is logical and modal rather than linguistic or rhetorical—the two major ways that fantasy scholar Farah Mendlesohn creates *her* admirable taxonomy of fantasy in *Rhetorics of Fantasy*. Focusing on “the way the fantastic enters the text” (Mendlesohn, 1), her approach has a great many merits, but I would simply like to note that her insight can be accommodated by possible-worlds semantics. One narrative theorist, Nancy H. Traill, has in fact already done so. She suggests that several sub-modes of the fantastic can be theorized, not only according to how “the fictional status of the supernatural is constructed,” but also according to how the supernatural “is made to confront and engage with its counterpart, the natural domain” (Traill, 11)—an insight strikingly similar to Mendlesohn’s idea about how the fantastic enters the text. In the end both approaches, by concentrating on different elements of world-construction, can tell us useful things about the ways in which readers engage fictive worlds.

8 Ironically, Tolkien himself had intense emotional responses to fairy-stories and fantasy, and many scholars have followed Tolkien’s lead in attributing such responses to a definitional core of fantasy. David Sandner, whose major work links the origins of fantasy to 18th-century theories of the sublime, has recently argued that “fantasy is defined by its very inability to be defined, by its quality of longing for something which can only be glimpsed, but never found, in the story itself” (134). Such a viewpoint works against any strictly logical or modal definition of fantasy.

Ultimately, I have argued that a modal or possible-worlds approach can foreground the process of world-creation to an extent unattainable by either textual history or thematic discussion alone. In terms of *The Hobbit*, it helps us differentiate between the three worlds created by the three different stages in that work's unusual publication history—the solo stage, the revision stage, and the assimilation stage. Indeed, Marie-Laure Ryan's concept of accessibility relations might be the handiest way to distinguish between the revision world and the assimilation world, since both worlds share the same textually represented world (TRW). Likewise, possible-worlds semantics pinpoints the most unusual features of the solo world, which can aid interpretation by encouraging fans and scholars to take *that* world (a historically significant and influential world in terms of Tolkien's career) seriously in its own right, rather than as a subordinate satellite of the more influential assimilation world. In addition, as a way of ending, let me suggest that possible-worlds semantics can have a much wider application within Tolkien studies than simply *The Hobbit*. Primarily thanks to the History of Middle-earth series, we have numerous textual variants and non- and sub-canonical stories within Tolkien's legendarium. In much the same way as we have analyzed the solo *Hobbit* world, possible-worlds semantics can provide a ready vocabulary for distinguishing between the numerous 'versions' of Middle-earth and Arda that have now been given a fictive ontological status thanks to the posthumous publication of Tolkien's writings.

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