



On Fairy-Stories and Fantasy: 50 Years After the Father's Farewell

This September marks the fiftieth anniversary of J. R. R. Tolkien's voyage to the Blessed Realm. Husband, father, scholar, author, artist—a myriad of titles could not do justice to the man behind the mythology of Middle-earth. However, there is another paternal title some have endeared to the professor: “Father of Fantasy”.¹ Years before the publication of *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien delivered an Andrew Lang Lecture at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland. He considered his subject, fairy-stories, “one of the highest forms of literature”. The collected manuscripts of his lecture from March 8, 1938, would later appear as the expanded essay, “On Fairy-stories”, which Tolkien believed to be “quite an important work, at least for anyone who thinks me worth considering at all”.² But what do readers consider most important in his essay? Many who read the essay reduce it to Tolkien's work in philology and ignore the genius of his philosophy. Tolkien knew fairy-stories could enchant, delight, and express truth. He was also keenly aware of their noblest ability: conveying Truth.

Understanding Tolkien

To truly understand Tolkien, we must acknowledge what Tolkien understood about himself: his personal identity. To form a complete portrait of the man who was Tolkien, it is helpful to examine the “Catholic Christian Meta-Model of the Person”. In addition to the sociocultural, psychological, ethical, biological makeup of a person, other dimensions should be considered:

Recent debates about personal identity typically leave out one or more of the following methodological *lenses*, necessary for understanding the per-



son: the *theological*, pointing to God's self-revelation and love; the *existential* and *narrative*, finding meaning in reality and developing one's life story; the *metaphysical* and *ontological*, ascertaining the origin and goal of the persona and the human existential, substantial, and physical body-spiritual soul unity. . . .³

As a Catholic, Tolkien recognized these facets of personhood as evidenced in his letters: “I . . . should chiefly be grateful for having been brought up (since I was eight) in a Faith that has nourished me and taught me all the little that I know.” Regarding religion in *The Lord of the Rings* he wrote: “[it] is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at

first, but consciously in the revision. That is why I have not put in, or have cut out, practically all references to anything like ‘religion’”. This quote is often used against Tolkien's Catholicism, as if he had to take out religion because he was Catholic. However, the next line in his letter states “the religious element is absorbed into the story and the symbolism”.⁴ Tolkien only realizes the Catholicism permeating *The Lord of the Rings* in the revision process because he is writing in his unique personhood which is inextricably linked to his Catholic identity. There is no separation, no personal versus public profession of Faith. Tolkien scholar Dr. Holly Ordway reiterates: “Tolkien's faith shaped him in no small part because it was not compartmentalized; it was not just something on the to-do list for Sunday mornings, nor a mere lifestyle choice.”⁵

Understanding Tolkien's Philosophy of Myth

With this in mind we can begin to understand Tolkien's “philosophy of myth” as presented in “On Fairy-stories”.⁶ Within the essay, Tolkien quotes a passage from a poem he composed for a reluctant convert to Christianity: C. S. Lewis. The poem “Mythopoeia” precedes the lecture by seven years. On the night of September 19, 1931, Tolkien, Lewis, and fellow Inklings Hugo Dyson dined at Magdalen College, Oxford.⁷ After dinner, on a late-night campus stroll, the trio discussed “mythopoeia”—mythmaking or storytelling. For Tolkien, the word “myth” was synonymous with “story”. Lewis likened fairy-stories to “breathing a lie through Silver”.⁸ Tolkien disagreed. He and Dyson convinced Lewis that the death and resurrection of Christ is the greatest true story ever told, “true myth”. In further response to Lewis,

Tolkien composed “Mythopoeia”. He quoted the following portion in his essay, and it deserves proper examination:

Dis-graced he may be, yet is no
de-throned,
and keeps the rags of lordship once
he owned:
Man, Sub-creator, the refracted Light
through whom is splintered from a
single White
to many hues, and endlessly combined
in living shapes that move from mind
to mind . . .
That right has not decayed:
we make still by the law in which
we’re made.⁹

Original Sin disgraced mankind. Yet, each person is called to participate in Christ’s mission as priest, prophet, and king through the universal, “holy priesthood” of all the faithful.¹⁰ Man as “Sub-creator” is only a refraction of the single Light of Creation, God. Tolkien elucidated on this idea in his essay: “Fantasy remains a human right: we make in our measure and in our derivative mode, because we are made: and not only made, but made in the image and likeness of a Maker.”¹¹

Tolkien’s words echo throughout Pope John Paul II’s *Letter to Artists*: “the human craftsman mirrors the image of God as Creator”. The Pope reiterates Tolkien’s hierarchy of creation and sub-creation:

The one who creates bestows being itself, he brings something out of nothing—ex nihilo sui et subiecti, as the Latin puts it—and this, in the strict sense, is a mode of operation which belongs to the Almighty alone. The craftsman, by contrast, uses something that already exists, to which he gives form and meaning. This is the mode of operation peculiar to man as made in the image of God.¹²

This is the foundation that formed Tolkien’s understanding of storytelling. With this in mind, we can return to St. Andrews’ lecture hall.

What is a Fairy-Story?

Tolkien had strong opinions on what did not qualify as a fairy-story. He categorized Beatrix Potter’s *Peter Rabbit* as a “beast-fable”, or tale consisting primarily of animal characters. He considered Jonathan Swift’s *A Voyage to Lilliput* (*Gulliver’s*



Travels) a “travellers’ tale”, a story that may “report many marvels, but they are marvels to be seen in this mortal world in some region of our own time and space; distance alone conceals them”. He also did not recognize dreaming as a mechanism in fairy-stories, ruling out Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. Tolkien used H. G. Wells’ *The Time-Machine* to explain “why the borders of fairy-story are inevitably dubious”. Although Wells’ story is set in the Primary World, there is an “enchantment of distance, especially distance of time” that works in the story, specifically regarding the races of human descendants—Eloi and Morlocks.

A commonality across the blurred borders of fairy-stories is the fulfilment of nascent human desires such as surveying the “depths and space of time”, and holding “communion with other living things”. Stories that successfully present the satisfaction of these desires “will approach the quality and have the flavour of fairy-story”. The definition of a fairy-story depends on “the nature of Faërie: the Perilous Realm itself, and the air that blows in that country”. Here is a glimpse of Tolkien’s metaphysics. Ontologically, Faërie cannot be defined because its nature will be different according to the Secondary World each artist sub-creates. A “fairy-story”, Tolkien wrote, “is one which touches on or uses Faërie, whatever its own main purpose may be: satire, adventure, morality, fantasy”.¹³

Fantasy and the Purpose of Fairy-stories

In a 2011 article for *Seizure*, author Kate Forysth called Tolkien’s lecture “The Birth of Fantasy”. She particularly hones in on a section of the essay where Tolkien defined Fantasy:

“I propose . . . to use Fantasy for this purpose,” he told his bewildered audience. The word combined both the idea of “fancy”, or the imagination, and the fantastic, what Tolkien called “the freedom from the domination of observed “fact””.

At that moment, fantasy as we know it was born.¹⁴

At best, this is a cherry-picked presentation that precludes the profundity of Tolkien’s definition. Tolkien wanted the perfect word that combined a “quality of strangeness and wonder in the Expression” (that is the verbal expression), the mental part of image-making (Imagination), and the successful expression of “the inner consistency of reality”, or “Secondary Belief”, which is Art itself.¹⁵ Is “fantasy”, as we know it today, Fantasy? We will revisit this question. First, we must put together the elements of Fantasy as defined by the father.

At a rudimentary level a fairy-story (which I will continue to use now interchangeably with Fantasy) “must succeed just as a tale, excite, please, and even on occasion move and within its own imag-

ined world be accorded (literary) belief”.¹⁶ To achieve the “inner consistency of reality”, the artist must work with the familiar to draw in the reader. Of this, Tolkien wrote: “Fantasy is made out of the Primary World, but a good craftsman loves his material, and has a knowledge and feeling for clay, stone and wood which only the art of making can give.”¹⁷

Tolkien describes three metaphysical purposes for creating Fantasy: Recovery, Escape, and Consolation. First, fairy-stories lead us to a recovery of sight where one must look outside of the self and see “things as we are (or were) meant to see them”. Fantasy gives us the ability to look at the world around us with fresh eyes. Second, the term “Escape” is not the same as the “escapism” that shirks responsibility. Fantasy should allow a reader to escape or detach from certain aspects of the Primary World such as technology or other “grim and terrible” horrors like “hunger, thirst, poverty, pain, sorrow, injustice, death”. Finally, there is consolation in terms of “the imaginative satisfaction of ancient desires” such as talking with animals, and most importantly, the “Consolation of the Happy Ending”. Just as Tragedy is considered the highest form of Drama, Tolkien wrote “the *eucatastrophic* tale is the true form of fairy-tale, and its highest function”. Here, Tolkien coined the term “Eucatastrophe”, or the “good” catastrophe. It is an unexpected joyous turn of events, “a sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur”. This does not “deny the existence of *dyscatastrophe*, of sorrow and failure” which are necessary to “the joy of deliverance”. Eucatastrophe denies “universal final defeat and in so far is *evangelium* [good news], giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief”.¹⁸

Eucatastrophe is Fantasy’s highest function; however, Tolkien felt this needed additional explanation in his Epilogue. If an artist has built a convincing world, then a “peculiar quality of ‘joy’ . . . can thus be explained as a sudden glimpse of the underlying reality or truth”. The answer to the question, “Is it true?” is: “Yes: it is true in that world.” Tolkien wanted to convey the ultimate Truth that connects the craftsman to the Artist. To a room full of college students, Tolkien declared that the Gospels contain the “true myth”, the story that “entered History and the primary world” and

“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 eucatastrophe of the story of the Incarnation”. In understanding Christ as his ultimate end, Man “may now perceive that all his bents and faculties have a purpose, which can be redeemed. So great is the bounty with which he has been created that he may now, perhaps, fairly dare to guess that in Fantasy he may actually assist in the effoliation and multiple enrichment of creation”.¹⁹ Pope John Paul II accentuated this as well:



That is why artists, the more conscious they are of their “gift”, are led all the more to see themselves and the whole of creation with eyes able to contemplate and give thanks, and to raise to God a hymn of praise. This is the only way for them to come to a full understanding of themselves, their vocation and their mission.²⁰

The titular character in Tolkien’s short story, *Leaf by Niggle*, also sings this hymn of praise: “‘It’s a gift!’ he said. He was referring to his art, and also to the result but he was using the word quite literally.”²¹ This is Tolkien’s legacy: conveying truth

and Truth through Fantasy. Do we still see his influence in contemporary Fantasy, or have the fruits fallen far from the Tree?

Fantasy or What You Will?

Forysth compared the derivatives of Fantasy as a genre to a “mythical hydra” with the sub genres of “science fantasy, dark fantasy, adventure fantasy, historical fantasy and romantic fantasy, not to mention new weird, steampunk, magic realism and that useful umbrella term speculative fiction (first used in 1889)”.²² In an interview for *LIFE*, Tolkien scholar Amy H. Sturgis said Tolkien’s work “reflected the potential of fantasy as a genre, and its influence extended beyond fantasy as well”. True, his literary achievement has generated a whole host of Fantasy imitators in literature and cinema. Sturgis referenced how the immersive worlds and galaxies of *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* “invite audiences to inhabit these fictional landscapes and explore the human condition through their hopeful morality tales. That’s Tolkienian storytelling”.²³

Though Tolkien considered literature a higher form of art, George Lucas’ cinematic mythology bears the marks of an effective fairy-story.²⁴ In a conversation on *Star Wars*, Drs. Michael Barber and Scott Hefelfinger discussed the universal themes that make the saga “perennially enduring” such as the struggle between good and evil and “the importance and possibility of redemption”.²⁵ Referencing “On Fairy-stories”, Hefelfinger remarked on the consistency and logic within Lucas’ art of storytelling.

Two American Fantasy novelists have garnered much attention in recent years with the adaptations of their work from novels to teleplays. The late James Rigney, known under the pseudonym Robert Jordan, wrote the *Wheel of Time* series. He was born in 1948 along with George R. R. Martin, author of *A Song of Ice and Fire*. Amazon Studios released the first season of their adaptation of Jordan’s novel in 2021. Martin served as writer and executive producer for HBO’s adaptation of his work, *Game of Thrones*. Both novelists have been compared to Tolkien and acknowledged him as a major influence. In the introduction to his tenth *Wheel of Time* book, Jordan wrote:

In the first chapters of *The Eye of the World* I tried for a Tolkien-esque feel without trying to copy Tolkien’s style, but that was by way of saying to the

reader, okay, this is familiar, this is something you recognize, now let's go where you haven't been before. I like taking a familiar theme, something people think they know and know where it must be heading, then standing it on its ear or giving it a twist that subverts what you thought you knew.²⁶

Martin has stated: "I reread [*The Lord of the Rings*] every few years; it had an enormous effect on me as a kid. In some sense, when I started [*A Song of Ice and Fire*], I was replying to Tolkien, but even more to his modern imitators."²⁷ Much of Martin's musings on Fantasy align with Tolkien's vision. Martin regards Fantasy as "more real than real" describing reality as "plywood and plastic, done up in mud brown and olive drab" and the "strip malls of Burbank, the smokestacks of Cleveland, a parking garage in Newark". This certainly echoes Tolkien's feelings regarding industrialized England and false escape. But there are two points Tolkien would have contested: "Reality is . . . ashes at the end . . . They can keep their heaven. When I die, I'd sooner go to middle Earth [*sic*]."²⁸ Is this moroseness a reflection of Martin as a Catholic turned atheist? Perhaps this is why Martin's characters and readers are deprived of Eucatastrophe.

Fantasy novel adaptations continue to be *en vogue*. Sarah J. Maas' *A Court of Thorns and Roses* is in development with Hulu, and Leigh Bardugo's *Shadow and Bone* saga aired its second season on Netflix in March. HBO produced the TV series *House of the Dragon* based on Martin's novel, *Fire and Blood*, with more spin-offs planned for characters from *Game of Thrones*. Are these adaptations merely "an attempt to counterfeit the magician's wand", undermining the Art of Fantasy and depreciating it?²⁹ Even Disney+ has released a slew of *Star Wars* shows after the final film in the Skywalker chronicles. Will these visual interpretations lead to escape or burnout?

Conclusion

Rightly ordered, the fairy-story is a "most nearly pure [art] form, and so (when achieved) the most potent".³⁰ Mythmakers and storytellers who achieve the true art of Fantasy recognize that "in the direst of times, we have reason to hope. Our need for consolation, inspiration, and hope is evergreen".³¹ At the other end of the spectrum "Fantasy can, of course, be carried to

excess. It can be ill done. It can be put to evil uses. It may even delude the minds out of which it came. But of what human thing in this fallen world is that not true?"³² True Fantasy allows us to regain perspective by escaping to worlds with infinite possibilities and perils. Fantasy achieves its highest *telos* when it consoles, be an ending bitter or sweet. Perhaps it is time for fantasy authors to review the notes bequeathed to them from the father.

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14. Forsyth, "Birth of Fantasy."
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16. Carpenter and Tolkien, *Letters*, p. 233.

17. Tolkien, *On Fairy-stories*, p. 68.
18. *Ibid.*, pp. 73–75.
19. *Ibid.*, pp. 77–78.
20. John Paul II, "Letter to Artists."
21. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, p. 110.
22. Forsyth, "Birth of Fantasy."
23. Gina McIntyre, "Reach of the Rings," *LIFE*, March 25, 2022, pp. 6–9.
24. There is evidence to support Tolkien's work having a direct impact on the *Star Wars* saga. Director George Lucas was born in 1944, and *The Lord of the Rings* became popular in the United States in the 1960's (Latson). In an early draft of *Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope*, Lucas appears to mirror Bilbo Baggins and Gandalf's initial meeting in *The Hobbit*:
 Kenobi approaches with a "good morning!"
 "What do you mean, 'good morning'?" Luke responds. "Do you mean that it is a good morning for you, or do you wish me a good morning, although it is obvious I'm not having one, or do you find that mornings in general are good?"
 "All of them at once," replies Kenobi.
 (Philip Koslocki, <https://voyagecomics.com/2019/11/16/obiwan-kenobi-was-originally-created-to-be-a-star-wars-version-of-gandalf/>).
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