

Truth and Reality in Tolkien's Middle Earth

The Role of Fantasy in the Christian's Life

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Abstract

Fantasy literature can express truths found in the physical world and in the Christian faith. J.R.R. Tolkien's trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings* is one example of fantasy that does so. In his essay, "On Fairy-Stories" Tolkien introduces four traits of fantasy: subcreation, recovery, escape, and consolation. Beginning with a defense of fantasy, this paper identifies the presence of these traits in the trilogy and how they correlate truth between the Primary and Secondary Worlds. A careful examination of how Tolkien's worldview is evident in his works follows with a detailed analysis of the portrayal of human nature shown most through the creature Gollum. Finally, a connection between consolation and the beauty of the Gospel reveals how fantasy can attest to the joy of Christianity and how Tolkien's world is sweetened by the Gospel.

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The Role of Fantasy in the Christian's Life

Literature that mirrors the real world and echoes the reader's experience has the greatest impact. The poet Horace affirms so when he addresses writers, "nature first shapes us within for any state of fortune—gives us pleasure or drives us to anger or casts us down to the ground with grievous sorrow and pains us—and then expresses the emotions through the medium of the tongue" (124). In addition to its artistic quality, a meaningful and memorable story contains truth that pertains to the real world.

The Christian reader should be strongly interested in the portrayal of truth in literature, which reveals a culture and a person's perception of reality. Gene Edward Veith urges Christians to be well read and involved in the literate world. He articulates that a good story can include sin as long as it depicts its consequences. To reject any book that describes sinful acts would be to reject the Bible (Veith 33). Veith tersely puts it: "to depict sin is not necessarily to advocate sin" (34). Man is fallen and thus needs a Savior, so a book that accurately illustrates the depths of man's depravity supports a life truth. It is a small wonder then that the best books and most lasting ones are the ones that are the most realistic to life, man, and nature.

These books are filled with one or more of the traits Paul mentions when urging the Philippians, "finally brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things" (*New International Version*, Phil. 4.8). Some Christians interpret this passage to imply that fiction, what the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines as "a thing that is invented or untrue," is not appropriate because it dispenses lies.

But a lie is a deception of reality. If the audience is aware that the art of storytelling is taking place, they are not being deceived. When a story is used to misrepresent the truth with the intent to fool somebody, then an issue of honesty and integrity arises. Fiction in the proper context is a piece of art. Fiction in an improper context is a lie.

Like a painting, a musical number, and a movie, literature is an art form that does not merit praise or condemnation for its medium but rather for its content. No one offers a greater model for a good story than the best storyteller Himself—Jesus Christ. Many of His stories include characters and concepts that His Jewish audience at the time of His earthly ministry could connect and were familiar with, and in so doing, were able to grasp His greater purpose behind the stories—to give them a piece of truth about His Kingdom and Person. Jesus shows that a story can be an effective medium for teaching truth. Beneath genres, plots, characters, and settings, there always lies a theme, and either the theme promotes truth or encourages a lie.

For those reasons, a fictional story can convey truth such as virtuous principles, realistic depictions of nature and humanity, and morals. Most Christians would agree with such a statement. However, regarding the fantasy genre—when fairies and wizards, elves and monsters, and even fictional gods are introduced, some believers cringe. At first a world of dragons and talking horses does not seem realistic to day to day living and therefore can be seen as a misrepresentation of truth. After all, Jesus uses familiar metaphors in His stories. He refers to objects His original Jewish audience would encounter every day. But fantasy is not divorced from reality. Veith asserts that “fantasy can function as a mirror, perhaps a fun-house mirror, whose exaggerations can help us notice what we normally would ignore” (118). In fantasy, theme, characterization, and

the structure itself reveal truth about the reality of both the physical and spiritual worlds despite the magical and other worldly elements present.

When speaking of food sacrificed to idols and personal convictions, Paul tells the Corinthian church, “‘Everything is permissible’—but not everything is beneficial. ‘Everything is permissible’—but not everything is constructive” (1 Cor. 10.23). This warning applies to all areas of life, for Christ followers are to give glory to God in everything they do (1 Cor. 10.31). Therefore, a person with a biblical worldview must ask the following questions: 1) Is fantasy beneficial to the Christian journey? 2) Why would any Christian want to imagine a fictional world when reality contains abundant hope due to God’s beauty and the joy of the Gospel? 3) Shouldn’t Christians find more practical uses of their time like serving people and building God’s kingdom? Each of these questions can be resolved, and the disparity between the fantastical and true worlds removed after shedding some light on the matter.

J.R.R. Tolkien addresses fantasy’s benefits in his essay “On Fairy Stories.” In it, he defends the genre by claiming that its purpose can be seen in four traits—recovery, subcreation, escape, and consolation, which always point back to truth found in the real world. First, recovery answers the second question above which asks why a Christian would want to imagine another world. Tolkien calls the real world the Primary World and the realm of faerie or fantasy he deems as the Secondary World (“On Fairy Stories” 68-73). He insists that an effective fantasy story will heighten the Primary World, not detract from it. He calls this process “recovery” (77). Recovery allows the person entering the realm of faerie to regain a clear picture of the Primary World. The fantastical subject allows that person to appreciate the familiar subject more. Tolkien elaborates:

Fantasy is made out of the Primary World, but a good craftsman loves his material . . . By the forging of Gram cold iron was revealed; by the making of Pegasus horses were ennobled; in the Trees of the Sun and Moon root and stock, flower and fruit are manifested in glory. (78)

In other words, fantasy has the potential to give a reader a new perspective about the real world through the imaginative depiction of a fictional one.

Next, subcreation exercises the God given gift of imagination. According to Janine Langan, imagination is an important tool for Christians. Imagination is a gift from God and what Langan calls “an act of hope” (65). Pope John Paul II affirms that “[imagination] stirs our hidden nostalgia for God” (qtd. in Langan 77). Since a Christian’s home is in Heaven, naturally that believer is drawn there through the imagination. A Christian’s imagination demonstrates how that person views God (72). Langan links the loss of imagination to Christian apathy (63). A world without imagination would be boring and tedious, which is the opposite of how God imagined it and designed it. The world began with God’s imagination, and as creatures made in His image, humans share His imaginative trait in a lesser degree. Tolkien calls subcreation the art of imagining and creating a Secondary World and claims that the faerie realm is not just for children but for all humanity (“On Fairy-Stories” 68). He breaks off into poetry:

Though all the crannies of the world we filled with Elves and Goblins,
though we dared to build Gods and their houses out of dark and light, and
sowed the seed of dragons—‘twas our right . . .we make still by the law in
which we’re made. (74)

Finally, both escape and consolation teach the readers about their earthly responsibilities and their heavenly hope. Fantasy offers escape from the ugliness of the Primary World (80). Tolkien is initially referring to the environmental toll that technological and scientific progress had left on England's countryside in his day. Fantasy provides a vicarious journey into lands untainted by man's intrusion, but the reader can also escape from limitations such as the inability to talk with animals, to fly and ultimately, to be immortal (84-85). Tolkien strongly emphasizes that proper escape should not lead the reader to deny the problems facing the real world or to ignore them indefinitely. On the contrary, the passing moments that readers escape into fantasy should revitalize their passion to change and impact the Primary World for good. Escape is not the same as desertion (79).

Then the third question concerning fantasy's impact on productivity is certainly valid. The realm of the imagination should not detract Christians from their earthly duties. In fact, it should do exactly the opposite. Spending too much time reading anything, despite its usefulness or practicality, or even taking part in a different private hobby at the cost of reaching out to others is falling short of God's calling. God wants His beloved children to enjoy life. In fact they should enjoy it all the more because of the hope they have. Leland Ryken argues that art and entertainment should be enjoyed for their own aesthetic qualities aside from any utilitarian purposes. After all, God created the wart hog and the Northern lights, neither of which has a practical use. Ryken points out that "[a] person with a Christian worldview has a reason to value enjoyment and the enlightened use of leisure time in ways that the human race at large does not" (149). Ryken echoes the poet Horace's point that art exists both to teach and delight others. In

The Screwtape Letters, C.S. Lewis uses the demon Screwtape to express his view on the purpose of pleasure. His evil character says, “Never forget that when we are dealing with any pleasure in its healthy and normal and satisfying form, we are, in a sense, on the Enemy’s [God’s] ground . . . it [pleasure] is His [God’s] invention, not ours” (Lewis 52). Of course Christians should certainly not shirk their responsibilities and relationships in life by putting their own pleasures before helping others, but there is a specific time and place for Christians to enjoy leisure time. When used properly, a good fantasy novel can further enrich one’s life.

While escape pinpoints earthly realities that need improvement, consolation, on the other hand, highlights the unspeakable joy in the Primary World. Tolkien best describes a happy ending as the story’s eucatastrophe or sudden good turn (85-6). When hope is faint and evil appears to have won, a sudden, unexpected incident occurs which turns the tides and brings about a joyous resolution. Therefore, the greatest truth fantasy offers is this realization of the happy ending, which is the Christian’s hope.

Nevertheless, fantasy is a genre, like any other genre, that can be used for a negative effect. Tolkien warns his readers, “Fantasy can, of course, be carried to excess. It can be ill done. It can be put to evil uses” (“On Fairy Stories” 75). To read too much fantasy and become consumed with other worlds and then in turn to forsake one’s duties in the real world is wrong. Tolkien goes on to explain how some authors invent stories of gods and then worship their gods. But he also adds that any good thing can be perverted and idolized (75). Fantasy stories are not to blame. The readers and writers are the ones responsible with what they do with this genre. It has the ability to portray truth or lies, to delight in faerie and the real world, or, by rejecting the Primary World, to despise both. It

is also true that if fantasy endorses such traits as greed, power, and witchcraft as advantageous to practice in reality, then its themes are corrupt. Discussing the importance of Christians as discerning readers, Veith writes, “Bad books can give us superficial gratification; good books can give us far deeper pleasure” (29).

Fantasy can provide such good books full of Christian truths and a biblical worldview that is always centered on the Gospel. Veith notes that “Christian authors in every age have used the writing styles common in their day to express the Christian faith” (xv). A story with a Christian worldview can give non-Christians a small taste of the joy of the Gospel, and it can strengthen brothers and sisters in Christ in their faith. However, the author does not have to be a Christian or does not need to have Christian principles underlying the story in order for it to be beneficial. Veith also argues, “Great works of literature may not always articulate an explicitly Christian worldview, but they will still usually be worth reading for their intrinsic merit and will often give unwitting testimony to God’s sovereignty over all of life” (28). There may be nuggets of truth that still inspire those of the faith or a mirroring of reality that God can use to impact the reader.

However, no one can properly enter fantasy if he or she does not accept the rationality of the Primary World. Debra Rogers affirms that “Without the discipline of realism, fantasy would be impossible” (n. pag.). A world where love is evil is irrational. Such themes in fantasy would relate to what Tolkien calls Morbid Delusion. He relays, “If men were ever in a state in which they did not want to know or could not perceive truth (facts or evidence), then Fantasy would languish until they were cured . . . Fantasy will perish, and become Morbid Delusion” (“On Fairy Stories” 75). Well done fantasy—whether it presents explicit doctrine, an implicit Christian worldview, or only a true

picture of the natural world—points to reality. Reality points to truth. Keeping the idea of reality and truth in mind, a careful look at Tolkien's masterpiece, *The Lord of the Rings*, will reveal how he effectively illustrates the benefits of fantasy within the genre's aesthetic and imaginative parameters.

J.R.R Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* need not be explicitly Christian in order to reveal truth about the natural world. However, evidence supports that at its core, its foundation is rooted in a Christian worldview. The way Tolkien deals with elements such as light and darkness, hope and despair, and the nature of man offers insights into the Christian life that are worth mentioning. Finally, Tolkien's implicit Christian worldview is illuminated by viewing his subcreated Middle Earth by ways of recovery, escape, and consolation.

The implications of light and darkness in Tolkien's world cannot be denied, and through recovery, truths about these motifs can be seen anew in the real world. In Middle Earth, light is more than a visual substance. It represents goodness and wholesomeness. The Oxford English Dictionary defines light as "the natural agent that stimulates sight and makes things visible." Tolkien applies sight not only to the visual sense but also to understanding. Where there is light, there is clarity and peace. When light is absent and only darkness abounds, confusion and fear reign. Shelob's lair exemplifies what Tolkien seeks to convey through these motifs. Tolkien paints a bleak picture for the hobbits as they enter her cave:

They walked as it were in a black vapour wrought of veritable darkness itself that, as it was breathed, brought blindness not only to the eyes but to the mind, so that even the memory of colours and for forms and of any

light faded out of thought. Night always had been, and always would be, and night was all. (*Towers* 702)

Tolkien often associates light with memory and life. It is only through the gift of Galadriel's phial that both Frodo and Sam survive the wicked Shelob's malice. Tolkien describes, "It flamed like a star that leaping from the firmament sears the dark air with intolerable light" (713). Later in Mordor, which is the darkest and vilest place on Middle Earth, Frodo and Sam find light and water, which gives them the extra boost they need to continue on. Tolkien could represent light and darkness in his writings because he knew the truth about them in the Primary World. Darkness is fear and blindness, not knowing what direction to take. There is real darkness in the world, but the Joy of the Gospel is that Christ came to penetrate it. Zechariah realized this when he prayed about the coming birth of Christ. He prophesies, "the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace" (Luke 1.78-79).

Light and hope are almost synonymous in Tolkien's world. Many readers like Rogers agree that the theme of hope is one of the main implicit truths of the story. After all, Aragorn's child-name is Estel, which means hope (n. pag.). Whenever light comes, hope is associated with it. For one, Aragorn fluctuates inwardly between hope and despair about the fate of his bond of love with the Lady Arwen. Tolkien reveals Aragorn's uncertainty when he describes, "His face was sad and stern because of the doom that was laid on him, and yet hope dwelt ever in the depths of his heart, from which mirth would arise at times like a spring from the rock" (*King* 341). Another example of this connection can be observed when Frodo and Sam notice the fallen head of the stone

king of Argonath. Beams from the sun rest on it and highlight a coronel of flowers on his brow. Frodo cries, “They cannot conquer forever!” (*Towers* 687). The victory of the Pelennor Fields is predicted when the wind changes and Mordor’s dark clouds blocking out the sun are blown away (*King* 112).

And the hope in the Ringbearer’s mission—in full knowledge of its chance of failure—motivates the rest of the members of the Fellowship. For example, in Mordor Sam encounters an internal struggle that mirrors Gollum’s earlier self debates. He argues, “It’s all quite useless . . . You are the fool, going on hoping and toiling” (*King* 216). Yet after regaining courage, he retorts, “I’ll get there, if I leave everything but my bones behind.” Committed resolve and seemingly futile hope are the determining factors that lead Frodo and Sam successfully to Mount Doom. In Middle Earth, Tolkien’s Christian worldview is seen most through what Ralph Wood calls, “its deep background and implicit hope” (1).

Tolkien’s worldview includes the hope of the life to come, but he also advocates stewardship of the earth and creation. Through escape into the lands of Lothlórien and Fangorn, Tolkien effectively shows his love for nature. The elven gardens conserve the environment while delighting the spirit in times of turmoil (Dickerson 101). Ents are proper stewards of the trees and plants and allow them to grow naturally (123). They want to keep the forest the way it is, unlike the Entwives who practice agriculture and horticulture (251). Yet regardless of interfering with growing things, the Entwives exhibit the same care for nature as the Ents do, and Treebeard grieves their estrangement. Tom Bombadil is one of the strangest characters of the trilogy and seems to have power over nature, yet unlike the evil wizard Saruman, he does not desire to dominate (22). Matthew

Dickerson and Jonathan Evans affirm that Bombadil has what they deem, “the desire to know and understand, but without the desire to manipulate” (21). In fact he is the only character the Ring does not affect. On the other hand, Saruman and the orcs destroy trees wantonly as do some people in the Primary World (124). And trolls, which are a mockery of the Ents, have no love for growing things but hide in the darkness of caves (126). Tolkien’s proper love for creation demonstrates the greater love he has for the Creator (252). By escaping into the fantastical forests uncorrupted by technology, readers can apply awareness and conservation to their practices in the Primary World (261-263).

Thus, these examples are consistent with a biblical worldview. Yet despite Tolkien’s worldview, he never preaches or expresses a denominational agenda in the trilogy (Rogers n. pag.). He does so because he believes allegory limits imagination (Smith 75). Tolkien also did not want readers to “mine” his Legendarium looking for hidden symbols of the Catholic faith (73). Catherine Madsen declares that Tolkien’s works exemplify natural religion only (n. pag.). Natural religion teaches about God or theism in general apart from divine revelation (n. pag.). Madsen asserts that it points to mountains rather than the Bible. In other words, she contends that Tolkien is only exerting a belief in a God, not specifically the message of Christ.

Madsen’s view is correct that one should not use *The Lord of the Rings* as a religious manual, but she is mistaken in saying that the novel only points to a general faith and that Tolkien did not wish his stories to lead others to Christian truth (n. pag.). What Madsen fails to realize is that the natural world already attests to the Gospel’s validity. Paul states, “For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what

has been made, so that men are without excuse” (Rom. 1.19). Therefore, even if Madsen is completely correct and Tolkien has no evangelical intentions, *The Lord of the Rings* would still convey truth because it reflects the natural world. What she calls the story’s magic is how it mirrors the wonder of God’s power through creation. However, Tolkien states in his letters that he is Catholic and his faith influences his works (Smith 73).

Thomas Smith argues that Tolkien’s story is Catholic in meditation, in savoring God’s goodness in virtues like what he calls, “nature, sacrifice, wisdom . . . death, and pilgrimage” (75-76).

Therefore, the fact that the gods of Middle Earth revert to the background in the *Lord of the Rings* in contrast to *The Silmarillion* and that the hobbits practice no religious observances, not even prayer (*Two Towers* 661), does not mean that the God of the Primary World is absent from Tolkien’s story. Wood affirms, “He makes the mythical world of Middle-earth non-religious, among other reasons, in order that we might see Christianity reflected in it more clearly if also indirectly” (4). Wood reasons that Tolkien would have wasted 1,200 pages of his novel by preaching a truth he could have simply done through the Bible itself (4). There is no better way of presenting the Gospel than through the story of Jesus alone, so if the novel’s only purpose was to point others to the Christian story then that is enough (4).

Although he couldn’t help but convey his worldview in whatever he did, Tolkien had other reasons for his subcreation. His first goal was to create an original myth for England and to present in his myth what Wood calls, “the highest virtues and traditions of his people” (19). *The Silmarillion*, which covers the creation story and the first two ages of Middle Earth, accomplishes this aim. In *The Silmarillion*, Tolkien relies a lot on

Scandinavian mythology but as he narrows in on Frodo's story in the trilogy, the Norse themes are not as noticeable (Wood 18). Richard Purtill calls the story a literary myth because it cannot actually capture the pre-Christian scope of an original myth since Tolkien writes it in post-Christian times (7). Yet in addition to his academic and patriotic goals, Tolkien's Catholic faith became the foundation of the trilogy. Wood speaks of how his Christian worldview implicitly pervades his literary myth:

He creates a mythical pre-Christian world where there is not yet a Chosen People . . . where the Hebrew prophets have not spoken the word of the Lord, where God has not become incarnate in Jesus Christ. . . Yet for all this, Tolkien's book is pre-Christian only in chronology, not in content. The Gospel resounds in its depths. (5)

Though a great friend and Christian mentor to C.S. Lewis, Tolkien had a different agenda than Lewis' in his works. Tolkien does not write an allegory in which one character represents Christ such as Aslan in C.S. Lewis' Narnia (Flieger 5). Wood also points out that Tolkien's idea focused more on the recovery process of associations, not equations. He expresses that: "[Tolkien] wants us to discern likenesses and resemblances between the Ruling Ring and the nuclear bomb, for instance, but not to equate them" (Wood 5). Although Gandalf dies for his friends and comes back to life, he is only demonstrating Christ-like characteristics just like several other characters in the trilogy and as Christians, "Little Christs," should do (Wood 6). For example, Aragorn is a wise king who heals the wounded in the Houses of Healing, Frodo carries the burden of the Ring to save Middle Earth from impending doom, and the lady Arwen forsakes her immortality in order to be with Aragorn. These actions all represent traits of Christ in

some way. Gandalf is not Ilúvatar, the creator of everything. He is a vassal of the gods and claims to be brought back from the dead by the higher powers to finish a deed on earth. Wood makes a helpful distinction when he claims that “Gandalf is not resurrected but resuscitated” (16). Therefore, neither theology nor art is cheated through a forced merger of the two. Death is not cheaply disposed of. Therefore, though in a different way than Lewis, Tolkien provides Christian truth in Middle Earth. He does so implicitly by the true representation of humans made in God’s image.

By Tolkien’s process of Recovery, objects and virtues demonstrated in the Secondary World emphasize those in the Primary World. Among the primary truths shown in Tolkien’s Middle Earth, his depiction of humanity attests to the fallen nature of man in the real world. The peak of humanity’s potential is evident in the courage and hope that the men of Gondor and Rohan possess. The depths to which they can sink appear in the bleak fates of both Denethor and Wormtongue. Yet most of the story takes place through the hobbits’ eyes. And it is out of all the hobbit-like folk that the creature Gollum captures the reader’s disgust and pity. Gollum’s role in the trilogy—his ties to the success of the quest and to the fate of Frodo—cannot be downplayed. He resembles the darkest and most degenerate state of humanity, but through him, Tolkien conveys a realistic picture of the warring nature of every man’s conflicted interests. In Gollum, Tolkien reveals the daily struggle between good and evil, servant and tyrant, man and monster. Yet even amidst the loss and depravity of what Elizabeth Arthur refers to as: “the Self which has almost been consumed by the Shadow” (n. pag.), a glimmer of hope penetrates the darkness.

It is important to remember that Gollum is still a man, though a mere skeleton of one, when Frodo meets him. Gandalf explains that he is not only related to hobbits but that he came from a wealthy and prominent family, quite similar to Bilbo's Took heritage (Elizabeth Arthur). Tolkien's readers delight in the hobbits' hedonistic and jovial society and sympathize with Frodo as he gradually loses his willpower. Elizabeth Arthur explains: "Although Middle-earth has seven intelligent races, it is the hobbits who dominate the action of the story, the hobbits who represent the dominant point of view, and the hobbits with whom it is easiest for most people to identify." They are, by far, the most relatable characters because Tolkien shares the most about them in his novels. Tolkien calls hobbits: "relatives of men" (*The Fellowship 2*). Unlike elves and dwarves, who have their own histories, hobbits share the weakness inherent in the race of men, and in the actions and motivations of these stout and sturdy mushroom loving and hairy footed people, truth about humanity in the Primary World is discovered the most.

Therefore, because Gollum stems from hobbit roots—his original name being Sméagol—he also is related to men who have fallen since their entrance into Middle Earth. And Gollum demonstrates more than any of Tolkien's other characters the struggle with opposing passions that such a fall entails. Sarah Arthur calls Gollum "disintegrated" due to his inconsistent actions and schizophrenic debates. She relays that "One personality seems to be loyal to Frodo; the other hopes to kill him at the soonest opportunity" (Arthur 62). This inward battle can be distinguished between the man Sméagol and the monster Gollum, or the Slinker and the Stinker as Sam calls them (*Towers 641*). Yet he is not equally divided between dualistic forces. The Ring has almost completely destroyed him, and his wicked Gollum side is more dominant. He is a

slave to his own selfish and deceitful desires—above all, His ultimate desire to get the One Ring—which are induced by Sauron through the Ring’s power. Elizabeth Arthur asserts that the Ring has twisted the hobbit Gollum used to be. At the same time, the man in him shines through at certain points in the story. Among these is the touching scene on Cirith Ungol when he approaches the sleeping Frodo:

For a fleeting moment, could one of the sleepers have seen him, they would have thought that they beheld an old weary hobbit, shrunken by the years that had carried him far beyond his time, beyond friends and kin, and the fields and streams of youth, an old starved, pitiable thing. (*Towers* 699)

It is Gollum’s manhood, his great resilience and hobbit-like sturdiness, which explains how he resists the Ring’s call to reunite with Sauron for 500 years—ten times more than any of the other Ringbearers possessed it (Elizabeth Arthur). He is a miserable and self-loving creature the majority of the time, but he still exhibits hatred for Sauron and his servants, and he has not yet become a wraith, passing completely into the shadow world (Arthur). Arthur contends, “Although he is a schizoid character, his Sméagol side is very hobbit-like still.” And as long as there is even a trace of the good Sméagol holding on, hope for him is still possible. Speaking of his cure, Gandalf tells Frodo, “There is little hope of that for him. Yet not no hope” (*Fellowship* 60).

Remarkably Bilbo is the one who first awakens the good Sméagol inside him after many years of hiding. Gandalf speaks of the encounter between Bilbo and the creature and draws attention once again to Tolkien’s great emphasis on light and memory:

There was a little corner of his mind that was still his own, and light came through it, as through a chink in the dark: light out of the past. It was actually pleasant, I think, to hear a kindly voice again, bringing up memories of wind, and trees, and sun on the grass, and such forgotten things. (*Fellowship* 60)

Sméagol also reacts pleasantly to Frodo's kindness. In fact, Gergely Nagy notes a change in the manner of his speech after Frodo tames him. At first his speech is simple, repetitive, and full of sibilant sounds, indicating his physical conditioning, because living secretive in the mountains, he never needed to articulate properly to communicate with himself (Nagy n. pag.). Gollum always addresses "Precious" when he refers to both the Ring and himself—and sometimes it can be an interjection (Nagy). He often speaks of himself as "we" and "us." Nagy calls to mind the origins of his name "Gollum," given to him by his gulping sound. In Old Norse, "Goll" can mean "gold," "treasure," "something precious," or possibly "ring" (Nagy). Gollum's name for his monstrous self and the Ring are the same. Thus Gandalf's words ring truer than say, "He hated and loved it [the Ring], as he hated and loved himself" (*Fellowship* 60). Tolkien also might have considered the Hebrew word, "golem" which signifies "monster" and "robot" (Nagy). Indeed, Gollum's actions are predominately automatic obedience to the Ring's command.

But once Frodo becomes his master, Sméagol begins to emerge and show a stronger presence. One indication of his presence is when he uses the personal "I" (Nagy). He also demonstrates helpfulness to both Sam and Frodo by guiding them and hunting for them. Nagy sees the difference and remarks, "the relation to the Master enhances his resistance to domination." This resistance appears through the continual

debates between Slinker and Stinker the rest of the journey to Shelob's cave. Unlike in Peter Jackson's film, Sméagol does not have a defining moment of overcoming Gollum. The struggle is constant until the moment of betrayal is complete and Shelob has Frodo at the end of her sting. From that moment on, the Sméagol side is described no more.

Up to then, Frodo's understanding and compassion toward Sméagol causes his good side to fight back. Gollum's conflict is tied up in his helplessness between Sauron's power over him and his service to Frodo. Elizabeth Arthur puts it, "in his lust for power and his tentative response to love he embodies the dilemma which besets all men." In this sense, Arthur is right that Gollum represents the average soul. And through the beauty of fantasy, Sméagol's plight can elucidate the truth about the human soul in the Primary World.

By means of the Recovery process, truth can be applied to people in the Primary World in their relation to sin. Humans face two sides of their nature as well—the flesh and the spirit. Only through a right relationship with Christ can the spirit be made right and have victory over the flesh, but after salvation, Christians still face a continual battle. Paul preaches, "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Eph. 6.12). Like Gollum and Sméagol, a man's soul is constantly at war.

One of the ways Satan causes defeat in so many Christian lives is through pervading their minds with lies. For this reason, Mark Bubeck teaches on the importance of fully utilizing the helmet of salvation to protect the mind. He comments that "To be double minded is to try to live with two minds. It is a kind of schizophrenia . . . one part

believes truth and the other part believes Satan's lies" (105). Gollum's schizophrenia is a picture of how people are deceived by false thoughts. Rather than believing that Frodo is trying to help him, Sméagol believes the lie that his master is an enemy (*Towers* 619).

When people doubt that God has their best interests at heart, they believe a lie.

Bubeck continues to proclaim that the best defense against the devil's lies is to listen to more of God's truth. He adds, "There is no surer way of putting the mind of Christ within us than by putting His Words into our minds" (Bubeck 108). Again this truth is seen in the Secondary World when Sméagol grows stronger as he spends more time in his Master's presence, and Frodo offers hope to Sméagol by trusting him to guide them. Bubeck points out that in 1 Thessalonians 5:8-9, Paul calls the helmet of salvation the "hope of salvation" (109). Whether intentional or not, Tolkien's hope in the Secondary World sparks renewed appreciation for the real hope that Christians have through salvation in Christ. This helmet of hope will block the thoughts of doubt and despair from harming the mind.

However, Sméagol ultimately loses control and becomes the power hungry villain, who only cares about the Ring and himself. Even the temporary obedience he demonstrates toward Frodo is due mainly to his oath by the Precious (Elizabeth Arthur). Hunger for power and possessiveness quench any desire to be a man again. Gollum gloats, "Perhaps we grows very strong, stronger than Wraiths. Lord Sméagol? Gollum the Great? *The* Gollum! Eat fish every day, three times a day, fresh from the sea. Most Precious Gollum! Must have it. We wants it, we wants it, we wants it!" (*Towers* 619). And he has already lost much of his hobbit-likeness. He hates the sunlight, which he calls "the Yellow Face" (607). He also can no longer taste and enjoy food like he used to. He

detests cooked rabbit, and when given lembas bread, he chokes and cries, “You try to choke poor Sméagol. Dust and ashes, he can’t eat that. He must starve” (608). Ralph Wood discusses the possibility of the lembas bread’s lightness and sustenance representing the Eucharist or the strength that the Lord gives (55). While it is true that Gollum calls to mind the realistic struggles that every human faces, he is also a warning against the selfish pursuit of unlimited power.

Tom Shippey describes this power in terms of addiction by explaining that “All readers probably assimilate Gollum early on to the now-familiar image of a ‘drug-addict’, craving desperately for a ‘fix’ even though he knows it will kill him” (Shippey 139). Wood calls evil “self devouring” (54). He describes three powers of the Ring that are characteristics of evil in the Primary World. He calls them, “longevity, invisibility, and coercion” (48). The Ring extends Gollum’s life but does not enhance it (Wood 66-67). Invisibility takes him out of the natural world and isolates him (68). Thirdly, Wood says of the Ring, “it enslaves the will” (69). In the *Silmarillion*, Tolkien portrays sin as a discordant tune introduced by Melkor into Ilúvatar’s great creation song. Both Melkor and Satan claim pseudo-lordship (49), a false lordship and a prideful desire to be like God. Wood states that “Evil literally defaces those who practice it” (41). For example, the good wizard Saruman is gradually corrupted by the pursuit of knowledge. Likewise, Gollum becomes his own god through the coercion of the Ring. Gollum is corrupt enough not only to die for the Ring but to kill for it. He confesses, “We are lost, lost . . . No name, no business, no Precious, nothing. Only empty. Only hungry; yes, we are hungry” (*Towers* 674). And unlike Frodo, who resists the Ring’s control until he reaches Mount Doom, Sméagol gives into it immediately by strangling Déagol the moment he

sees it. This covetousness is the opposite of what Christ followers are called toward. A.W. Tozer explains that the great spiritual secret is that Christians can have material things—a family, a job, a car—but they should possess nothing (27). Gollum is a reminder of those in the Primary World who cannot reconcile having something without possessing it. He is undeniably the foil and antithesis to Frodo (Elizabeth Arthur). More than that, Gollum is also the living prediction of what Frodo could become.

If Sméagol has the potential to overcome the monster inside him, then Frodo undoubtedly faces the possibility of experiencing Gollum's fate should he submit to the Ring's will. Their fates are linked together by the Ring. Elizabeth Arthur makes the statement, "There is little doubt that Gollum is a picture of what any of the other Ringbearers might have been, had circumstances treated them less kindly, or their own characters been less strong." Although Bilbo does what neither Frodo nor Gollum can do by willingly giving up the Ring, he does not escape its side effects either. Arthur recollects the scene in Rivendell where Frodo shows him the Ring:

To his distress and amazement he [Frodo] found that he was no longer looking at Bilbo; a shadow seemed to have fallen between them and through it he found himself eyeing a little wrinkled creature with a hungry face and bony groping hands. He felt a desire to strike him. (*Fellowship* 260)

And of course there are many occasions where Frodo grows possessive, mimicking Gollum, and even suspects Sam. Arthur also brings to mind the instant in the Tower of Cirith Ungol when he envisions Sam as a greedy orc after his treasure (*King* 188). She points out, "Clearly the loss of will which Gollum manifests in its most

extreme form, is steadily growing in Frodo.” One reason for Frodo’s unexpected resilience is that unlike Gollum, secluded and isolated from all other living things for many years, Frodo has Sam to help him move forward when he cannot do it alone. Frodo admits, “And Frodo wouldn’t have got far without Sam” (*Towers* 697). Again, another principle that can be applied to the Primary World is the necessity for true, positive friendship.

Yet at the story’s crucial climax, Frodo finally turns into the monster and claims the Ring for his own, and he fails to overcome the darkness within himself. It is by Gollum’s intervention that the Ring is finally destroyed. Thus Elizabeth Arthur calls Gollum the hero of the story. But to call Gollum the hero is inaccurate. The farthest thing from Gollum’s mind is to destroy the Ring. He cries, “Lost, lost! We’re lost. And when Precious goes we’ll die, yes, die into the dust” (*King* 221). The fight Sam sees inside Orodruin is between two mad monsters, who have both lost control of their wills to the Ring. They only want to possess the irresistible power that it claims to give. To lose one’s mind implies the loss of clarity, memory, and hope. Frodo attests to the darkness and forgetfulness associated with despair:

I know that such things happened, but I cannot see them. No taste of food, no feel of water, no sound of wind, no memory of tree or grass or flower, no image of moon or star are left to me. I am naked in the dark, Sam, and there is no veil between me and the wheel of fire. I begin to see it even with my waking eyes, and all else fades. (*King* 215)

Arthur claims that this madness excuses Gollum from all responsibility since his mind is controlled by the Ring. However, Gollum originally chooses to submit to its evil

power when he murders Déagol, and when he betrays Frodo to Shelob, he is answerable to the oath he swore by it. His promise by the Ring destroys him—and ironically the Ring as well. Therefore, the Ring indirectly defeats itself. Gandalf's words strike truth when he hints, "A traitor may betray himself and do good that he does not intend" (*King* 89). Evil people often destroy themselves in the Primary World too.

One person cannot make things right, nor is one person the hero of Tolkien's trilogy. If Frodo would have thrown the ring into the fire by his own will, he would have been the Christ-figure, which was not Tolkien's intent (Elizabeth Arthur). Arthur stresses that Tolkien's trilogy is about the collective effort of a group of people, who do their best to confront evil. However, the outcome cannot be decided by them alone. Therefore, it is the eucatastrophe—the unexpected turn—that happens when the Ring betrays itself. Frodo reminds Gollum that the promise he made by the Ring to be faithful to Frodo may turn out to be his downfall. He warns, "If I, wearing it, were to command you, you would obey, even if it were to leap from a precipice or to cast yourself into the fire" (*Towers* 626). Frodo unknowingly foreshadows Gollum's fate when at Orodruin he commands, "Begone and trouble me no more! If you touch me ever again, you shall be cast yourself into Mount Doom" (*King* 221). Such is the case with Gollum, whose wicked intentions finally bring him to Mount Doom where he takes back his Precious from Frodo and in doing so tumbles off the edge.

This "accident" is the chink in Sauron's plans and the hope that shines through. Nor is Gollum's fall a subconscious effort to do right as Arthur suggests. He shrieks and wails, "Precious" as he hurtles to his doom (*King* 224). Tolkien speaks of the consolation of the happy ending in fantasy:

. . . it is a sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur. It does not deny the existence of dyscatastrophe, of sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance; it denies . . . universal defeat . . . giving a glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief. (“On Fairy-Stories” 86)

When first introducing Gollum to Frodo, Gandalf states, “My heart tells me that he has some part to play yet, for good or ill, before the end; and when that comes, the pity of Bilbo may rule the fate of many” (*The Fellowship* 65). His words come true. Because Bilbo did not stab Gollum in the Misty Mountains when he had the chance, Gollum is present in the end to take the Ring into the fire. Tolkien uses Greek and Scandinavian depictions of fate in his new mythology (Wood 14). Gandalf refers to the Providence of the whole situation by saying, “Bilbo was meant to find the Ring, and not by its maker. In which case you also were meant to have it. And that may be an encouraging thought” (*Fellowship* 61). Whether or not this Providence is all a part of Ilúvatar’s great song or is simply the mystery of the eucatastrophe, the reader must decide. Nonetheless, mercy and justice undeniably conquer covetousness and selfishness in the Secondary World which is a testament of the same truth in the Primary World.

Gollum is the most obvious case of the propensity man has for great evil. Overall, he is a wicked being who is goaded into a life of darkness and corruption by the lust for power, which is nothing more than self-glory. Over time, Gollum is so obsessed over his prize that it becomes synonymous with himself, and he takes on its name. He is a picture of what Frodo can become and, more importantly, a symbol of what humanity can become in the Primary World. However, Tolkien paints him realistically to indicate that

even a monstrous sinner has hope. He is not clearly black and white. And through his incapability of forsaking goodness entirely, he attests to its potency all the more. His relationship with Frodo starts to cure him of his illness, but in order to be truly free he has to die to his own desires. Instead, he chooses to hold on to his Precious, and in turn, they fall together. Jesus declares, “whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it” (Matt. 16.25). Although Tolkien may have implicitly woven this truth into the story through his worldview, he may not have purposely intended to draw this precise correlation. However, through Recovery, such a connection between faith and fantasy is possible.

Of course Gollum is not the only relatable character to the real world despite what Elizabeth Arthur claims. To her, the other characters are mere stock archetypes common to fantasy and its purposes while this rank and crafty outcast alone is multi-dimensional and capable of moving the audience. It is true that most of the characters in Middle Earth are either on the side of good or evil, but their firm stance does not discount their credibility. Many harbor differences and grievances with one another, but they choose to put aside these issues to fight Sauron, the greatest threat to Middle Earth. Some of the characters in Middle Earth, like the elves and the orcs, are wholly good or evil. They make their choice once and for all while others—mainly the men and hobbits—waver between what is right and wrong (Arthur). Gollum is among the characters who show the most inward struggle, but he is not the only one. Many more of Tolkien’s characters express internal conflicts and changes of perspectives.

Dynamic character changes are apparent in many cases. None of the members of the fellowship are left unaffected at the end, least of all Frodo. Both Wormtongue and

Saruman had at one time been good, but they have allowed themselves to gradually become corrupt. The Lady Eowyn is trapped bemoaning her unreciprocated love toward Aragon while slowly coming to love Faramir and accepting her role in society. Sarah Arthur remarks that Gimli's and Legolas' friendship arises only after the dwarf is changed by encountering Galadriel (91). This same rough and daring dwarf later trembles at the door of the dead. Tolkien remarks, "at once a blindness came upon him, even upon Gimli Glóin's son who had walked unafraid in many deep places of the world" (60). Even Orcs were not always evil. They are corrupted "dark-elves" (Tally 17). Orcs display the worst traits of humanity like racism and disunity, but also human characteristics like hunger and thirst (18). There are many more examples of Tolkien's characters, who have realistic traits that touch the reader.

Even more than Tolkien's depiction of humanity, the greatest portrayal of primary truth through Tolkien's Middle Earth is the consolation of the happy ending. Yet Madsen is correct in declaring "The story has a eucatastrophe, but it has no happy ending." Although the Ring has been destroyed, the world is not saved for everyone. After all, the fate of the Ring only brings about a lesser evil for the elves since they will vanish from Middle Earth and lose the things they loved there (Madsen). There is not final eucatastrophe for them, nor for Arwen who is separated from her father by sharing Aragorn's fate and who eventually loses him to death. Wood confirms, "Tolkien never lets us forget that no battle is finally won, no victory permanently achieved—not in this world at least" (16). Yet he adds that Tolkien did not want to cheapen the hope of resurrection which is the Joy of the Gospel.

Death is inevitable in both Middle Earth and the real world. The loss of his parents by the time he was 12 years old shook Tolkien (Flieger 2). In fact, death and immortality were the themes he specifically mentioned he wanted to address in his myth (Purtill 9). The men in Middle Earth bemoan death as the elves bemoan deathlessness and the loss of what they outlive. Legolas tells Gimli, “For such is the way of it: to find and lose, as it seems to those whose boat is on the running stream” (*Fellowship* 425). Grief is real despite hope for eucatastrophe. Rogers brings to mind that even Jesus wept at his friend’s death (n. pag.). But the grief makes the joy stand out the greater (Wood 17). The reality of death is what makes the reality of resurrection in the real world so earth shattering. Wood testifies, “Lest this poignant realism seem somehow sub-Christian, we should remember that a melancholy air also infuses much of Scripture, and that Hebrew wisdom is built on an unflinching honesty about death” (Wood 17). The Christian hope is that Christ has conquered death.

And Tolkien’s Middle Earth has not yet reached such an ultimate happy ending. The Ring’s destruction spurns on the Fourth Age, which is not devoid of problems facing men (43). Gandalf wisely advises their leaders, “Yet it is not our part to master all the tides of the world, but to do what is in us for the succour of those years wherein we are set” (*King* 155). But hope remains in Arwen’s offspring for the anticipation of a true eucatastrophe, which would only occur when Ilúvatar establishes final and complete restoration. Wood puts it, “As we shall discover, the Age of Men shall excel even that of elves and wizards, because in one of them Ilúvatar shall assume human form” (39). Such a eucatastrophe would undeniably parallel the Christian faith. Middle Earth anticipates

such a eucatastrophe, but that is not Tolkien's point. The Gospel is enough. Tolkien contends:

The Gospels contains a fairy-story . . . and among the marvels is the greatest and most complete conceivable eucatastrophe. But this story has entered History and the primary world . . . The Birth of Christ is the eucatastrophe of Man's history. The Resurrection is the eucatastrophe of the story of the Incarnation . . . This story begins and ends in joy . . . There is no tale ever told that men would rather find was true ("On Fairy-Stories" 88-9)

Tolkien's world is certainly different from the Primary World, yet at its core it relies on primary truth through the physical and spiritual realities that exist for humanity. Tolkien's trilogy is written by a man who desired to impact the world through a mythology within the realm of faery, and in doing so, he could not compartmentalize his imagination from his faith in the Gospel. At the same time, Tolkien did not cheapen the Gospel nor the fantasy genre by preaching. Christian readers can apply truths taken from Tolkien's Secondary World in their daily lives and Christian walk. However, the Gospel does not become better or worse because of it. On the contrary, the joy of eucatastrophe and the hope of Middle Earth are richer and more tangible in light of the inconceivable Joy of the Gospel.

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