

“Just a Fool’s Hope”: J.R.R. Tolkien’s Eucatastrophe as the Paradigm of Christian Hope

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Abstract

In his essay titled “On Fairy-Stories,” J.R.R. Tolkien uses the term “eucatastrophe” to describe the unexpected, fortunate turn of events for the protagonist in a fantasy story. Tolkien applies the word beyond its literary context to signify the Christian’s experience of joy, especially resulting from the Incarnation and Resurrection. Such an explicit link between fiction and theology seems absent from his more well-known work, *The Lord of the Rings*. Yet both Tolkien himself and critics of his writing have labeled the novel a modern-day classic of Christian literature. This thesis will defend the Christian label of *The Lord of the Rings* by exploring the thematic occurrence of eucatastrophe in both the book and in biblical meta-narrative.

“Just a Fool’s Hope”: J.R.R. Tolkien’s Eucatastrophe as the Paradigm of Christian Hope

In a letter to Father Robert Murray, J.R.R. Tolkien called *The Lord of the Rings* “a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision” (*Letters* 172). A casual reading of the story would seem to contradict this statement. While the protagonists display classical virtues such as prudence and fortitude, Middle-earth as a whole contains no apparent religions, rituals, or creeds to mark the book as Christian literature. Unlike C.S. Lewis’s *Narnia* chronicles, no Creator deity arrives incarnate to aid in the War of the Ring, and the narrative mentions fate or doom nearly as often as mercy or grace. A deeper analysis must reconcile these facts with the opinions of Christian readers, critics in the majority, and the author himself, all of whom assert that the story houses an inescapable theology. This thesis will attempt to prove the Christian nature of *The Lord of the Rings* by tracing both its Catholic and pagan roots, arriving at necessary criteria for determining the worldview of a book, analyzing the counterpart themes of hope and despair as they appear in the novel, and finally exploring Tolkien’s concept of “eucatastrophe” as the paradigm of Christian hope.

The Roots of Middle-earth

A Catholic Work?

Writing in a modernist age that valued realism, Tolkien argued for the literary and spiritual merits of fantasy. In what essentially amounts to his apology of the genre, the essay “On Fairy-stories,” Tolkien calls real life “the Primary World” and the realm of imagination “the Secondary World” (60). The Secondary World illuminates the Primary by allowing readers to stand outside of reality and look inward. “We need,” Tolkien claims, “to clean our windows; so that the things seen clearly may be freed from the drab

blur of triteness or familiarity” (77). In other words, fantasy can tackle the same themes and moral issues as more realistic fiction, but its otherworldly setting prompts emotional resonance by casting those issues in a fresh light. In *The Gospel According to Tolkien*, Ralph C. Wood responds to a common accusation of escapism: “Far from encouraging us to turn away from such evils, Tolkien’s book forces us to confront them... This great work enables us to escape *into* reality. Tolkien achieves this remarkable accomplishment by embedding the Gospel as the underlying theme of his book” (1). Beyond its appeal either as entertaining fiction or enlightening literary classic, *The Lord of the Rings* remains popular because of the insights and Christian convictions of its author, who allowed his understanding of reality to mold his fantasy and his fantasy to point to higher realities.

Tolkien’s essay on the spiritual dimension of fantasy highlights an important factor in tracing the Christian influence on a work, that of authorial intent. An historical association of Christian literature with allegory, from Dante’s *Divine Comedy* to John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*, might tempt critics to read Tolkien’s writings allegorically. However, in the foreword to the second edition of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Tolkien reacts against a popular interpretation that the story symbolizes his own experiences during the first and second World Wars. He writes, “I cordially dislike allegory in all its manifestations... I much prefer history, true or feigned, with its varied applicability” (xv). His preference for “applicability” means that the characters and their dilemmas can illuminate certain truths about modern society, but the work does not derive its overall meaning from real-world events. Further defending his work against the label of allegory, Tolkien claims that he mainly intended to tell “a really long story that would hold the

attention of readers, amuse them, delight them, and at times maybe excite them or deeply move them...It is neither allegorical nor topical” (xiv). Tolkien populates his Middle-earth with characters, not allegorical caricatures, and those characters do not exist merely to represent ideals. Rather, they possess individual strengths and flaws; they live, talk, laugh, work, and die in the manner of real human beings.

While he dismissed the strict constraints of allegory, Tolkien did admit that his Catholic faith profoundly shaped his work. In 1953, a year before *The Fellowship of the Ring* first came to print, he wrote to a friend about that intersection, saying, “The religious element is absorbed into the story and the symbolism...I have consciously planned very little” (*Letters* 172). Often, many writers cannot prevent their beliefs, passions, and personal experiences from saturating their words, and Tolkien clearly experienced the phenomenon. A brief survey of Tolkien criticism agrees with that assessment. According to the *J.R.R. Tolkien Encyclopedia*, 1973 saw the first major treatment of Middle-earth’s Christian underpinnings with Sandra Miesel’s *Myth, Symbol, and Religion in “The Lord of the Rings”* (Birzer, “Christian Readings” 100). Clyde S. Kilby followed suit in 1976 with a memoir of his correspondence with Tolkien concerning the author’s faith and works (100). And Joseph Pearce’s *Tolkien: Man and Myth*, published in 1998, triggered a “whole new wave of Christian evaluations of Tolkien” (100). As many of these scholars realized, the Christian nature of *The Lord of the Rings* rests in the subtext and mood, in the characters and their struggles. Tolkien set out to craft a good story wrapped in a complex mythology, not a parable or morality fable, but his mythology nevertheless sympathizes with his worldview.

The clearest correlation between Tolkien's *legendarium* and Christian cosmology opens *The Silmarillion*, the posthumously published history of Middle-earth. "There was Eru, the One, who in Arda is called Ilúvatar," begins this seminal work, "and he made first the Ainur, the Holy Ones, that were the offspring of his thought" (3). Ilúvatar then imparts to these created beings a great theme of music, instructing them to add to it their "own thoughts and devices" (3), thus allowing them to assist in the creation of the world. Yet this mythological creation story boasts no pagan pantheon. Ilúvatar among the Ainur does not represent a great god among many gods, but a being akin to the Judeo-Christian God among his angelic court. Wood confirms that "Tolkien's world is thoroughly theocentric. It is inescapably God-centered...The valar [Ainur] are not divinities but subordinate beings whom Ilúvatar has created with the Flame Imperishable of his own Spirit" (*Gospel* 11-12). Furthermore, only Ilúvatar holds power over life, and he personally bestows life to his "children," Elves and Men (J. Tolkien, *Silmarillion* 6), an attribute certainly comparable with the Living God of Scripture. Like the Genesis account, Tolkien's mythology also contains a Fall. Melkor, "mightiest among" the Ainur (5), begins to weave in to the greater theme his own music out of lust for power (4), eventually waging war against Ilúvatar, his children, and the other Ainur (10) and thus cementing his role as the Satan-figure of Middle-earth.

Tolkien held his mythology dear to his heart for both literary and theological reasons. In "Tolkien, Creation, and Creativity," Trevor Hart links the Middle-earth cosmology to Tolkien's own ideas about his role as a "sub-creator." Throughout his life, Tolkien was occupied with "the place of human artistry within the context of a divine creation" (51). Comparing early and later drafts of *The Silmarillion*, Hart points out that,

while the substance of the myth hardly changed, Tolkien's revised language more sharply distinguishes the Ainur's imagination from Ilúvatar's "real-ization," who alone can alter existence and give shape to the Ainur's creative vision (50-52). Clearly, Hart asserts, Tolkien felt an "artistic responsibility...to the basic nature of reality as he believed it to be" (43), a reality that includes God as Creator and human beings as simultaneously like and unlike their Maker. Although *The Silmarillion* was not published until after *The Lord of the Rings*, the *legendarium* lived always in Tolkien's thoughts, and it girds the reality of the hobbit stories.

No character in *The Lord of the Rings* mentions the name of Ilúvatar or the monotheistic creation story recorded in *The Silmarillion*, but traces of divine providence are evident throughout the novel. At several points in the plot, the hobbits escape danger by seeming chance. However, many of the wisest characters hint that a power greater than simple luck is influencing events. During the conversation in which Gandalf explains the origins of the Ring to Frodo, he tells him, "Bilbo was *meant* to find the Ring, and *not* by its maker. In which case you also were *meant* to have it" (J. Tolkien, *Fellowship* 54-55). Later on, after Tom Bombadil rescues the hobbits in the Old Forest, he declares, "Chance brought me then, if chance you call it" (123), implying that the human concept of "chance" might not match the reality.

Yet Tolkien allows the interplay between fate, free will, divine providence, and complete coincidence to remain ambiguous, as when Merry and Pippin are saved by an arrow "aimed with skill, or guided by fate" (*Towers* 446). Paul H. Kocher writes that characters frequently discuss the theme of fate and free will, but only as a practical matter, not a philosophical one (34), and in most instances the issue stays undetermined,

although Gandalf at least believes that Frodo's "calling" as a Ringbearer should encourage him (J. Tolkien, *Fellowship* 55). Kocher also points out that, had Tolkien revealed too much about the mysterious power operating behind the scenes, the outcome of the plot would have lost its suspense (39). Verlyn Flieger states that "a paradox" rules Middle-earth, "a world guided by both fate and free will" in which Men may act beyond Ilúvatar's theme of Music, and Elves, while bound by the Music, may change their attitude toward it for good or ill (*Splintered Light* 52). But this dilemma does not diminish the Christian overtones of the work, for theologians in the real world, too, find a blurred line between God's sovereignty and human choice.

Despite the "thorny thicket," as Kocher calls it (34), of fate, providence, and free will, the text supplies evidence of supernatural involvement in the world. For instance, although the names "Eru" and "Ilúvatar" appear nowhere in *The Lord of the Rings*, Bradley J. Birzer records Tolkien's admission that the "Secret Fire," the mysterious authority that the wizard Gandalf serves, is a title for the Holy Spirit (*Sanctifying Myth* 62). Though veiled by an obscure reference, divine presence does exist in the story. Like the biblical book of Esther, *The Lord of the Rings* does not mention God by name, but he nevertheless directs the course of history through his agents. Along those lines, Birzer also writes, "In the pre-incarnational time in which Tolkien's tale takes place one could reach Ilúvatar only by speaking to and through the Valar, Ilúvatar's delegates in Arda" (*SM* 62). In a sense, the Valar play a role similar to that of the Levite priests, who served as intercessors between the Hebrew people and Yahweh until the time of Christ.

Thus, Ilúvatar the Creator seems to stand at a distance from his Creation, with the exception of special moments in *The Silmarillion* and his possible, though by no means

confirmed, providential intervention in the War of the Ring. Even from the early history in *The Silmarillion*, Ilúvatar chooses to work through intermediary agents. The Valar, of course, rule with the authority granted to them by their Maker. Even more significant to the daily life of Middle-earth, Flieger says that “the creation of Elves and Men is a result or outcome of Melkor’s rebellion and a conscious addition by Eru to Arda Marred. It is not unreasonable to suppose, therefore, that they are in some sense meant to be the instruments of healing for the marred world” (*SL* 77). But the achievement of the Earth’s renewal seems a high feat for created beings. To that end, Tolkien hints that Middle-earth, too, will one day experience salvific Incarnation. This idea appears in what Christopher Tolkien describes as a “remarkable and hitherto unknown work,” but “a major and finished work” (303): “The Debate Between Finrod and Andreth” published posthumously in *Morgoth’s Ring*. Kilby calls it a “Job-like conversation” (qtd. in Birzer, *SM* 56), in which Finrod, an Elf, and Andreth, a wisewoman, debate the natures of the two races and their respective destinies. Andreth, after alluding to the Fall of Man and describing the spiritual pain humans feel upon death, mentions in passing “those of the ‘Old Hope,’” who say “that the One will himself enter into Arda, and heal Men and all the Marring from the beginning to the end” (J. Tolkien, 321). Andreth does not dare to share in this ancient hope, but she nevertheless relates the legend to her companion. Finrod wonders how Ilúvatar could enter into his creation while simultaneously remaining “the Author without” (322). “Would it not shatter Arda?” he asks (322). But he decides, “I cannot conceive how else this healing could be achieved” (322). Birzer labels this unique work “the central explanatory text of the theology of Tolkien’s mythological

world” (*SM* 58). For Tolkien the Catholic, divine Incarnation is the only answer to the woes of the world, even an imaginary world.

The characters in *The Lord of the Rings* do not practice organized religion or await a Messiah figure, but the trappings of Christianity appear on a symbolic level. The Elven *lembas* bread shares similar characteristics to the Eucharist, providing both physical sustenance and spiritual renewal. In “*The Lord of the Rings – A Catholic View*,” Charles A. Coulombe further mentions several accounts of saints who survived on the bread of the Eucharist alone (57), and likewise, in the heart of Mordor, Frodo and Sam have only the *lembas* to feed themselves. Coulombe suggests that “magic, wielded for good, is in *The Lord of the Rings* the same as that of the Sacraments upon the life of the devout Catholic” (59). The provider of the *lembas*, the Elf woman Galadriel, resembles a Marian figure—beautiful, mystical, source of refuge and light, and lauded by characters such as Gimli. More significantly, when Frodo faces the Black Riders on Weathertop, he finds himself crying, “*O Elbereth! Gilthoniel!*” (J. Tolkien, *Fellowship* 191), invoking the name in a prayer-like fashion. Flieger identifies “Elbereth” as Varda, the queen of the Valar who bears the “light of Ilúvatar” (*SL* 89), making her an intercessor between mortals and God, a role that Catholics attribute to Mary. Coulombe distinguishes between theological and cultural Roman Catholicism, but the book reflects even the latter. According to Coulombe, “The king is, in a lessened sense, the Vicar of God...he became the exiled leader of the faithful, whose return alone would bring a return to the old ways, and an end to change and unrest” (56). It takes little imagination to find this belief reflected in the title and plot of *The Return of the King*. Finally, on the level of meta-narrative, T.A. Shippey’s research reveals that much of Tolkien’s careful chronology

mirrors important dates in the Christian calendar, such as December 25, when the Company sets out from Rivendell, and March 25, the date of both Sauron's fall and of the Crucifixion (208). Shippey calls this calendar Tolkien's "signature, a personal mark of piety" (208). Such Christian trappings in the context of the Story threaded beneath the Middle-earth myth—Creation, Fall, and the hope of future Incarnation and Consummation—suggest a deeply Catholic work.

A Pagan Mythology?

Yet Tolkien the devout Roman Catholic was also Tolkien the Anglo-Saxon scholar, so a Northern European influence naturally found a way into his *mythos*. According to Rolland Hein in *Christian Mythmakers*, Tolkien studied at least seven different ancient and modern tongues, and he began his teaching career as a professor of Anglo-Saxon. Soon enough, he started to invent his own original languages (176). *The Lord of the Rings* itself did not germinate from a character, a plot, or even a setting, but from language. Tolkien writes that "a language requires a suitable habitation, and a history in which it can develop," and Middle-earth first came into being as a host to Tolkien's invented speech (*Letters* 375). Early on, his interest in Welsh and an "intoxication" with Finnish influenced the construction of the various branches of Elvish (214). The true roots of Middle-earth are firmly planted in the languages of ancient Northern Europe.

As a philologist, Tolkien understood how much language influences culture to the same extent that culture shapes language, for he claims, "Languages and names are for me inextricable from the stories" (214). In "On Fairy-stories," owing a great debt to the linguistic theories of Owen Barfield, Tolkien writes, "The incarnate mind, the tongue,

and the tale are in our world coeval” (48), a statement Flieger describes as “the interdependence of consciousness, language, and myth” (*SL* 72). For this reason, a pagan linguistic influence on the languages of Middle-earth opens the door to the pagan traditions, pagan trappings, and pagan thought that appear throughout *The Lord of the Rings*. Hein points out that both Tolkien and his friend C.S. Lewis “were drawn together by their mutual interest in what they termed ‘northernness,’ or the mythic aura that arose from Norse myths and legends” (178). Middle-earth, while bearing the light of Christian virtue, hides it beneath the shroud of Anglo-Saxon darkness and despair.

An unavoidable sense of doom forms a large part of that darkness, so much so that Patricia Meyer Spacks calls *The Lord of the Rings* “by no means a Christian work” (53). In *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, Bede demonstrates the Anglo-Saxons’ view of life and the afterlife by recording their analogy of a sparrow, which flies into a warm banquet hall then quickly darts back into the cold night (129). The analogy illustrates the pagan belief that all of life and the world is headed toward ruin. Wood writes, “A pagan sense of Doom—the notion that the world’s outcome is unalterably bent toward final destruction—resounds like a dread drumbeat throughout *The Lord of the Rings*” (*Gospel* 15). The Northern Europeans call the day of doom “Ragnarok,” the annihilation of Earth and the gods. But Tolkien “refuses to dismiss this dark view of death” (16). The protagonists in his novel constantly refer to going to their doom and fighting in spite of certain destruction. Even when the heroes do achieve victory, that victory is always temporary. After the Ring is destroyed, Sam asks, “Is everything sad going to come untrue?” (J. Tolkien, *King* 930). But Gandalf merely replies that “a Shadow” has been defeated (930), hinting that another evil will arise in the Fourth Age.

While Christian elements are evident in the story, so are pagan elements, especially the continual shadow of fate, death, and doom.

Because these pagan linguistic and cultural elements do affect the setting, a pagan sense of loss overshadows *The Lord of the Rings*. Lost history, the lost values of antiquity, even the Quest to destroy the Ring all infect the mythology with a melancholic air, a lack of hope for the past as well as the future. In fact, W.A. Senior argues that this feeling of loss composes one of the central themes of the book (174). In his essay “Loss Eternal in Tolkien’s Middle-earth,” Senior analyzes the etymology of the word “loss” as derived from Old Norse usage and tied to the ideas of destruction and ruin, and he connects the recurrence of the word in *The Lord of the Rings* to “the falling world paradigm into which the entire Middle-earth saga—taken again in its Norse sense—fits” (174). The sense of loss connects closely to the repeated sense of “fading,” especially the fading of the Elves into legend as they leave Middle-earth prior to the Fourth Age of Men. For instance, Galadriel’s people nurture a deep and ancient relationship with their land, Lórien, so that Sam is unsure “whether they’ve made the land, or the land’s made them” (J. Tolkien, *Fellowship* 351). Yet even Galadriel must leave her cherished home, forever “diminishing” into the West (357). In *The Return of the King*, after Sauron’s defeat, Galadriel, Elrond, and Gandalf converse together about “ages that were gone,” standing so that “if any wanderer had chanced to pass...it would have seemed to him only that he saw grey figures, carved in stone, memorials of forgotten things now lost in unpeopled lands” (963). Discussing the mythic quality of the book, Shippey suggests from this passage that perhaps not all the Elves sail West, some remaining behind to become the stone figures of English folklore, “the marker of an ultimate loss” (212). With

the exception of the cheerfully isolated Shire at the beginning of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Tolkien's world drinks deeply of ancient history, old ruins, civilizations sunk into the sea, wistful memory, mortality, and the long passage of time. Christianity, of course, looks to history as a precedent for hope, but the tone of Tolkien's narrative suggests more the tragic "northernness" he loved and studied.

Rohan, the Middle-earth land most resembling Anglo-Saxon culture, likewise exemplifies a pagan sense of loss. In *The Two Towers*, as the Company prepares to confront the decrepit King Théoden, Aragorn chants a poem written by "a forgotten poet" in the Rohirric language, a language that Legolas describes as "laden with the sadness of Mortal Men" (497). In a thorough study of the names, places, and actual Rohirric phrases found in the *Rings* narrative, John Tinkler points out that "the language of Rohan not only 'resembles' Old English, it is Old English" (169). In fact, the name for Théoden's hall, *Meduseld*, meaning "mead-house," comes directly from *Beowulf* (167). Though the immortal Elves experience a grief and ruin of their own, they cannot comprehend the deep well of loss that the human soul feels upon death, a feeling apparently captured by the Anglo-Saxon tongue of the men of Rohan.

Not only the aesthetics of the language but also the content of the poem itself suggests this sense of sadness: "Where now the horse and the rider? Where is the horn that was blowing? / ... / They have passed like rain on the mountain, like a wind in the meadow; / The days have gone down in the West behind the hills into shadow" (*Towers* 497). Shadow—symbolizing both destruction and ignorance—has consumed the horse and rider so crucial to Rohan's mounted culture, as well as the blowing horn that suggests the Horn of Gondor. Furthermore, the poet sang these words long before *the* Shadow rose

in the East, the Shadow that now threatens to literally demolish horse and horn. Middle-earth, in other words, has always experienced a shadowy loss of memory. This fictional poem bears striking similarity to the Old English work “The Wanderer,” which in modern English reads:

Where went the steed?
 Where went the rider?

 How time vanishes,
 darkens under night’s helmet,
 as if it never were. (90-95)

Like the reference to a “forgotten poet,” this theme of the vanishing of time fills the novel with an overwhelming nostalgia for an unrecoverable past.

Several other elements complicate the theology of Tolkien’s *legendarium*. The Valar, as previously stated, act in a similar capacity to the Judeo-Christian angelic court, but the resemblance is not perfect. Their part in the creation of the world goes far beyond the role of angels in the Bible, and their association with natural elements suggests pantheistic overtones. Furthermore, although the immortal Elves may die in battle, they return to Middle-earth reincarnated, which confuses the question of the Christian nature of the mythology. Tolkien attempts to address these discrepancies. Replying to a concerned reader, he writes, “‘Reincarnation’ may be bad *theology*...But I do not see how even in the Primary World any theologian or philosopher, unless very much better informed about the relation of spirit and body than I believe anyone to be, could deny the *possibility* of re-incarnation as a mode of existence...if it pleased the Creator” (*Letters*

189). These elements are mythical, not theological, but they nevertheless support a pagan interpretation.

Pagan Christianity

Tolkien himself inadvertently provides a model for reconciling these two opposing halves of Christian and pagan. In his essay “*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*,” Tolkien argues that a Christian authored the poem *Beowulf*, using stories and accounts from the heathen past. This man was “a learned man writing of old times, who looking back on the heroism and sorrow feels in them something permanent and something symbolical” (11). The anonymous poet shares much in common with Tolkien, who confessed that he desired to create a mythology for England (*Letters* 144). Tolkien’s sympathy with noble pagan culture reflects his adamant belief that the present earthly life, by itself, offers no hope. In Tolkien’s words, *Beowulf* is “concerned primarily with *man on earth*, rehandling in a new perspective an ancient theme: that man, each man and all men, and all their works shall die. A theme no Christian need despise” (*MC* 9). In fact, no Christian could deny this theme, which Scripture readily affirms. Tolkien’s novel and his essay on *Beowulf* perhaps correct a modern trend within Christendom toward affirming the positive elements of the faith while downplaying or outright ignoring the negative, for Christianity does proclaim both the good news of salvation and the bad news of human depravity ending in death. Tolkien further states that the *Beowulf* author “treasures the memory of man’s struggles in the dark past, man fallen and not yet saved, disgraced but not dethroned” (*MC* 10). Both the anonymous poet and Tolkien himself portray a world poised between the Fall of creation and its awaited redemption.

Rather than condemning pagan culture for its sorrow and hopelessness or fully embracing it for its courage and noble sacrifice, the ancient Christian poet saw wisdom in redeeming the old myths, for even the heathens hold on to a memory of God's truth, distorted as it is. While Tolkien includes a pagan sense of loss in his epic, elsewhere he writes, "Man is not wholly lost," but "keeps the rags of lordship once he owned" ("On Fairy-Stories" 74). In *Splintered Light*, Flieger points out that Tolkien's emphatic phrase "*man on earth*" is "key to Tolkien's reading of the meeting of paganism and Christianity in the poem and in his own philosophy as well," for man on earth, whatever may come after death, must still die, and "that battle and the defeat that follows it constitute a theme no Christian, including Tolkien in his own work, need despise" (18). Like *Beowulf*, *The Lord of the Rings* joins a pagan environment to a Christian sensibility, hallowing the one and grounding the other. Wood agrees: "[Tolkien] creates a mythical pre-Christian world where there is not yet a Chosen People...where the Hebrew prophets have not spoken the word of the Lord, where God has not become incarnate in Jesus Christ...Yet for all this, Tolkien's book is pre-Christian only in chronology, not in content." (*Gospel* 5). The one question that remains—how can a book with a "pre-Christian" setting be classified as Christian literature?—calls for a more nuanced framework.

Defining Christian Literature

While a thorough interpretation of literature begins with the author's intent, it does not end there. Biographical information suggests that Tolkien invented a Christian story, gradually aware of the influence his faith had on his works. But biography alone does not explain how that story is Christian in nature, nor does it corroborate Tolkien's claims about his own work.

Since Christianity adheres to a set of objective truths and tenets, a reputedly Christian work must somehow reflect those tenets. In the essay “Reading and Writing Worldviews,” Gene Edward Veith, Jr. describes worldview criticism, supposing that “the very act of writing involves the articulation of meanings—drawn from the author’s beliefs, assumptions, and imaginative constructions—that constitute a little world” (118). Veith draws on the work of James Sire, a Christian thinker who advocates identifying worldviews by asking questions such as “*What is prime reality?*” or “*What happens to a person at death?*” (122). In the words of Veith, worldview criticism “is a way to engage constructively the whole range of human expression from a Christian perspective” (119). In much the same way they might determine the worldview of an individual, literary critics can determine the inherent “worldview” of a book by posing the types of questions that reveal a certain perception of reality. In other words, a work of literature may be considered Christian if the plot, characters, themes, and subtext allude to a biblical understanding of important life inquiries, such as what happens after death or whether right and wrong are eternally unchanged. *The Lord of the Rings*, though set in a mythical world, does not shy away from these deeper questions of reality.

As a war epic that deals directly with the power and extent of evil, the plot of *The Lord of the Rings* suggests the question, “What basis for hope exists in this life?” Despair and hope both affect the tone of the story. Despite the fantastic setting, a sharp sense of realism stings when beloved characters die on the battlefield, when Frodo returns from his quest victorious but emotionally scarred, and when the entire world must enter into the Fourth Age without the mystery and wisdom of Gandalf and the Elves. C.S. Lewis once said that a “profound melancholy” overwhelms the book (qtd. in Wood, *Gospel* 17).

Yet even so, Wood believes that “the sadness serves to enhance the joy” (17), for hope comes into play in almost equal measure, often as the only thing spurring the characters on through dark lands or dark times. Despair and hope coexist in the believer’s life as well, but the Christian’s response to each emotion distinguishes his or her faith from other religions. Since different worldviews answer this question of hope in different ways, the answer dwelling in the subtext of *The Lord of the Rings* can articulate its status as a Christian or pagan work.

Despair and Hope in *The Lord of the Rings*

The Shadow of Despair

Throughout *The Lord of the Rings*, characters both noble and corrupt experience a pervading gloom. Denethor exemplifies this paradox as the noble steward of Gondor whose fraternization with Mordor has caused him to adopt a philosophy of defeatism. His downfall occurs after he foolishly uses the crystal ball-like *palantír* to judge the military might of the Enemy, leading him to conclude, “Hope is but ignorance” (J. Tolkien, *King* 835). In his despair Denethor commits suicide rather than fall victim to the supposed inevitability of defeat (836), for the *palantír* offers an incomplete vision, allowing him to comprehend the power of evil but not of Good. Wood associates this false vision with the “lust of the eyes” described in 1 John 2 (*Gospel* 111), an exchange of faith for a secure future that ultimately provides neither. The steward’s belief in the inevitable downfall of the Free Peoples echoes Tolkien’s description of the ancient pagan motif of the “battle with the hostile world and the offspring of the dark which ends for all, even the kings and champions, in defeat” (*MC* 7). Gandalf warns Denethor that his suicidal ritual belongs to the “heathen” past (*King* 835). Yet even the Anglo-Saxons found honor in courageously

battling the monsters regardless of the outcome. Unlike them, Denethor refuses to relinquish control of his fate and serve a higher purpose: “I would have things as they were in all the days of my life...to be the Lord of this City in peace, and leave my chair to a son after me...But if doom denies this to me, then I will have *naught*: neither life diminished, nor love halved, nor honour abated” (836). Denethor is not a villain in the traditional sense, not an embodiment of evil or a self-serving coward, but a tragic noble whose Faustian thirst for knowledge without wisdom results in his death.

In a similar way, the once-wise wizard Saruman succumbs to hopelessness when he views the might of Sauron through a *palantír*. Saruman, once a great and powerful ally for Good, does not turn to evil ways out of innate wickedness or weakness, but because of the despair that arises from fear and a dangerous obsession with the mechanizations of the enemy. Like Denethor, Saruman follows the “lust of his eyes” in his need to predict and master his own fate, but unlike Denethor, the wizard chooses not to resign but to defect, to throw in his lot with the forces of darkness as a means of self-preservation. Denethor refuses honor abated, but Saruman refuses honor at all. Flieger writes, “In his overweening pride, Saruman has broken himself, not, like Frodo, by yielding to a cause greater than himself but by trying to impose himself upon the cause, by endeavoring to control rather than submit” (*SL* 158). Saruman inevitably finds that he cannot control the direction of events in his own favor, becoming both a puppet of and a weaker rival to Sauron.

Saruman’s perilous sin is his unadvised study of the ways of Mordor, initially intended for good, but eventually leading him to despair of the cause of righteousness. After learning of the wizard’s betrayal, Elrond grimly remarks, “It is perilous to study too

deeply the arts of the Enemy, for good or for ill” (J. Tolkien, *Fellowship* 258). Ironically, though Saruman the White now fashions himself as “Saruman the Wise, Saruman Ring-maker, Saruman of Many Colours” (252), the intentional fragmenting of pure white into multiple colors does not magnify wisdom but dim it. The theme of “splintered light,” as Flieger discusses at length in her book of the same name, underlies the entire *Silmarillion* history (43, 49), and these splintered lights of “progressively lessening intensities” give rise to the “deepening sorrow, a sense of loss, of estrangement, and ever-widening distance from the light and all that it signifies” that pervade the entire myth (60). Furthermore, light’s opposite, shadow, is not a true opposite but an absence of light. Wood writes, “We are never meant to take evil with the same seriousness that we accord to the Good, lest we become perversely fascinated with things we allegedly abominate,” which is Saruman’s gravest error (*Gospel* 51). Because darkness is “*privatio boni*, the absence of good,” it can only imitate and parody, not create (51). Thus, Saruman’s self-proclaimed title of “Ring-maker” only copies the Lord of the Ring’s own devices, who himself can only twist and distort the Good. Through betrayal motivated by fear and despair, Saruman becomes a mimicker of a mimicker, a shadow of a shadow.

Yet consideration of a probable grim future does not arise from folly only. The main characters in the book project a certain amount of hopelessness onto the Quest. In *The Fellowship of the Ring*, after Gandalf falls and the Company experiences its first major tragedy, Aragorn questions, “What hope have we without [him]?” (J. Tolkien 324). But in a spirit of stoicism he answers his own question: “We must do without hope... We have a long road, and much to do” (324). Even Gandalf, their wise and righteous leader, later says, “Listen to the last words of the Steward of Gondor before he died: *You may*

triumph on the fields of the Pelennor for a day, but against the Power that has now arisen there is no victory. I do not bid you despair, as he did, but to ponder the truth in those words” (J. Tolkien, *King* 860). After all, “there never was much hope,” he says to Pippin, “just a fool’s hope” (797). Shippey argues that Tolkien, whose experiences as a soldier would not let him accept defeatism, attempts to revive in his fiction the ancient “theory of courage” he had already defended in his *Beowulf* essay (149). This theory demands that hope or despair, victory or defeat, should make no difference to a true hero, whose only concern lies in performing his duty to the best of his ability. Shippey points out that “Northern mythology asks more of people than Christianity does, for it offers them no heaven, no salvation, no reward for virtue except the sombre satisfaction of having done right” (150). In one sense, then, when Gandalf advises the others not to “despair, but to ponder the truth” in Denethor’s words, he does not ask them to adopt a different attitude from the steward’s but simply a different resolve. Hope seldom favors the righteous, but that fact should not discourage heroes from pursuing righteousness.

A prime example of the lingering sense of despair comes at the end of *Return of the King*, after the Free Peoples have won and the world supposedly has been set right again. The Ring is destroyed and the threat of Sauron eradicated, but the weary hobbits return to their homeland to find it oppressed and in chaos. Though the “Scouring of the Shire” proves successful and the hobbits restore the beauty of their country, an inevitable sense of loss—a loss of innocence, an inability to return completely to the way things were—pervades the last several chapters. Years after his sacrifice on Mount Doom, Frodo confesses to Sam that he is “wounded; it will never really heal” (J. Tolkien, *King* 1002). Frodo likely refers to his physical wounds, but the quotation also implies the

emotional scars and spiritual ruin he suffered carrying the burden of the Ring. Tolkien made clear that he did not intend his work as an allegory for either of the World Wars, but these final chapters still retain the feeling of a soldier returning home from battle permanently changed. In “The Sense of Time in Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*,” Kevin Aldrich writes, “The main note that the book leaves us with is one of poignancy, in which sorrow overpowers joy” (87). Because of his hurts, in the end, Frodo leaves the Shire. Hein writes that the Grey Havens represent “the final consolation, that of death as triumphant conclusion to heroic endeavor” (211). Though Frodo’s voyage promises him peace in a paradise on Earth, the tone of the passage suggests more the peace of death, not of healing within Time, so that even the victory of the War of the Ring turns out to be a bittersweet one at best.

The Glean of Hope

Even though the protagonists admit to their own feelings of despair as the war continues, a subtle difference in outlook separates Denethor’s gloom from the Company’s realism. The steward finds no hope for any part of the future, believing Sauron will establish his reign swiftly and permanently. In contrast, the Company denies hope to its members but gives it to Frodo. By marching against the armies of Mordor, Aragorn and the others give the Ringbearer a chance to complete the Quest, even though they themselves will most likely die (J. Tolkien, *King* 862). This glimmer of hope is almost entirely crushed when the Mouth of Sauron offers “evidence” of Frodo’s death (871). Yet even when they believe they have surely failed, the Company still resolves to fight and not flee. To them, the battle against darkness is not a matter of power but of principle, of duty, and, more importantly, a matter of faith in the goodness of their cause. Wood

writes, “Their devotion to the Quest does not depend upon any sort of certainty concerning its success. They are called to be faithful rather than victorious” (*Gospel* 144). This duty goes beyond the pagan “theory of courage,” as Wood believes that “Gandalf’s call for the massed forces of the Free Peoples to serve as sacrificial lambs has biblical rather than classical echoes” (102). Standing before the vast armies of Mordor, Pippin realizes that he now understands Denethor’s despair, but unlike Denethor he determines to “smite some of this beastly brood before the end” (J. Tolkien, *King* 874), hoping that his small sacrifice might somehow dint the machine of war.

Beyond this battle strategy, which the protagonists realize may or may not succeed, runs a deeper current of future-oriented hope. The mortal life may offer little hope. Middle-earth as a whole seems to have little hope. But throughout the novel, the wisest characters come to believe in a hope beyond the walls of the world. In an Appendix to *The Return of the King*, Aragorn comforts his wife Arwen from his deathbed, saying, “In sorrow we must go, but not in despair. Behold! we are not bound for ever to the circles of the world, and beyond them is more than memory” (1038). In Stratford Caldecott’s words, the immortal Elves “can hope for nothing higher than memory: a frozen image of perfect beauty in the Far West” (27). This idea echoes Frodo’s vision of Valinor: “The grey rain-curtain turned all to silver glass and was rolled back, and he beheld white shores and beyond them a far green country under a swift sunrise” (1007). Yet even Valinor exists as a temporary, earthly refuge. For this reason, Caldecott concludes, “If Tolkien had not been a Christian, perhaps this would have been something like his final word. But Men are not Elves, and the hope of Men transcends time” (27). Ultimately, Middle-earth looks forward to a future day of consummation.

This theme hearkens all the way back to the early drafts of *The Silmarillion*, as well as to *The Hobbit*, in which a dying Thorin Oakenshield declares, “I go now to the halls of waiting to sit beside my fathers, until the world is renewed” (288). Arwen, too, in her time, lies down in a green grave “until the world is changed” (*King* 1038). This persistent hope in the permanent victory of the Good marks Tolkien’s mythology as distinctly Christian.

In contrast to both antique pagan and modern secular hopelessness for the afterlife, Christianity looks forward to a glorious future in spite of present suffering. The Apostle Paul writes, “Our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all” (*New International Version*, 2 Cor. 4.17). Eternity future will be a recreation of the idyllic past, yet different and better, celebrating a joy rooted in the Resurrection. As Wood points out, “While it is impossible for any member of the Company ever to voice such a distinctly Christian hope, they all stake their lives on a future realization of the Good beyond the bounds of the world” (*Gospel* 144).

Christians celebrate Easter not only because of its meaning for the past but also because of its implications for the future, for if Christ had not risen from the grave, Christians should “be pitied more than all men” (1 Cor. 15.19), bearing the weight of both suffering on earth and no hope beyond it. The Christian, though continually looking back to the tragic mistakes of history, does so in order to look forward to the glorious consummation of history. The Fellowship, though continually admitting to gloom and despair, does so in order to increase the magnitude and significance of joy.

Christian Paradox

In the Christian life, hope and despair may coexist, a paradox epitomized in the believer's relation to death. As a Christian, Tolkien recognized death as both a gift to fallen humanity and as a heavy and unnatural burden. Genesis and Romans portray death as an intruder, for death resulted from the Fall of Man. In Tolkien's "The Debate of Finrod and Andreth," wisewoman Andreth argues that, originally, mortal Men were "*born to life everlasting, without any shadow of any end*" (314). Finrod remarks that the Elves have noticed in Men a curious discomfort while living the world. He describes the difference between the two races "like that between one who visits a strange country, and abides there a while (but need not) [i.e., Men], and one who has lived in that land always (and must) [i.e., Elves]" (315). His description mirrors Hebrews 11:13-14, which portrays the saints as "aliens and strangers on earth...looking for a country of their own." If, as Flieger argues, the kinship and distinctions between Elves and Men allow Tolkien to highlight the paradoxical nature of the human race in the Primary World (*SL* 120), then "The Debate" reveals a biblical picture of humanity as both at home in the world and at odds with it, fearing the destruction of the body yet longing for escape.

Understanding death as a departure from God's original plan for his creation, but also understanding death as a divinely-appointed check on human wickedness, Christianity holds both a positive and a negative view of death. Paul writes longingly about the idea of throwing off mortal bonds, being "away from the body and at home with the Lord" (2 Cor. 5.8). Thus, Tolkien likewise views death as a gift to humankind. In *The Silmarillion*, the immortal Elves envy Man for his mortality, which they believe to be a special gift from Ilúvatar (269), for the Elves who elected to remain in Middle-earth understand the torment of living forever in a broken world. However, unlike Plato and

other pagan philosophers, Tolkien acknowledges that the spirit and the body, the immaterial and the material, are meant to coexist. Death, then, is a sundering of that which is supposed to be united. Andreth expresses this profound truth: “We do not live in our right being and its fullness save in a union of love and peace between the House [body] and the Dweller [spirit]. Wherefore death, which divides them, is a disaster to both” (317). Aldrich analyzes a line from the poem about the One Ring: “And finally, how are men presented? We are ‘Mortal Men doomed to die’. The heavily stressed alliterative syllables...sound ominous...The main note of man’s existence, then, in this apparently simple little poem seems to be his mortality” (90). Yet Aldrich also notes, “*The Lord of the Rings* is about immortality and escape from death. But there is no escape *from* death except *through* death, if at all” (100). Tolkien confirms one of the many paradoxes of Christianity, that death gives human beings cause for both despair and for hope.

The Good Catastrophe

Tolkien’s Description of Eucatastrophe

Pagan and Christian, hope and despair, life and death, present pain and future glory—these paradoxes in *The Lord of the Rings* are reconciled in Tolkien’s concept of the eucatastrophe, a term he coins in the essay “On Fairy-Stories.” In defending fantasy as a literary genre and as a legitimate means of expressing universal truths, Tolkien develops a concept of the happy ending that transcends fiction and points to the Story underlying all of history. Identifying the “Consolation of the Happy Ending” as the highest function of fantasy (85), Tolkien writes the following about eucatastrophe:

[It is] the good catastrophe, the sudden joyous “turn”...a sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur. It does not deny the existence of *dyscatastrophe*, of sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance; it denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat and in so far is *evangelium*, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief. (86)

Eucatastrophe refers to an unexpected conclusion that happily alters the course of the plot in the protagonist’s favor. The description in “On Fairy-Stories” justifies the paradox of hope and despair found in *The Lord of the Rings*. Shippey writes that the novel reconciles “what appear to be incompatibles: heathen and Christian, escapism and reality, immediate victory and lasting defeat, lasting defeat and ultimate victory” (xxxii). Eucatastrophe offers a surprising victory, but one “never to be counted on to recur.” Eucatastrophe fills the hero with joy, but a joy “poignant as grief.” On the other hand, its appearance as unexpected—even undeserved, as hinted by the word “grace”—flavors the idea of eucatastrophe with hope of supernatural origin.

Eucatastrophe as a Literary Term

As a linguist and a literary scholar, Tolkien developed his concept of eucatastrophe by prefixing “*eu-*,” Greek for “good,” to “*katastrophe*.” Flieger explains, “*Katastrophe* is the dénouement of classical Greek tragedy, coming from *katastrephēin*, ‘to turn down or overturn,’” so that “eucatastrophe” literally means “the good overturning” (*SL* 27). In “On Fairy-stories,” Tolkien makes the connection between the two genres explicit: “Tragedy is the true form of Drama, its highest function; but the

opposite is true of Fairy-story” (85). David Lyle Jeffrey summarizes Tolkien’s intent as a labor “to offset the *dour denouement*, the slide into depression so increasingly characteristic of late nineteenth-century and turn-of-the-century novels” (56). Tolkien is, in other words, “making the case for a literary category of hope” (56)—a category any Christian should gladly welcome into the canon.

Yet the happy ending of a fairy-story and the sadness of a Greek tragedy can share the same literary space. In fact, Tolkien admits that the possibility of “*dyscatastrophe*, of sorrow and failure” is “necessary to the joy of deliverance” (86). After all, he asserts, the denial of “universal final defeat” goes against “much evidence” (86). The nature of the eucatastrophe as completely unexpected, as the fulfillment of hope sudden and unlooked for, lends it its emotional power.

Still, a discerning critic might distinguish between the unique concept of eucatastrophe and the older convention of *deus ex machina*, defined today as “a person or thing (as in fiction or drama) that appears or is introduced suddenly and unexpectedly and provides a contrived solution to an apparently insoluble difficulty” (“Deus ex machina”). In his *Poetics*, Aristotle explains the pitfalls of the *deus ex machina*, advising playwrights that “the solutions of plots too should come about as a result of the plot itself...and not from a contrivance” (100). Unlike the *deus ex machina*, the eucatastrophe does depend upon prior events. Tolkien writes, “It is not an easy thing to do; it depends on the whole story which is the setting of the turn, and yet it reflects a glory backwards” (86), thus allowing it the “inner consistency of reality” that he believes is essential to good fantasy (68). Etymologically and literarily, eucatastrophe is a paradox—both as a “good catastrophe” and as a surprising, fortunate turn of events that still upholds the integrity of

the narrative. As a literary concept, then, eucatastrophe contains several key elements: in a time when all hope seems lost, an unusual, unexpected, or supernatural turn occurs in the protagonist's favor, revolutionizing the outcome and producing a joy "like sorrow." And though the turn holds some sort of precedence in the narrative, it is "never to be counted on to recur."

Eucatastrophe as a Spiritual Idea

Tolkien's own definition of eucatastrophe encompasses the Christian experience of grace. Writing to his son Christopher concerning "On Fairy-stories," Tolkien presents an anecdote that demonstrates his understanding of eucatastrophe as a spiritual reality. He relates the story of an ill little boy "who was *not* healed," who was "practically dying with 2 nurses attending him," but who, after a seemingly ordinary event, suddenly begins to recover, "so plain and matter of fact: for so miracles are" (100). To Tolkien, eucatastrophe in the Primary World represents nothing short of a miracle, a divine intrusion into the drama of history. It represents grace and forgiveness, a "divine absurdity"—absurd in that none deserve it, divine in that all may receive it.

Yet the joy of unexpected victory occurs only after the sorrow of seemingly inevitable defeat. The tone of despair and the hint of hope in *The Lord of the Rings* are both necessary because both occur in the real world and in the Christian life. One of the great paradoxes of Christianity is the cohabitation of joy and sorrow—the sorrow of the *via dolorosa* and the joy of salvation made possible by the cross; Paul's sorrow in living and joy in death, while still recognizing death as the last enemy to be defeated; and the joy of Consummation amid the horrors of end-times Apocalypse. But in the Christian life on earth, sorrow and joy do not merely coexist; they co-operate. In *The Silmarillion*,

Ilúvatar takes Melkor's cacophonous theme and weaves it into the Music, turning Melkor into Ilúvatar's own "instrument in the devising of things more wonderful, which he [Melkor] himself hath not imagined" (J. Tolkien 5). In the same way, God will take sorrow and suffering and weave them into his plan for the unmarring of the world. Before departing for Valinor, Gandalf tells the hobbits who remain in Middle-earth, "I will not say: do not weep; for not all tears are an evil" (*King* 1007). To Tolkien, a key part of the definition of eucatastrophe is the kindling of a joy "as poignant as grief," a joy "which produces tears because it is qualitatively so like sorrow, because it comes from those places where Joy and Sorrow are at one, reconciled, as selfishness and altruism are lost in Love" (*Letters* 100). Or, as Haldir says in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, "Though in all lands love is now mingled with grief, it grows perhaps the greater" (339). This principle is also inherent in the Catholic concept of *felix culpa*, the Fortunate Fall, that Adam and Eve's sin, while sorrowful, has led to greater joy because it has revealed the grace of God. By grace do sadness and joy work together for good.

Eucatastrophe in the Biblical Meta-narrative

Ecclesiastes

The philosophy of Ecclesiastes echoes the despairing tone in *The Lord of the Rings*. The first twelve chapters of the Old Testament book show hopeless misery as the Teacher struggles to find life's meaning in a variety of activities. A cyclical pattern emerges: "The sun rises and the sun sets, and hurries back to where it rises" (Eccl. 12.13), as if each day and indeed all of history are forever doomed to repeat themselves. Middle-earth history seems to work in patterns and cycles as well. Sauron replaces Melkor as the greatest threat to Ilúvatar's works, and another dark lord will eventually replace Sauron.

Much of the language of Ecclesiastes, such as the famous line, “There is nothing new under the sun” (1.9), echoes dialogue in the novel, such as Legolas’s sad reflection, “The passing seasons are but ripples ever repeated in the long long stream. Yet beneath the Sun all things must wear to an end at last” (J. Tolkien, *Fellowship* 379). Neither the fiction of a Christian author nor the Bible itself shies away from the harsher aspects of life on Earth.

Yet this melancholic work ends with a micro-example of eucatastrophe. A secularist reading Ecclesiastes might assume it ends in utter ruin, the Teacher throwing up his hands in nihilistic resignation. But the book holds a surprising twist: “Here is the conclusion of the matter. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man” (Eccl. 12.13). The Teacher’s conclusion at first seems similar to the ancient pagans’ theory of courage, which calls for performing one’s duty in the face of defeat, but in the context of God’s redemptive plan and the overarching message of Scripture, fearing God and keeping his commandments promises a long-lasting, more hopeful outlook. The final verse represents the eucatastrophe of Ecclesiastes precisely because it is an unnatural conclusion to the argument, just as Paul says that even “the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom” (1 Cor. 1.25). Only divine inspiration could have prompted such a simple yet profound answer to the question of life’s meaning.

The Gospel Story

Tolkien himself attests that the Christian Gospel embodies eucatastrophe in the Primary World. In “On Fairy-Stories,” he writes, “This story has entered History...the desire and aspiration of sub-creation has been raised to the fulfillment of Creation. The Birth of Christ is the eucatastrophe of Man’s history. The Resurrection is the

eucaastrophe of the story of the Incarnation” (88-89). In fact, this explicit Christian hope partially inspires Tolkien’s concept of eucaastrophe. In a letter, he confesses that the joy of the “unhoped-for happy ending” relates to the joy of sudden miracle and grace in fairy-tales and, more importantly, the joy in realizing that sudden miracle and grace can occur in the real world as well (100-1).

As conclusion to the great story of history, the book of Revelation contains a “good catastrophe” in a literal sense. Unlike pagan “Ragnarok,” in which Doom will eventually overtake the world, the biblical vision of the apocalypse ends not in chaos but in joy. The visions at the beginning of Revelation certainly seem morbid. Death, famine, plague, rampant evil, and the destruction of the Earth and heavens create a horrifying vision. But, contrary to the modern connotation of “apocalypse,” Revelation is ultimately a declaration of joy, restoration, and a vision of renewed paradise. Sorrow and joy mingle in this book, just as sorrow and joy mingle in the individual’s life. But in the Christian worldview, Good will always win out in the end, a truth that forms the basis of Christian hope.

Eucaastrophe in *The Lord of the Rings*

Physical: The Destruction of the Ring

In many ways, Frodo represents a typical literary Christ figure. He is virtuous, humble, and willing to sacrifice himself for the cause of righteousness. Caldecott points out further similarities, in that “Frodo passes through Shelob’s impenetrable darkness,” symbolizing Christ’s passion, “through an unconsciousness that Sam cannot distinguish from death,” and he sustains “wounds, through which he becomes increasingly ‘full of light’” (29). Yet in the heart of Mount Doom, when this quality of character is most

urgently needed, Frodo takes a drastic departure from the model of Christ—he fails in the Quest. After a yearlong journey through trial and darkness, Frodo succumbs and claims the Ring as his own (J. Tolkien, *King* 924), and in this moment all hope seems lost, the sorrow before the turn. Yet perhaps Tolkien understood that few if any literary heroes can perfectly mimic the real sacrifice of Christ. Birzer writes:

After the Ring is destroyed, Frodo is stunned that he remains alive. To be a true hero, he thought, he would have had to have sacrificed himself, thus seeking his own glory. He failed to realize that God’s task for him was over; he was to live...To claim more, would be to claim the sole right of Jesus Christ, as the savior of mankind. (*SM* 60)

Though the search for a “type” of Christ in *The Lord of the Rings* may end in disappointment, Frodo’s failure exhibits the truth that no mere human can renounce such a powerful and coercive evil will by his own strength alone.

Frodo fails not only as a model of Christ but also as a model of the typical hero. Pagan literature, both classic and modern, demands a champion who sets off on a quest, wavers and errs, but ultimately succeeds through courage or wisdom, or else dies in the attempt. Wood records the dissatisfaction many readers felt with Frodo’s failure, but he points out that a traditional hero would have “assured us that evil can be defeated by dint of human and hobbitic effort” (*Gospel* 73). The subversion of the typical hero narrative in *The Lord of the Rings* springs from the author’s faith. The hero fails, lest readers wrongly assume that earthly good can vanquish spiritual evil. As Hein says, “The nature of the heroism necessary for the defeat of evil is one of the great themes of *The Lord of the Rings*; it lies not in acquisition, great physical prowess, or in great cunning, but in self-

abnegation and renunciation” (191). At the climactic moment, Frodo dies to self, visually transformed into “a figure robed in white” wearing a “wheel of fire” (J. Tolkien, *King* 922). He becomes for a brief instant inhuman, for no human or hobbit could see this Quest through to its end. Tolkien himself explains, “Frodo ‘failed’...But one must face the fact: the power of Evil in the world is *not* finally resistible by incarnate creatures, however ‘good’; and the Writer of the Story is not one of us” (*Letters* 252). The Writer of the Story is indeed the only One who could intervene and cause the eucatastrophic moment.

For amidst this catastrophe, hope arises. Gollum takes Frodo by surprise and steals the Ring, but in the process he falls into the fire, accidentally destroying the evil (925). Immediately, Sauron’s fortress crumbles, and the terror that has plagued the Free Peoples vanishes into dust. In this desperate hour, only the unforeseen event of Gollum’s sudden appearance saves the Quest. Flieger describes this event as “evil undoing itself,” writing, “It was not necessarily destined, not necessarily foresung in the Music, and yet the concatenation of events is such that nothing else could have happened...Fate and free will have come together to produce the inevitable, unpredictable, and necessary end” (*SL* 154), a perfect description of eucatastrophe as a literary device. Later, Frodo tells Sam, “I tried to save the Shire, and it has been saved” (1006), acknowledging his passive role by speaking in the passive voice. In Gondor, a minstrel sings a song of praise to “Frodo of the Nine Fingers” (933), an allusion that extols him for his sacrifice yet subtly reminds him of the failure that led to the loss of his finger. Bringing together the paradoxes of pagan and Christian, sorrow and joy, Flieger also writes, “The end is inevitable. For man always loses to the monster at last. Frodo is defeated just as surely as Beowulf is. It is

characteristic of Tolkien, however, that he does not end on this note. Frodo loses, but in losing he wins a great victory” (“Frodo and Aragorn” 144). Here perhaps more than in any other scene, the interplay between fate, free will, providence, and coincidence remains ambiguous. Spacks calls it Fate (64). Caldecott attributes the event to “help from ‘outside’, from beyond ourselves” and to “grace” (31). But Spacks also notes that Gollum’s “original acceptance of evil has made him will-less” (64). Perhaps, then, Gollum’s continual inclination toward evil, resulting in evil’s self-destruction, reflects the strange collision of human will and divine intervention characterized by the Pharaoh of the book of Exodus, who “hardened his heart” until eventually God hardened it for him (8.15, 9.12). In either case, whether intervening directly or allowing evil to undo itself, God retains control over the course of history.

As Gollum’s fate depends on his history of treachery and lust for the Ring, Frodo’s fate depends on his earlier mercy. Though he fails to destroy the Ring, his true victory comes in *The Two Towers*, when he shows pity on Gollum and spares him his life (J. Tolkien 601). Wood believes that pity marks the central virtue of the book and is its highest Christian achievement (*Gospel* 149), while Kocher asserts that divine providence “not only permits evil to exist but weaves it inextricably into its purposes for Middle-earth” (48). Tolkien himself says, “The ‘salvation’ of the world and Frodo’s own ‘salvation’ is achieved by his previous *pity* and forgiveness of injury” (*Letters* 234). A single act of mercy enables the fortunate turn that saves the Quest.

Yet, although Middle-earth feels a “sudden joyous turn” at Sauron’s defeat, Frodo himself experiences only a physical eucatastrophe. Years after the destruction of the Ring, Frodo still feels mental and spiritual anguish, so he sails to Valinor to heal. Even

the sanctuary of Valinor is temporary, or as Birzer describes it, the journey is “a purgatorial one, but one of healing, not suffering” (*SM* 71). Flieger’s research suggests that one of Tolkien’s separate poems, “The Sea-bell,” may in fact tell of Frodo’s fate after he leaves the Grey Havens. The poem describes a traveler, possibly Frodo, who visits a Valinor-like refuge, finds no comfort there, then returns home to empty streets and silence (*SL* 161-3). In fact, Flieger believes, “Here is no *eucatastrophe*, no consolation giving a glimpse of joy. What happens to Frodo is *katastrophe*, the downward turn in the action, when the hero is overcome” (152). After the fortunate turn of events on Mount Doom, Frodo survives, but the narrative does not reveal whether or not he ever feels the sensation of joy essential to a eucatastrophe. However, the eventual realization of Arda Unmarred offers hope far beyond the scope of the *Rings* story, even if the speaker of the poem is Frodo, even if Frodo ultimately finds no rest in Valinor, and even if he never receives a “fairy-tale” happy ending.

Emotional: Sam Sees a Star

In *The Lord of the Rings*, each eucatastrophe happens in a similar way—during the bleakest moments, through supernatural means. One of Sam Gamgee’s own bleakest moments comes while he and Frodo inch their way across Mordor. The shadows grow deep around them, and the Ring is becoming a burden too heavy for Frodo to bear. At this lowest ebb of despair, Sam sees a star: “The beauty of it smote his heart, as he looked up out of the forsaken land, and hope returned to him...[T]he thought pierced him that in the end the Shadow was only a small and passing thing: there was light and high beauty for ever beyond its reach” (*King* 901). This scene, while not the end of their journey, holds the quality of eucatastrophe. It marks a happy turn of events for the hobbit’s soul if

not his situation. According to Wood, the star represents “a sign of transcendent hope— . . . hope in a future that will last, no matter the outcome of their errand” (*Gospel* 145). The next sentence in the passage from the novel confirms Wood’s interpretation that true hope survives any circumstance, for Sam realizes that “his song in the Tower had been defiance rather than hope; for then he was thinking of himself. Now, for a moment, his own fate, and even his master’s, ceased to trouble him” (901). Although Sam’s loving devotion to Frodo resembles Christian charity, in this case such humanly affection cannot stand against the prevailing darkness. Fortunately, for a single moment Sam relinquishes the burden of being the hero, of “thinking of himself” as the savior of the Quest, and he recognizes that a higher power controls his and Frodo’s fate. Like the eventual unmarring of Middle-earth, like the Resurrection in our own world, the beauty of the star does not offer present relief but rather a promise—that truth and beauty are preserved in the heavenly realm high above temporal evil.

In catching a glimpse of starlight beyond shadow, Sam finds hope not only for the present but also for the future. In *The Two Towers*, he wisely discerns that his and Frodo’s actions form part of a larger story, one that has gone on since the beginning of time and that will go on long after their part in the tale ends, “past the happiness and into grief and beyond it” (696-7). Sam’s low social position, the short stature of hobbits, and the trivial impact of the Shire on the events of the great world would seem to represent Sam’s ultimate irrelevancy. But if Frodo, as Flieger phrases it, embraces “littleness and greatness” (*SL* 158), then Sam the gardener can take comfort in knowing that he plays a role at once insignificant and important. Wood describes this knowledge as “the Company’s conviction that their errand constitutes a small action within a gigantic

cosmic drama...[T]hey believe that the victory of good is ultimately assured, even if they may themselves fail and soon be forgotten” (*Gospel* 107). In essence, Sam’s glimpse of the star confirms the existence of a larger story playing itself out, one which does not need him but which he may join. Discussing Tolkien’s essay on *Beowulf*, Flieger points out that his phrase “[man living] beneath the sky’s inaccessible roof” conveys “the concept of the sky as a ceiling and by extension a limit on the upward reach of human speculation,” and that “vision carries no promise of hope or salvation” (*SL* 16). If the sky limits human understanding of infinity, then Sam’s vision of a star beyond shadow and cloud seems, if only for a moment, like a glimpse at joy beyond Time and the walls (and roof) of the world.

The characterization of Sam throughout the book builds up to this emotional eucatastrophe. Even more than many hobbits, Sam delights in beauty. He loves the simple pleasure of gardening, and he enjoys fireworks and good song as all Shire folk do. He also has an innocent love for the beautiful Rosie Cotton, thinking of her while in the middle of the ugly chaos of Mordor. On a deeper level, his fascination with the Elves reflects a fascination with their ethereal and glorious beauty. While a humble gardener would seem a poor candidate for an authority figure, Caldecott points out that “Sam’s growing to maturity and the healing of the Shire go hand in hand...the gardener and healer of gardens becomes a ‘king’ – or at least a Mayor” (29-30). When Sam possesses the Ring for a brief time, the Ring twists his love for beautiful things by offering him a vision of a vast garden-kingdom where Mordor once stood (J. Tolkien, *King* 880-1). Sam toys with the idea of putting on the Ring and wielding its power in order to actualize this vision. But he wisely realizes that the Ring would only grant him a corrupted form of

beauty, so in sadness he rejects the idea. This characterization—a lover of beauty journeying through a land of dark decay—makes Sam’s joy at seeing the star all the more potent. The pure and wholesome beauty of the star offers him a true vision of real beauty that he can look forward to, should their Quest succeed.

Spiritual: The Thwarted Salvation of Sméagol

If the occurrence of a eucatastrophe represents the ultimate hope, a thwarted eucatastrophe represents the bottom of despair, a tragedy captured by the phrase “what might have been.” Several times in the narrative, Gollum, once a hobbit-like creature, begins to recall his old life before the Ring caused him to waste away. On the stairs of Cirith Ungol, he experiences one of these moments as he observes the sleeping Frodo, and the narrative describes Gollum looking almost like “an old weary hobbit, shrunken by the years that had carried him far beyond his time, beyond friends and kin” (J. Tolkien, *Towers* 699). This scene holds the potential for eucatastrophe, a sudden grace for this wretched creature and a final chance to renounce the Ring and discover salvation. Flieger analyzes the etymology of “turn,” a word Tolkien associates with eucatastrophe: “This is *metanoia*, reversal, a reversal of the direction of the mind. The same word means ‘repentance.’ The turn, then, is a kind of conversion, and what we feel at the turn of a fairy-story is, to however small a degree, a conversion experience” (*SL* 29). A eucatastrophic moment for Sméagol would literally mean his conversion. Kocher writes, “Gollum’s private torment actually stems from the fact that the Ring’s conquest of his will is incomplete, leaving intact sufficient impulses toward good to breed an unending inner conflict” (64). These “sufficient impulses toward good” almost break through to conquer or suppress the Gollum-side of his nature. However, in perhaps the saddest scene

in the entire book, a suspicious Sam wakes up at exactly the wrong moment and accuses Gollum of trickery, thus destroying any hope of his redemption.

One final scene demonstrates the extent of eucatastrophic hope. After the destruction of the Ring, Frodo and Sam lie vulnerable on the slopes of an erupting Mount Doom, resigned to despair, until suddenly the eagles emerge from the smoke to rescue them (J. Tolkien, *King* 930). Significantly, three eagles appear, one for Frodo, one for Sam, and one for Gollum. Had he only chosen forgiveness over the Ring, Gollum, or rather Sméagol, could have been saved at the last. Hope lies in the eucatastrophe—in swift and sudden grace from above—even for a wretch like him.

The Lord of the Rings as Christian Literature

Each of the eucatastrophic moments in *The Lord of the Rings* ultimately seems to fall short of Tolkien's description of the happy ending: "However wild its events, however fantastic or terrible the adventures, it can give to child or man that hears it, when the 'turn' comes, a catch of the breath, a beat and lifting of the heart, near to (or indeed accompanied by) tears" ("On Fairy-stories" 86). Though the final chapter of the novel ends with tears, they are the tears of sorrow and of loss, not of joy. Each of the three types of eucatastrophe—physical, emotional, and spiritual—lacks an essential element of the other two that would make the event utterly joyful. By a miraculous turn of events, the Ring is destroyed, Middle-earth saved, and Frodo's life preserved, but his psychological scars become permanent, and at the end of the story he remains unhealed. Sam experiences joy and hope when he glimpses starlight beyond shadow, but he still faces a trying journey through that shadow. Sméagol comes close to experiencing redemption, but his past sins and enslavement to the Ring thwart his second chance. For

these reasons, Wood asserts that “there is no real eucatastrophe in Tolkien’s great work—no catastrophic ending in which, though much is destroyed, good totally triumphs” (“Augustinian” 85). If the eucatastrophe represents the paradigm of Christian hope, then *The Lord of the Rings* would seem to lack this greatest hope.

However, just as “the sadness serves to enhance the joy” (Wood, *Gospel* 17), a failed literary eucatastrophe only reveals the need for what Tolkien calls “the eucatastrophe of Man’s history,” the Incarnation and Resurrection of Jesus Christ (“On Fairy-stories” 88). Shippey writes, “The closer the myths of Middle-earth approach to the Christian one, it seems, the sadder (because the more finally inadequate) they become. Tolkien’s pre-Christian Limbo contains no real heathens, but it has no scope either for a *Divina Commedia*, a divinely-inspired happy ending” (212-213). *The Lord of the Rings* can claim the label of Christian literature precisely because its eucatastrophic moments fail to adequately capture the joy of deliverance embedded in the Gospel. For Tolkien to attempt to write a fairy-story more powerful and more moving than the Greatest (and Truest) Fairy-story would mark the height of arrogance, akin to Melkor’s wish to weave a mightier theme than Ilúvatar’s. Wood shows that Tolkien “is no sort of evangelist” (*Gospel* 6):

Tolkien seems to have had a strong sense of the once-and-for-all character of God’s revelation in Israel and Jesus. In a real sense, these definitive acts of divine self-disclosure cannot be repeated, not even literarily...Tolkien the Catholic is confident that the sacramental and missional life of the church will convey the Gospel to the world without the assistance of his own art. (6)

Tolkien's dislike of allegory proves this point. He does not intend to reiterate the story of Israel and Christ through his own mythology, but to enrich it, to pay tribute to his Creator by offering his own humble sub-creation. Like the pagan myths of old, yet to a greater and more deliberate degree, the *legendarium* contains a mote of divine revelation that stops short of total reconciliation, leaving the reader hungry for the full and infinite light.

In "On Fairy-stories," Tolkien reveals what underlies the happy ending of a story: "In the 'eucatastrophe' we see in a brief vision that the answer may be greater—it may be a far-off gleam or echo of *evangelium* in the real world...It looks forward (or backward: the direction in this regard is unimportant) to the Great Eucatastrophe" (88-89). Although his discussion of Christ's Incarnation appears in the epilogue to the essay, it represents more than an afterthought. Tolkien does not merely apply his literary theory to his religious beliefs; those beliefs form a crucial part of his entire argument. He describes the sudden "turn" in fairy-stories as "a piercing glimpse of joy, and heart's desire, that for a moment passes outside the frame, rends indeed the very web of story, and lets a gleam come through" (87). A gleam of what? one might ask. Clearly, Tolkien has in mind the Christian joy that redeems both past and future stories, and all of reality with them, and bestows on them a greater and more permanent meaning.

Although the eucatastrophes in *The Lord of the Rings* do not measure up to the Great Eucatastrophe, and although the joy of Frodo's and Sam's deliverance from the slopes of Mount Doom is tempered by the sorrow of their parting at the Grey Havens, Tolkien still finds purpose in sub-creation: "Story, fantasy, still go on, and should go on. The Evangelium has not abrogated legends; it has hallowed them, especially the 'happy ending.' The Christian has still to work...to suffer, hope, and die; but he may now

perceive that all his bents and faculties have a purpose” (89). Tolkien’s story does not offer complete satisfaction or guarantee the happy fates of the protagonists, for satisfaction can only come from “outside the frame.” For this reason, *The Lord of the Rings* remains a deeply Christian work, because it allows a gleam—and only a gleam—to come through.

Conclusion

Tolkien the Anglo-Saxon scholar, Tolkien the *Beowulf* critic, Tolkien the war veteran could not have written *The Lord of the Rings* without a tinge of that same despair that permeates both ancient and modern heathen culture. Yet Tolkien the devout Roman Catholic, who believed so adamantly in the real and present grace of God, could not have created his *legendarium* without hints of divine providence. Although the melancholy air and pagan trappings of *The Lord of the Rings* cast doubt on its worldview, the Christian Gospel informs every part of it, especially the near-happy ending. For the sudden, unexpected “turn” suggests that in real life, too, the Story often ends in Joy, brought about by a previous mercy, yet wholly undeserved—the divine absurdity, the good catastrophe.

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