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J. R. R. Tolkien and Escapism
By Caleb Webb

J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* is one of the most popular book series of all time with hundreds of millions of copies sold since its publication in the 1950s. Many of its avid fans appreciate the realistic nature of the stories, which create opportunities for escape by allowing readers to get lost in the world of Middle Earth. Prior to *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien published an essay entitled "On Fairy-Stories," where he defends the legitimacy of fantasy, fairy-stories, and escapism generally from attacks by the modern critics of his day. In that essay, Tolkien argues that there can be heroism in escapism, that escaping allows for the condemnation of modern life, that escapism can draw one into a truer reality, and that escaping satisfies certain inner desires. While the literary critics in the early 20th century tended to be more cynical about the escapist nature of fairy-stories, escapism in the 21st century has reached new heights and is now more commonly celebrated than criticized. Given the potentially dangerous side of escapism in excess, it is vital to examine whether escapism has a healthy or valuable role to play in literature, particularly in the biblical Christian worldview. Although some of Tolkien's arguments may require some qualification, he is right to affirm the value—and virtue—of escapism when used in appropriate moderation.

Tolkien attempts to differentiate escape from desertion and rhetorically asks whether seeking or imagining escape from prison should be considered blameworthy. He uses this as his basis for differentiating the escape of the prisoner from the flight of the deserter, but he fails to define his terms or provide a counterexample of desertion that would be substantively different from escape. One reason Tolkien fails to do so is because desertion is merely a good thing that is perverted or taken out of proportion so as to become a vice. When not treated with moderation, escapism can easily become an avenue for avoidance or distraction. This is why the excessive use of food, sex, drugs, gaming, and television are often used by people who seek to numb their minds from the harshness of reality. Escape then becomes not heroism but cowardice when it results in avoiding one's responsibilities by wasting time, shirking obligations, or engaging in addiction. The Bible charges Christians with being "the light of the world" so that others "may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 5:14–16, English Standard Version). This implies a certain level of responsibility necessary for believers to live faithfully. To fulfill this calling, Christians cannot totally ignore the reality of their surrounding world; a balance must be made. Further, Tolkien does not defend his claim that escapism in itself is heroic. Though escapism in moderation may be practical or even healthy, the heroism that Tolkien describes seems to come more from the reaction that stems from escapism than from escapism itself.

Tolkien defends escapism by arguing that it can draw one into a truer reality. He contends that technological innovations like streetlamps may be excluded from much escapist literature "simply because [they are] so insignificant and transient." As opposed to their critics, escapists are not "servient to the whims of evanescent fashion" and may thus focus on truer, more lasting subjects. Tolkien's reaction is against those who believe that "motor-cars are more 'alive' than...

centaurs or dragons” or that a factory chimney is more real or alive than an elm tree, and he makes a number of comparisons between man-made objects and natural and fantastical contrasts, arguing that the latter categories are more interesting and artistic. Tolkien concludes by arguing that escapist fairy stories may indeed be more true to reality because they stay within original subject matter like the heaven or the sea, while more “serious” literature considers only cheap imitations of the true elements that are “no more than play under a glass roof by the side of a municipal swimming-bath.”

His argument here is in reaction to those who allege that man-made things are more real and alive than natural or fantastical things, and it rests on the notion that man-made things are more ephemeral, while natural and fantastic things are more artistic and interesting. While Tolkien is right that there is no rational basis to believe that man-made things are more real and alive than natural things, Tolkien’s argument seems to be emotionally based rather than logically reasoned in the way it swings so far in the other direction by arguing that nature is more real than man-made things. This is evinced especially in his choice of metrics, as the permanency, intrigue, or artistic qualities of a thing are immaterial to the question of its reality. This line of reasoning also fails to comport with the desire Tolkien describes for “a time when men... delighted with the work of their hands.” By arguing that man-made things are less real than natural things, Tolkien himself becomes one of those men who feel “disgust with man-made things” and who require escape to relearn how to delight in the handiwork of mankind. In maintaining elsewhere the goodness of sub-creation, Tolkien demonstrates that he affirms the capacity of man to partake in the creation of the beautiful. But by arguing that man-made things are less real than natural things, he falls into the trap of dualism, affirming form but not substance. However, the biblical command of the creation mandate is to “fill the earth and subdue it” (Gen. 1:28). As such, Christians should recognize that the sub-creative responsibility of man spans beyond the cognitive level of story-making to substantive man-made devices and that such devices should not be considered any less real than creation in the natural world.

In addition to the condemnation of modern life, Tolkien claims that escapism satisfies certain inner desires. These include the desire to appreciate the work of one’s hands, some listed natural desires, and a number of desires based on ancient limitations. First, the desire to be satisfied in the work of one’s hands comports well with the aforementioned Genesis creation mandate, and an escape that helps one appreciate the beauty of craft supports this. The desire for escape from natural conditions such as “hunger, thirst, poverty, pain, sorrow, injustice, [and] death” also aligns with the biblical picture of a world yearning to be “set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (Rom. 8:21).

Tolkien posits that part of the appeal of escapist literature is a longing for “a time when men... delighted with the work of their hands,” arguing that many men of his day felt “disgust with man-made things.” Other desires satisfied by escape are more natural and may include “hunger, thirst, poverty, pain, sorrow, injustice, [and] death.” Fantasy literature offers escape from a number of “ancient limitations” and “old ambitions and desires,” such as the desire to visit the deep sea, to fly like a bird, to converse with other living things, and to escape from

death. Tolkien describes this final desire as “the oldest and deepest.” Of these desires, it seems to be the most prevalent and most easily recognizable. In “classic” fairy tales, escape from death is most clearly expressed in the closing phrase, “[T]hey lived happily ever after,” which serves to push thoughts of death to the indefinite future. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* goes a step further in its escape from death, offering a number of “‘replacements’ for the natural ending of life,” such as with the reincarnation of Gandalf or the elves’ departure into Valinor. Tolkien’s preoccupation with death may have stemmed from his experience in World War I, which left many of his closest friends dead. This experience likely led Tolkien to ask through the solemnity of *The Silmarillion* why death, pain, and evil must come, and it may explain why he so strongly focuses on the escape from death elsewhere in his works.

Scripture repeatedly affirms the concept of rest, and Jesus even advocates a form of escape to his disciples when he tells them, “Come away by yourselves to a desolate place and rest a while” (Mark 6:31). As Reilly argues, “this kind of solace or respite is... a time needed to regroup one’s forces for the next day’s battle.” At the same time, escape can serve as an antidote to the pain of the Fall because it recognizes that these natural limitations “are in fact unnatural, imposed on man at the time of the Fall.” The ancient limitations Tolkien describes may similarly point to the reality that this world is not man’s ultimate home. While the Bible’s conception of heaven is not explicit on all these points, Scripture affirms that freedom from death will become reality in heaven (Rev. 21:4). Similarly, the ability to converse with other living things was present in the Garden of Eden and will thus likely also be restored in the new creation. In this way, Tolkien’s desire to be free from ancient limitations may be an example of Hebrews’ description of people “looking for a country of their own” and “longing for a better country—a heavenly one” (Heb. 11:14, 16).

Lastly, Tolkien also argues for escapism saying that it allows for the condemnation of modern life. Tolkien begins his defense of escapism by arguing that it allows for a condemnation of modern life. He asserts that critics of escapism have scorned not only escape but also its frequent corollaries: “Disgust, Anger, Condemnation, and Revolt.” Instead, they “prefer the acquiescence of the ‘quisling’ to the resistance of the patriot.” Tolkien uses this opportunity to enter into a brief tirade about his disgust with the modern “Robot Age,” where he accuses the critics of fearing the revolt that may come when people are awakened to the dismal nature of their reality. The critics worry about the “wicked face” of escapism, that is “Reaction,” wherein men “might rouse men to pull down the streetlamps.” This comes about when, after reflection, rational men come to condemn “progressive things” like factories, machine guns, and bombs. Even without reaction or rebellion, Tolkien says that mere silence about such things through the use of archaism in escapist literature can amount to their implicit condemnation. Tolkien does this in his own legendarium, where “[h]e offers his readers a world unblemished by many of the things he detests about his own society... to provide what he believes is much-needed relief.” In his essay, “Tolkien and the Fairy Story,” R. J. Reilly encapsulates Tolkien’s idea here when he states that “to write about [the world] is in a sense to accept it.” In this sense, escapism’s avoidance of modernity may be understood as an implicit condemnation of it.

However, writing about modernity but casting it in a negative light may accomplish the same end more effectively by making readers think about the evils of modernization rather than simply forget about them. This is evidenced in the scouring of the Shire, which portrays the modernization of the hobbits' homeland as evil and ugly and causes readers to actively think about it in that way. At the same time, the scouring of the Shire could also support Tolkien's argument for escapism. As J. S. Ryan points out, "Having come 'back again' from a world where they have gained in moral fiber, [the hobbits] proceed to set the Shire to rights by first fighting and routing their enemies and then rebuilding and replanting the devastated areas." In this way, the hobbits' escape from their everyday life helped to prepare them to then react in rebellion against the encroachments of modernism. Ultimately, Christians are called to pray, as Jesus did, "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10). Christians should not be complacent with the world around them but should be interested in the restoration of all things and in establishing the Kingdom of God on earth. Thus, it is good and right for Christians to focus on "whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, [and] whatever is commendable" (Phil. 4:8) so as to use their collective imaginations to conceptualize how to usher in that better reality.

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