

“WHAT A TALE WE HAVE BEEN IN”: EMPLOTMENT
AND THE EXEMPLAR CHARACTERS IN *THE LORD
OF THE RINGS* AND THE HARRY POTTER SERIES

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ABSTRACT. Linda Zagzebski’s theory of moral exemplarity emphasizes the importance of admiration in developing ethical behavior. This essay argues that admiration involves wonder and distance and is best evoked by mixed or flawed characters; it demonstrates this through discussion of the characters in J. R. R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* and J. K. Rowling’s Harry Potter series. Using Paul Ricoeur’s taxonomy of prefiguration, configuration, and refiguration in narrative work, it discerns a self-reflexivity in the protagonists of these fantasy novels, which is echoed by that of the readers, who are brought to realize their own emplotment in larger narratives. Features in Tolkien and Rowling that aid this exploratory reading include the length and depth of the novels, the decentering of the reader’s own reality, and their open endings, which offer an invitational role to further interpretation. Virtue is viewed more teleologically than in Zagzebski, for moral realism is woven into the metaphysics of these novels, which allows mimesis of flawed characters to be ethically productive.

KEY WORDS. emplotment; moral realism; Paul Ricoeur; J. K. Rowling; J. R. R. Tolkien

“What a tale we have been in, Mr Frodo, haven’t we? ... I wish I could hear it! I wonder how it will go on after our part.”¹

In one of her seminal articles on moral exemplars, Linda Zagzebski noted how narratives engage our motives more successfully than abstract ethical theories and suggested the importance of admiration and emulation in motivating people to engage actively in moral practices.² In testing out the role of the moral exemplar in two examples of fantasy fiction, Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* and J. K. Rowling’s Harry Potter series, I shall be developing Zagzebski’s theory of admiration to embrace negative examples and the flawed nature of morally good characters. Unlike Koji Tachibana, however, who questions the necessity of admiration in exemplarity, I shall argue for its worth and develop it further as a mode of reflection.³ I shall also make use of Bryan R. Warnick’s *Imitation and Education*, which develops a social context for exemplarity and allows for the possibility of

1. J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* (1954; repr. London: Bloomsbury 1997), 929.

2. Linda Zagzebski, “Moral Exemplars in Theory and Practice,” *Theory and Research in Education* 11, no. 2 (2013): 193–206, 193, 198. See also Linda Zagzebski, *Exemplarist Moral Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), and Linda Zagzebski, “Exemplarist Virtue Theory,” *Metaphilosophy* 41, nos. 1–2 (2010): 41–57.

3. Koji Tachibana, “Nonadmirable Moral Exemplars and Virtue Development,” *Journal of Moral Education* 48, no. 3 (2019): 346–357.

discursive reasoning in mimetic acts.⁴ By demonstrating the role of self-reflection and fictionality in the reading experience of Tolkien and Rowling's novels, I hope to offer suggestions for its practical use in educational settings.⁵

Warnick has a much more active understanding of the process of imitation than Zagzebski. He argues that as well as offering "inspiration to attain an ideal," human exemplars can also "elicit questioning" and "open up new ways of seeing the world."⁶ This suggests an active, intentional engagement, which we can see at work in Sam Gamgee's reflections in my epigraph. Sam has gone through the interpretive work outlined by Paul Ricoeur in *Time and Narrative* as he describes the way in which any text, but particularly a fictional story, is mimetically appropriated. First, we never come innocently to our reading or listening but are shaped by a matrix of stories, plots, competencies, and symbols, all of which he terms "prefiguration."⁷ Second, we have to make the story work by activating its codes and uniting its various actions to form intelligible structures: grasping it altogether. This is an action of the productive imagination and a form of *poiesis* in Aristotelian terms.⁸ Third, "refiguration" describes the activity of opening the text to the world of the reader or listener, anchoring its fictive time to one's own temporality.⁹

Such a development of Tolkien's narrative into one's own reality is a common response to the power of his writing, so that adult readers might propose marriage in his invented Elfish language or join a commune based on Tom Bombadil's ecological way of living. Such mimetic contagion is particularly noticeable in responses to fantasy novels, which offer a deliberately constructed other world; one can find equally strong effects on Harry Potter readers, although research also reports a refiguration crisis, in which readers report a disillusion with the world beyond the novels, which is less easy to refigure, since (sadly) the Muggle world lacks the magical abilities of Harry and his friends.¹⁰ It is the strong "carry-over"

4. Bryan R. Warnick, *Imitation and Education: A Philosophical Inquiry into Learning by Example* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008).

5. This is laid out in the first volume of *Time and Narrative*: Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

6. Warnick, *Imitation and Education*, 118.

7. Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, 75.

8. *Ibid.*, 76.

9. *Ibid.*, 76–82.

10. See Steven Dempster, Alice Oliver, Jane Sunderland, and Jo Thistlethwaite, "What Has *Harry Potter* Done for Me? Children's Reflections on Their '*Potter Experience*,'" *Children's Literature in Education* 47, no. 3 (2016): 275.

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between the text and the reader's world that allows an element of mimesis and makes these novels a good test of how not only the characters but the reading process itself develops moral character.

The first commonality between Tolkien's and Rowling's fictions is a reading experience of length and depth. Tolkien's three-volume novel is over a thousand pages, and Rowling's series even longer. In a study of young readers of Harry Potter, Steven Dempster and his co-researchers discovered that some children gained a sense of achievement from reading such long books, which encouraged them to tackle other longer fiction, including Tolkien.¹¹ To commit to such an experience is itself transformative in the multitasking and skim reading of a digital age. The virtues of patience and constancy are already being practiced as readers persevere in a readerly Odyssey. Rowling's prose is comparatively easy and includes a great deal of conversation, realist in its inconsequence and vividly articulated detail. Yet so fully realized is every aspect of Hogwarts life and the novels so densely plotted that adult and child readers alike need their wits about them to keep up. It is impossible to skim read and understand what is going on. Iris Murdoch's version of virtue ethics in *The Sovereignty of Good* is helpful here. She calls for Simone Weil's ethic of "attention," which is "the idea of a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality."¹² To read closely and with loving attention to the particularity and otherness of the text is itself an ethical practice in which the attention the author gave to her amazingly complex creation and its dexterous wordplay is fully realized in the responsive attention of the reader.

As has just been noted, the length of the works goes along with a deeply thought-out fictional world. Since Tolkien had years earlier fully conceived the mythic dimensions of Middle-earth in the tales that would become the *Silmarillion*, references can be embedded in songs or customs in *The Lord of the Rings* without full explanation, leading to a satisfying sense of vistas opening in all directions. This failure to fully explain is also a reality effect, comparable to our experience of life outside the text, where mysteries and aporias abound. Ricoeur calls the bundle of stories and narrative forms the reader brings to a new text prefiguration, but the irony of reading Tolkien is that his novel more than any other brings its own prefigurings, which parallel those of our own experience, so that the reading experience is akin to encountering a person: we are dropped into the middle of an ongoing narrative that has a backstory of which we may be only partly aware.

To read *The Lord of the Rings*, therefore, is to be brought up explicitly and self-consciously to the fact of prefiguration in Middle-earth and our own lives. The novel contains several musings on its own fictional shaping, as in my epigraph

11. Dempster et al., "What Has *Harry Potter* Done for Me?," 276; and Adam Willows, "Stories and the Development of Virtue," *Ethics and Education* 12, no. 3 (2017): 337–350. See also Brenda P. Dixey and Andrea M. D'Angelo, "Harry Who? An Investigation of Students' Reading of the Harry Potter Series," *RMLE Online* 25, no. 2 (2015): <https://doi.org/10.1080/19404476.2002.11658156>.

12. Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge, 1970), 30.

in which Sam shapes his experiences into saga form, in which the hobbits' quest forms one element in a longer narrative. Earlier, Frodo had also referred to their situation as akin to that of people in a story with a "happy or sad ending, but the people in it don't know. And you don't want them to."¹³ Readers are brought to face the fictional nature of what they are reading here and at the same time they experience the *in via* nature of temporality and the need for configuration of their own story as an active process.

The more we read of the strangeness of the cultures described in *The Lord of the Rings*, the more aware are we of our own situatedness. When Treebeard the Ent informs Pippin and Merry that he has no place for hobbits in his Lore of Living Creatures list, when hobbits have been our crucial focalizers of events, readers feel quite strange, as if we too had been excluded. The sense of ourselves as members of the Muggle world and thus excluded from the parallel reality of wizard society has a similar defamiliarizing effect in the Harry Potter stories. Admiration is at work here, certainly, but it operates *consciously* through the reader's perception of distance from the person or phenomenon esteemed.

A second reason why these novels particularly engage their readers is due to another aspect of their relation to our own world. Tolkien's Middle-earth is our planet eons ago, before it took its present physical shape, and in the Prologue to *The Lord of the Rings* Tolkien writes in mock anthropological style of hobbits as "more numerous formerly than they are today" as if we might still come upon one hiding in the undergrowth.¹⁴ Similarly, Rowling makes her wizard world an unseen parallel society to our own, the existence of which is revealed to the British Prime Minister upon election.¹⁵ This parallelism means the reader is always making comparisons across cultures, and much of the humor comes from the similarities and differences from our world and its defamiliarization. Famously, there is now a mock-platform 93/4 at King's Cross Station where fans pose with a trolley half disappearing through the wall. In this way the fictional settings affect the lives of the contemporary reader, albeit remotely in the case of Tolkien, although the hobbit partiality for fish and chips renders the Shire wholly British across the eons.

Tolkien rashly declared that he hoped to craft "a body of more or less connected legend" for England, and his fiction is highly allusive to Anglo-Saxon epic, Norse myth, and biblical narratives.¹⁶ Similarly, Beatrice Groves, in her study *Literary Allusion in Harry Potter*, has traced references to works as diverse as the *Aeneid*, Shakespeare plays, and poems by Coleridge.¹⁷ Rowling's names are particularly

13. Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings*, 696.

14. *Ibid.*, 1.

15. J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* (London: Bloomsbury, 2005), chap. 1, 1–25, describes the visit of the Minister of Magic, Cornelius Fudge, to 10 Downing Street.

16. J. R. R. Tolkien, "Letter 131 to Milton Waldman," in *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, ed. Humphrey Carpenter (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1981), 142.

17. Beatrice Groves, *Literary Allusion in Harry Potter* (London: Routledge, 2017), 1, 5, 19.

creative in that respect. Even though many of the allusions might pass undetected by the reader, they add depth and cosmic significance to the lives of the wizard child characters. Moreover, the epigraphs call attention to the intertextual levels of reference, even when they are not recognized.

This allusive intertextuality, which opens the text to other worlds, is replicated in the openness of the endings of these two works. In an early study of reader reception, Umberto Eco distinguished between closed and open texts. A James Bond novel, for example, will only work for a certain model implied (male) reader, who can activate the textual codes in a certain way. By contrast, a Kafka story will mean something different every time it is read and is constructed to make that multiplicity of response possible.¹⁸ It might seem that the strong ethical dimension and depth of realization might make *The Lord of the Rings* a closed text, but its conclusion is deliberately open-ended. In the final chapter, Frodo Baggins and Sam Gamgee, who have come increasingly to seem complementary halves of a whole, come to part. The wounded Frodo sets sail to the West for healing in another reality, while Sam goes home to his wife and daughter, to become Frodo's heir. While the logic of events makes this the only possible solution, there is a sadness and sense of loss for the reader, who must bear this separation and anagogically hold together the separated friends. "Anagogic" is a word used by Eco to describe movement to another level of interpretation, and is the work of entertaining a multiplicity of meanings; he takes the term from the medieval four levels of interpretation of biblical texts, where it has the sense of holding the present moment and the *eschaton* together.¹⁹ In *The Lord of the Rings* the reader must similarly hold together the historical trajectory of Sam returning home with the sailing of Frodo to a spiritual world, separated from his friend. The closure of "Well, I'm back," of Sam's final words is held in tension with the mystery of Frodo's goal.²⁰ Here I would see evidence that supports Warnick's claim that exemplars can provoke questioning and model creative processes, offering an "invitational role" to further interpretation.²¹

We travel with Frodo as far as a lonely island where "the grey rain-curtain was rolled back, and he beheld white shores and beyond them a far green country under a swift sunrise."²² Frodo's story is not over and we feel the curtain as theatrical, revealing a new scene in a play, but one that lies beyond the present work. Ricoeur's refiguration of connecting the text with the reader's own reality is completed with Sam, safely encircled by his family, with the word "home" enabling a narrative contract through a concept we can easily connect to our own

18. Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), 4–5, 161.

19. *Ibid.*, 51.

20. Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings*, 1008.

21. Warnick, *Imitation and Education*, 118.

22. Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings*, 1007.

experience. Frodo is most certainly a strong example of an estimable and imitable exemplar in Zagzebski's sense, truly admirable in his suffering heroism; but in his ending, admiration is returned to its French meaning of wonder. The philosopher Descartes described "admiration" as the origin of the passions. It has something of an epiphany about it as a phenomenon appears that has presence and excessive meaning which surprises but also brings with it the aura of mystery, and opens desire, if only the desire to know, which was so original a human motivation in Aristotle.²³ As I suggested above, admiration involves a conscious sense of distance, provoking desire to overcome it as well as an equal acknowledgment of the gulf between the self and the admired person.

Rowling has a strong and seemingly finished conclusion when Voldemort is finally destroyed. But she chooses to end the series on a deliberately open note with the departure to Hogwarts of the children of the protagonists, with Scorpius Malfoy also a pupil. With tensions already evident, the reader feels that the story could begin all over again. In both cases, this opens the horizon of the text beyond the novel into the reader's interpretive control and has strong significance for any ethical reading. Harry's son Albus is terrified that the Sorting Hat, which discerns the potential character of any new pupil, will put him in Slytherin, the house to which those who served the Dark Lord belonged. To address these fears, Harry points out the courage of Slytherin member Severus Snape, but adds that the sorting hat "takes your choice into account," revealing that it did for Harry himself.²⁴ The series reader knows this, recalling in the first novel that Slytherin had been offered to Harry: "Not Slytherin, eh? ... Are you sure? You could be great, you know, it's all there in your head, and Slytherin will help you on the way to greatness, no doubt about that — no? Well, if you're sure — better be GRYFFINDOR!"²⁵ In the action of the sorting hat, free will is asserted along with the moral luck of a child's disposition and passions. Yet the Sorting Hat lies in the future beyond the novel for young Albus and his future choice is unknown. Admiration here is equally part of the emotion felt by the reader but again it lies in an awareness of distance, in the tension between choices that the Sorting Hat offers, as well as in Harry's purity of heart and inclination to the Good that rejects ambition.

So far, I have argued that there is an embedded moral exemplarity in the reading process of such long novels, which call out readers' loving attention and patience, as they commit to "deep reading." I have demonstrated that the way these novels are constructed in particular bring readers up against the prefiguring of the interpretive process. To use Ricoeur's terminology, they allow configuring of

23. René Descartes, *The Passions of the Soul*, trans. Stephen H. Voss (1649; repr. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1989), 52, II, art. 70; and Aristotle, *The Metaphysics*, trans. Hugh Lawson-Tancred (London: Penguin, 1998), I. 980a.

24. J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), 607.

25. J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (London: Bloomsbury, 1997), 91. In the United States, the title was changed from "Philosopher's" to "Sorcerer's" Stone.

events into larger narrative structures of significance in which allusive references play a part. The third stage in the interpretive process of refiguration, whereby the horizons of the text and that of the reader are brought into relation, is affected by first, the constitutive relation between the novels' worlds and our own and, second, by the openness of the endings of *Harry Potter* and *The Lord of the Rings*, which bring mystery and wonder into play and foreground the importance of choice. I have also sought to argue for the complexity of admiration and tried to articulate its mechanism as one of conscious distanciation and desire.

Mention of the sorting hat brings us to the second mode of moral exemplarity in these texts, which is by means of the characters, who are presented in highly ethical terms, and indeed through the virtues. The fourfold taxonomy of the cardinal virtues in the four houses of Hogwarts has been discussed by Potter bloggers, though not in academic studies. Kjetil Kringlebotten identified them as Hufflepuff representing justice, Gryffindor courage, Ravenclaw practical wisdom, and Slytherin temperance.²⁶ Slytherin has lost true temperance, but its cunning is a perversion of an understanding of how to link goals and means virtuously and with moderation. Based on one of the many Sorting Hat songs, *Harry Potter* merchandising sells clothing with the four houses' shields and mottos, which emphasize the virtues of each one.²⁷ It is a popular game among child readers to decide to which house they would belong, so that moral decision-making is central to the effect of reading the novels. The Sorting Hat could therefore be built easily into a classroom activity in which students analyze the appropriateness of the Hat's decision for each protagonist and work out for themselves which House most describes their own qualities and the protagonists they wish to emulate.

And indeed, the ethics of the novels is mimetic and virtue-based rather than deontological. The school has many rules, which Harry breaks, and for which he is punished; but he is learning that there is a deeper ethical way of life which is internal, and developed through active virtuous choice, as one seeks the good. As headmaster Albus Dumbledore says, "it is our choices, Harry, that show us what we truly are, far more than our abilities."²⁸ Harry's and his friends' rule-breaking is sometimes wholly wrong, as in the taking of the Weasley car, but sometimes necessary, because it takes breaking over a hundred rules to rescue Ginny. The protagonists are learning true prudence and right and wise

26. See Kjetil Kringlebotten, "Hogwarts and the Four Cardinal Virtues," *Virtuous Wizardry* (blog), March 13, 2007, <https://virtueofpotter.wordpress.com/2007/03/13/hogwarts-and-the-four-cardinal-virtues/>, accessed 4/7/2021.

27. Warner Brothers uses the four houses to maximize market diversification, down to different chocolate flavors. See https://harrypottershop.co.uk/?gclid=CjwKCAjw_o-HBhAsEiwANqYhp_0mJ8Vl6VdLY8bRIQe9r5axemVqC7VxJj1XmxAag07u4Mc4hzmXoCkpAQAvD_BwE, accessed 6/7/2121.

28. J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (London: Bloomsbury, 2002), 245.

action through their mistakes. The readers, therefore, engage in what Warnick calls “process” rather than “results” imitation, in that they are imitating forms of life within communities of interpretation rather than the simple copying of an action.²⁹ There is no way child readers will have to copy Harry and manage an invisibility cloak, but they will discover how to deal with one’s mistakes.

The Harry Potter series presents Hogwarts as a benign institution, and its rules are there to keep children safe and serve the common good. Already, however, the existence of Voldemort and the corruption of Slytherin have rendered the rule-based approach inadequate. Through questioning school rules and taking risks to serve the good, Harry Potter stories become more exemplary as they model and problematize ethical decision-making. Children learn to do the right action for the right reason as serving the full flourishing of themselves and others and not because someone tells them to do something — which is ironically how exemplarity is sometimes described.³⁰ Moreover, despite the Sorting Hat’s decision, which suggests the ruling virtue of the child, it quickly becomes apparent that the unity of the virtues is necessary for effective ethical action against Voldemort.³¹ Among the most trustworthy fighters of the Order of the Phoenix is the Hufflepuff, Nymphadora Tonks, who shows Gryffindor-like courage as well as justice and intelligence, while Ravenclaw Luna Lovegood demonstrates temperance and loyalty to Harry, calming him during his period of excessive anger in *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*.

One of the most shocking elements of moral discernment in the novels is the discovery that Severus Snape, long seen as Harry’s enemy and in league with Voldemort, is actually working for Dumbledore to protect Harry. This causes readers to reassess nearly six novels and change their views completely. Now they must regard even Harry’s beloved father as something of a bully in his treatment of Snape. Furthermore, the great Dumbledore himself is revealed by the end of the series as someone who flirted with anti-Muggle ideology in his youth, who has always known Harry would have to die to defeat Voldemort and has, in fact, prepared him morally to do so.

Significantly, Harry learns both of his protection by Snape and his mortal destiny as discerned by Dumbledore by means of the Pensive, a magical device by which he sees snapshots of Snape’s memories through the professor’s own eyes. He is therefore forced to reconsider experientially. Rowling is a consummate maker of plots and this is one of the most shocking in any novel, let alone a novel for children. To go on reading is to engage therefore in complex acts of recollection and reassessment. The stories take Harry from age eleven to eighteen and the readers

29. Warnick, *Imitation and Education*, 115 .

30. See Warnick’s defense against this claim in *Imitation and Education*, 119–120.

31. On the unity of the virtues, see Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. James Alexander Kerr Thomson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), 224–225, Book 6, 1145a1–2.

mature with him, with the discernment of parental figures as fallible as part of the maturing process. Classroom discussion of parents as exemplars can lead naturally from Harry's experience and, indeed, study year by year of the whole series could form the basis of a program of moral education.

For we witness the maturation of a whole range of different exemplar characters, such as the hapless Neville Longbottom, a shy, clumsy figure of fun and an unlikely member of Gryffindor, who matures to be a major player in the defense of Hogwarts. His steady development from introverted lack of confidence to leadership of Dumbledore's Army demonstrates the way that a person comes to embody a virtue the more they try to practice it and imitate those who possess it.³² Neville attributes his strength of determination to Harry's example: "The thing is, it helps when people stand up to them, it gives everyone hope. I used to notice that when you did it, Harry."³³ Calling Harry Potter a moral exemplar, any more than Neville, does not mean he is a perfect character but that his actions and intentions have this morally recognizable teleological character: hope in this case. The cardinal virtues after all are those which make ethical action possible: courage to sustain the good, temperance to aim it in the right proportion, prudence to direct it wisely, and justice to order actions fairly and appropriately.

This teleological element is noticeably muted in Zagzebski's model in which the *telos* is defined as nothing more than the actions of the exemplar:

In each case, the concept to be defined (virtue, good state of affairs, right act, and so on) is defined via indexical reference to a paradigmatically good person. So a virtue is a trait we admire in that person and in persons like that. A good state of affairs is a state of affairs at which persons like that aim.³⁴

In the Harry Potter stories, as we have seen, the very failures of Harry and his friends to live up to the virtues reveals that they do not originate in the person but are woven into institutions, relationships, educational practice, and the whole world of the novels. What makes Harry an exemplar is not always his success in exhibiting these cardinal virtues but this overall *telos*, which is detectable in how others such as Dumbledore, or his friends, view him as well as his own self-reflection. Zagzebski embraces the circularity of the exemplar's perceived estimable qualities as providing all that is necessary for successful imitation, citing Christ and Confucius as examples.³⁵ Yet each of these exemplars is situated in texts that are teleological in character and from which their actions derive meaning. There is moral realism behind the benevolence of Confucius and the beatitudes of Christ, just as in the fictional universes of my two chosen authors. One might argue, indeed, that in creating a fictional world, whether realist or fantastical, one

32. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 91, Book 2, 1103a14.

33. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, 462.

34. Zagzebski, "Exemplarist Virtue Theory," 55.

35. Zagzebski, "Moral Exemplars," 200.

necessarily embodies an implicit teleology, if only for the duration of the narration, in the sense of an ending.³⁶

Rowling, indeed, reveals ultimately an underlying religious teleology in making Harry an embodiment of a specifically Christian virtue, that of love or charity, which with faith and hope direct the cardinal virtues to their end in God.³⁷ The word “love” is thrown constantly in his face by Voldemort in their final encounters as an example of weakness in contrast to his own Nietzschean will-to-power. From the very first volume, Harry’s ruling desire, as reflected in the Mirror of Erised, had been love, whether longing for his lost family or love for his friends, school, and mentors.³⁸ Needy to begin with, like Plato’s Eros in the *Symposium*, Harry’s love matures and rises up the chain of loves to embrace the Good itself.³⁹ It is not just an emotion but a settled disposition which, as in Thomas Aquinas’s construal, shapes and directs the other virtues to their fulfillment in God.⁴⁰ Harry is also contrasted to the young Albus Dumbledore, who sought glory with Grindelwald, and who resented the demands of his disabled sister, so that she was accidentally killed. Her tomb’s epitaph from Matthew 6:21, “where your treasure is there will your heart be also,” critiques Dumbledore’s denigration of family love in the “treasure” who is his sibling. As a message to Harry, the epigraph acts to emphasize that his own heart understands very well the treasure of loving relationships. It is this perception that enables him to defeat death, because love directs him to move knowingly toward his own demise and to accept its finality.

The simple prose style of Rowling’s stories, therefore, masks a complex moral system, which is fully embodied in the characters and their relations. Her ethics is primarily Aristotelian and so mimesis and character are at its heart. Tolkien’s novel is different in that there are fewer great reversals of character interpretation and the human protagonists, such as Aragorn, operate a form of consistent heroic virtue characteristic of the epic. One character who does change is Eówyn, the shield-maiden who yearns for Aragorn partly because of her own unrecognized heroic capacities. She learns to refocus her desire and lose her death-wish; she is the human protagonist who develops most and gains new ethical insight. Eówyn and the hobbit Merry combine to defeat the witch-king and his horse in battle, and

36. On this tendency, see Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967).

37. See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (London: Burns, Oates and Washburn, 1920), 22 vols, 2ae, qs 1-46.

38. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*, 156–157.

39. Plato, *The Symposium*, trans. Michael Joyce, in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, Bollingen Series LXXI (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), 562, 210e–212a.

40. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* 2ae, q. 23, art. 8, resp. 3: “charity is said to be the end of other virtues, because it directs all other virtues to its own end. And since a mother is one who conceives within herself and by another, charity is called the mother of the other virtues, because, by commanding them, it conceives the acts of the other virtues, by the desire of the last end” (emphasis added).

do so in the hieratic prose of an Anglo-Saxon poem. But afterwards Merry returns to humorous hobbit discourse and talks of the benefits of being small and overlooked amid the carnage. Eówyn also comes down from the epic heights in her recovery in the Houses of Healing, becoming more human and vulnerable.

It is at this point that Eówyn can truly become an exemplar, because she is imitable. An ethically complex character in a novel is surely a more stable moral exemplar than the public figures delineated by Zagzebski. Indeed, one of her examples, Jean Vanier, has been revealed to have been a sexual abuser. Either the media portray such people as unrealistically perfect, or they present them as geniuses with separate negative features (as in some sporting or athletic heroes). By contrast, a figure like Eówyn is imperfect in ways that are made comprehensible to the reader, linked to restrictive gender roles and the family dynamics of a dynasty infiltrated by the enemy, causing what a modern novel would describe as deep depression and a lack of self-worth in the young woman. Even her extraordinary courage is partly the result of not caring enough about her own safety. Admiration at the productive use she makes of her imperfection is more useful for mimetic appropriation than moral perfection or excellence.

Although critics have sought to find the cardinal and theological virtues in *The Lord of the Rings* as they are undoubtedly exhibited, the novel is actually a melancholic text in which beauty and goodness are being drained from existence; in the end, Frodo fails in the task with which he has been charged. Evil defeats itself providentially, when Gollum falls into the fires of Mount Doom, so that the Ring is unmade. Humans, dwarves, elves, and Ents may unite to defeat the forces of evil, but Tolkien presents a world that cannot, in the end, rescue itself. Where his characters do act as moral exemplars of particular value is in their self-conscious sense of operating teleologically in this cosmic dimension of macrocosmic and microcosmic relation, and in their failure, which takes on an added depth from the larger narrative. We have already seen how when Frodo and Sam are hiding in a cleft of rock at the gates of Mordor, Sam begins to compare their experiences to those of characters in old tales and songs: “‘Why, to think of it, we’re in the same tale still! It’s going on. Don’t the great tales ever end?’ ‘No, they never end as tales,’ said Frodo. ‘But the people in them come and go when their part’s ended. Our part will end later — or sooner.’”⁴¹

In my title, I referred to this self-reflection as *emplotment*, even though in Ricoeur, as in narratology generally, that term usually refers to the way in which the reader draws together the actions of a story to make a shape of some significance, rather than their own experience. Tolkien is remarkable for the ways in which his protagonists know that they are part of larger narratives and are reading their own story. Their words are made ironic because readers know that Frodo and Sam are, indeed, just characters in a novel. Yet it is this awareness of fictionality that gives the story its reality effect. The hobbits even suggest to Gollum a role with themselves in a story that is concerned with the flourishing

41. Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings*, 697.

of their world: they offer him virtue, which as Alasdair MacIntyre in *After Virtue* makes plain can be engendered only through traditions and practices. There one finds one's role and in following it and its narrative, one learns to be virtuous. As MacIntyre puts it, "I can only answer the question, 'What am I to do?' if I can answer the prior question 'Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?'"⁴² Sadly, Gollum refuses the offered community and part in the story, though he is no less crucial in the development of its plot. By contrast, when offered the Ring by Frodo Galadriel considers the kind of narrative that would ensue from her acceptance: "'In place of the Dark Lord you will set up a Queen. And I shall not be dark but beautiful and terrible as the Morning and the Night ... All shall love me and despair!'"⁴³ This future she considers and rejects: "'I pass the test ... I shall diminish, and go into the West, and remain Galadriel.'"⁴⁴ Galadriel's ability to imagine herself in different narratives enables her to make a true moral choice; paradoxically, the more emplotted she is — i.e., aware that she is nested in larger stories — the more freely she is able to act.

It is this sense of being a character in a larger story that Tolkien's fiction offers its readers and that is so necessary to psychic health. British young people are the most unhappy in Europe and perhaps one factor in their lack of self-worth is that they are unable to connect their lives to social roles and larger stories.⁴⁵ Frodo and Sam are therefore, in my view, moral exemplars in their emplotment, where even failure is just part of the larger story and not dishonorable. Plato was worried about the use of Homer's *Iliad* in education because he feared that the bad behavior of divine and human characters would be imitated.⁴⁶ The key factor here in mimesis is not so much the actions themselves but the moral shaping of the larger narrative in which they occur. In Homer, it is unclear how one is to interpret the Olympian squabbles. *The Lord of the Rings*, however, has a strong conception of a providential order, in which protagonists seek to serve the Good, which is bound up with the full flourishing of the natural as well as the social order. Harry Potter, too, has this sense of being a player in a larger narrative. His life comes prefigured as "the boy who lived" and he is marked by a scar as the result of an early encounter with Voldemort. He is an exceptional character in this sense of a life heroically overdetermined and emplotted, but so central is he in shaping readers' perspective on events that they can imaginatively participate

42. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd ed. (London: A & C Black, 2013), 250.

43. Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings*, 356.

44. *Ibid.*, 357.

45. See the discussion of the data from PISA 2018 and other studies in the 2020 *Children's Society Good Childhood Report*. Of the twenty-four countries evaluated, the UK children ranked lowest in reporting high life satisfaction and a sense of purpose in life. The Children's Society, *The Children's Society Good Childhood Report 2020* (London: The Children's Society, 2020), <https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/2020-11/Good-Childhood-Report-2020.pdf>, 37.

46. Plato, *The Republic*, in *Complete Dialogues*, 624–5, Book II, 377e–378e.

in his situation. In his unfair treatment by the Dursley relations in Privet Drive, the Cinderella plot is rehearsed, making the association all the more mythic, and linking with the common children's fantasy of belonging to quite another world or family than one's own.

Harry Potter, in fact, has a doubled existence in that a piece of Voldemort's soul has become embedded in him. This takes his emplotment to a new level of intensity and makes him often a mystery to himself, unable to understand why he has certain powers. Frodo similarly experiences a divided selfhood, as the power of the Ring invades his will. This sense of inner conflict is more productive of imaginative moral engagement by readers than a simple good versus evil story in which the hero is unconflicted. The hero's divided subjectivity draws the reader into moral debate and questioning. Alasdair MacIntyre believes that a society in which the virtues are taken seriously is always one in which they are contested and debated. The reader's admiration in this context is always an analogical grasping of the teleological Good and the gap between its fulfillment.

What makes this self-division productive and enables the protagonist to mature is an ethical practice that Aristotle believed was essential to the moral life, namely, friendship. The *Nicomachean Ethics* distinguishes between the friendship of utility, where someone is cultivated for what one might get out of him or her; the friendship of pleasure, for example, which might describe a drinking companion; and the friendship of virtue, in which one cares for one's friends and wishes to assist and develop the good in them.⁴⁷ The friend becomes a kind of imitative mirror for self-reflection and moral development. Frodo's relationships all have this virtuous quality. He begins with Bilbo, Gandalf, and the Fellowship, who are all devoted to the Common Good.⁴⁸ His circle narrows to Sam, who begins as employee and ends as friend and heir, and who bears both Frodo and the Ring at one point. Harry has Hermione and Ron as well as a larger circle of friends and mentors, with Dumbledore playing the Gandalf role. His circle also narrows, to just Hermione at one point. Among studies of the effect of Rowling's novels on young people, two emphasize the importance of friendship, with children sometimes envying and always valuing the depth of friendship between the main protagonists.⁴⁹ What characterizes these friendships, however, is their focus on the Good. From early on, Harry and his friends protect the weak, stand up to bullies, and seek the Common Good, with the stakes rising in each subsequent novel. The friends quarrel and misunderstand each other but remain loyal. Even after Ron left the others in the

47. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 261–2, Book 8, 1156a1–1156b.23.

48. See Harald Thorsrud, "Voldemort's Agents, Malfoy's Cronies and Hagrid's Chums: Friendship in Harry Potter," in *Harry Potter and Philosophy: If Aristotle Ran Hogwarts*, ed. David Baggett, Shawn E. Klein, and William Irwin (Chicago IL: Open Court, 2004), 38–48, which uses this same taxonomy.

49. See Cristina V. Bruns, "Reading Readers: Living and Leaving Fictional Worlds," *Narrative* 24, no. 3 (2016): 351–369; and Ranjana Das, "'To Be Number One in Someone's Eyes ...': Children's Introspection about Close Relationships in Reading Harry Potter," *European Journal of Communication* 28, no. 4 (2013): 454–469.

tent in *The Deathly Hallows*, overcome by the horcrux locket, he tried to return and does so eventually, saving Harry's life.

While a cursory reading of the many young reader reviews online reveals how intensely readers identify with the friends — as if they were part of their own circle — they are also aware of the role of death and loss, and in this awareness lies one key element of the educational potential of the series.⁵⁰ In the end Harry must face death alone. Both novelists are noteworthy for their attention to transience and mortality and that is the last element in which they offer characters who have the potential to act as moral exemplars. In the post-mortem encounter at King's Cross, Dumbledore calls Harry, who has faced Voldemort without magic or defense and given himself to die, "the true master of death ... he accepts that he must die, and understands that there are far, far worse things in the living world than dying."⁵¹ Rowling's is a religious perspective, of course, and it enables her to demonstrate the power of the epitaph on the Potter parents' gravestone: "the last enemy that shall be destroyed is death" (from 1 Corinthians 15:26). While readers well know that their own experience of death will not bring them back to earthly life as Harry's does, walking with him and his terrors through the scene in the forest where he encounters Voldemort is educative and gives to death itself a narrative character. Even though Tolkien's novel excludes most overt religious practice, it too holds out the hope of a destiny for humankind beyond the confines of Middle-earth, and in the appendix, Aragorn makes of his own life a finished narrative by choosing the moment of his demise and giving himself up to death.⁵²

There is no easy way to prove the necessity of a cause and effect in the moral influence of a story on those who read or hear it, although evidence cited by Zagzebski suggests improved moral behavior among children who read a story about a positive exemplar as against those who did not read it.⁵³ This evidence, however, is taken from studies of very young children. I have sought to demonstrate, however, that the two fantasies described here encourage mature, active, and open reading and deliberation, akin to Warnick's "invitational role" of imitation; and they can be transformative, both in the loving attention and patience required and in the task of mediating between complex open endings and one's own experience. I have drawn attention to the role of emplotment, both in the

50. Fan websites also reveal quite matter-of-fact and often creative discussion of the dark topics of the novel as at <https://www.fanfiction.net/community/Harry-Potter-the-Master-of-Death/105520/>, accessed 4/7/2021.

51. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, 577.

52. Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings*, 1038.

53. Zagzebski, *Moral Exemplarism*, 131. The research Zagzebski cites was conducted by Kang Lee and colleagues, and it involves telling some children the story of George Washington and the cherry tree. The story of Pinocchio had no effect, nor did a negative version of the Washington story, prompting Zagzebski to conclude in favor of purely positive moral exemplars. It is noteworthy, however, that the children's ages ranged from 3 to 7 in that study, whereas the stories I am discussing are for older children and adults. See Kang Lee, Victoria Talwar, Anjanie McCarthy, Ilana Ross, Angela Evans, and Cindy Arruda, "Can Classic Moral Stories Promote Honesty in Children?," *Psychological Science* 25, no. 8 (2014): 1630–1636.

sense of finding narrative patterns and refiguring reality but also in the sense of the characters modeling for the reader the various roles in which we might find ourselves. This lends itself easily to classroom practice and to exploration of the nature of death as part of a life narrative. The Harry Potter novels are particularly apt as sites for moral inquiry through emplotment. While they have sometimes been criticized for elitism, given that only wizards may attend Hogwarts, the novels make Muggle/wizard relations a site of moral inquiry, and Hogwarts itself is meritocratic, containing those like Hermione who are of Muggle descent. Moral luck, indeed, as I have suggested, is a central topic of the novels.

Reading, I would suggest, is a practice in MacIntyre's usage, by which "goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to and partly definitive of that form of activity."⁵⁴ This is a long-winded way of saying that reading itself develops virtue, rather than some extrinsic good that one might get from it. It is not winning chess, so much as learning the moves and techniques that make such an outcome possible, that gives one the goods *internal* to the game. This speaks to the relative failure of Frodo, who fails extrinsically, yet gains intrinsically. I have sought to demonstrate that complexity, failure, and even depravity can be exemplary, provoking wonder and admiration in the context of a teleologically directed text: "Deprive children of stories," writes MacIntyre, "and you leave them unscripted, anxious stutterers in their actions as in their words."⁵⁵ As a practice, reading can be communal, and it would be good to develop classroom reading together as an ethical as well as literary activity. For it is novels with teleologically directed fictional worlds with embedded ethics, such as my two examples, that offer readers of all ages what Warnick calls for — that is, "imitative and creative communities" in which cultivation of virtue is possible and which offer opportunities for students of any age to explore their role and purpose in the larger narratives of which they are already a part.⁵⁶

54. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 175.

55. *Ibid.*, 201.

56. Warnick, *Imitation and Education*, 114.