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Tolkien and the Deadly Sin of Greed

Amanda A. Kieffer
Liberty University, akieffer3@liberty.edu

Amanda Kieffer

Dr. Thomas A. Provenzola

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J.R.R. Tolkien was a scholar and artist who was profoundly influenced by his Roman Catholic faith. Tolkien was raised as a Roman Catholic by his mother until she died, and afterwards his faith became his consolation.[1] Tolkien's faith colored all of his literary works; however, as a philologist and artist, he had a great disdain for overly explicit theology within literature, as demonstrated by his dislike for the overtly Christian Arthurian Legend.[2] In his essay "On Faerie Stories" Tolkien explains his view of the art of fantasy, which includes two beliefs: (1) that fairy stories are a means of recovery—of "regaining a clear view"—which would by his account include the recovery of a proper sense of certain virtues, and (2) that in order to be successful, fairy stories must create an "inner consistency of reality" which mirrors the Primary World—the world of reality.[3]

Tolkien not only asserts his view on the proper role of fantasy but also exhibits it throughout all of his writings. Specifically, Tolkien seeks to address concerns such as the problem of evil and the conflict between sin and virtue through his multifaceted characters. Tolkien dissolves his Roman Catholic faith into his stories in solution form as a means of

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1. Verlyn Flieger, *Splintered Light: Logos and Language in Tolkien's World* (London: The Kent State University Press, 2002), 2–3.

2. J.R.R. Tolkien to Milton Waldman, n.d., in *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, ed. Humphrey Carpenter and Christopher Tolkien (New York: The Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000), 144.

3. J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Tolkien Reader* (New York: The Ballantine Publishing Group, 1966), 68–69; 77.

communicating a variety of concepts, including his belief that *Radix mallorum est cupiditas*—"Greed is the root of all evil."[4] Of all the seven deadly sins which Tolkien's Roman Catholic theology imbues his Legendarium with, greed—or more specifically, possessiveness—is the primary sin which Tolkien views as the beginnings of evil. Tolkien exemplifies his mythological and theological framework, which consists of his beliefs about nature, authorship, and sub-creation, throughout his creation of Middle-Earth, especially through his characters such as Sauron, Saruman, and Feanor who all ultimately fall prey to greed, the deadliest of sins, and the effects it has upon the personhood and relationality of humanity. However, thankfully, Providence intervenes, bringing about a eucatastrophe in which, in a bittersweet climax at Mount Doom, Middle-Earth is saved from its avarice.

A Privation of the Good: Tolkien and Augustine on Evil

As an orthodox Roman Catholic, Tolkien viewed evil primarily in Boethian terms as an absence of the good, in line with the doctrine articulated by St. Augustine:[5]

> Augustine's privation account of evil holds that evil, in and of itself, is not something real and positive, but rather is something parasitic on what is and is good. It is the very defectiveness of defective created goods; it is a lack of goodness in a thing that is and is good. In and of itself, evil is a negation, a lack, a privation of being and goodness. It is a kind of non-being.[6]

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4. Charles W. Nelson, "The Sins of Middle-earth: Tolkien's Use of Medieval Allegory," *J. R. R. Tolkien and His Literary Resonances: Views of Middle-Earth*, Ed. George Clark and Daniel Timmons, 83–94 (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2000), Rpt. in *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*, Ed. Janet Witalec. Vol. 137 (Detroit: Gale, 2003. Literature Resource Center), Web. 29 Apr. 2016; Geoffrey Chaucer, "The Pardon Peddler's Prologue," *The Canterbury Tales*, trans. Burton Raffel (New York: The Modern Library, 2008), 347.

5. Tom Shippey, *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century* (New York: The Houghton Mifflin Company, 2002), 141, quoted in Benjamin Saxton, "J.R.R. Tolkien, Sub-Creation, and Theories of Authorship," *Mythlore A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*, 31. no. 3–4 (2013): 47–59.

6. Donald A. Cress, "Augustine's Privation Account of Evil: A Defense," *Augustinian Studies* 20 (1989): 109–122, doi: 10.5840/augstudies1989204.

The idea that evil is the absence of good can be seen in Tolkien's presentation of the origin of his Secondary World as the creation of Ilúvatar, a good and perfect god,[7] but it is most memorably articulated by Elrond in *The Fellowship of the Ring*. As the leaders of the various races of Middle-Earth gather to discuss what to do with the One Ring, Elrond says in response to Boromir's desire to wield the Ring against Sauron,

> If any of the Wise should with this Ring overthrow the Lord of Mordor, using his own arts, he would then set himself on Sauron's throne, and yet another Dark Lord would appear. And that is another reason why the Ring should be destroyed: as long as it is in the world it will be a danger even to the Wise. For nothing is evil in the beginning. Even Sauron was not so.[8]

In contrast, Shippey suggests that Tolkien presents not only the Boethian view, but also the Manichean view, and that he therefore sees evil as a reflection of the tensions set forth in the Bible itself, as evidenced by the Lord's prayer in which Jesus states, "[l]ead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil" as though evil is an outside force from which a person should flee.[9] Shippey suggests that the One Ring is an example of the Manichean theory of evil as an outside power which acts upon humanity.[10] However, as Scott A. Davison accurately points out, "the One Ring has the powers it possess only because it was created by Sauron . . . this means that the Ring is not an example of the Manichean idea of an independent evil force in the world. . . ."[11] Thus, although Tolkien does highlight the tensions between the Boethian and Manichean ideas within his Legendarium, he is ultimately Augustinian in his view of evil.

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7. J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* (New York: The Ballantine Publishing Group, 1977), 3–13.

8. J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2004), 267.

9. Shippey, 141.

10. Ibid., 139–140.

11. Scott A. Davison, "Tolkien and the Nature of Evil*,"* in *The Lord of the Rings and Philosophy: One Book to Rule Them All*, ed. Gregory Basham and Eric Bronson (Peru, IL: Carus Publishing Company, 2003).

Tolkien's Legendarium as Medieval Allegory

Just as Tolkien's view on evil was predominantly colored by his Roman Catholic upbringing, so too were his views on sin and virtue. The more obvious evil of the villains in his Legendarium, such as Melkor, Sauron, Shelob, and Saruman, is not the only evil present within Middle-Earth. In fact, perhaps the most insidious evil is that which is present within the good characters in the form of sin and character flaws.[12] Charles Nelson asserts that it was not only Tolkien's Roman Catholic theology that was strong in his writings, but also his love of medieval literature and writing styles.[13] In his essay, "The Sins of Middle-earth: Tolkien's Use of Medieval Allegory," Nelson explains that during the medieval era it was popular to depict the figures of the seven deadly sins—and their parallels in the seven saintly virtues—and that it makes sense for Tolkien as a devout Roman Catholic to use these forms as his means of incorporating vice and virtue into his Legendarium.[14] Nelson continues to explicate his thesis by demonstrating that Tolkien personified each of the seven deadly sins within a particular race or character within Middle-earth, as follows: Dwarves – Greed, Men – Pride, Elves – Envy, Ents – Sloth, Hobbits – Gluttony, Wormtongue – Lechery, and Orcs – Anger.[15]

Roman Catholic and Medieval, but Not Allegorical

While Tolkien was indeed a strong Roman Catholic who sought to imbue his work with Roman Catholic ideals and theology as well as a lover of medieval literature (especially Chaucer), he was directly opposed to the use of allegory. In a letter to Milton Waldman he

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12. Nelson, 83–94.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid.

15. Ibid.

directly stated, "I dislike Allegory – the conscious and intentional allegory – yet any attempt to explain the purport of myth or fairytale must use allegorical language."[16] This is why Purtill's explanation of Tolkien's works, such as "Leaf by Niggle," as "applicable rather than allegorical" is a more accurate description of any of Tolkien's works, including the way Tolkien incorporates characteristics such as the seven deadly sins within his Legendarium.[17]

Tolkien's dislike of allegory flows directly out of his view of an author's role as a sub-creator. As Benjamin Saxton points out, "Tolkien was deeply concerned with the delicate balance between authors, authority, and interpretive freedom."[18] Tolkien's basis for his theory of sub-creation was directly related to his beliefs about God's role as a Creator and His connection to humanity.[19] In his essay about fairy stories and sub-creation, "On Faerie Stories," Tolkien writes, "Fantasy remains a human right: we make in our measure and in our derivative mode, because we are made: and not only made, but made in the image and likeness of a Maker."[20] He believed that when an author used allegory he limited both his and his readers' potential for creativity.[21] This is why Nelson's assertion that Tolkien uses medieval allegory in his Legendarium is incorrect.

Radix mallorum est cupiditas: Greed as the Foundational Deadly Sin

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16. Tolkien to Waldman, 145.

17. Richard Purtill, *J.R.R. Tolkien: Myth, Morality, & Religion* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1984), 25.

18. Saxton, 47.

19. Ibid., 50.

20. Tolkien, *The Tolkien Reader*, 75.

21. Saxton, 57.

Nelson, however, is correct in emphasizing Tolkien's love of medieval literature.[22] As a professor of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford, he was quite familiar with medieval literature—especially that of Chaucer, whom he saw as the last true author of Anglo-Saxon literature. Although the Roman Catholic catechism greatly informed Tolkien's view of sin (specifically the seven deadly sins), so did Chaucer's stories "The Parson's Tale" and "The Pardon Peddler's Tale."[23] From Chaucer, Tolkien derived *Radix mallorum est cupiditas*, which means "greed is the root of all evil" and is ultimately the Latinized form of 1 Timothy 6:10.[24] This maxim serves as the foundation for Tolkien's view of the sins he portrays within Middle-Earth and demonstrates that greed is not simply one of many sins as Nelson asserts. Despite Nelson's claim that greed is only significantly exhibited by Tolkien in the race of Dwarves, Hawkins correctly points out that, as one of the most prominent sins of Middle-earth, greed is a sin that affects men, wizards, Ents, dwarves, and other races alike.[25] In fact, as Kocher aptly notices, "Tolkien's personal philosophy for living in society as well as his philosophy of evil focuses on greed. . ." and "the human desire to possess/hoard people and things as 'property'. . . is 'at the core of all the evil underlying the War of the Ring.'"[26]

That Tolkien's personal philosophy focuses on greed can also be seen in his treatment of humans' relationship to Nature. Chris Brawley discusses Tolkien's ecology in relation to the

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22. Nelson, 83–94.

23. Chaucer, 347–364; 530–596.

24. Ibid., 347; Emma B. Hawkins, "Tolkien's Linguistic Application of the Seventh Deadly Sin: Lust." *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*, 26. no. 3–4. (2008): 35; *The Holy Bible* (Anaheim, CA: Foundation Publications, Inc. NASB, 1995).

25. Nelson, 83–94; Hawkins, 35.

26. Paul H. Kocher, *Master of Middle-Earth: The Fiction of J.R.R. Tolkien*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1972), 24 & 66, quoted in Hawkins, 35.

growing field of ecocriticism in his article "The Fading of the World: Tolkien's Ecology and Loss in The Lord of the Rings."[27] Brawley explains that Tolkien's view of nature is directly tied to his view that recovery could be achieved through fairy stories and his view of possessiveness as the primary sin which splinters man's relationships with both other people and nature. Tolkien sets forth in his essay "On Faerie Stories" the ability to find recovery—a regaining of a clear view—as the primary purpose of the fairy story.[28] Entering into the Secondary World of Faerie allows for a paradigm shift.[29]

Part of what has been lost that the fairy story seeks to restore is the sense of wonder, awe, and the numinous which nature was meant to provide.[30] In Tolkien's view, there is a sort of sacramental vision which needs to be recaptured as humanity is "freed from the drab blur of triteness or familiarity – from possessiveness."[31] Humanity's appropriation of nature as something that is only good for what it can do for people is an improper attitude toward and possession of nature, which ought to be viewed as other and holy and as deserving of respect and care. A good example of the interrelatedness that humanity is meant to have with nature is seen in Tom Bombadil. Frodo asks Goldberry if Bombadil owns the forest and she responds, "No indeed! That would indeed be a burden. The trees and the grasses and all things growing or living in the land belong each to themselves. Tom Bombadil is the Master."[32] The forest is not

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27. Chris Brawley, "The Fading of the World: Tolkien's Ecology and Loss in 'The Lord of the Rings'." *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 18, no. 3 (71) (2007): 292–307.

28. Tolkien, *The Tolkien Reader*, 77.

29. Ibid., 293.

30. Brawley, 295.

31. Tolkien, *The Tolkien Reader,* 77, quoted in Brawley, 295.

32. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 124.

Tom Bombadil's property. He does not possess it, but he has a healthy relationship with it. Tolkien's personal philosophy toward nature simply asks that people "not view nature as a commodity but, instead, to appreciate the wonder of the created world as a representation of that which is other."[33]

Possessiveness: The Greatest Character Flaw

As seen through Tolkien's view of man's relationship with nature, Tolkien's conceives of greed as more than simply a love of money and worldly goods. While greed is manifested in a variety of ways within Middle-earth, some more obvious than others, there are three characters that exhibit greed in specific ways which extend beyond the typical characterization of greed and highlight the gravity with which Tolkien considered the deadly sin of greed: Sauron, who demonstrates greed as a desire to possess power and control over others; Saruman, who demonstrates greed as imitative desire; and Feanor, who demonstrates greed as an over-possessiveness of one's own sub-creative acts. As the antagonist in *The Lord of the Rings* and the heir to Melkor, Sauron is certainly the most high-profile perpetrator of the sin of greed, if not the greatest perpetrator within the entire Legendarium. As evidenced by the famous Elven poem, Sauron's greed was primarily focused on regaining the possession of the One Ring and on using it to possess the people and land of Middle-earth:

> Three Rings for the Elven-kings under the sky, Seven for the dwarf-lords in their halls of stone, Nine for Mortal Men doomed to die, One for the Dark Lord on his dark throne in the Land of Mordor where the Shadows lie. One Ring to rule them all, One Ring to find them, One Ring to bring them all and in the darkness bind them in the Land of Mordor where the Shadows lie.[34]

33. Brawley, 297.

34. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 50.

As Chaucer explains in "The Parson's Tale," "[a]varice does not involve only land and other kinds of property, but sometimes involves knowledge, or glory, and every sort of excessive thing."[35] This extends to the desire to control or possess people. Through his desire to rule the wills of men, elves, and dwarves, Sauron reveals his inherently greedy nature. Because he isn't content with his own free-will, but instead wishes to possess the power to control the wills of others as well, he forges the One Ring. Unfortunately, as Chaucer notes, those whose primary sin is avarice become possessed by the very thing which they seek to possess. In Sauron's case, his desire to possess the One Ring ties his fate to the fate of the ring, without which he cannot hope to rule the wills of others, and yet the more he seeks to rule others the less he is able to choose to alter the path which he is already on. Sauron's slavery to the Ring is compounded by the unfortunate nature of the Ring, which was created as an outpouring of Sauron's very nature and being as an individual person. In the end, Sauron's greed so binds him that to the One Ring that as it melts away, so too is he destroyed.

In Saruman, the once great wizard and Master of Isengard, is seen what Hayden Head in the vein of René Girard calls "imitative desire."[36] This is a particularly devastating manifestation of greed as it, rather than enslave the sinner, changes and diminishes the very nature and character of the individual caught in its snare.[37] In explaining Girard's theory, Head says that people do not desire objects for themselves or for their perceived value, but because they are possessed by another: a rival.[38] This "triangular model of desire" is exemplified by Saruman's

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35. Chaucer, 373.

36. Hayden Head, "Imitative Desire in Tolkien's Mythology: A Girardian Perspective," *Mythlore: A Journal of J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*, 26. no. 1- 2 (2007): 137.

37. Ibid., 139.

38. Ibid., 138.

desire for the One Ring.[39] While Nelson considers Saruman's greatest flaw to be pride, this is a

shallow understanding of Saruman's primary character flaw, though pride may be an incidental

sin he commits.[40] Deeper than his pride is Saruman's desire to possess the power of the One

Ring in order to set himself up in the place of Sauron as yet another Dark Lord. Saruman imitates

Sauron both by building up his own army of Orcs and in his incessant pursuit of the One Ring. in

In his attempt to become like Sauron, Saruman loses his own authentic nature as one of the Wise,

wizards sent to help Middle-earth defeat Sauron. Instead, Saruman becomes a cheap imitation of

the Dark Lord. The splintering and fading of his individual nature through his imitation of

Sauron is clearly seen in one of his interactions with Gandalf. In his attempt to seduce Gandalf

into joining his pursuit for power and the Ring, he reveals the extent to which his greed has

overcome him and transformed his nature. Gandalf relates the change which has completely

altered the nature of Saruman to the Council of Elrond:

> "For I am Saruman the Wise, Saruman Ring-maker, Saruman of Many Colours!" I
> looked then and saw that his robes, which had seemed white, were not so, but were
> woven of all colours, and if he moved they shimmered and changed hue so that the eye
> was bewildered.[41]

Saruman's exchange with Gandalf is pregnant with meaning, but at the very least it certainly

reflects the aspect of greed which manifests itself in "imitative desire," and reveals yet another

tragic pitfall of this deadliest of sins: the loss of individual self.

The third manifestation of greed highlighted by Tolkien is seen in the improper

relationship which a sub-creator can have to their sub-creation. This is seen in Feanor's over-

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39. Ibid.

40. Nelson, 83–94.

41. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 259.

possession of his greatest works—the Silmarils.[42] Although Saxton's article on sub-creation

deals primarily with Tolkien's view of the author's role in the creation of fairy-story, Tolkien's

views of sub-creation and authorship are applicable to Feanor's position as an artist and sub-

creator of the Silmarils. Tolkien reacts strongly against the idea that an artist is able to dominate

or appropriate their art.[43] He believes that the artist is supposed to leave space for the creativity

of others to join him in the process of sub-creation.[44]As with most of Tolkien's philosophy, this

particular aspect of his views on sub-creation coincides with his views about nature: there is to

be an interrelatedness between humanity and nature, just as there is to be between an artist and

an observer, which promotes relationality but does not suppress or destroy it.[45] This is what is so

tragic about the story of Feanor. What could have been a source of great joy and community if

used in service of others, became the cause of the splintering of the elvish race and the

destruction of many lives.[46]

Christie, in his article titled "Sméagol and Déagol: Secrecy, History, and Ethical

Subjectivity in Tolkien's World," relates Tolkien's view of secrecy.[47] Living in an era of war

that increasingly promoted secrecy as a means of protecting the nation from its enemies, Tolkien

viewed secrecy in a sort of two-pronged way: secrecy could be used as a means to promote

strong relationships and create a sense of community, or it could be used to isolate individuals

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42. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, 72.

43. Saxton, 49.

44. Ibid., 50.

45. Brawley, 297; Saxton, 50–51.

46. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, 86–102.

47. C.J. Christie, "Sméagol and Déagol: Secrecy, History, and Ethical Subjectivity in Tolkien's World," *Mythlore: A Journal of J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*, 31. no. 3–4 (2013): 83–101.

and destroy community when improperly used.[48] In Feanor's case, his creation of the Silmarils in secret was a contributing factor to his eventual over-possession of them. Instead of inviting others into the process of creating them, he isolated himself. Instead of sharing the beauty of the Silmarils with others, Feanor began to "love the Silmarils with a greedy love, and grudged the sight of them to all save to his father and his seven sons; he seldom remembered now that the light within them was not his own."[49] When the time came to make a choice as to whether or not he would use his sub-creation to benefit his community as it was meant to be used, he instead allowed his greed to get the better of him as he said, "This thing I will not do of free will."[50] Feanor's greed and inability to relinquish the possession of his most precious creation led to the Kinslaying and the fall of the Elves, a far greater consequence than what would have occurred if he had not over-possessed his sub-creation and had instead shared it with his community in a promotion of the relationality which was intended.

Eucatastrophe on Mount Doom

Finally, although the climax of Tolkien's Legendarium, which occurs on Mount Doom, is full of philosophical and theological meaning, Tolkien additionally weaves into it the message that a relinquishing of humanity's possessive tendencies is key to defeating evil in the world and within ourselves. Just as with Feanor, one's obsessive possession of objects, time, and people can often lead to great pain and suffering for both the sinner and those around them. Thankfully, in Tolkien's account, providence intervenes, and despite Frodo's emphatic statement of possession—"I have come…But I do not choose now to do what I came to do. I will not do this

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48. Ibid., 83–85.

49. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, 74.

50. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion,* 87.

deed. The Ring is mine!"—Gollum bites off his finger, steals the ring, and in the process falls into the fires of Mount Doom, destroying the ring.[51]

Tolkien's message about avarice in the climax of the Legendarium is a clear reflection of Chaucer's views on this particular deadly sin. For each deadly sin, Chaucer suggests a remedy, and the remedy for Avarice is mercy. It is quiet poetic then on the part of Tolkien that ultimately it was Frodo's mercy on Gollum, and before him Bilbo's pity, that in the end saved not only him, but all of Middle-earth from its own greed.[52] This is foreshadowed when Gandalf tells Frodo regarding Bilbo's pity on Gollum, "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."[53] In the end, Gandalf is shown to be right. Bilbo's pity and later Frodo's mercy were key in the eventual remedy of their own possessiveness of the One Ring.

Tolkien's actual treatment of the deadly sin of greed within his Legendarium is far greater than the simple allegorical interpretation which Nelson ascribes to him. Tolkien's genius as a writer and insight as a philosopher and theologian (of sorts) are reflected in his subtle yet impactful interweaving of the consequences of greed within the lives of the peoples of Middle-Earth. He shows readers that greed is not simply the love of money. Greed is the root of all evil, and it takes a variety of forms, as represented by Sauron's desire to possess power over and control others, Saruman's imitative desire, and Feanor's over-possessiveness of his sub-creative acts. Tolkien also reveals that a proper relationship with nature can provide recovery from the drab familiarity which the appropriation of nature can cause. Ultimately, Tolkien shows that in

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51. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 945–946.

52. Chaucer.

53. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 59.

relinquishing possession of the things and people we most desire, we can find a greater sense of

personhood, relationality, and peace within the world.

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