

The Influence of Language:
Belief in J.R.R. Tolkien's Fictional Mythology and *The Lord of the Rings*

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Introduction

Studying the works of J.R.R. Tolkien inevitably leads to a question of belief, that is, the question of whether readers actually believe in the fictional world and how that experience of belief generates meaning. Much of the scholarship on fantasy literature is very interested in this question, beginning with Tolkien's own discussions of "Secondary belief" in his essay "On Fairy-Stories." The existing criticism has succeeded in establishing a lexicon of terms that describes how a work of fantasy conveys meaning. These works of scholarship provide an answer to the implicit question that arises when reading fantasy: "If a story takes place in a fictional world completely foreign to my own, how can I take away any meaning that is applicable to real life?" To provide an answer, critics often allude to *The Lord of the Rings* to create their own generalizing terms and concepts that can be applied to any work of fantasy or the genre of fantasy more broadly. Although a comprehensive understanding has been established regarding how fantasy generates meaning through belief, there is an incomplete application of these ideas to Tolkien's fictional works. Gary Wolfe, for example, uses *The Lord of the Rings* and other works of fantastic literature to argue that fantasy must create a sense of "deeper belief" in the mind of a reader for that reader to extract any valuable meaning from the story. He does not, however, explain exactly *how* Tolkien's work evokes "deeper belief." This thesis will briefly summarize some of the existing concepts and terminologies surrounding fantasy literature, and then demonstrate exactly how Tolkien's works of fiction (specifically *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and *The Silmarillion*) inspire belief to fulfill the roles of fantasy that have already been determined.

Tolkien creates an entire *belief system* rooted in the fictional creation myth found in the posthumously published writings that constitute *The Silmarillion*. Though *The Silmarillion* was

not available to the public until after his death, Tolkien had written the vast majority of the stories within it before writing *The Hobbit* or *The Lord of the Rings*, and the belief system that governs his fantasy world is most readily apparent in the first three sections, “Ainulindalë,” “Valaquenta,” and “Quenta Silmarillion.” These sections chronicle the creation of Eä, Tolkien’s fictional universe, by Eru Ilúvatar called the One, and the Ainur, lesser gods of Eru’s creation. The belief system that I will attempt to define (both its origins in *The Silmarillion* and its workings in Tolkien’s later stories) is ultimately what allows readers to recognize the meanings of Tolkien’s stories that are applicable to the primary world, i.e. the world that we as readers actually exist in.

The first section of the thesis, “Language, Sub-Creation, and Secondary Belief,” will examine Tolkien’s essay “On Fairy-Stories” and related criticism that establish a rhetoric to describe how fantasy evokes belief and thereby creates meaning. The second section, “J.R.R. Tolkien: Philologist, Catholic, and Family Man,” will look at Tolkien’s biography, particularly his religious and academic upbringing, in an attempt to discover the real-life inspirations that ultimately develop into the belief system of Tolkien’s fiction. The third section, “Tolkien’s Universal Creation Myth,” will argue that Tolkien’s creation myth is simultaneously indicative of Christian beliefs, as John Gough argues in his essay “Tolkien’s Creation Myth in *The Silmarillion* – Northern or Not?,” as well as pagan beliefs, making the creation myth of *The Silmarillion* an expression of Western belief in general. The fourth section, “‘Behold your Music! This is your minstrelsy’ – The Creation of Eä,” will provide a textual analysis of Tolkien’s fictional creation myth and attempt to reveal some of the aspects of his belief system that are evident within. The final section, “Song in *The Lord of the Rings*,” will demonstrate how Tolkien uses song in *The Lord of the Rings* to reveal his belief system to his readers as well as

connect the trilogy to the larger context of *The Silmarillion*. But first, in order to begin to understand the belief system in Tolkien's fiction, let us examine a brief scene from *The Lord of the Rings*.

In the beginning of *The Return of the King*, the third novel of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, the hopes of the free peoples of Middle-earth hang by a thread. The army of Rohan, led by King Théoden and Aragorn, has defeated the treacherous wizard Saruman's host of fighting orcs known as Uruk-hai at the Hornburg, Rohan's defensive stronghold in the valley of Helm's Deep. But a greater evil remains in the east. Sauron's hordes of orcs amass for an imminent strike at Minas Tirith, the capital city of Gondor and the last major stronghold of men.¹ Frodo Baggins, the hobbit charged with the task of destroying Sauron's Ring of Power, creeps ever closer to Mount Doom in the heart of Sauron's fiery domain of Mordor, the one place where the Ring can be destroyed. But if Sauron should discover the Ring-bearer and reclaim his Ring, the destruction and enslavement of mankind is all but guaranteed.

The remaining members of the Fellowship (those originally appointed as Frodo's guards but separated from him – i.e. Aragorn, the elf Legolas, the dwarf Gimli, the hobbits Merry and Pippin, and Gandalf the wizard) ride with King Théoden, his nephew Éomer, and his guard of Rohirrim back to the Hornburg from Isengard. In Isengard, Théoden and his captains treated with Saruman only to be met with malice and attempts to infect their minds with hexing words. Afterwards, Gandalf and Pippin break off from the company, riding hard for Minas Tirith to muster what defenses they can. Nazgûl, the dark servants of Sauron, have been spotted flying overhead, scouting the land. "Many hopes will wither in this bitter Spring," laments Aragorn as they prepare to ride under cover of darkness (*The Return of the King* 50). Shortly after they

¹ For the sake of clarity, I will adopt Tolkien's language to describe elements of plot and setting, though critics have argued that it reads slightly sexist at times to the modern reader - e.g. referring to the realms of "Men."

depart, one of Théoden's rear guard gallops to the front of the company to warn the king of an approaching contingent of foreign cavalry, riding hard to overtake the Rohirrim. King Théoden calls a halt at once, and his riders about-face to confront the strangers, spears brandished in a defensive formation.

The sinking moon was obscured by a great sailing cloud, but suddenly it rode out clear again. Then they all heard the sound of hoofs, and at the same moment they saw dark shapes coming swiftly on the path from the fords. The moonlight glinted here and there on the points of spears. The number of the pursuers could not be told, but they seemed no fewer than the king's escort, at the least.

When they were some fifty paces off, Éomer cried in a loud voice: 'Halt! Halt! Who rides in Rohan?'

The pursuers brought their steeds to a sudden stand. A silence followed; and then in the moonlight, a horseman could be seen dismounting and walking slowly forward. His hand showed white as he held it up, palm outward, in token of peace; but the king's men gripped their weapons. At ten paces the man stopped. He was tall, a dark standing shadow. Then his clear voice rang out.

'Rohan? Rohan did you say? That is a glad word. We seek that land in haste from long afar.'

'You have found it,' said Éomer. 'When you crossed the fords yonder you entered it. But it is the realm of Théoden the King. None ride here save by his leave. Who are you? And what is your haste?'

'Halbarad Dúnadan, Ranger of the North I am,' cried the man. 'We seek one Aragorn son of Arathorn, and we heard that he was in Rohan.'

'And you have found him also!' cried Aragorn. Giving his reins to Merry, he ran forward and embraced the newcomer. 'Halbarad!' he said. 'Of all joys this is the least expected!'

(The Return of the King 50-51)

This scene exemplifies what Tolkien terms "eucatastrophe" – a turn of events that delivers a character from seeming harm or danger, resulting in the release of pent up fear and emotion on the part of the reader. Tolkien argues that eucatastrophe is the highest function of fantasy literature, akin to tragedy in drama. In *The Return of the King*, Tolkien describes the Dúnedain as they ride up to King Théoden's host as "pursuers," "dark shapes coming swiftly" with the reflection of the moon in their spears. The pent up anticipation is voiced by Éomer's cry, "Halt! Halt! Who rides in Rohan?" Already set on edge, readers are further encouraged to imagine these

newcomers as foes. The white hand held up “in token of peace” is reminiscent of the white hand of Isengard that adorned the Uruk-hai’s battle standards, a parallel that leaves readers uncertain about the identity and intent of these newcomers. And suddenly, with Halbarad’s reply, “Rohan? Rohan did you say? That is a glad word,” the reader realizes that perhaps the approaching riders are some unanticipated ally, confirmed by Aragorn’s embrace and line, “Of all joys this is the least expected!” Readers release their held breaths and rejoice in the knowledge that another small force for good has taken up arms in defense of the realms of men.

But there is much more to this scene than the literary device eucatastrophe, the physical experience of relief in fantasy literature that Tolkien defined and implemented throughout his work. The text implies a restored unification between the Rohirrim and the Dúnedain. The Dúnedain are direct descendants of the Númenóreans who settled Gondor, while the Rohirrim are distantly related, though considered inferior in lineage. Cirion, the Steward of Gondor early in the Third Age, granted the lands of Rohan to Eorl the Young and his kin after they rode to the aid of Gondor in the Battle of Celebrant when the Easterlings (wicked men from the east) attempted to invade Gondor. Since then, however, a lack of communication and the ailing mental health of Denethor, the current Steward of Gondor, has resulted in an uncertain alliance between the two largest realms of men. This eucatastrophic scene, where the kin of the rightful King of Gondor join with the Rohirrim for a single cause, therefore symbolizes the reunification of free men across Middle-earth, a necessary event for the ultimate defeat of Sauron.

Although the history of Rohan and Gondor is unfamiliar to all but the most devoted Tolkien fans, the text of *The Return of the King* makes apparent that these two groups of men come from different cultures and harbor a certain amount of mistrust towards one another. Part of what makes Tolkien’s work unique is that he grounds almost every interaction between

differing peoples in centuries and even millennia of invented history. The texts containing Middle-earth's history are available for those who are inclined to seek them out, but what is truly remarkable about Tolkien's work is that one does not need to read the historical texts to understand the complex relationships at work. In this case, the relationship between the Rohirrim and the Dúnedain is understood even if the historical details are unknown. Aragorn's inspiring acts of valor in defense of the Hornburg and the people of Rohan directly leads Théoden and Éomer to put aside their mistrust and accept his kin from the north. Gimli points out the differences between the groups of men, saying, "They are a strange company, these newcomers... Stout men and lordly they are, and the Riders of Rohan look almost as boys beside them; for they are grim men of face, worn like weathered rocks for the most part, even as Aragorn himself; and they are silent" (*The Return of the King* 52-53). The "grim" faces and "silence" of the Dúnedain suggest that there are reservations among the men, and it is understood through the text that the soldiers of Rohan and the Rangers from the North maintain an unstable trust in one another at best.

In fact, the mistrust of outsiders is part of the larger culture or belief system at play in Tolkien's work. The members of the fellowship encounter similar suspicion when they first meet the elves of Lothlórien and the men of the Riddermark. Other examples include Beorn's initial mistrust of the Dwarves in *The Hobbit*, Frodo and the other hobbits' mistrust of Aragorn when they first meet him in Bree under his pseudonym "Strider," and Treebeard's misgivings upon finding Merry and Pippin in Fangorn Forest. All of these relationships eventually turn into steadfast friendships, and Tolkien seems to be implying something about how trust is earned and maintained.

The mistrust that dwarves and elves have toward one another is particularly revealing of Tolkien's belief system. Unless they have poured through the dense texts of *The Silmarillion* or the appendices to Tolkien's other works, readers are not aware that elves and men were created by Eru Ilúvatar, the mightiest and first god in Tolkien's legendarium, while the dwarves were created by Aulë, one of the Valar (lesser gods originally created by Eru Ilúvatar) who is the "master of crafts" whose "lordship is over all the substances of which Arda is made" (*The Silmarillion* 27). Eru Ilúvatar first commanded Aulë to destroy the dwarves, as they were not in accordance with his designs, but he ultimately took pity on the disheartened Aulë and allowed the dwarves to live.

Then Aulë took up a great hammer to smite the Dwarves; and he wept. But Ilúvatar had compassion upon Aulë and his desire, because of his humility; and the Dwarves shrank from the hammer and were afraid, and they bowed down their heads and begged for mercy. And the voice of Ilúvatar said to Aulë: 'Thy offer I accepted even as it was made. Dost thou not see that these things have now a life of their own, and speak with their own voices?... They shall sleep now in the darkness under stone, and shall not come forth until the Firstborn have awakened upon Earth... But when the time comes I will awaken them, and they shall be to thee as children; and often strife shall arise between thine and mine, the children of my adoption and the children of my choice.'

(*The Silmarillion* 43-44)

In this story, Tolkien reveals more than just the origin of elves or dwarves. He sets up a complex relationship between the two whose foundation lies in the very traits that his gods embody. The elves take after Eru Ilúvatar – wise, immortal, and just – conscious of all living things and the symbiotic relationship they share. Dwarves are also like their maker, concerned with their own works and obsessed with the treasures of the earth to the fault of greed. It is clear from this passage that dwarves and elves, "the children of [Eru's] adoption and the children of [his] choice," are destined to harbor a certain amount of loathing toward one another. Yet one can also infer this from *The Lord of the Rings*, recognizing the physical differences as well as the differences in values that the two races have. The rocky relationship between elves and dwarves

is a great example of how Tolkien's belief system can be directly defined using *The Silmarillion*, yet the same belief system can be implicitly understood by reading of *The Lord of the Rings*.

The origin story of elves and dwarves is a small part of the larger narratives of "Ainulindalë," "Valaquenta," and "Quenta Silmarillion," the first three parts of *The Silmarillion* that make up the creation myth of Arda, Tolkien's world. Like the tale of Aulë and the dwarves, the creation myth in its entirety provides more than just an origin story. It sets up an entire belief system and moral structure. As John Gough writes in his essay, "Tolkien's Creation Myth in *The Silmarillion* – Northern or Not?," Tolkien "wanted to provide, through his own English works, the kind of epic, mythic literature that already existed in Greek, Celtic, Germanic, Scandinavian, Finnish, and Romance languages" (Gough 2). This "mythic literature" that Tolkien used as inspiration functioned not only to provide religious explanations for the origin of the world, but also to establish an understanding of morality through the use of metaphor. Tolkien's creation myth, reminiscent of many cultures' religious texts, is no different. *The Silmarillion* establishes a belief system that governs the events in Tolkien's other works. This belief system is implicitly understood by readers of *The Lord of the Rings*, and is particularly apparent in the songs and idioms that Tolkien's characters reference. The belief system at work in Tolkien's writings is similar enough to the general beliefs of western culture, particularly the moral beliefs of Christianity, that readers will recognize it as relevant to their lives and readily suspend disbelief to accept the impossibilities of Tolkien's stories, or as Wolfe puts it, engage in "deeper belief."

Despite his efforts, Tolkien was unable to publish the writings in *The Silmarillion* during his lifetime. Arne Zettersten writes that "Tolkien was... of the firm opinion that these two large books should be published together" in the chapter "Fantasy: For Children and Adults" of his book *J.R.R. Tolkien's Double Worlds and Creative Process* (Zettersten 185). Tolkien's desire to

publish *The Silmarillion* along with *The Lord of the Rings* is a testament to the vital role that these early writings play in the formation and understanding of his later work. He clearly believed that access to *The Silmarillion* could help illuminate the meaning or meanings of *The Lord of the Rings*. But because *The Lord of the Rings* achieved international renown without the benefit of *The Silmarillion* to alert readers to Tolkien's belief system, we may infer that the same belief system is implicitly recognizable in the trilogy. However, understanding exactly how *The Lord of the Rings* creates meaning, how it inspires "deeper belief," requires an analysis of the early writings in *The Silmarillion*, in which the elements of Tolkien's belief system are initially established.

The general consensus from scholars such as Gary Wolfe, R.J. Reilly, C.S. Lewis, and even Tolkien himself is that literature that foregrounds the impossible, in the way that fantasy does, illuminates certain concepts in a way that realistic literature cannot. In other words, by bluntly presenting the impossible as ordinary, works of fantasy force the reader to reexamine and question everything they assume to be true in the story, even the realistic aspects, and perhaps come away with a new perspective on a concept they previously thought they understood. However, before readers of fantasy can reevaluate concepts that are ordinarily considered axioms, they must actively *believe* in the fantastic work. Belief, after all, is a mental exercise, and one can choose to believe in something he or she knows to be false in order to access a more profound truth of meaning.

In *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien structures the impossibilities of the story according to the belief system that he created in the *The Silmarillion*. They are logical in their own way; there is meaning behind the magic. Even without reading *The Silmarillion*, readers of *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* easily understand the structure and logic of

Tolkien's belief system. Laced throughout Tolkien's exhilarating tales of grandeur and wonder are metaphorical lessons, similar to religious parables. Also similar to religion, readers can take comfort from the stories and their implications, and are encouraged, to some extent, to actually believe in Tolkien's world of impossibilities. This genuine experience of belief illuminates the thematic significance of the fantastic work in the eyes of the reader. The creation myth in *The Silmarillion* lays the foundation for readers to engage in what Gary Wolfe terms "deeper belief" and Tolkien himself calls "Secondary belief," a necessary process for readers to recognize the meaning in any work of fantasy. Let us look in more detail at the terminology that critics have created to understand how a work of fantasy creates meaning, a process that begins, as Tolkien himself argued, with the manipulation of language.

Language, Sub-Creation, and Secondary Belief

The mind that thought of *light, heavy, grey, yellow, still, swift*, also conceived of magic that would make heavy things light and able to fly, turn grey lead into yellow gold, and the still rock into swift water. If it could do the one, it could do the other; it inevitably did both. When we can take green from grass, blue from heaven, and red from blood, we have already an enchanter's power – upon one plane; and the desire to wield that power in the world external to our minds awakes. It does not follow that we shall use that power well upon any plane. We may put a deadly green upon a man's face and produce a horror; we may make the rare and terrible blue moon to shine; or we may cause woods to spring with silver leaves and rams to wear fleeces of gold, and put hot fire into the belly of the cold worm. But in such 'fantasy', as it is called, new form is made; Faërie begins; Man becomes a sub-creator.

(Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories" 133)

Tolkien revealed much of his perception and intent with regard to his own work in the 1947 essay "On Fairy-Stories," first published in his book *Tree and Leaf* and since collected elsewhere. Tolkien created his own definition of the fairy-story, one that identifies the manipulation of language as the defining quality of fairy-tales rather than an adherence to a certain type of plot. He was also wrestling with the literary methods used by authors of fairy-

stories to create meaning that he would ultimately emulate in his own works of fiction. When writing *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien knew that he was doing something different than the traditional author of fairy-tales, but still viewed his work as a kind of contemporary fairy-story that engages readers in the same way that traditional fairy-stories do. As R.J. Reilly writes in his 1963 essay “Tolkien and the Fairy Story,” “I believe that the genre and meaning of the trilogy are to be found in his essay on fairy stories” (Reilly 137). In this essay, Tolkien most clearly delineates what he believes is the source of meaning and literary value in a work of fantasy literature or, because the genre did not exist as such at the time, a work of literature that takes place in the impossible realm of “Faërie.”

It all begins with language and the manipulation of language. By relying on language to comprehend and communicate the information our senses perceive, we inevitably allow for the possibility of altering that language and thereby altering our comprehension. When an artist or writer engages in this type of manipulation, he or she is performing what Tolkien terms “sub-creation.” All artistic works result from sub-creation, manipulating the mediums by which we perceive reality in order to create meaning; yet works of fantasy foreground the process of sub-creation and call attention to the fact that the axioms of reality are purposefully misconstrued. If the author successfully presents the impossibilities of his or her story as part of a logical structure that will ultimately reveal some meaning, then the reader temporarily accepts the clear manipulations of reality and engages in what Tolkien calls “Secondary Belief.” With the reader in this state of mind, a work of fantasy creates meaning in a way that a work of realistic literature cannot, or at least cannot to the same degree. Secondary Belief temporarily removes the reader from reality, and therefore allows him or her to more objectively observe and analyze the primary world, or the world that the reader actually exists in. In Tolkien’s literary canon, *The*

Silmarillion is the preeminent work of sub-creation and establishes a belief system for *The Lord of the Rings*, a belief system founded on the manipulation of language, which encourages readers to engage in Secondary Belief.

The fluid nature of language, the endless meanings and possibilities that arise when putting words together, is the keystone of Tolkien's fantasy work. Well known as a philologist, Tolkien's language takes on a magical capacity for creation. The most obvious manifestation of Tolkien's reverence for the power of language is the meticulous care with which he crafted his own fictional languages, most notably the elven dialects of *Sindarin* and *Quenya*. In his fiction, languages other than *Westron*, or the "common speech," are generally imbued with mystical properties. Many elven words contain healing powers, ancient dwarven phrases can be used to open secret mountain gates, and merely uttering the language of Mordor will fill listeners with a sense of hopeless dread. As Reilly points out, the languages of mythical creatures in *The Lord of the Rings* are somehow indicative of the traits that those creatures exhibit. "The Ents... the great trees of the Third age, are among the oldest living things. They speak to the hobbits in a language as old, as slowly and carefully articulated, as the earth itself. And when Tom Bombadil speaks, it is as if Nature itself – nonrational, interested only in life and in growing things – were speaking" (Reilly 139). Of course, by ascribing literal magic powers to the languages of Middle-earth, Tolkien is implying that the languages, or language more generally, of our world contain a related abstract power.

With regard to language it seems to me that the essential quality and aptitudes of a given language in a living monument is both more important to seize and far more difficult to make explicit than its linear history. So with regard to fairy stories, I feel that it is more interesting, and also in its way more difficult, to consider what they are, what they have become for us, and what values the long alchemic processes of time have produced in them.

("On Fairy-Stories" 130)

Tolkien argues that it is not the evolution or “linear history” of language that is worthy of study, but rather the intrinsic “quality and aptitudes” of language – which implies language contains power or even a consciousness – that influence a given society. Like language, stories and tales should be studied with regard to their effect on culture rather than their origin. Language and stories are constantly in flux, subject to the “long alchemic processes of time,” and a fable thousands of years old may have magically, as though through the chemical processes of alchemy, taken on an entirely new meaning.

However, the passage of time is not the only way language takes on new meanings.

Writers actively manipulate language to alter our perceptions.

The incarnate mind, the tongue, and the tale are in our world coeval. The human mind, endowed with the powers of generalisation and abstraction, sees not only *green-grass*, discriminating it from other things (and finding it fair to look upon), but sees that it is *green* as well as being *grass*. But how powerful, how stimulating to the very faculty that produced it, was the invention of the adjective: no spell or incantation in Faërie is more potent. And that is not surprising: such incantations might indeed be said to be only another view of adjectives, a part of speech in a mythical grammar.

(“On Fairy-Stories” 133)

Human perception (“the incarnate mind”), language (“the tongue”), and stories (“the tale”) are inherently coeval. To alter one is inevitably to alter the others. Therefore, to actively alter language is a kind of “spell or incantation” because it has the power to alter human perception. Simply by changing an adjective, one can provide “another view,” and participate in the “speech of mythical grammar.” All writers manipulate language to alter their readers’ perceptions to some extent. But while an author of realism must rely solely on devices such as vivid detail, exaggeration, or repetition to highlight an aspect of their story and thereby apply meaning to it, the author of fantasy can use language to alter the very foundations of human perception, and afterward present familiar concepts to be reexamined. Consider, for example, the Ents in *The Lord of the Rings*. By making a tree walk, talk, and recite poetry, by delving into the conscious

mind of a tree and revealing all of its fears and hopes, Tolkien forces his readers to reevaluate their understanding of nature. This manipulation of language, and subsequently of stories and perception, is the process of sub-creation.

In a successful work of fantasy – that is, a work of fantasy that both evokes Secondary Belief and conveys meaning to the reader – the sub-creation is carried out swiftly and logically. Obviously a realm of immortal beings and dragons and wizards and rings of power disturbs our sense of real world logic, but following the reader’s initial acceptance that the story will take place in a setting of impossibility, the rest of the magic in Faërie must remain plausible. As Gary Wolfe writes in his 1982 essay, “The Encounter with Fantasy,” “The further we progress in a fantasy narrative, the less we expect in the way of new impossible marvels; once the ground rules have been laid, a *deus ex machina* in fantasy is as intrusive as in any other kind of fiction” (Wolfe 226). In other words, the author of a work of fantasy cannot use the fact that magic exists in his or her story to justify a plot twist or solution to a problem presented in the narrative that violates the reader’s sense of belief in the fantasy world. The impossibilities in Faërie must adhere to a recognizable structure, outlined in the beginning of the narrative, so that each instance of magic is logical to the reader.

In *The Lord of the Rings*, the part that the Great Eagles of the Misty Mountains play is an interesting example of how Tolkien avoids interposing a new impossible marvel, yet uses the constructs of his belief system to move the story along. When Gandalf is imprisoned by Saruman on the top of the tower of Orthanc, it is Gwaihir the Windlord, “swiftest of the Great Eagles,” who delivers him from captivity (*The Fellowship of the Ring* 314). Though it would be easy to argue that this is a *deus ex machina* in Tolkien’s story, the conversation that Gandalf has with Gwaihir reveals it to be something rather different. “‘How far can you bear me?’ I said to

Gwaihir. ‘Many leagues,’ said he, ‘but not to the ends of the earth. I was sent to bear tidings not burdens’” (*The Fellowship of the Ring* 314). Gwaihir is not merely stating that he can only fly Gandalf so far, he is defining his role in the events of the trilogy more broadly. Just as the Ents exhibit similar traits to the trees they personify – slow to speak and decide on a course of action, as well as hesitant to involve themselves in the conflicts of others – the eagles behave in a way that we could reasonably expect sentient eagles to behave. They are not simply allied with men because they can talk and fear the destruction of Sauron. Rather, they are a prideful race that maintains their autonomy, only directly involving themselves in the affairs of men and elves and wizards when they feel it is absolutely necessary. And even then, Gwaihir does not fly Gandalf to Rivendell where he is desperately needed, but drops him in the nearby realm of Rohan, saying that he was “sent to bear tidings not burdens.” In other words, the eagles’ role in Middle-earth is that of a messenger or observer. They cannot directly influence the fate of the free peoples of Middle-earth, but nevertheless they provide valuable information and a kind of indirect counsel. Perhaps Tolkien is commenting on the value of eagles, or nature more generally, in the primary world. But more concretely, he is plugging the eagles into his belief system, assigning them a part to play in the larger narrative, as well as highlighting something fundamentally true about real world eagles through the personification of his eagle characters. Readers may be frustrated that Gwaihir won’t simply fly over Mount Doom and drop the ring in from above, but in the context of Tolkien’s belief system, his logical application of impossibilities, we understand that this cannot occur.

To read a work of fantasy is to put your trust in the author, to follow him blindly into an unfamiliar world with the assumption that whatever you find there will somehow become meaningful and applicable to the primary world. Wolf describes this trust as an “implied

compact between author and reader – an agreement that whatever impossibilities we encounter will be made significant to us, but will retain enough of their idiosyncratic nature that we still recognize them to be impossible” (Wolfe 224-25). This “implied compact” manifests into Secondary Belief, or what Wolfe terms “deeper belief in the fundamental reality that this world expresses” (Wolfe 232). The “fundamental reality” of a work of fantasy is its meaning, its theme, its motif, its significance that the reader can take away from the fantastic realm and relate to the primary world.

Interestingly enough, the meaning conveyed by a work of fantasy almost always deals with something rather ordinary or familiar. “Fairy-stories deal largely, or (the better ones) mainly, with simple or fundamental things, untouched by Fantasy, but these simplicities are made all the more luminous by their setting” (“On Fairy-Stories” 167). By taking a commonplace object or concept and placing it in a fantastic world, we are able to examine it with a new perspective. The manipulation of language in a work of fantasy manipulates the perceptions of the reader and allows him to view a whole array of familiar objects and concepts in a completely new light. Tolkien calls this result of Secondary Belief “Recovery.”

Recovery (which includes return and renewal of health) is a re-gaining – regaining of a clear view. I do not say ‘seeing things as they are’ and involve myself with the philosophers, though I might venture to say ‘seeing things as we are (or were) meant to see them’ – as things apart from ourselves. We need, in any case, to clean our windows; so that the things seen clearly may be freed from the drab blur of triteness or familiarity – from possessiveness... This triteness is really the penalty of ‘appropriation’: the things that are trite, or (in a bad sense) familiar, are the things that we have appropriated, legally or mentally. We say we know them.

(“On Fairy-Stories” 165-66)

Tolkien argues that one of the most valuable experiences that a reader can take away from fantasy literature is Recovery. If we go long enough without altering or examining our perceptions of the world, we begin to become overly familiar with the objects that we regularly

observe, and we ascribe a possessive mentality to these objects and concepts. “All things become blurred by familiarity; we come to possess them, to use them, to see them only in relation to ourselves. In doing so we lose sight of what the things really are, *qua* things – and ‘things’ here includes people, objects, ideas, moral codes, literally everything. Recovery is a recovery of perspective” (Reilly 144). Engaging with fantasy forces the reader to temporarily alter his or her perspective, to reevaluate even the simplest of objects and perhaps realize something new.

In his 1955 essay “The Dethronement of Power,” C.S. Lewis discusses Tolkien’s concept of Recovery and directly relates it to *The Lord of the Rings*, which he describes as a myth:

The value of the myth is that it takes all the things we know and restores to them the rich significance which has been hidden by the “veil of familiarity.” The child enjoys his cold meat, otherwise dull to him, by pretending it is buffalo, just killed with his own bow and arrow. And the child is wise. The real meat comes back to him more savory for having been dipped in a story; you might say that only then is it real meat. If you are tired of the real landscape, look at it in a mirror. By putting bread, gold, horse, apple, or the very roads into a myth, we do not retreat from reality: we rediscover it. As long as the story lingers in our mind, the real things are more themselves. This book [*The Lord of the Rings*] applies the treatment not only to bread or apple but to good and evil, to our endless perils, our anguish, and our joys. By dipping them in myth we see them more clearly. I do not think he could have done it in any other way.

(Lewis 15-16)

In addition to describing the clarity with which we can rediscover something in a fantastic world, Lewis explains that the process of Recovery extends beyond tangible objects to include more complex moral or mental concepts such as “good and evil, our endless perils, our anguish, and our joys.” A very real and influential agency is applied to indefinite human ideas in *The Lord of the Rings*. Consider Boromir’s desire to use the Ring as a weapon against Sauron. Readers who have come to appropriate the concepts of good and evil might naturally assume that good people can use evil means to enforce a greater morality. But when they see Boromir attempt to take the Ring forcefully from Frodo, driven mad by its influence, they are forced to reevaluate their perspective and ultimately develop a more profound and accurate understanding of good and

evil. Perhaps that understanding is that good people are easily enticed by evil, or that evil deeds done for the sake of virtue will ultimately lead to ruin. Whatever the realization may be, this scene then becomes a commentary on any number of historical events, from the use of the atom bomb to the modern argument over whether or not means of mild torture are acceptable if we believe it will save lives. This scene from *The Lord of the Rings* does not feign to provide an answer to such complex moral issues, but rather encourages readers to approach such issues with a clear understanding of good and evil, unappropriated and *recovered* from years of practical application. Reilly also identifies concepts in *The Lord of the Rings* that are rediscovered through Recovery:

Applying the theory of Recovery to the trilogy, then, we rediscover the meaning of heroism and friendship as we see the two hobbits clawing their way up Mount Doom; we see again the endless evil of greed and egotism in Gollum, stunted and ingrown out of moral shape by years of lust for the Ring; we recognize again the essential anguish of seeing beautiful and frail things – innocence, early love, children – passing away as we read of the Lady Galadriel and the elves making the inevitable journey to the West and extinction... We see morality *as* morality.

(Reilly 145)

Indeed, there is a literal power that surrounds many abstract concepts in *The Lord of the Rings*, concepts such as friendship, love, mercy, and pity, as well as the ever permeating influence of hate and a lust for power. By engaging in the Secondary World, the reader is able to recover a non-egocentric awareness of the concepts presented in the work of fantasy.

The final two results of Secondary Belief are Escape and Consolation, which Tolkien admits “are naturally closely connected” (“On Fairy-Stories” 167). “In fact, Escape brings about Consolation as its end or effect” (Reilly 146). Tolkien is aware of the rhetoric surrounding “escapism” and the fact that many critics have condemned fantasy on the grounds that it is “escapist.” Regardless, he vehemently maintains that “Escape is one of the main functions of fairy-stories” (“On Fairy-Stories” 167). He refuses to admit that Escape is a negative function of

the fairy-story. In fact, he claims quite the opposite: that Escape is a necessary rebellion from reality, and critics of fantasy who use this word to discredit the genre “are confusing, not always by sincere error, the Escape of the Prisoner with the Flight of the Deserter” (“On Fairy-Stories” 168).

Why should a man be scorned, if, finding himself in prison, he tries to get out and go home? Or if, when he cannot do so, he thinks and talks about other topics than jailers and prison-walls? The world outside has not become less real because the prisoner cannot see it.

(“On Fairy-Stories” 168)

Though Tolkien is not so pessimistic that he believes life is akin to imprisonment, his metaphor is well-taken. Using the imagination to escape for a time from the confines of reality can be not only enjoyable, but also beneficial. It offers “a kind of satisfaction and consolation” in a world of “hunger, thirst, poverty, pain, sorrow, injustice, death” (“On Fairy-Stories” 173). The tragedies of everyday life can be more optimistically and energetically confronted if one has the opportunity to Escape to a more idyllic world for a time. “This kind of solace or respite is necessary; it is not refusal to face reality, it is a time needed to regroup one’s forces for the next day’s battle” (Reilly 147). The constant bombardment of negativity and hardship can be detrimental to one’s desire to achieve, even his or her desire to live. Escape is a healthy and effective solution.

Although there are a variety of consolations that can result from Escape, the primary Consolation, and one that cannot be equaled in any other literary genre, is “the Consolation of the Happy Ending” (“On Fairy-Stories” 175).

Almost I would venture to assert that all complete fairy-stories must have it. At least I would say that Tragedy is the true form of Drama, its highest function; but the opposite is true of the Fairy-story. Since we do not appear to possess a word that expresses this opposite – I will call it *Eucatastrophe*. The *eucatastrophic* tale is the true form of the fairy-tale, and its highest function.

(“On Fairy-Stories” 175)

Just as works of tragic drama end in an epiphany and death, the eucatastrophic fairy-story ends in a “sudden joyous turn” where all that seemed lost is suddenly redeemed or saved (“On Fairy-Stories” 175). In both cases, the reader is aware of the inevitable ending. To continue Tolkien’s drama analogy, we see that eucatastrophe functions in *The Lord of the Rings* in much the same way that tragedy functions in *Romeo and Juliet*. The prologue to Shakespeare’s play tells us that the two lovers will ultimately die, yet the audience is still struck by grief when they do, just as readers of *The Return of the King* know that Gondor will not fall to the hordes of Sauron in the Battle of the Pelennor Fields, yet the courage and camaraderie of men still produces “Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief” (“On Fairy-Stories” 175). This joy is the preeminent Consolation of the fairy-story, its most important function.

The concepts inherent in Secondary belief (Recovery, Escape, and Consolation) are closely aligned with Tolkien’s belief system that is outlined in *The Silmarillion* and apparent throughout *The Lord of the Rings*. The importance of Recovery, the regaining of a clear perspective that identifies an object or idea as apart from oneself, is reiterated in Ilúvatar’s decision to spare the Seven Dwarf Fathers created by Aulë. Once the dwarves came into being, Ilúvatar, as a symbolic representation of wisdom and morality, recognizes the importance of preserving their right to autonomous life. On the opposite end of the spectrum, the malevolent Melkor attempts to appropriate Arda and the creatures that inhabit it as his own. He stands as an example of the dangers that arise when one forgoes, or refuses to engage in the process of Recovery. Ilúvatar exemplifies the opposite: the value of Recovery and the wisdom gained by it. Not only are there many examples of Consolation in the form of eucatastrophe in Tolkien’s fiction (Gandalf’s deliverance from the tower of Orthanc thanks to Gwaihir the Windlord comes to mind, as well as the scene of the Dúnedain overtaking the Rohirrim that has already been

discussed) but the idea of Consolation is associated with the literal power that Tolkien ascribes to abstract moral decisions or evaluations. Concepts such as faith and hope, camaraderie and courage, bring about Consolation and eucatastrophe as a kind of natural result.

Now that we have defined some of the terminology that is used to describe the workings of fantasy literature and looked at the general methods that fantasy authors implement to create meaning, let us more closely examine Tolkien's specific belief system, beginning with its origins apparent in his biography.

J.R.R. Tolkien: Philologist, Catholic, and Family Man

Before we come to the analysis of Tolkien's writings, some description of his upbringing and professional life can help us begin to understand the belief system that ultimately governs his fictional world. John Ronald Reuel Tolkien was born on January 3, 1892 in Bloemfontein in the Orange Free State, now called the Free State Province of South Africa. His father was a banker by profession, and died of rheumatic fever when Tolkien was only three-years-old. After the death, his mother Mabel took him and his younger brother Hilary to Birmingham, England to live closer to members of their extended family (Carpenter 27). Tolkien began exploring the English countryside around Birmingham at a very young age, the very landscapes that are thought to have inspired much of the topography of Middle-earth and Tolkien's other fictional realms, including his Aunt Jane's farm Bag End – the name used for the Baggins' home in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* (Carpenter 113).

Mabel Tolkien initially took on the responsibility of educating her two sons, Ronald (as he was known to the family) and Hilary. Ronald Tolkien proved to be a very gifted student from an early age, showing particular interest in the study of language and botany (Carpenter 29). He

would wander the countryside drawing landscapes and identifying plant-life, and he was taught the rudiments of Latin at an extremely young age. His fascination with both of these disciplines became a life-long passion, and evidence of his extensive studies is continually displayed in *The Lord of the Rings*. His love of language is evident, first of all, from the numerous fictional languages he invented for his world, but also from the use of language as the substance of magic that we saw in the previous section. His love of botany is apparent throughout the series, but particularly in the beginning of *The Fellowship of the Ring* in chapters such as “The Old Forest,” “In the House of Tom Bombadil,” and “Flight to the Ford.” While many readers grow frustrated with the slow pace and lack of action in these early chapters, they seem necessary to explain what is at stake should the quest to destroy Sauron’s ring fail. Tolkien devotes almost half of the first book to painting a picture of Middle-earth as serene, the Shire as a fertile little Eden devoid of hardship and evil. Without this initial set-up, the fear of Sauron’s triumph wouldn’t be as potent. There wouldn’t be as much to lose in the eyes of the reader.

Similar to language and botany, religion played a crucial role in the development of Tolkien’s world. The discord between Tolkien’s English Protestant relatives and his Roman Catholic relatives led to religious tension that featured prominently in his life. His mother converted to Roman Catholicism after the death of his father, a decision that greatly upset her Baptist family (Carpenter 31). After Mabel’s death in 1904, when Tolkien was just 12-years-old, his guardians continued to push Catholic beliefs on him. He remained a devout Catholic for the rest of his life, and his wife Edith even converted from Protestantism to marry him against her family’s wishes.

Though Tolkien was undeniably a sincere supporter of the Catholic faith, he was interested in many religious beliefs, archaic as well as contemporary, and much of his interest in

religion can be attributed to his fascination with language. His grandson Simon Tolkien recounts an amusing anecdote on his website in which the elderly Ronald expresses his discontent with the liturgical reforms implemented by the Second Vatican Council:

I vividly remember going to church with him in Bournemouth. He was a devout Roman Catholic and it was soon after the Church had changed the liturgy from Latin to English. My grandfather obviously didn't agree with this and made all the responses very loudly in Latin while the rest of the congregation answered in English. I found the whole experience quite excruciating, but my grandfather was oblivious. He simply had to do what he believed to be right.

(Simon Tolkien, "My Grandfather")

Tolkien's faith was founded on language itself as much as the translated teachings and values of Catholicism. In his view, changing the language that the religion was originally expressed in is akin to changing the beliefs of the religion itself. Just as the Latin language played a part in the development of Tolkien's belief in the tenets of Roman Catholicism, Tolkien's implementation of language in his fiction encourages his readers to engage in Secondary belief in his fictional world.

In his early adolescence, while studying Latin and Anglo-Saxon, Tolkien began recreationally creating fictional languages with his cousins, such as *Animalic*, *Nevbosh*, and *Naffarin*. Tolkien would continue to create fictional languages throughout his life. *Sindarin* and *Quenya*, the two primary languages of the elves in Tolkien's fiction, are so widely developed that they now function as languages, extensive enough for conversation and studied by some Tolkien enthusiasts ("Tolkien's Languages"). The very concept of belief is interdependent with language in Tolkien's mind, and as we have seen, the magical or supernatural elements of Tolkien's work rely entirely on the manipulation of language.

In 1911, Tolkien joined a party of twelve that hiked from Interlaken to Lauterbrunnen across the Swiss Alps. He later wrote in a 1968 letter to his grandson Michael, "The hobbit's

(Bilbo's) journey from Rivendell to the other side of the Misty Mountains, including the glissade down the slithering stones into the pine woods, is based on my adventures in 1911" (*The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien* #306). Part of the immersion that readers feel when reading Tolkien's work can be attributed to that fact that many of the elements of his stories are inspired by true events and observations. In this case, the "glissade down the slithering stones into the pine woods" is indicative of a memorable scene in *The Hobbit* from the chapter "Out of the Frying-Pan Into the Fire." Bilbo's crossing of the Misty Mountains feels like a non-fiction adventure story (other than the encounter with goblins and Gollum) because it was inspired by just such an expedition. "Then he [Bilbo] looked forward and could see before him only ridges and slopes falling towards lowlands and plains glimpsed occasionally between the trees... he still wandered on, out of the little high valley, over its edge, and down the slopes beyond" (*The Hobbit* 61). Here, Tolkien is not allegorizing the Alps as the Misty Mountains, but rather using real experiences to make the Misty Mountains feel more authentic and believable to his readers.

Similarly, the towers of Orthanc and Barad-dûr in Tolkien's fiction seem almost historical, rather than lavish elements of a work of fantasy, because Tolkien's descriptions of them were largely based on the 16th century tower known as Perrott's Folly and the Victorian tower of Edgbaston Waterworks that he lived near as a young teenager (Birmingham Heritage Forum). These realistic aspects of Tolkien's fantasy help to highlight the magic in his work and suggest that the fantastic elements deviate from reality with a purpose in mind other than amusement or entertainment.

In October of the same year as his expedition through the Swiss Alps, Tolkien began studying at Exeter College, Oxford. He graduated in 1915 with first class honors in English Literature and Language. Following his graduation, Tolkien enlisted in the British Army as a

Second Lieutenant in the Lancashire Fusiliers. He was involved in multiple assaults on German strongpoints and trenches, and many of his fellow soldiers and former school companions were killed in the war. In October of 1916, Tolkien's battalion assaulted the German Regina Trench. Tolkien himself came down with trench fever caused by lice and was discharged from service in November of the same year (Carpenter 93).

Many Tolkien fans have pointed to his service in World War I and the fact that Tolkien wrote much of *The Lord of the Rings* during World War II to argue that the trilogy is an allegory for the wars of Europe, particularly the Second World War. Just as Bilbo's trip across the Misty Mountains was inspired by Tolkien's trip through the Alps, but the Misty Mountains aren't intended to represent the Alps, Tolkien's experiences with war undeniably influenced his work, but he repeatedly denied any allegorical interpretations of *The Lord of the Rings*. "I dislike Allegory – the conscious and intentional allegory – yet any attempt to explain the purport of myth or fairytale must use allegorical language" (*The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien* #131). Tolkien denounces "intentional allegory," that is, a story designed to have one specific interpretation related to a real event. But he admits that dealing with fantasy requires the use of "allegorical language." Without condemning *The Lord of the Rings* to a single interpretation of allegory, Tolkien allots for the use of language and descriptions in his fiction that are perhaps reminiscent of real European wars, though this is only to heighten the verisimilitude of his stories, not to suggest a parallel between them and any specific event of history.

While recovering from illness and serving hospital and garrison duties back in England, Tolkien began writing *The Book of Lost Tales* and *The Fall of Gondolin*, the first works to chronicle the complex fictional myths that describe the creation of Arda and the initial tales of the immortal elves who were the first to inhabit the continent of Middle-earth. These tales were

constantly edited and expanded until they were finally published posthumously by Tolkien's son Christopher in *The Silmarillion*.

During these garrison duties, Tolkien was able to spend much of his time with his wife Edith. After her death in 1971, in a letter to Christopher, he recalled an episode where she danced for him in a clearing of the woods nearby Roos:

I never called Edith *Luthien* – but she was the source of the story that in time became the chief part of the *Silmarillion*. It was first conceived in a small woodland glade filled with hemlocks at Roos in Yorkshire (where I was for a brief time in command of an outpost of the Humber Garrison in 1917, and she was able to live with me for a while). In those days her hair was raven, her skin clear, her eyes brighter than you have seen them, and she could sing – and *dance*. But the story has gone crooked, and I am left, and I cannot plead before the inexorable Mandos.

(*The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien* #340)

Tolkien admitted that his tale of *Beren and Lúthien* was inspired by this event, and he even had the names “Beren” and “Lúthien” engraved on his and his wife's tombstone. Tolkien's invocation of Mandos (his own fictional god of Death and Doom) demonstrates the authentic belief that Tolkien had in his own fictional world. He saw Middle-earth in Europe and Europe in Middle-earth, which helped establish a connection between the primary world and Tolkien's fictional Arda for his readers.

Following the war, Tolkien had a number of academic jobs working for the Oxford English Dictionary, the University of Leeds and Pembroke College at Rawlinson, and as Bosworth Professor of Anglo-Saxon in Oxford. He was an avid member of the Inklings, an informal literary discussion group that also included C.S. Lewis. During this time, Tolkien worked with E.V. Gordon to produce “A Middle English Vocabulary” and a new edition of “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,” both of which are still referenced today. He also wrote *The Hobbit* and drafted preliminary editions of *The Lord of the Rings*. Tolkien's 1936 lecture titled “Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics” is widely recognized as the first argument for studying

the Anglo-Saxon poem for its literary merits, rather than as a linguistic and historical document (Carpenter 143).

Despite all of his scholarly exploits and his constant work on his own fiction, Tolkien remained an extremely devoted father and husband. He had three sons and a daughter and famously illustrated cards from “Father Christmas” for his children during the holidays that contained stories of adventure and wonder (Tolkien, *The Father Christmas Letters*). Throughout his drafting of *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien would constantly send manuscripts to his youngest son, Christopher, stationed in South Africa, who maintained an extensive correspondence with his father regarding the creation of the trilogy. After his father’s death, Christopher went on to compile and publish many of Tolkien’s manuscripts and writings.

Tolkien’s upbringing, professional life, and enthusiastic role as a father reveal some key features of the belief system he implemented in his work. Specifically, that Catholic morals provide a basis for the morality in Tolkien’s work, that belief and language are interrelated, that exploration and travel are enlightening enterprises, and that devotion to one’s family and kin is a fundamental part of goodness.

Of course, the belief system in Tolkien’s writings is altered, or perhaps not necessarily altered but enhanced by magic, which allows Tolkien to explore abstract concepts in terms of their direct influence on the events of his stories. We saw this in the previous explication of Tolkien’s concept of Recovery. Seemingly minor good deeds in Tolkien’s work end up influencing the course of history. The most readily available example of this influence is the decision to spare Gollum. When Gandalf recounts the previously unknown gap in the Ring’s history in the chapter “The Shadow of the Past” of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Frodo remarks

that it is a “pity” that Bilbo did not kill Gollum when he had the chance, that Gollum “deserves death,” to which Gandalf replies:

Deserves it! I daresay he does. Many that live deserve death. And some that die deserve life. Can you give it to them? Then do not be too eager to deal out death in judgement. For even the very wise cannot see all ends. I have not much hope that Gollum can be cured before he dies, but there is a chance of it. And he is bound up with the fate of the Ring. 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 – yours not least.

(The Fellowship of the Ring 85-86)

As it turns out, Bilbo’s decision to exercise mercy and spare Gollum is crucial to the success of the quest to destroy the Ring of Sauron. Without Gollum, Frodo and Sam would never even have managed to gain access to the scorched and desolate land of Mordor, the only place the Ring can be unmade. What is more, Gollum’s lust for the Ring saves Frodo from being subdued by its influence. At the very last moment, standing above the fires of Mount Doom, the one place the Ring can be destroyed, Frodo instead decides to keep the Ring for himself. The infuriated Gollum leaps on him, bites his Ringed finger off, and stumbles into the fire to be destroyed along with the One Ring of Power. The influences of evil are too great for any individual to overcome. No one is capable of willingly destroying the Ring, but seemingly insignificant acts of mercy and kindness often wield a power to overcome evil in a way that no one at the time could anticipate.

Tolkien’s beliefs outside of his fiction can be summed up in much the same way. He believed strongly in a God who took part in the lives of mortals, though his influence remained unseen and unclear. It is impossible to predict how the powers for good will shape mortal life when a small act of kindness is committed, but in Tolkien’s world, a subtle improvement in the affairs of humankind is always the direct result of an act of individual goodness. Alternatively, acts of wickedness and greed are immediately rewarded, and therefore evil will always remain a more enticing course of action. In order to continue examining the belief system that dictates the

events of *The Lord of the Rings*, let us next evaluate the religious implications of the creation of Arda, and the roles of the gods that shaped Tolkien's world.

Tolkien's Universal Creation Myth

John Gough's essay "Tolkien's Creation Myth in *The Silmarillion* – Northern or Not?" focuses exclusively on "Ainulindalë," the first chapter of *The Silmarillion*, and argues that Tolkien's creation myth is indicative of Roman Catholicism more so than the Norse and Celtic mythologies so often ascribed as his inspiration. Although the manner in which the universe was created in *The Silmarillion* shares a number of similarities with Catholic beliefs, the mythology that follows, and the completion of Arda by numerous gods who descend into the world is much more indicative of pagan beliefs.

Gough writes that "the Norse creation myth and Tolkien's clearly share no common ground" (Gough 7). The primary observation supporting this claim is that Tolkien's creation myth addresses the creation of something from nothing, the filling of a matter-less void, and Norse mythology does not. In Norse mythology, when creation begins there is already the Tree, Yggdrasil, and a fiery realm called Muspelheim to the south and an icy realm of mist to the north, Nifelheim. "In the Norse myth there is no beginning from nothing" (Gough 6). The concept of a single omnipotent being that can create substance from emptiness is fundamental to Christian doctrine, and as Gough points out, to Tolkien's creation myth.

Then the voices of the Ainur, like unto harps and lutes, and pipes and trumpets, and viols and organs, and like unto countless choirs singing with words, began to fashion the theme of Ilúvatar to a great music; and a sound arose of endless interchanging melodies woven in harmony that passed beyond hearing into the depths and into the heights, and the places of the dwelling of Ilúvatar were filled to overflowing, and the music and the echo of the music went out into the Void, and it was not Void.

(*The Silmarillion* 15)

However, there is a fundamental difference between traditional Christian doctrine and Tolkien's creation myth, namely that the Christian God created the entirety of the heavens and the earth independently, whereas Ilúvatar created the Ainur and then invited them to assist in the shaping of his grand "theme." The role of the Ainur is more closely aligned with Greek, Norse, and Celtic mythologies. "Thus it came to pass that of the Ainur some abode still with Ilúvatar beyond the confines of the World; but others, and among them the greatest and most fair, took leave of Ilúvatar and descended into it... and therefore they are named the Valar, the Powers of the World" (*The Silmarillion* 20). Among the Valar are Melkor, who seeks constantly to undo and mock the work of the others, and his brother Manwë, the greatest of the Valar in authority who hold dominion over the skies. Although elves and men were created by Ilúvatar himself as the greatest part of his theme, others of the Valar created much else on Arda. Ulmo, the Lord of Waters, shaped the oceans and the seas; Aulë, the master armorer and craftsmen, created the landscapes of continents and the dwarves to dwell in the mountains he shaped; Oromë, the Lord of Trees, created much of the wildlife in Arda; and Melkor, ever meddling, created demons known as Balrogs to serve him and orcs in mockery of the "Children of Ilúvatar," elves and men. Gough addresses this digression from Christian belief by writing, "Tolkien extends the orthodox Christian view of creation by allowing the Ainur to be subcreators" (Gough 5). By writing off the role of the Valar, Gough is brushing aside the fact that polytheism is inherently *non-Christian*. It seems rather that Tolkien blends the orthodox Christian view of creation with other mythologies by allowing the Ainur to shape specific parts of his world.

Gough's choice of the word "subcreators" is an interesting one here, as Tolkien himself has argued that people, artists and writers, are the ones who engage in "sub-creation." For Tolkien, art itself is a means of sub-creation that mimics and honors the creation of the world

according to Catholic doctrine. His fictional works are, to some extent, a form of devotion meant to capture and reiterate the implications and meanings of divine creation. In this sense, his creation myth is certainly Christian in intent, or promotes morals that are most readily identified as Christian. However, the direct involvement of many diverse gods in the affairs of mortals presents a significant deviation from Christian belief.

Gough's second argument is that Tolkien's creation myth and the Christian tradition of creation both foreground the foundation of morality through the fall of a divine being: Satan in Christianity, Melkor in Tolkien.

But now Ilúvatar sat and hearkened, and for a great while it seemed good to him, for in the music there were no flaws. But as the theme progressed, it came into the heart of Melkor to interweave matters of his own imagining that were not in accord with the theme of Ilúvatar; for he sought therein to increase the power and glory of the part assigned to himself.

(*The Silmarillion* 16)

Gough argues that Norse mythology does not “show any sense of morality” until post-creation tales of “the warriors’ code of valor, honor, and truthfulness” (Gough 7). He instead likens the fall of Melkor to the fall of Satan in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. Tolkien wrote in a 1951 letter to Milton Waldman, an editor for London publishers who admired Tolkien’s work, that *The Silmarillion* “is mainly concerned with Fall, Mortality, and the Machine.”

With Fall inevitably, and that motive occurs in several modes. With Mortality, especially as it affects the creative (or as I should say, sub-creative) desire which seems to have no biological function, and to be apart from the satisfactions of plain ordinary biological life, with which, in our world, it is indeed usually at strife. This desire... has various opportunities of ‘Fall’. It may become possessive, clinging to the things made as ‘its own’, the sub-creator wishes to be the Lord and God of his private creation. He will rebel against the laws of the Creator – especially against mortality. Both of these (alone or together) will lead to the desire for Power, for making the will more quickly effective, - and so to the Machine (or Magic).

(*The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien* #131)

Tolkien's description of "Fall" and the motives that bring it about are directly applicable to Melkor. When Melkor interjects his own melody into the theme of Ilúvatar, he is attempting to "interweave matters of his own imagining," or act upon his "creative... desire which seems to... be apart from the satisfactions of plain ordinary biological life." As a result, he "wishes to be the Lord and God of his private creation," rebels against Ilúvatar, harbors a growing "desire for Power," and ultimately uses "the Machine (or Magic)" to implement his will. Therefore, Gough is correct in comparing the fall of Melkor in *The Silmarillion* to the fall of Satan in *Paradise Lost*. Both divine beings ultimately fall from grace because of their desire to create according to their own free will. The fall, however, is fundamentally concerned with the establishment of morality, and as we have already seen, Tolkien's sense of morality is undeniably linked to the Catholic tradition. The shortcoming of Gough's argument is instead a failure to recognize that the whole of Tolkien's creation myth, particularly the shaping of the land and the wars waged by the Valar, draws on pagan beliefs to establish a sense of mysticism in nature and an interactive relationship between mortals and gods.

While Gough admits that Norse mythology greatly influenced Tolkien's later works (he rightly points to the similarities between Odin and Gandalf, the Nordic names of the Dwarves, and the influence of *Beowulf* on the character Smaug the Dragon), he argues that the creation myth itself is fundamentally Christian. Though the creation of the universe chronicled in "Ainulindalë" shares many similarities with Catholic doctrine, Gough fails to address "Valaquenta" and "Quenta Silmarillion," the second and third sections of *The Silmarillion*. It is crucial to note that "Valaquenta" and the beginning of "Quenta Silmarillion" are a continuation of Tolkien's creation myth. The very first sentence of "Quenta Silmarillion" is "It is told among the wise that the First War began before Arda was full-shaped, and ere yet there was anything

that grew or walked upon earth” (*The Silmarillion* 35). Clearly the process of creation does not end with “Ainulindalë.” Before any life other than Eru Ilúvatar and the Ainur existed, when Arda was still in flux of form, the Valar waged war upon it, creating great works only to have them cast down by Melkor.

The creation myth in *The Silmarillion* was influenced by every piece of mythology that Tolkien was familiar with, and this accounts for more literature than most people ever read. The moment of creation, the filling of the void, and the establishment of morality through the fall of a divine being are reminiscent of Christian doctrine; while the continued active creation of Arda by the Valar (notably the “Two Trees of Valinor,” Telperion and Laurelin, that wax and wane in a mirror image of each other leading to the establishment of time) is clearly aligned with pagan, and particularly Nordic, beliefs. Therefore Tolkien’s creation myth should not be thought of in terms of “Northern or Not,” but rather as a universal creation myth that evokes belief in the entire Western tradition. His belief system contains elements from many cultures’ mythologies, but is simultaneously unique and can only be accurately understood through explication of his writings independent of arguments about inspiration.

“Behold your Music! This is your minstrelsy” – The Creation of Eä

The completeness of J.R.R. Tolkien’s fictional world is astounding. The stories that take place there range from mythological battles between the immortal Valar to simple tales about humble hobbits who adventure across the countryside. In Tolkien’s writings, readers will discover an intricate web of histories and myths that span thousands of years, chronicling the conflicts of warring peoples as well as personal fables of love and valor, and all of this with a level of detail that is comparable to a history textbook. The immersive nature of Tolkien’s world

makes it that much easier for readers, perhaps unconsciously, to draw parallels between Arda and the primary world and to experience a true feeling of belief in the fantastic realm. But the sheer volume of material is not the only aspect of Tolkien's work that inspires Secondary belief. As previously discussed, the creation myth and the early tales of Middle-earth chronicled in *The Silmarillion* set up a belief system that is at work in the rest of Tolkien's fiction. These early writings reveal the foundation of a culture, or multiple cultures, that characters are a part of in his most famous work, *The Lord of the Rings*. Three fundamental concepts within this culture are the immediate and alluring benefits of evil deeds, the moral implications of tampering with the autonomy of sentient beings, and the magical influence of song.

The Silmarillion contains five distinct parts: "Ainulindalë," "Valaquenta," "Quenta Silmarillion," "Akallabêthe," and "Of the Rings of Power and the Third Age." "Ainulindalë," tells of the creation of Eä, the universe, or "the world that is" in Quenya, one of the many fictional languages that Tolkien created for use in his legendarium. Eru, the One, who is also known by the name Ilúvatar, begins by creating the Ainur, "the Holy Ones, that were the offspring of his thought, and they were with him before aught else was made" (*The Silmarillion* 15). Ilúvatar then begins weaving together a "great theme" in the form of a song. The Ainur contribute harmonies to this great theme, and the result is the creation of the universe and the world Arda where before there was only "the Void." But the "mightiest" of the Ainur, Melkor, deviated from the music to create his own "loud, and vain, and endlessly repeated" song that "had little harmony" (*The Silmarillion* 17). This introduces tension and disharmony into the world, and all of the evil and destructive forces on Arda are the result of Melkor tainting Ilúvatar's theme.

Melkor's interjection and disruption of the theme of Eru Ilúvatar is the first indication in the larger narrative of Arda that evil acts have immediate and readily apparent results, making them more enticing than acts of goodness that are subtle and obscure in their influence. Tolkien's identification of Melkor as the "mightiest" of the Ainur further indicates that evil is more brutishly powerful than good. In the very creation of Tolkien's world, he establishes the workings of morality that are ultimately exemplified in the symbol of the Ring created by Sauron, a servant of Melkor. Simply putting it on promises immortality, power beyond reckoning, and even though the wise know of its treachery, simpler minds are convinced that they could wield the Ring and use its power to perform virtuous acts. In fact, Melkor's interjection into the theme of Eru Ilúvatar and Boromir's attempt to take the Ring from Frodo by force are both indicative of the same belief regarding good and evil.

To Melkor among the Ainur had been given the greatest gifts of power and knowledge, and he had a share in all the gifts of his brethren. He had gone often alone into the void places seeking the Imperishable Flame; for desire grew hot within him to bring into Being things of his own, and it seemed to him that Ilúvatar took no thought for the Void, and he was impatient of its emptiness. Yet he found not the Fire, for it is with Ilúvatar. But being alone he had begun to conceive thoughts of his own unlike those of his brethren.

(The Silmarillion 16).

The original two spaces in Tolkien's creation myth are the "dwelling of Ilúvatar," a heavenly realm where the gods reside, and the "Void," or the empty firmament that the musical theme of Eru Ilúvatar fills with substance. In this scene, Melkor grows impatient with Ilúvatar for leaving the Void empty, and wanders through it in search of the "Imperishable Flame," a symbolic representation of the power to create life. As Melkor's impatience grows, he becomes more and more desirous to take matters into his own hands and fill the Void with his own creations. Melkor's intentions seem genuine, to bring life into a lifeless world, but his impatience and

desire to rule over that life corrupt him, and he begins to “conceive thoughts of his own unlike those of his brethren,” thoughts of domination and evil.

Boromir’s actions in *The Lord of the Rings* mirror Melkor’s tainting of Ilúvatar’s great theme. He is subject to the same corruption as Melkor. This is not due to laziness or simple repetition on Tolkien’s part, but is rather an indication of how Tolkien views evil and presents it in his stories. Toward the very end of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Boromir attempts to convince Frodo to bring the Ring to Gondor to use as a weapon against Sauron:

True-hearted Men, they will not be corrupted. We of Minas Tirith have been staunch through long years of trial. We do not desire the power of wizard-lords, only strength to defend ourselves, strength in a just cause. And behold! in our need chance brings to light the Ring of Power. It is a gift, I say; a gift to the foes of Mordor. It is mad not to use it, to use the power of the Enemy against him. The fearless, the ruthless, these alone will achieve victory. What could not a warrior do in this hour, a great leader? What could not Aragorn do? Or if he refuses, why not Boromir? The Ring would give me power of Command. How I would drive the hosts of Mordor, and all men would flock to my banner!... I do not say destroy it. That might be well, if reason could show any hope of doing so. It does not. The only plan that is proposed to us is that a halfling should walk blindly into Mordor and offer the Enemy every chance of recapturing it for himself. Folly!

(*The Fellowship of the Ring* 322)

When reading Boromir’s appeal, one cannot help but admit that there is logic in his request. The men of Gondor have fought and died for thousands of years to keep the forces of Mordor at bay, to protect Middle-earth, to keep harmonious places like the Shire safe from violence. It is their great hour of need. The forces of Mordor greatly outnumber them and threaten to annihilate their entire civilization. And when an object that could give them an advantage over their enemy is discovered, the rest of the free world refuses it to them and devises a plan that’s most likely outcome will deliver the Ring back to Sauron, ensuring their destruction.

Yet Boromir reveals the folly in his argument when he identifies himself as the savior of men. He desires safety for his people, but underneath this claim is a clear desire for power, just

as Melkor wished to fill the Void with life, to bring beauty into the empty world, but his true aim is to rule over his creations and “be a master over other wills” (*The Silmarillion*, 18). If Boromir succeeded in taking the ring, his fate would mimic that of Melkor, setting out to serve but harboring a growing lust for power that would ultimately lead him to treachery.

These scenes suggest not only that evil is appealing by nature, but that the foundation of evil is a will to hold dominion over others. After the creation of Arda, the Ainur behold it with a sense of wonder, and many opt to descend into it, to “be contained and bounded in the World, to be within it for ever, until it is complete, so that they are its life and it is theirs” (*The Silmarillion* 20). Among the Valar who descend into the world is Melkor.

And he feigned, even to himself at first, that he desired to go thither and order all things for the good of the Children of Ilúvatar, controlling the turmoils of the heat and the cold that had come to pass through him. But he desired rather to subdue to his will both Elves and Men, envying the gifts with which Ilúvatar promised to endow them; and he wished himself to have subjects and servants, and to be called Lord, and to be a master over other wills.

(*The Silmarillion* 18)

The fall of Melkor and his descent into evil are the results of his desire to rule others. Arda is a “gift” that Ilúvatar crafts for his “Children,” Elves and Men. Although the Children of Ilúvatar are part of his grand theme, offshoots of his thought, he intends to give them dominion over Arda after its completion and to let them rule as they see fit. The Valar, other than Melkor, share this desire and descend into the world in order to prepare Arda for the arrival of the Children of Ilúvatar.

But when the Valar entered into Eä they were at first astounded and at a loss, for it was as if naught was yet made which they had seen in vision... [They] perceived that the World had been but foreshadowed and foresung, and they must achieve it. So began their great labours in wastes unmeasured and unexplored, and in ages uncounted and forgotten, until in the Deepes of Time and in the midst of the vast halls of Eä there came to be that hour and that place where was made the habitation of the Children of Ilúvatar... When therefore Earth was yet young and full of flame Melkor coveted it, and he said to the other Valar: ‘This shall be my own kingdom; and I name it unto myself!’”

(*The Silmarillion* 20-21)

The creation of Arda is a selfless act, designed to be the dominion of the Children of Ilúvatar, and the virtuous gods delight in the free will afforded to Elves and Men, while Melkor thinks only of bending their wills to his own.

Aulë's creation of the dwarves is another example of morality in terms of honoring other beings' free will. Ilúvatar stops Aulë from destroying the "Seven Fathers of the Dwarves" by saying, "Dost thou not see that these things have now a life of their own, and speak with their own voices?" (*The Silmarillion* 44). Even though Ilúvatar is displeased that another creation was made against his will, he recognizes that once the dwarves are established as autonomous beings, it is not his place, not even he, Eru, the One, to take away their right to live freely.

In *The Lord of the Rings*, Sauron's initial forging of the Ring is also indicative of the relationship between morality and interfering with free will. When the Ring is brought before the council in Rivendell, Elrond relates the story of its creation:

Many eyes were turned to Elrond in fear and wonder as he told of the Elven-smiths of Eregion and their friendship with Moria, and their eagerness for knowledge, by which Sauron ensnared them. For in that time he was not yet evil to behold, and they received his aid and grew mighty in craft, whereas he learned all their secrets, and betrayed them, and forged secretly in the Mountain of Fire the One Ring to be their master. But Celebrimbor was aware of him, and hid the Three which he had made; and there was war, and the land was laid waste, and the gate of Moria was shut.

(*The Fellowship of the Ring* 202)

Sauron feigns friendship with the Elves of Eregion and the Dwarves of Moria by revealing to them secrets of craft that allow them to make rings of power. But Sauron learned the nature of the rings that belonged to the Elves and the Dwarves, and forged one in secret that would give him power over the others. Again, it is the desire for influence over others that ultimately leads to evil and destruction in Tolkien's world. This desire is the reason that evil entered the world at

all, the reason for Melkor's fall, and it continues to be the reason that malevolent forces such as Sauron plague Arda with their influence.

Beyond the explanation of the origins of morality in *The Silmarillion*, it is clear that music and song are inherently linked with creation in Tolkien's world. The matter and substance of the universe were crafted in song, and hearing was originally the sole sense of perception in the halls of Eru Ilúvatar.

But when they [the Ainur] were come into the Void, Ilúvatar said to them: 'Behold your Music!' And he showed to them a vision, giving to them sight where before was only hearing; and they saw a new World made visible before them, and it was globed amid the Void, and it was sustained therein, but was not of it. And as they looked and wondered this World began to unfold its history, and it seemed to them that it lived and grew. And when the Ainur had gazed for a while and were silent, Ilúvatar said again: 'Behold your Music! This is your minstrelsy; and each of you shall find contained herein, amid the design that I set before you, all those things which it may seem that he himself devised or added.

(*The Silmarillion* 17)

The very fabric of the universe in Tolkien's creation myth is composed of song. The world is described in the same terms as the music that created it: fluid and fluctuating as it "gathered power and had new beauty" (*The Silmarillion* 16). When the Ainur look upon the world, it begins to "unfold its history, and it seemed to them that it lived and grew." The existence of Arda is like one big symphony, rising and falling as the Valar create and Melkor destroys, and the music continues until "the end of days."

Music is not only a means of creation, but a means of preservation and ultimately destruction as well. In the first chapter of "Quenta Silmarillion," "Of the Beginning of Days," the Valar arrive in Arda and begin their work preparing it for the arrival of the Children of Ilúvatar. They create many great works in Middle-earth, and there is a time of peace and harmony known as the Spring of Arda. But Melkor spends this time gathering dark servants to him, spirits and Maiar who are "of the same order as the Valar but of less degree," and he "came forth suddenly

to war, and struck the first blow, ere the Valar were prepared” (*The Silmarillion* 30/36). Middle-earth is left in ruin, and the Valar flee to create a new domain called “Valinor,” all save Ulmo, the lord of waters. Ulmo rarely comes to Valinor, “unless there were need for a great council,” and dwells instead in the “Outer Ocean” (*The Silmarillion* 40).

In the deep places he gives thought to music great and terrible; and the echo of that music runs through all the veins of the world in sorrow and in joy; for if joyful is the fountain that rises in the sun, its springs are in the wells of sorrow unfathomed at the foundations of the Earth... And thus it was by the power of Ulmo that even under the darkness of Melkor life coursed still through many secret lodes, and the Earth did not die.

(*The Silmarillion* 40)

Arda is again depicted as a living entity, and the songs of Ulmo compose the essence of life flowing through its veins. Melkor failed to permanently condemn Middle-earth to darkness and ruin because Ulmo continued to provide sustenance deep in the ocean, where Melkor could not gain access, in the form of song. He kept hope alive so that the Valar could ultimately retake Middle-earth from Melkor and resume their work. This passage also indicates that there is a balance of “sorrow and joy” in the sustaining songs of Ulmo, suggesting that music comprises not only life in Tolkien’s world, but also death and grief. It is a cycle, just as the joyful water that spouts out of “the fountain that rises in the sun” initially came from the “wells of sorrow unfathomed.”

In fact this cycle of life and death, of creation and destruction, is also a fundamental part of the great theme of Ilúvatar that created the universe. Immediately after the music of the Ainur travels out into the void and fills it with substance, Tolkien writes, “Never since have the Ainur made any music like to this music, though it has been said that a greater still shall be made before Ilúvatar by the choirs of the Ainur and the Children of Ilúvatar after the end of days” (*The Silmarillion* 15). Music will ultimately un-make the universe just as it was made. Music is the substance of existence as well as the force of ultimate destruction in Tolkien’s mythology. In *The*

Lord of the Rings, songs are used for a number of functions, primarily to actively record history, but also as a means of prophesy and a source of hope.

Song in *The Lord of the Rings*

The Lord of the Rings contains references to many of the past events that are found in *The Silmarillion*, most often in the form of song.² In Tolkien's world, songs function to both chronicle past events and actively record history as it unfolds, creating a fantasy world that appeals to our sense of historical completeness and an inestimable future. In addition to alluding to the history of Arda within Tolkien's fiction, songs also function as prophesies, and this use of song indicates Tolkien's belief that language is the cornerstone of magic.

When Aragorn leads Frodo, Sam, Merry, and Pippin to Rivendell through the wilderness, the five travelers take refuge in the ruins of a forsaken watchtower. Even the "burned and broken" watchtower on Weathertop, which we learn was used in days of old by the Dúnedain to watch for evil forces coming down from the north, is itself an indication of this world's rich history (*The Fellowship of the Ring* 228). Aragorn tells the four hobbits that "it is told that Elendil stood there watching for the coming of Gil-galad out of the West, in the days of the Last Alliance" (*The Fellowship of the Ring* 229). Merry asks who Gil-galad was, and Sam replies with a song:

*Gil-galad was an elven king.
Of him the harpers sadly sing:
the last whose realm was fair and free
between the Mountains and the Sea.*

*His sword was long, his lance was keen
his shining helm afar was seen;*

² Song here is used generally to include any form of verse in *The Lord of the Rings*, such as the poems of Treebeard, as all of the verse in the trilogy is sung or spoken by a character.

*the countless stars of heaven's field
were mirrored in his silver shield.*

*But long ago he rode away,
and where he dwelleth none can say;
for into darkness fell his star
in Mordor where the shadows are.*

(The Fellowship of the Ring 229)

This song is about events chronicled in the fifth and final section of *The Silmarillion*, “Of the Rings of Power and the Third Age.” This brief section describes events that led to and are included in *The Lord of the Rings*. It recounts the “last alliance of elves and men” that besieged Sauron for seven years in his fortress of Barad-dûr at the end of the Second Age (*The Silmarillion* 294). Elendil and the famous elf-warrior Gil-galad were slain by Sauron. “But Sauron also was thrown down, and with the hilt-shard of Narsil Isildur [Elendil’s son] cut the Ruling Ring from the hand of Sauron and took it for his own” (*The Silmarillion* 294).

Sam learned these verses from Bilbo Baggins, who Aragorn tells us must have translated them from “the lay that is called *The Fall of Gil-galad*, which is in an ancient tongue” (*The Fellowship of the Ring* 229). Very early in the story of *The Lord of the Rings*, we see three indications of a world with a rich past: the once tall watchtower that has been reduced to rubble, the song celebrating the life of a fallen elven king, and the “ancient tongue” that is no longer spoken by the peoples of Middle-earth.

Atop Weathertop, the hobbits want to learn more about Gil-galad, but Aragorn does not think it wise to speak of the noble elf’s death at the hands of Sauron while the Nazgûl, the Ringwraiths who serve Sauron, are hunting them. “‘No!’ said Strider interrupting, ‘I do not think that tale should be told now with the servants of the Enemy at hand. If we win through to the house of Elrond, you may hear it there, told in full’” (*The Fellowship of the Ring* 235). This statement from Aragorn, or Strider as he is called in the beginning of the trilogy, is significant

for two reasons. The first is that the reader gets a sense of the function of magic in Middle-earth. It is implied that the travelers could give strength or knowledge to the Nazgûl by recounting the fall of Gil-galad. Language and tales do indeed contain magical properties in Middle-earth, as simply speaking in the language of Mordor will cause the world to darken and any listeners to be filled with a sense of dread.

The second reason that this quote is significant is Aragorn's reference to Elrond and his house as a kind of library or storehouse of histories and tales. Aragorn agrees to tell the hobbits another tale, the tale of Beren and Lúthien Tinúviel, but admits that "it is a long tale of which the end is not known; and there are none now, except Elrond, that remember it aright as it was told of old" (*The Fellowship of the Ring* 235). The elves are immortal beings, and Elrond is over three thousand years old. He fought alongside Elendil and Gil-galad in the siege of Barad-dûr. Aragorn's description of him suggests that Elrond plays an important role as a guardian of the world's histories. The "house of Elrond," or the elven city of Rivendell, contains volumes and volumes of histories and tales. This storehouse of history and knowledge is what attracts Bilbo to Rivendell, who also serves as a keeper of tales in Middle-earth, as he spends his last years recounting his own adventures and translating ancient texts into the common tongue. It is clearly an honorable practice in Middle-earth to record and retain the histories of past ages. The common adage, "those who do not learn history are doomed to repeat it" is particularly true for the inhabitants of Middle-earth. Without the knowledge of how Sauron and other treacherous entities were overcome in the past, the free peoples of Middle-earth cannot hope to defeat them again. Just as the songs of Ulmo kept life sustained during the dark age of Melkor's reign, the songs of Middle-earth's people contain a knowledge that is necessary to resist the forces of evil.

Tolkien also uses songs in his fiction to continue the tradition of recording history. His characters compose songs about events that have recently occurred in the novels. Frodo and Sam both write verses about Gandalf and his fall in the Mines of Moria as they rest in the elven land of Lothlórien (*The Fellowship of the Ring* 424-425). Aragorn and Legolas take the time to compose a song about Boromir after he is slain by the Uruk-hai along the river Anduin, even though Merry and Pippin are captured, possibly injured or even dying. They decide that it is prudent to compose a song in Boromir's memory before running off to try to save the two hobbits. The two sing of the West, North, and South Winds, asking for tidings and lamentations for the fallen Boromir. But Gimli says, "you left the East Wind to me... but I will say naught of it" (*The Two Towers* 23). The East Wind comes from Mordor, and the free peoples of Middle-earth do not look to it for wisdom or guidance. The influence and powers of song are apparent in this scene, both in Aragorn and Legolas' decision to delay their rescue mission to compose a song for Boromir, and in the group's fear of evoking the East Wind for the harm or misfortune it might bring. The very wind is personified in their songs, and it seems that a connection between people and the powers of nature can be achieved through verse.

The two lay Boromir in one of their boats with his arms and armor and send him down the great waterfall of the river, "but in Gondor in after-days it long was said that the elven-boat rode the falls and the foaming pool, and bore him down through Osgiliath, and past the many mouths of Anduin, out into the Great Sea at night under the stars" (*The Two Towers* 22). The process of recording history in song is alive and well within *The Lord of the Rings*, not just as a means of understanding the past, but also as a kind of gift to the future. There is even the suggestion that future myths, such as the mystique surrounding Boromir's funeral boat, will tell of the events in *The Lord of the Rings*. The continuing process of recording history through song

serves to set the stories of Middle-earth within a world that has an origin but no foreseeable ending, a world that is constantly creating its own history, just as the primary world.

Despite the efforts of characters such as Elrond and Bilbo, elements of histories are lost and tales are forgotten. As Aragorn said of the tale of Beren and Lúthien, the elven princess who forsook her immortal life for her love of the mortal man Beren: “it is a long tale of which the end is not known.” However, these gaps in the known history of Arda do not render it an incomplete world, no more than the burning of the library of Alexandria renders our culture incomplete. Instead, the gaps in histories and songs suggest that knowledge has been lost, but can be rediscovered. After the assault on the Hornburg, Gandalf tells King Théoden that the Ents have gone to war against Saruman.

The king was silent. “Ents!” he said at length. “Out of the shadows of legend I begin to understand the marvel of the trees, I think. I have lived to see strange days. Long we have tended our beasts and our fields, built houses, wrought our tools, or ridden away to help in the wars of Minas Tirith. And that we called the life of Men, the way of the world. We cared little for what lay beyond the borders of our land. Songs we have that tell of these things, but we are forgetting them, teaching them only to children, as a careless custom. And now the songs have come down among us out of strange places and walk visible under the sun.

(The Two Towers 197)

The knowledge of the existence of Ents, and of the natural force that they represent, had been lost to the Rohirrim and was considered mere legend by the men of the Riddermark. This knowledge was lost until, of course, the Ents come marching out of the forest of Fangorn to flood Saruman’s stronghold in Isengard. As Théoden says, “the songs have come down among us out of strange places and walk visible under the sun.” The mystical power and influence of songs permeates the lives of all the peoples of Middle-earth, not just the immortal keepers of history such as Elrond.

Similar to the forgotten songs that come to life before Théoden's eyes, many songs in *The Lord of the Rings* also function as prophecies. The most significant is the prediction of the return of the rightful king of Gondor, which had been ruled by stewards since the line of Isildur was driven into exile at the beginning of the Third Age.

*All that is gold does not glitter,
Not all those who wander are lost;
The old that is strong does not wither,
Deep roots are not reached by the frost.*

*From the ashes a fire shall be woken,
A light from the shadows shall spring;
Renewed shall be blade that was broken:
The crownless again shall be king.*
(*The Fellowship of the Ring* 298)

The predictions of this verse are fulfilled in *The Return of the King* when Aragorn assumes the throne of Gondor. However, even songs of prophecy are not necessarily destined to occur. The Ents, for example, have a song that tells of the return of the Entwives, the females of their kind. The Ents are in a period of mourning for their species as the disappearance of the Entwives means that no new Ents have been born for some time. Though the Ents live longer than almost any other creature in Middle-earth, they fear that their species is coming to an end. There is hope in the form of a song that tells of the return of the Entwives, but as Treebeard says to Merry and Pippin as he marches to war against Saruman:

I should have liked to see the songs come true about the Entwives. I should dearly have liked to see Fimbrethil again. But there, my friends, songs like trees bear fruit only in their own time and their own way: and sometimes they are withered untimely.
(*The Two Towers* 106)

Treebeard laments that the predictions in songs do not always come true. Although the fulfillment of prophecy is part of the function of magic in Middle-earth, the world that Tolkien presents would seem unrealistically whimsical if every event foretold in a song came to be.

Instead, it falls to the singers and listeners to actively fulfill the predictions made in song. But even so, some songs “are withered untimely,” their predictions never come to fruition, and the balance of joy and sorrow in Ulmo’s songs applies to the songs of mortals as well.

In Tolkien’s world, songs have an underlying power of magic. Some are prophetic, some historical, and some simply celebratory; but all songs in Arda contain elements of wisdom that are of use to the characters in Tolkien’s stories. This wisdom ranges from trivial matters such as Bilbo learning not to be so uptight in *The Hobbit* when the Dwarves sing “Chip the glasses and crack the plates!/ Blunt the knives and bend the forks!/ That’s what Bilbo Baggins hates,” to serious methods of understanding the world such as the Entish song that lists and describes every living thing on Middle-earth (*The Hobbit* 16).

In addition to exerting literal influence in Tolkien’s world, song is one of the most effective mediums through which Tolkien reveals his belief system and induces Secondary belief in *The Lord of the Rings*. Not only do songs imply a historically complete world, referencing events of the past and recording events of the present, but they also reveal the values and dogmas of his characters, and more broadly, the cultures of Middle-earth. Tolkien’s use of song, from the foundation of creation to the memorializing of fallen characters, encourages readers to *recover* a new perspective on the role of song in the primary world. We believe in Tolkien’s world and in the power of songs there, and that belief translates to understanding that is applicable to real life.

Conclusion

The Music of the Ainur in Tolkien’s creation myth establishes the significance of song as the tangible foundation of his world, and Ulmo’s music within the sea sustains the life of Arda during the darkest periods of Melkor’s reign. Yet readers of *The Lord of the Rings* sense the

influence of song even without a direct knowledge of the role music played in Tolkien's stories of creation. Tolkien's entire belief system is this way: evident in the creation myth of *The Silmarillion*, yet understood through the text of *The Lord of the Rings*. Even though a direct knowledge of the stories within *The Silmarillion* is not necessary for readers to experience Secondary belief, the existence of *The Silmarillion* is necessary for *The Lord of the Rings* to effectively exhibit a belief system that is understood, if not articulable, by its readers.

The consistent application of Tolkien's belief system, from the origins of Eä through the events of the Third Age, is part of the reason that readers readily engage in Secondary belief in Tolkien's world. We see how quickly a desire to do good can turn to malicious intent in the fall of Melkor *and* much later in Boromir's attempt to take the Ring by force. We see the corruption that occurs when one attempts to rule over others in Melkor's wars against the Valar as well as Sauron's forging of the Ring. And we see the influence of song throughout. Don Elgin describes these tenets of Tolkien's world as part of a "philosophical belief" that is evident throughout Tolkien's work. They go beyond literary devices, and Tolkien's strict adherence to them within his fiction can help us understand the sudden explosion in popularity that *The Lord of the Rings* experienced in Tolkien's later life.

The Lord of the Rings is the second-best selling novel ever written, with over 150 million copies sold to date (Wagner). The majority of copies sold were purchased during the height of Tolkien's fame in the 1970s. But why was there a delay of about 15 years between the publication of *The Lord of the Rings* and the height of its popularity? The answer, I believe, is that western culture found itself in need of the kind of optimistic belief system that Tolkien presents in his work.

The early 1970s was a time of pessimism and doubt. The growing unpopularity of the Vietnam War, the oil embargo of the Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries (OAPEC) and the resulting energy crisis, and the Watergate scandal had left the western world, and particularly the United States, in a state of mistrust toward their leaders and uncertainty in the future. Tolkien's stories were a refreshing Escape, to borrow Tolkien's use of the word, from the negativity and cynicism that many people, especially the younger generation, felt at the time.

In his book *The Comedy of the Fantastic*, Don Elgin discusses the sudden surge of interest in Tolkien's work that occurred in the late 1960s and 1970s: "the work [*The Lord of the Rings*] exhibited a unity of theme and form which arose from a consistent critical theory and philosophical belief which Tolkien had outlined earlier in his essays, 'Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics' and 'On Fairy-Stories.' Such consistency stood in marked contrast to the kind of pessimism and self-mockery characteristic of the experimental and/or existential novels which had been predominant at the time" (Elgin 32). The "critical theory" and "philosophical belief" that Elgin refers to in Tolkien's works of scholarship is the same quasi-religious belief system that Tolkien establishes in his fictional creation myth. For many young adults coming of age in the 1970s, *The Lord of the Rings* was so appealing because they recognized, likely subconsciously, a structure of faith that provided a sense of moral consistency and clarity. They took comfort in Tolkien, applying the ideas of his belief system to the primary world.

Toward the end of the trilogy, after Sauron's assault on Minas Tirith, Gandalf convinces the remaining Captains of the West to march on the black gates of Mordor in an attempt to draw Sauron's attention away from Frodo and Sam who are inching ever closer to the fires of Mount Doom. He points out that this is their best hope of destroying the Ring and stripping Sauron of all his power. Yet it would not bring about the end of struggle in Middle-earth.

Other evils there are that may come; for Sauron is himself but a servant or emissary. 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, uprooting the evil in the fields that we know, so that those who live after may have clean earth to till. What weather they shall have is not ours to rule.

(The Return of the King 171)

This passage is particularly indicative of Tolkien's belief system and reveals part of the appeal that that system had for young people in the 1970s. Though evil can never be entirely removed from the world, and when one source of immorality falls it will inevitably be replaced by another, it is the responsibility of those who recognize injustice to act so that future generations "have clean earth to till." During a time when people felt that there was so much wrong in the world that it could never be set right, it was a comforting think in these terms, i.e. that each generation has their own evils to confront, but virtue can be upheld if we each "do what is in us for the succour of those years wherein we are set." It is a unifying notion, a uniting belief, and *The Lord of the Rings* brought people together when there was so much dividing them. Tolkien's fiction doesn't engage readers in Secondary belief simply by presenting a world of logical magic, as Wolfe has argued, but by establishing a logical and evident belief system that can be understood, if not identified, by reading any of his fantasy works. The evidence that Tolkien created an entire set of moral evaluations, just as he created an entire world, is in our culture's history, and his works will continue to stimulate belief as long as we keep returning to them.

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