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Response 2

Tolkien and The Ruin

There are many places in Lord of the Rings where Tolkien stops to describe ancient ruins.

This adds to the appearance of a long history in the book, which helps to contribute to its realism. Tolkien was familiar with the poems of the Exeter Book, and one poem that especially seems to be important to him is The Ruin. In The Ruin, the anonymous poet describes the remains of what probably was a Roman bath, maybe near the city of Bath, and imagines what the lives were like of the people who once lived there, but they have now all died, and what is left is only a shadow of what was once glorious. The Ruin shows how all things that were once glorious must eventually pass away and be replaced. The poet says that

Slaughtered men
fell far and wide, the plague-days came,
death removed every brave man.
Their ramparts became abandoned places.
The city decayed; warriors and builders
Fell to the earth. Thus these courts crumble[.] (I would put line numbers here)

Tolkien used the idea of things passing away in his own work; he puts in ruins as a sign of what was there in the past to help readers imagine what the old kingdoms used to be like, which helps to both explain the action in the present of the story and to add a historical air to his work.

I will focus on the ruin of Weathertop. Strider knows what it once was, a tower of Arnor: “in the first days of the North Kingdom, they built a great watch-tower on Weathertop, Amon Sûl they called it. It was burned and broken, and nothing remains of it now but a tumbled ring, like a rough crown on the old hill’s head. Yet once it was tall and fair.” (page number here)
He uses it to do basically the same thing; he feels that he and the hobbits will be able to spot

Commented [MB1]: Note how the title tells us what work JRRT is engaging with, in this case the Old English poem “The Ruin”.

Commented [MB2]: Note how short the quote is – the writer left enough room for their own argument

Commented [MB3]: Note that we have an arguable thesis here, although I might have gotten to it sooner

Commented [MB4]: again, a short quote that leaves the writer room for their own argument

Commented [MB5]: “same thing as Tolkien,” I presume – be sure grammar and mechanics are correct

any pursuit of the Black Riders from the hill. However, just like in The Ruin, war and destruction come to Amon Sûl; five Black Riders attack Weathertop and wound Frodo with the Morgul-knife. The Ruin describes the greatness of the Roman empire but then how war and sickness destroyed it; in the same way, Weathertop cannot stand against the Nazgul, as it could not hold out in the past, and Frodo is sick with a potentially fatal wound. Arnor was destroyed by the Witch King of Angmar, who turns out to be the leader of the Nazgul, so not only was Amon Sul destroyed once by Sauron's forces, but history repeats itself; the party, though not destroyed, is driven off Weathertop and forced to move on to Rivendell, just as the rest of the Arnorians were driven into hiding as Rangers.

Amon Sûl was great and glorious once, but the Enemy destroyed it, and all that is left are ruins that show the history of the place and let the reader know that the ruins are part of a very long story that is still going on. Tolkien uses a similar event, the attack on the party, in the same place to show how the strife which occurred in the past is still occurring in the present; the past can be recalled, but never really brought back, just re-enacted in a different time. This shows the Anglo-Saxon idea that Tolkien mentioned in "The Monsters and the Critics" that all things which rise will have their time, but eventually they will fall and be replaced by something new, and the cycle will repeat. By seeing the cycle in action in Lord of the Rings, the reader can imagine the action of the story having been foreshadowed in the past of the story, which makes Middle-Earth seem to have a very long history.

Commented [MB6]: Notice the nice, concise connection between the poem and LOTR – the reaction of the writer to the sense of depth in LOTR is linked to the sense of the past in "The Ruin"

Commented [MB7]: The writer should probably have mentioned "The Ruin" again here, but the point is still obvious, as the issue raised in the first paragraph is echoed in the conclusion.