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Eucatastrophe in *The Lord of the Rings*

Kirsten Setzkorn

And they all lived happily ever after...” It is a ubiquitous phrase that over time has come to reflect the quintessential ending of fantasy stories and fairy tales. To imagine a story without this concluding phrase is nearly as difficult as imagining a narrative unfold without the opening words “A long, long time ago”. Yet, as a reader, the joy of the happy ending is often sweeter than the excitement of the tale’s beginning. Why does the happy ending, the victory snatched from the jaws of defeat, resonate so deeply? One of the greatest authors of the modern age, J. R. R. Tolkien, offers an answer to this question in the conclusion of his masterful work of fantasy, *The Lord of the Rings*.

The Lord of the Rings is a story of epic scale. It has a most unlikely hero, not a man of great deed and renown, but a simple hobbit of small stature named Frodo who hails from the quaintly insular and idyllic Shire. The unwitting recipient of a ring of great evil, Frodo learns that he holds the One Ring of Power forged long ago by the Dark Lord Sauron. Possession of the One Ring is all that stands between Sauron and the strength and power to destroy Middle-Earth. Rather than give into the temptation to use the power of the Ring for himself, Frodo and a small band of companions undertake a perilous quest to destroy the Ring in the one place it can be unmade, the fires of the volcanic Mount Doom where it was forged in the very heart of Sauron’s dark domain. The fate of all free peoples of Middle-Earth depends on the success of this quest.

A Valley of Shadow

In the climax of the *Lord of Rings*, Frodo and his companion, Samwise, must traverse the desolate wasteland of Mordor to reach Mount Doom. Utterly exhausted from months of treacherous journeying, it will take all the strength that is left within them to complete the task. A sea of Orcs, monstrous servants of the Dark Lord, stand between these two hobbits and the belching fires that will destroy the Ring.

In Mordor, Frodo and Sam find themselves in a literal and metaphorical valley of shadow. As Frodo moves deeper into Sauron's domain, "the growing weight of the Ring," writes Tolkien, becomes "a burden on the body and a torment to his mind." In their struggles, even the ever-hopeful Sam begins to realize that even if they destroy the Ring, they will not survive the quest or ever return home to the Shire.

As Frodo and Sam reach the heart of Mount Doom, all hope seems to fail. Just as Frodo is about to destroy the Ring, he succumbs to its seductive power and claims the Ring as his own. At that same moment, the miserable creature Gollum, who once served as a guide to Frodo and Sam but then betrayed them in an attempt to take the Ring for himself, reappears. Driven by his unquenchable desire for the Ring, he had stalked the hobbits across Mordor and finally caught them in this most vulnerable moment. An intense struggle between Frodo and Gollum ensues, culminating in Gollum biting the Ring from Frodo's finger. As Gollum pauses for a moment to admire his precious prize, he slips and falls into the flames below. The Ring is destroyed! An unexpected turn of events in a moment of utter darkness leads to the unmaking of the Ring and the undoing of Sauron.

Relief and Rescue

The Ring now gone, Sauron's power crumbles. His armies flee in terror, his high towers topple, and his mighty ramparts fall. For a moment, Sam and Frodo feel "only joy, great joy" at the lifting of this terrible burden and the relief of knowing their quest is at long last finished. But their joy is diminished as they seek shelter on imploding slopes of Mount Doom.

They are stranded, alone, and awaiting death. Frodo and Sam collapse from exhaustion, believing that their story has ended, not knowing their delivery from danger is close at hand. The wizard Gandalf, with the help of the Great Eagles, rescues Frodo and Sam from the mountainside, and they fly to safety.

When Sam awakes, he is met with many happy surprises. He first realizes that he and Frodo have survived. At his bedside, he sees that Gandalf, who he had long thought dead, is actually alive! He cries, "I thought you were dead! But then I thought I was dead myself! Is everything sad going to come untrue?" Indeed, many sad things do come untrue in the conclusion to *The Lord of the Rings*. The Ring is destroyed, and the ultimate evil of Sauron is defeated. Frodo and Sam survive the quest to be reunited with their friends and companions. They even witness the return of the king, the coronation of Aragorn as the long-lost heir of the kingdom of Gondor.

Eucatastrophe

In the climax of the *Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien orchestrates numerous unexpected victories that elicit hope and joy not only in the characters, but vicariously in the reader as well. The destruction of the Ring when all hope seemed lost, and the miraculous rescue of Sam and Frodo as Mount Doom collapsed around them, represent what Tolkien has coined a "eucatastrophe", or a "good catastrophe". Just as a catastrophe is an unexpected disaster, a eucatastrophe is a sudden joyful turn of events. It is a miraculous turning of the tides that lifts the readers' hearts and makes them catch their breath. It is the happy ending.

The eucatastrophe is a literary device suited particularly well to fantasy and fairy stories, according to Tolkien, but it also points to a truth far greater than the plot of a story. As he explains in his essay "On Fairy Stories," Tolkien believes the eucatastrophe in literature can serve as "a far-off gleam or echo of evangelium in the real world." In fantasy, the joy of the happy ending and the characters' miraculous defeat of evil can reflect the greater joy of the real, true story of the Gospel. While the joy of the

eucatastrophe in fiction is only a faint and finite representation of the joy of the good news of the Gospel, it reminds the reader that in the end evil will not win. It reminds the reader that when all hope seems lost, God is still at work to accomplish His sovereign plan.

In his letters, Tolkien points to the Resurrection as the great eucatastrophe in human and redemptive history. What at first appears to be an utter defeat, Jesus' death on the cross, becomes an ultimate victory over death in His Resurrection. In the Gospels, after Jesus' crucifixion, the disciples and the women who followed Jesus are weeping and mourning over His death. But as they approach His tomb in sorrow, their mourning is suddenly turned to great joy as they learn that the tomb is empty and He has risen from the dead (Matthew 28:8, Mark 16:10-11)! A skilled author like Tolkien, inspired by the eucatastrophic joy of the Gospel, can craft moments of lesser eucatastrophe in their fictional works that elicit joy in their reader because they provide a glimpse into the true joy of the Gospel.