



Universidad de Valladolid

FACULTAD de FILOSOFÍA Y LETRAS
DEPARTAMENTO de FILOLOGÍA INGLESA
Grado en Estudios Ingleses

TRABAJO DE FIN DE GRADO

Would You Rather Be a Man or an Elf? Analyzing Death,
Immortality, and Fall in Tolkien's Narrative

Mario García González

Tutor: Carlos Herrero Quirós
Curso 2016-2017

ABSTRACT

This graduation project deals with a writer who is considered to be the father of Fantastic Literature in the English language: J. R. R. Tolkien. He was the only author capable of writing a complete mythology for England. Specifically, this paper is about Tolkien's conception of death and immortality and how these affect Middle-Earth peoples, especially as regards the fall of two of them: Men and Elves'. We have extensively drawn on many secondary sources as well as on Tolkien's works in order to provide a general idea of these concepts in his *Legendarium*. After a brief review of Tolkien's life and works, we proceed with an analysis of the dichotomy between both Men's and Elves' ways of dying, and, finally, explore one of the consequences of this dichotomy: the fall of both peoples.

Keywords: Tolkien – Death and Immortality – Fall – Men - Elves

RESUMEN

Este Trabajo de Fin de Grado trata sobre el autor que es considerado como el padre de la literatura fantástica en lengua inglesa: J. R. R. Tolkien. Tolkien ha sido el único autor que ha sido capaz de escribir una mitología completa para Inglaterra. Específicamente, este trabajo trata sobre la concepción de la muerte y la inmortalidad, y cómo afecta esta última a los pueblos de la Tierra Media, especialmente en la caída de dos de ellos: el de los Hombres y el de los Elfos. Para dar una idea general sobre estos términos en su *Legendarium* he leído y analizado cuidadosamente un gran número de fuentes secundarias y obras de Tolkien. El trabajo empieza con un breve repaso a la vida y las obras de Tolkien, continúa con un análisis de la dicotomía entre las formas de morir de Elfos y Hombres, y termina con una de las consecuencias de esta dicotomía: la caída de ambos pueblos.

Palabras clave: Tolkien – Muerte e Inmortalidad – Caída – Hombres - Elfos

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INTRODUCTION

“The construction of [an] elaborate and consistent mythology ... rather occupies [my] mind”, wrote J. R. R. Tolkien (Bloemfontein, 1891 – Oxford, 1973) in one of his letters (26). Tolkien is known for being the father of fantastic literature because he was able to build a complete mythology throughout his whole life. Although he will be remembered as the author of works like *The Silmarillion*, *The Hobbit*, and, above all, *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien was a very prolific author of extended narratives as well as a philologist, a poet, and a short story writer. His works have been analyzed since they were published, and even today, authors like the English Tom Shippey and the Spanish Eduardo Segura, among many others, continue analyzing in depth his life, his narrative, and his academic writing ideas. For example, we know through his biographers that his childhood was a key point in the awakening of his creativity, not only because he lived most of it surrounded by the typical English countryside, but also because of the tragic episodes that happened to him even before his adolescence. Tolkien’s works are a reflection of his worries, his passions, and his nuisances as well.

A comprehensive analysis of Tolkien’s figure lies beyond the scope of this paper, so we will focus only on one of his major concerns which is otherwise innate in human nature, that is, the exploration of the concept of death. Tolkien, as a human being, was concerned about the essence of dying, and as a Christian follower, he was also concerned with where humans go after dying. His works, as he himself admitted on a couple of occasions, were not written following the patterns of allegory, yet we can appreciate through the analysis of his work that his conception of death stemmed from his religious beliefs. In this project, we will highlight the centrality in Tolkien’s literary production of the concepts of death and immortality, which the author saw as “what set the wheels going” (*Letters* 203).

1. JOHN RONALD REUEL TOLKIEN: LIFE AND WORKS

1.1. Life

John Ronald Reuel Tolkien was born in Bloemfontein in 1892. His parents, Arthur Tolkien and Mabel Suffield, were English, but Arthur's work forced the family to stay in South Africa for a while.

When John was a child, the weather in Bloemfontein was a problem for his health, so Mabel decided to return to England with him and Tolkien's younger brother, Hilary. They set up on Sarehole, a rural area near Birmingham, where John, according to his official biographer Humphrey Carpenter, opened out his imagination in an ideal place, the English countryside (*Biography* 17).

In 1896 Mabel was informed that her husband had died. This fact changed completely the situation of Tolkien's family because Mabel's husband was the only member who was working outside the home. So, from then on, Mabel took care of her two sons by herself. She decided to start John's education at home because at the age of four he was already able to read and write almost perfectly. Mabel wanted Ronald to pass the admission exam at King Edward's School. She taught him Latin and French, although the latter language did not call his attention as much as the former.

Regarding the boy's religious education, Mabel decided to become a Catholic (previously she was a Protestant), and Tolkien followed her steps. He was a Catholic during his whole life, and he loved the Christian religion so much that its presence in his writings is undeniable.

In 1903 Tolkien, who studied at King Edward's School and later moved to St Philip's, came back to the former school to continue his training. There he started to learn Greek, a language which, together with the Latin he was taught by his mother, was one of the key points in his taste for the Classical Literature and for Philology as well.

In 1904 Mabel died. Tolkien and his brother were forced to live with one of their aunts, Mrs. Faulkner. There Tolkien met Edith Bratt. She was three years older than him and they fell in love quickly. Although she did not share his taste for languages was not as educated as him, their love was so strong that they lived together until the end of their lives.

Father Francis, a Spanish-Welsh priest who went to live in England, was Tolkien and Hilary's guardian after Mabel's death. He introduced Tolkien to the Spanish language, which is present in some aspects of his novel *The Lord of the Rings*, as, for example, in the etymology of the river Anduin ("Big River"), which was taken from the etymology of the Spanish river Guadalquivir (whose meaning is *Río Grande*, "big river" in English).

After some years, in 1910, Tolkien was admitted to Oxford University as a student. There he chose to study Comparative Philology and Classic Literature, and was interested as well in Old English (the epic poem *Beowulf* impressed him so much that he would devote a substantial part of this scholarly work to its study—his famous 1936 lecture on *Beowulf* criticism is often regarded as the most important paper ever written about this work—and translation) and in some Nordic languages (Old Norse, Gothic, and Old Icelandic) and their literature. He read and studied in depth Nordic sagas as the *Volsungs* or the *Eddas*, and also the Finnish text *The Kalevala*. These works would impact him in such a way that he would adapt some of their passages in his novels *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*.

While he was studying in Oxford, World War I broke out in Britain (1915). He was told that he had to enlist in the British Army to defend the country against the Germans. Before enlisting he finished his studies in Oxford and only then did he start his training in Exeter, a school which would become a training camp during the war. Once he was ready, he joined the 13th battalion of the Lancaster Fusiliers to fight on the battlefield.

In 1916 Tolkien left the Army temporarily and decided to marry Edith Bratt by the Catholic rite before going to France. She had been converted to Catholicism some years before, so they married without problems on the 22nd of March at the Catholic church of Warwick.

The First World War was a very traumatic experience for Tolkien because he experienced in the first person the horrible consequences of combat. After his marriage to Edith, he fought in

the Battle of the Somme, one of the bloodiest episodes of the war, as a signaling officer. Grotta describes the World War I trench warfare as “a Dantesque nightmare: rotting corpses in no-man’s-land, intermittent shelling and sniper fire, constant downpours [,] and flooded trenches, and a sea of mud reeking of death” (Grotta 45). Fortunately, Tolkien went ill with fever and he was moved to a hospital, where he started writing *The Book of Lost Tales*, which would later become *The Silmarillion*. This collection of unfinished tales about the origin of Middle Earth (aspects of which we enter our discussion in a later section of this paper) would be the beginning of his mythology.

After the war, in 1918, Tolkien started to work as a lexicographer for The Oxford English Dictionary. His main job there consisted in tracing the etymologies of some words. Later he would say about his experience there that he “learned more in [those] two years than in any other equal period of [his] life”. After this experience, Tolkien became a professor at several universities. In Leeds he “applied for the post of Reader in English Language” (*Biography* 88); in Rawlinson and Bosworth’s he taught Anglo-Saxon and, finally, he taught English Language and Literature at Merton’s until 1959, when he retired definitely. From then on, he lived peacefully with his wife until her death, in 1981. Tolkien died two years later, in 1983.

1.2. Works

As mentioned in the introduction, Tolkien was a very prolific writer. He started his literary career in 1917, the year when he “begins to write *The Book of Lost Tales*, which eventually becomes *The Silmarillion*” (*Biography* 264) and continued to do so until the end of his life without being able to complete this project. Indeed, by the time of Tolkien’s death *The Silmarillion* was rather a collection of unfinished notes which were ordered and published posthumously by his son Christopher. Next follows an enumeration of his longer works with a brief explanation.

- 1) *The Silmarillion* is a collection of unfinished short stories that Tolkien wanted to group together and be the origin of his mythology. In it we learn, from the Elves’ perspective, how Eru (God in Tolkien’s mythology) and the Valar (immortal creatures that existed with Eru

itself) created Arda (the Earth) through music, and how Eru's Children (Elves, or the First Born and Men, or the Followers) appeared there and started to develop through time. In *The Silmarillion* it is also reported how Evil started in Arda by the figure of Melkor, one of the Valar who, jealous of the power of the other ones, started to destroy what the rest were building.

- 2) "*The Hobbit* ... began as merely another story for amusement" (*Biography* 180), and it was not Tolkien's purpose to include it in his mythology. His original intention was to read this tale out loud to his children, not to write and publish it. But the kids liked it so much that he decided to do so in 1937 for the publishing house Allen and Unwin. The tale was born in Tolkien's mind when, as he said in one of his letters, he was correcting papers and, in a blank one he found, wrote: "In a hole in the ground there lived a Hobbit" (*Letters* 215). The tale is about a hobbit (a short, wild and quiet Middle Earth creature) who receives the visit of a group of *dwarves*¹; these urge him to go with them and recover Thorin, the King under the Mountain's treasure, which was guarded by a dragon far away from the Shire. Rayner Unwin, the editor's son, read the tale and liked it as well as Tolkien's sons; the editor "warn[ed] Tolkien that 'a large public' would be 'clamouring to hear ... from [him] about Hobbits'" (*Biography* 86). For this reason, Tolkien wanted to find in the story of *The Hobbit* an element that he could use to continue his tales about hobbits, and he decided it to be the ring that Bilbo finds before meeting Gollum in the tale. Starting from this point, Tolkien wrote the last part of the *Legendarium: The Lord of The Rings*.

- 3) *The Lord of the Rings*, as we have just pointed out, was the novel which put an end to Tolkien's *Legendarium*. This is the only novel as such finished by our author. It narrates the trip of the One Ring from the Shire, the place in which Frodo, Bilbo's nephew, lived, to Mordor, where it had to be destroyed. This novel took Tolkien thirteen years to write (from 1936 to 1949), but it was published in three volumes (*The Fellowship of the Ring*, *The Two Towers*, and *The Return of the King*) in 1953, 1954, and 1955 respectively. The book became so famous later on that many people still consider it to be the best book in English 20th century literature.

¹ Tolkien "was infuriated ... for he found that his printers had changed several of his spellings, [as for example] *dwarves* to *dwarfs*" (*Biography* 221).

After this brief overview of aspects related to Tolkien's life and major works, now we move on to the discussion of Death and Immortality and of the role they play in Elves' and Men's Fall in the works of the English author, which is the main subject of this paper.

2. DEATH AND IMMORTALITY IN TOLKIEN'S WORKS

2.1. The role of death in Tolkien's life

During his life, and especially in his first 25 years, Tolkien had several experiences related to the deaths of his close family and some of his friends. Firstly, as we pointed out in an earlier section, his parents died when he was very young, and he would remember them (especially his mother) during his whole life. In relation to Mabel's death in 1904, Tolkien wrote in 1913 that:

My own dear mother was a martyr indeed, and it is not to everybody that God grants so easy a way to his great gifts as he did to Hilary and myself, giving us a mother who killed herself with labour and trouble to ensure us keeping the faith. (*Biography* 39)²

It is worth remembering that Tolkien took his devotion to Christianity and his passion for the study of languages from his mother, and once again, according to his biographer, "her loss had a profound effect on his personality. It made him into a pessimist... He had a deep sense of humour and a great capacity for making friends. But from now onwards there was to be a second side, more private but predominant [especially] in his diaries and letters" (*Biography* 39).

Later, during the First World War, Tolkien lost almost all his school friends, with whom he had created a couple of years before a literary group called the T. C. B. S., which is an acronym for Tea Club and Barrovian Society. This club "included Tolkien, Christopher Wiseman, R. Q. Gilson, [Geoffrey Smith] and three or four others" (*Biography* 53). The only survivor, apart from Tolkien, was Wiseman, but the T. C. B. S. would never reunite again.

Taking into account these traumatic episodes during his early life, it is not surprising that the influence of death in Tolkien's works played a very important role, as we will see below. Only too aware of his own mortality, he desired to be "immortal" in his works. That way, his presence would endure and his readers would remember him when reading what he has written.

² Carpenter does not mention where Tolkien wrote these lines, so we are quoting directly from Carpenter's *Biography*.

In the next section, we are going to analyze why Tolkien considered the topic of death and immortality the most important in his novel *The Lord of the Rings*.

2.2. Death in *The Lord of the Rings*

As stated above, *The Lord of the Rings* is the only finished novel by J. R. R. Tolkien. What was his purpose when he wrote such a long tale? In a letter to the Houghton Mifflin Company written in 1955, Tolkien said that:

[*The Lord of the Rings*] is to me, anyway, largely an essay in ‘linguistic aesthetic’, as I sometimes say to people who ask me ‘what is it all about?’ It is not ‘about’ anything but itself. Certainly it has *no* allegorical intentions, general, particular, or topical, moral, religious, or political. The only criticism that annoyed me was one that it ‘contained no religion’ (and ‘no Women’, but that does not matter, and is not true anyway). It is a monotheistic world of ‘natural theology’ (*Letters* 220).

Later, in the draft of a letter to Maria de Bortadano (who is believed to have asked Tolkien if the novel was about Power and Domination), the author answered:

I do not think that even Power or Domination is the real centre of my story. It provides the theme of a War, about something dark and threatening enough to seem at that time of supreme importance, but that is mainly ‘a setting’ for characters to show themselves. The real theme for me is about *something much more permanent and difficult: Death and Immortality*: the mystery of the love of the world in the hearts of a race ‘doomed’ to leave and seemingly lose it; the anguish in the hearts of a race ‘doomed’ not to leave it, until its whole evil-aroused story is complete. (*Letters* 246; my italics)

This is not the only letter in which Tolkien affirms that Death and Immortality are the central topics of his novel. In another missive to Herbert Schiro where Tolkien denied the novel to be allegorical, he wrote: “I should say, if asked, [that] the tale is not really about Power and Dominion: that only sets the wheels going; *it is about Death and the desire for deathlessness*. Which is hardly more than to say it is a tale written by a Man!” (*Letters* 262).

Apart from Tolkien’s report about the presence of Death and Immortality in *The Lord of the Rings*, a linguistic analysis of the novel reveals that the word “death” is highly frequent. After compiling a corpus with all the chapters of the novel and searching for that word with the *AntConc* software, we have found out that the word “death” appears 149 times in around 500,000

words, out of which two of them are written in the plural (“deaths”). More details about this corpus-based evidence are shown in the Appendix to this graduation project.

From contextual perspective, and furthering our analysis of the recurrence of death throughout the novel, it is easy to see that it often appears in opposition to hope. We will illustrate this with three examples. The first example we have chosen is a passage from *The Return of the King* in which Merry sees Eowyn, who is disguised as a man (Dernhelm) in order to be allowed to fight in the final war. When he sees her, he says that “He [Eowyn disguised as Dernhelm] caught the glint of clear grey eyes; and then he shivered, for it came suddenly to him that it was the face of one without hope who goes in search of death” (*The Return of the King* 67). As it can be appreciated here, the loss of hope implies negative thoughts of the characters, and the most negative one is that they are going to die.

In the second example that is shown below, Tolkien describes the Lord of the Nâzgul as responsible for a “struggle of contraries”. In *The Return of the King* the narrator describes the Nâzgul, one of Sauron’s creatures, as follows:

[The Nâzgul] sat a shape, black-mantled, huge and threatening. A crown of steel he bore, but between rim and robe naught was there to see, save only a deadly gleam of eyes: the Lord of the Nazgûl. To the air he had returned, summoning his steed ere the darkness failed, and now he was come again, bringing ruin, *turning hope to despair, and victory to death*. A great black mace he wielded. (108)

If we were asked to choose the clearest example of the opposition between death and hope in the novel, there is no doubt that it is the scene in which Gilraen, Aragorn’s mother, tells his son about her death: “*Ónen i-Estel Edain*³, *ú-chebin estel anim*” (*Return of the King* 349)⁴. These words mean that Gilraen has given up all hope she had to the Edain and that she dies precisely because no hope remains in her soul.

³ Men of the West

⁴ “I gave hope to the Dúnedain. I have kept no hope for myself” (Translation as in *The Return of the King*. Directed by Peter Jackson, New Line Cinema, 2003)

2.3. The Origins: The conception of Death and Immortality in *The Silmarillion*: Men versus Elves

In order to understand better the role of Death and Immortality in *The Lord of the Rings* we think it is necessary to expand our study to the rest of Tolkien's *Legendarium*. As we stated before, the story told in the novel happened during the Third Age of Arda, but prior to it there were two more ages, the First Age and the Second Age. During these periods, the creatures that appear in *The Lord of the Rings* were created and their immense power grew as Sauron was gaining more strength and domination over Men, Elves, and other Middle Earth creatures. We will now focus exclusively on this creational event and on the role played by Men and Elves in the beginnings of Arda and how their death and the desire of immortality constitutes an important theme in Tolkien's entire mythology.

2.3.1. The nature of Elves

The Elves are the eldest of the Children of Ilúvatar. In Cuiviénen (from Quenya, "Water of Awakening") they "rose from the sleep of Ilúvatar; and while they dwelt yet silent by Cuiviénen their eyes beheld first of all things the stars of heaven" (*The Silmarillion* 18). Eru Ilúvatar, the "God" of Tolkien's mythology, gave them the fate of being immortal, which means that their bodies do not age. Nevertheless, they can still be killed in the war (for example, Glorfindel dies defending Gondolin) or they can also die because of exhaustion and loneliness (as it happened to Arwen after Aragorn's death in Appendix A of *The Lord of the Rings*). Just like Men, whom we will analyze below in this paper, Elves have a physical body and a spiritual soul, but, unlike Men, theirs are both material; the former is immortal and the latter is "mortal". In Davis' words, "Elvish bodies can grow weary or be hurt so that they can't sustain life. But when they do, elvish souls remain 'within the circles of the world'." (*The Lord of the Rings and Philosophy* 128). This means that if Arda disappears, both the body and the soul will vanish together because, as we have just said, the Elves' soul is material as well as Arda.

When elves die within Arda, their body does not leave the earth but they "go" to the Halls of Mandos until Arda vanishes (for example, Fëanor's mother, Miriel, in *the Silmarillion*) or

until they are reincarnated (for example, Glorfindel, who was killed, as we have mentioned before, in Gondolin and reappeared later saving Frodo from the Nazgûl in *The Lord of the Rings*). This process of reincarnation is supposed to happen only once per elf, as there are no examples of double reincarnation within Tolkien's mythology.

2.3.2. The nature of Men

On the other hand, we have the Followers (also named the Secondborn), as Men are called in Tolkien's *Legendarium*, because of being the Second Children of Eru. They are the ones "destined to inherit and rule Middle Earth" (Tolkien Gateway). This race is mortal, which means that their bodies die after some time living in Arda, and varies according to the human race they belong to (for example, Númenóreans, Kings of Men among the rest -like Aragorn- live in general more than the average of Middle Earth ones (for a more detailed explanation of the island of Númenor and the men that live there, see the section "The Second Fall of Men.") Nevertheless, unlike Elves, their souls are eternal even after Arda's end, so they will remain forever, as the Christian tradition defends, near God.

2.3.3. Elves and Men's Debate Concerning Death and Immortality

As we have stated before, Death and Immortality are human concerns that inevitably appear to some extent, in the writings of nearly every author, as questions like "What comes after Death?" are inherent to human nature. Tolkien wanted to express these concerns as a continuous debate between Men and Elves about Death and Immortality, emphasizing how either class of creatures faces these issues. Their differing perspectives with regard to their own deaths make them wish to belong to the other race in order to experiment its way of dying. In other words, Men were jealous of Elves because these have a long-durable body and can enjoy life for much longer than they actually enjoy it being Men. Elves, on the other hand, want to be Men because, as they have a mortal but long-standing body, their soul is also mortal and will disappear and be forgotten once Arda vanishes. This difference between these two races appears as a philosophical

dilemma. If we could decide between being a Man or an Elf, what would we, Men, as we are, desire to be?

In his writings after *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien considered seriously changing this conception of the different fates of Men and Elves' bodies and souls. As a religious man throughout his whole life, Tolkien knew that the soul of Men, as one of the Children of God, is released when Jesus dies and comes back to life. Therefore, in Tolkien's *Legendarium*, while Elves are, as well as Men, the Children of God in his mythology, why should their souls have to disappear together with Arda instead of being released as well as Men's ones? It may have been more logical that both Elves and Men had mortal bodies and eternal souls, but Tolkien always preferred applicability over allegory, and built his mythology at a time when he did not yet resort to the Christian religion as an explanation for his original body-soul conception: the one that features prominently in *The Hobbit* and in *The Lord of the Rings*.

This is why Christopher, the son of the author of the *Legendarium* and the editor of his father's notes regarding the inception of his mythology, decided not to include this view in *The Silmarillion*, but rather in his father's well-known, yet not studied in depth, *History of Middle Earth* collection, more specifically in the 10th volume, *Morgoth's Ring*. There, Christopher included a debate –written by his father- between a wise woman, Andreth, and an elf, Finrod, concerning their deaths and the origin of the differences between their different ways of dying. We will summarize these ideas when we talk about Death, Immortality, and Fall below in this paper.

3. THE CONCEPT OF “FALL” IN TOLKIEN’S MYTHOLOGY

In one of his letters, number 131 to be more precise, Tolkien claimed that “there cannot be any ‘story’ without a fall—all stories are ultimately about the fall—at least not for human minds as we know them and have them” (*Letters* 147). Tolkien’s *fairy stories*, as they are, cannot be an exception. In this section, we will analyze the role that Death and the desire for Immortality play in the Fall of both Children of Eru -Elves and Men- due to their mutual jealousy over each other’s desirable mortal fate. Against the backdrop of both races’ temptation (ultimately succumbed to) to rebel against Eru Ilúvatar’s desire for each of them, we will be showing why Death, Immortality and Fall are intimately related.

3.1. Rings and Fall

The Lord of the Rings is basically about the need to destroy the One Ring, created by Sauron in the First Age in order to rule the rest of them (the ones of Elves, Dwarfs, and Men). The first words of the novel, which are part of a poem, make it explicit from the start:

Three Rings for the Elven-kings under the sky,
Seven for the Dwarf-lords in their halls of stone,
Nine for Mortal Men doomed to die,
One⁵ for the Dark Lord on his dark throne
In the Land of Mordor where the Shadows lie.
One Ring to *rule them all*, One Ring to *find them*,
One Ring to *bring them all* and in the darkness *bind them*
In the Land of Mordor where the Shadows lie
(*The Fellowship of the Ring* 1; my italics)

The One Ring was forged thanks to the creation of the Elves’ rings. But why did the Elves create them? Sauron tricked them in such a way that they contributed to their own fall. For a moment he hid his maliciousness and said to the Elves:

[W]herefore should Middle-earth remain for ever desolate and dark, whereas the Elves could make it as fair as Eressëa, nay even as Valinor? And since you have not returned thither, as you might, I perceive that you love this Middle-earth, as do I. Is it not then our task to labour together for its enrichment, and for the raising of all the Elven kindreds that wander here untaught to the height of that

⁵ The One Ring

power and knowledge which those have who are beyond the Sea? (*The Silmarillion* 356)

Sauron knows that the Elves' weakness is their desire of infinite wisdom, so he urges them to create something that could stop time and "help" them achieve their goal. As explained in *The Silmarillion*, "the Elven-rings Sauron most desired to possess them, for those who had them in their keeping could *ward off the decays of time* and *postpone the weariness of the world*" (*The Silmarillion* 357; my italics). To understand Sauron's desire to stop time, it is worth remembering that this character has the same nature and fate as the Elves, that is, his body and soul are bound with Arda and they will disappear with it.

Here the readers of *The Silmarillion* may ask themselves: is Sauron's desire negative in itself? If we think about it objectively, it is not. But Tolkien did have a negative point of view on this. A Catholic Christian (like Tolkien was) will argue that by building the Rings, Sauron and the Elves are being selfish; they are only acting for their own benefit and they are rebelling against the creation of the Divine Being of Arda, the One who created them, Eru. They want their longevity to become true immortality; if Arda does not disappear, Sauron and the Elves will not die with it.

After tricking the Elves, who taught him the art of ring-building, as Tolkien wrote, "secretly Sauron made One Ring to rule all the others, and their power was bound up with it, to be subject wholly to it and to last only so long as it too should last" (*The Silmarillion* 356). This means that Sauron, as well as the Elves, could be immortal if his Ring is not destroyed, and the Evil will remain eternally in Arda. But Sauron did not reach his objective; the three Elves' Rings were not affected by the power of the One Ring, and the power of Narya, Galadriel's ring, was restricted to Lorien; that is why Frodo wonders why time is much slower there than in other Middle Earth lands (*The Fellowship of the Ring* 470).

Apart from Elves, Men also fall in the works of Tolkien because of the Rings, which play a very important role in this Fall as well. As we said above, Sauron tricked the Elves and forced them to teach him how to forge the magical rings, and he secretly made the One Ring, capable of ruling the rest of them. Sauron captured the sixteen rings that Elves made and gave nine to powerful kings of Men from Númenor and Easterling (*Tolkien Gateway*), among other Middle

Earth realms, because they were anxious to delay their death forever and become immortal. Due to the power of the rings, they reached “immortality” (actually, an intermediate state in which they were neither alive nor dead, and their desire died because of their agony at being trapped in the middle of life and death) and became the ringwraiths, also named *Nazgûl* (from black speech *Naz* “ring” and *gûl* “wraiths”). Tolkien describes them in the *Silmarillion* as follows:

Men proved easier to ensnare [than Elves]. Those who used the Nine Rings became mighty in their day, kings, sorcerers, and warriors of old. They obtained glory and great wealth, yet it turned to their undoing. They had, as it seemed, *unending life, yet life became unendurable to them*. They could walk, if they would, unseen by all eyes in this world beneath the sun, and they could see things in worlds invisible to mortal men; but too often they beheld only the phantoms and delusions of Sauron. And one by one, sooner or later, according to their native strength and to the good or evil of their wills in the beginning, they fell under the thralldom of the ring that they bore and under the domination of the One, which was Sauron’s.

And they became for ever invisible save to him that wore the Ruling Ring, and they entered into the realm of shadows. The Nazgûl were they, the Ringwraiths, the Enemy’s most terrible servants; darkness went with them, and *they cried with the voices of death*. (*The Silmarillion* 358; my italics)

In *The Lord of the Rings*, these creatures were sent by Sauron to the Shire riding black horses in order to steal the One Ring from Frodo, but they were avoided by the hobbits until one of them hurt Frodo in Weathertop. After that, in the Ford of Bruinen, the water of the river killed their horses but not their riders, who came back to Mordor and were sent again to fight in the War of the Ring on huge black winged shadows. In the words of Gandalf, “[Nazgûl’s] horses must have perished and without them they are crippled. But the Ringwraiths themselves cannot be so easily destroyed.” (*The Fellowship of the Ring* 273); these words mean that Gandalf knew that the *Nâzgûl* were not mortal creatures. In *The Return of the King*, Éowyn, disguised as Dernhelm, defeated the Witch-king and, with him, the rest of the Nazgûl came back definitely to Mordor to finally disappear with Sauron after the ring was destroyed.

3.2. The Athrabeth Finrod ah Andreth: A Debate on Death and Immortality

After the analysis of the role that the magical Rings play in the Fall of Elves and Men, we will focus our attention on the origins of the mortal nature of Men in Tolkien’s *Legendarium*. “The first fall of Man”, as Tolkien claims in the already mentioned Letter 131 to Milton Waldman, “nowhere appears” (*Letters* 147), but in the tenth volume of “The History of Middle Earth”

collection, entitled *Morgoth's Ring*, in which, among other stories that Tolkien wrote throughout his life, he proposed an alternative point of view to the traditional way of presenting the Elves' death (that the Elves' body and soul should remain within Arda until its vanishing). According to Christopher Tolkien, editor of the series, this was written after *The Lord of the Rings*. From this we can deduce that the characters' deaths that are narrated in this novel and also in *The Hobbit* were seen in the traditional framework of reference instead of the one that features in the debate that we are going to analyze next.

The story reminds us of Plato's dialogues in the sense that it is basically a conversation between an elf and a woman in which the former, Finrod, wants the latter, Andreth, to tell him why Eru (God) wanted Men to be mortal and not immortal like Elves are indeed. The answer to this question is that Men offended God in such a way that He changed their immortal nature to a mortal one. Andreth tells Finrod that "Men are not by nature short-lived, but have become so through the malice of the Lord of the Darkness whom they do not name... 'Death was imposed upon us'. And behold! the fear of it is with us always, and we flee from it forever as the hare from the hunter" (*Morgoth's Ring* 310), in this way confirming that Men were created to be immortal by nature, and Morgoth in some way "stole" their immortality and thus this race became mortal. Finrod seems not to be convinced by the wise woman's words; he knows that the only one who can grab the immortality from Men is Eru, the One, and not one of his servants, like Morgoth, who did not receive enough power from God to do it. He explains this very clearly in his reply to the woman:

Nay, Andreth, the mind darkened and distraught; to bow and yet to loathe; to flee and yet not to reject; to love the body and yet scorn it, the carrion-disgust: these things may come from the Morgoth, indeed. But to doom the deathless to death, from father unto son, and yet to leave to them the memory of an inheritance taken away, and the desire for what is lost: could the Morgoth do this? No, I say. And for that reason I said that if your tale is true, then all in Arda is vain, from the pinnacle of Oiolosse to the uttermost abyss. For I do not believe your tale. None could have done this save the One.

'Therefore I say to you, Andreth, what did ye do, ye Men, long ago in the dark? How did ye anger Eru? For otherwise all your tales are but dark dreams devised in a Dark Mind. Will you say what you know or have heard?' (*Morgoth's Ring* 314)

Andreth, as the tale goes on, does not find a convincing answer to Finrod's question, but Tolkien, in his commentary on this story, located just before the debate, "reproduces" it in the benefit of his readers just like Adanel, the woman who raised Andreth, knew it. There we find out about the steps of the first Men in Arda, before their death. Eru was revealed in their souls as a light that encouraged them to learn and explore the world in which they were going to live from the moment they were created. As Men are impatient and unsatisfied creatures (they want to know everything in a little time), they started to ask their God about a many areas of knowledge, but Eru did not answer all the questions that Men asked Him. Instead, Eru wanted them to look for the answers by themselves and enjoy the process of learning, so that they could become wise on their own. In Tolkien's words: "[Eru's] Voice had spoken to us [Men], and we had listened. The Voice said: 'Ye are my children. I have sent you to dwell here. In time ye will inherit all this Earth, but first ye must be children and learn. Call on me and I shall hear; for I am watching over you'" (*Morgoth's Ring* 346).

It is then when a mysterious character in the image of a Man appears. As he is more beautiful than them, he tells them that he can give them all they need in order to be satisfied. They accept his offer without thinking much, and finally become "addicted" to this character and reject all that their inner voice (the Good one) said to them in the beginning.

This beautiful creature whom Men adores at this point tells them about Darkness, and he defines himself as "[i]ts Master". He tells Men that he will protect them from it (*Morgoth's Ring* 347). Eru's Voice reminds them that the creature they are addicted to is, in fact, Darkness itself, and urges them to go away from it. But Men continue rejecting their inner voices and loving the Voice of Darkness: "Thou art the One Great, and we are Thine" (*Morgoth's Ring* 348).

As time passes by, the character that represents the Voice of Darkness commands Men to give him gifts in exchange for their "protection", and they start to call him "their Master" (*Morgoth's Ring* 348). The consequence is that the Voice of Light is never heard again in Men's souls, save once, when it says: "Ye [Men] have abjured Me, but ye remain Mine. I gave you life. Now it shall be shortened, and each of you in a little while shall come to Me, to learn who is your Lord: the one ye worship, or I who made him" (*Morgoth's Ring* 348). From then on Men become mortal creatures (death is Darkness, and Men's 'Master' will not protect them from it

anymore). Thus Elves start to envy Men, calling their Death ‘Ilúvatar’s Gift’, because they want their souls to remain immortal like do Men’s ones after dying. This short story is a myth that Tolkien created to explain the Fall of Men, but he deleted it from *The Silmarillion* for being “explicitly Christian” (*Biography* 99).

Going back again to the “Athrabeth Finrod ah Andreth”, Finrod believes that the story of the Fall of Men has been manipulated by Melkor, and says to Andreth:

Beware of the chaff with your corn, Andreth! For it may be deadly: lies of the Enemy that out of envy will breed hate. Not all the voices that come out of the darkness speak truth to those minds that listen for strange news. But who did you this hurt? Who imposed death upon you? Melkor, it is plain that you would say, or whatever name you have for him in secret. For you speak of death and his shadow, as if these were one and the same; and as if to escape from the Shadow was to escape also from Death. But these two are not the same, Andreth. So I deem, or death would not be found at all in this world which he did not design but Another. Nay, death is but the name that we give to something that he has tainted, and it sounds therefore evil; but untainted its name would be good. (*Morgoth’s Ring* 311)

With these words, Finrod means that the word “Death” in itself does not have a negative connotation, but it is Melkor who, relating Death to Darkness and Shadow, associates it with negative words as suffering, pain, and loss, to cite some. Death is in itself a *voyage* from life to eternity, as Aragorn explains to Arwen when he is about to die in Appendix A of *The Lord of the Rings*: “In sorrow we must go, but not in despair. Behold! We are not bound for ever to the circles of the world, and beyond them is more than memory. Farewell!” (*The Return of the King* 350)

This sub-created story is a reflection of Men’s death in the real world. Humans believe that Death is a punishment, as we associate the term to others like shadow, emptiness, and darkness. Andreth tells Finrod that it is Melkor who has changed the immortal nature of Men into a mortal one, but Finrod is right: Melkor is not God –this is Eru indeed- and He is the one who punished Men and condemned them to be only “hosts” in Arda, as we have said before, because of their rebellion against the Divine plans.

3.3. The *Atrabêth*: Númenor and the Second Fall of Men

As with the first Men, who were tempted by Evil to avoid dying (see the chapter on the debate between Finrod and Andreth above), there was another Fall of Men in Tolkien's mythology told in the *Atrabêth*, also known as "The Fall of Númenor". This story belongs to *The Silmarillion*, and in it Tolkien tells the readers that those Men who helped the Elves when they fought against Sauron were doomed to be the Kings of Men, and they were able to live longer than the men from Middle Earth (while still being mortal). They lived at Númenor, a star-shaped island located between the Middle Earth (to the East of the island) and the Undying Lands (to the West of the island). The Valar, the immortal creatures who created the world known in Tolkien's mythology, lived in those lands, and prohibited Men to sail there.

It may be worth the while to briefly review the storyline of this episode for the sake of completing our overview. One day, Sauron is caught and enslaved in Númenor, and there he finds a plan to trick Men again. He tells them that Eru is not their God, but himself, and so he can protect from the Shadow those who follow him (as he did with Men in their first Fall). Those Men who decide to follow Sauron realize little by little that their lives are getting shorter and shorter, but they continue to adore their supposed "God". At the end of the story, Ar-Pharazôn, the last king of Númenor, seeing that Men's lives are decreasing in length, plans to sail to the Undying Lands and fight against the Valar in order to rule them and force them to return the "immortal" nature of Men. In the words of Tolkien:

But the years passed, and the King felt the shadow of death approach, as his days lengthened; and he was filled with fear and wrath. Now came the hour that Sauron had prepared and long had awaited. And Sauron spoke to the King, saying that his strength was now so great that he might think to have his will in all things, and be subject to no command or ban. And he said: 'The Valar have possessed themselves of the land where there is no death; and they lie to you concerning it, hiding it as best they may, because of their avarice, and their fear lest the Kings of Men should wrest from them the deathless realm and rule the world in their stead. And though, doubtless, the gift of life unending is not for all, but only for such as are worthy, being men of might and pride and great lineage, yet against all Justice is it done that this gift, which is his due, should be withheld from the King of Bangs, Ar-Pharazôn, mightiest of the sons of Earth, to whom Manwë alone can be compared, if even he. But great kings do not brook denials, and take what is their due.' (*The Silmarillion* 121)

Ar-Pharazôn sails to the West with his army, but the Valar do not fight against them. Instead, they call Eru, the One, and punish Numenóreans by sinking the island in which they are living. Those Men who escape from Númenor will have descendants, and these will, later on, join forces to form the kingdom of Gondor during the Third Age. The last Numenórean to survive is Aragorn, a central character in the story told in *The Lord of the Rings*).

Now that we have contextualized the story by summarizing its plot, let us analyze the role played in it by Death, Immortality and Fall. Although Númenoreans have a longer life than Middle Earth Men, as we have just said, they also have to deal face to face with Death. In time Sauron realizes the weakness of Men: their desire to be Immortal as the Valar. It is Men's envy of these creatures (stirred by Sauron in his own benefit) that causes the former's lives to be ever shorter until Ar-Pharazôn finally decides to do something against Eru, whom he deems responsible for their mortal nature. The reason why Numenóreans disobey their God and sail to the West is that they want to conquer the Undying Lands in order to try to "change" the natural tendency to die into an immortal fate, the same as supposedly enjoyed by the First Men in the beginning of times. Sauron also wants Men to defeat the Valar; since he is not a true immortal creature as the Valar are, but, like Elves, will disappear with the end of Arda. Being peaceful creatures, the Valar do not fight against Ar-Pharazôn and his army. Instead, and in order to punish them, they simply call Eru, the One, who, at the end of the story, decides to sink the island and kill all the long-living Numenóreans. To sum up, then, the Second Fall of Men is similar to the first one because they heed and follow their desires and refuse to accept the designs of their real God, Eru.

CONCLUSION

Throughout this paper, we have analyzed the concepts of "death", "immortality" and "Fall in a very specific context: the life and works of J. R. R. Tolkien. As we have explained, Tolkien had to overcome his parents' death in his childhood, and this fact left an important mark later in his writings. In addition to this, Tolkien was a Catholic during his whole life, and, although his *Legendarium* is set in a time supposedly before the birth of Jesus Christ, the Cristian morality can be felt in every passage of his stories. From this perspective, Tolkien's view of Death is not negative as such, as we have often highlighted, but rather underscores the idea that for Men, it is

a way liberating the soul (Eternity) after the body stops living. The Elves, the other fantastic creatures whose death has been analyzed here, do not die as Men do, but they are bound to the Arda: once it disappears, both the body and the soul of Elves will disappear with it too. These different natures that Men and Elves have to face lead them to envy each other, and this situation conceals a philosophical debate, which needs further investigation: would we, from our human perspective, prefer to be Men or Elves?

In the works of Tolkien, the desire for immortality leads both Elves and Men to disobey their God (Eru Ilúvatar in Tolkien's mythology) and, as a consequence, they fall in one way or another. Throughout this paper we have analyzed the role that the magical rings have in the Fall of the Elves through their egocentrism, which leads them to build those rings to stop time and thus Arda's disappearance; the relation between Darkness and Death as the cause of the First Fall of Men due to Melkor's cleverness at finding Men's weakness (reported in the Debate of Finrod and Andreth); and the Fall of Númenor, where the Second Fall of Men is told, in which Melkor showed again his maliciousness against creatures that are good by nature, namely Men.

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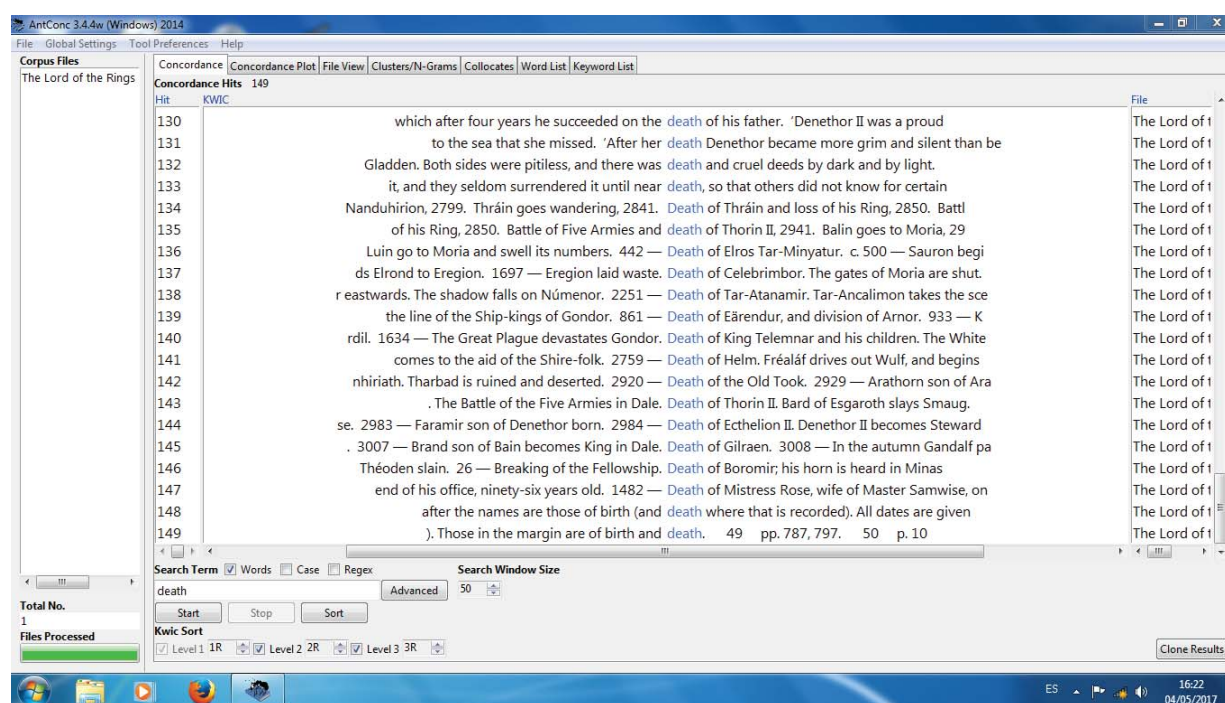
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APPENDIX

As we stated in the chapter “Death and Immortality in *The Lord of the Rings*”, in order to show (also in a quantitative way) that the topic of Death is important throughout the whole novel, we have conducted a modest linguistic analysis in which we used the *AntConc* program to show how frequently Tolkien used that word in *The Lord of the Rings*. After compiling the text in .txt format and loading it into the software, we searched for the word “death” in the Concordance tool, and we obtained the following result:



Here it can be seen that the word “death” appears 149 times throughout the novel, which has 500,000 words; this means that the frequency is 0,0003%, a high percentage if we compare it with the use of this word by an English speaker’s in everyday speech. This indicates clearly that the presence of death in the novel is highly spread, and also that Tolkien was right when he considered the theme of Death in many of his letters as the most important one in the novel and, we can add, in his works.