



Catholic Realism and Fantasy in the Twentieth Century: My Journey to Seeing the Beauty of Both



J. R. R. Tolkien



Flannery O'Connor

Are realism and fantasy really (or only “fancifully”) opposed to one another, as modern academia—even, and perhaps especially, Catholic academia—seem so often to propose? I have wondered about this question for practically my whole reading life, but it seems to me that these two great literary movements are not opposed but rather pointing to the same reality. Dismissing the fundamental connection between the two genres—or worse, denigrating one in order to promote the other—is at best dangerous and at worst truly harmful. Although magical realism, a literary style that blurs the line between fantasy and reality, is one solution, I would propose that the Catholic notion of paradox will better serve our end. Chesterton famously observes that a paradox is an apparent contradiction that actually conveys a deeper, and often overlooked, truth. To that end, I want to share a little story of how I grew to see these two seemingly opposing literary genres as being in harmony with one another. In particular, when a work of fantasy is compared to a work of realism within the confines of

the Catholic understanding of art and literature, fantasy and realism become, in a very real sense, beautifully the same.

To explore the issue, I was initially going to compare J. R. R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* with William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies*, due to the fact that both novels not only share curiously similar titles but also were published in 1954—*Ring* in July and *Flies* in September. Although Tolkien’s masterpiece epitomizes the fantasy genre and Golding’s dystopian work employs the realistic situation of a group of boys stranded on a desert island, the latter remains primarily a work of allegory rather than of realism. So I wondered what author and story I ought to choose to represent twentieth century realism? The answer was right under my nose—another novel published in the early 50s (May 15, 1952 to be exact) by another extraordinary Catholic writer and contemporary of Tolkien—*Wise Blood* by Flannery O’Connor. This novel—of the highest kind of realism—is one of the four central examples I use in my doctoral dissertation, “Catholic Literary Theory: The

Conditional Existentialism of Four Protagonists and their Creators”. Apart from O’Connor, the other authors on whom I focused were Walker Percy, Cormac McCarthy, and Mary McCarthy.

Both Tolkien and O’Connor were equally responsible for my initial passion for literature and equally instrumental in my eventually becoming a professor of literature. Looking back on when I began my dissertation about a decade ago (and when I finished five years ago), I wonder how it didn’t occur to me from the start to dissertate about fantasy and realism, how Tolkien and O’Connor both wrote the way they did because of, rather than despite, their Catholic beliefs. There exists a “deeper magic” (to use Aslan’s phrase in C. S. Lewis’s *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*) that ties Tolkien’s fantasy to O’Connor’s realism more than Tolkien to J. K. Rowling, for instance, or O’Connor to James Joyce or Mary McCarthy. Naturally, the comparison has already been made—for example, in David Sneider’s 2006 article “Between Eucastrophe and Grace: J. R. R. Tolkien

and Flannery O'Connor", and more recently, the 2020 Thomistic Institute's lecture "The Catholic Imagination in J. R. R. Tolkien and Flannery O'Connor". Certainly, however, several books need to be written about it, and perhaps a library full of books, to counterbalance the hundreds devoted to comparing Tolkien to Rowling or George R. R. Martin (the writer of *A Game of Thrones* and *A Song of Ice and Fire* series) or comparing O'Connor to Joyce or Mary McCarthy or Cormac McCarthy.

As Snider observes in his article "Between Eucastrophe and Grace", as far as we know, neither Tolkien (who died less than a decade after O'Connor) nor O'Connor even read each other's work; nevertheless, Tolkien's and O'Connor's common Catholic faith and practice united them powerfully.

The claim that Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* is more similar to O'Connor's *Wise Blood* than it is to Rowling's *Harry Potter* (or that O'Connor's *Wise Blood* is more similar to Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* than it is to Mary McCarthy's *The Group*) would be, in itself, a topic for a dissertation. So instead of making such a proposition in this short essay, I will simply share the personal connection I have to both Catholic authors and how I find one's fantasy and the other's realism doing basically the same great things in my own life. As is so often the case, it's not so much *what* one knows, but rather *who* one knows, that makes all the difference.

Like Flannery O'Connor, I am a Georgian. I was born and raised a Catholic in Augusta, Georgia, a couple hours from O'Connor's birthplace (Savannah) and where she was raised (Milledgeville). Whereas O'Connor was born on the great Marian Feast of the Annunciation (March 25, 1925), I was born sixty years later on the great Marian Feast of the Assumption (August 15, 1985). And yet, in spite of these accidents of birth, I became acquainted with Tolkien before I read O'Connor.

I started *The Hobbit* the summer before fifth grade. I had just begun Bilbo's journey when my parents announced, "Load up—we're going to Grandma's!" I was caught between the Scylla of not being able to finish this most amazing story and the Caribdis of car-sickness. Of course, I had to read the story, and as far as I can remember, my reading-in-a-car induced sickness was immediately and completely healed. Soon afterwards, I read (probably much of it in a car) Lewis's *The Chronicles of Nar-*

nia for myself (my mom had read the series to us, which I have already done twice for my small children, as well). Now that I think about it, my car-sickness conflict was very similar to that of Bilbo's—I wanted to safely read my fantasies and fictions in the comfort of my hobbit hole, but Gandalf and the dwarves were calling me out into the real world. In a way, getting over not being able to read during the 22-hour road-trip from Augusta to the Davis Mountains of Texas was my gateway into the wonderful and boundless world of literature—fantasy or otherwise. I read *The Lord of the Rings* in middle school, but his *Silmarillion* had to wait until college, when a certain Professor Joseph Pearce told all his twentieth-century literature students that we were not *real* Tolkien fans until we had done so.

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But what if my literary adventures had ended in only fantasy, even the best kind, like Tolkien's and Lewis's? Although my journey in many ways began in the Misty Mountains, it led me south to the Smoky Mountains, a sometimes setting of Southern Gothic literature (for instance, when the grandmother in O'Connor's "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" points out Stone Mountain or when the depraved Lester Ballard in Cormac McCarthy's *Child of God* roams the mountainous region of Sevier County, Tennessee). Being the youngest of six, I was fairly young when my parents were fairly old, so my father wisely allowed my Scoutmaster and close family friend to fill in the gap with respect to all those outdoorsy activities. In addition, I have a childhood friend whose father is a Flannery O'Connor scholar, Dr. Henry Edmondson III, so the great Southern writer of the mid-twentieth century had been on my literary horizons from the beginning.

Luckily for me, my Scoutmaster and Dr. Edmondson, who taught some courses in Spain for Georgia College and State University (O'Connor went there when it was called Georgia State College for Women), both wanted to hike the Pyrenees mountains. Dr. Edmondson wanted to take his son to Spain, as well, and his son wanted to bring a friend. I was in a middle school garage band called "Shadrach Five" with said friend—a fellow voracious reader—so guess who got to tag along? We practiced our backpacking in the nearby Appalachian mountains, so that we could make it through the much bigger Pyrenees. I wanted to mention this little adventure because a return to Europe (except to Oxford, England rather than to Santiago de Compostela) and another fortuitous friendship, over two decades later, would mark a return to Lewis and Tolkien. But first, let me relate my sojourn with another great realist, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and then again (as you already know), O'Connor, in my graduate years.

As an undergraduate at Ave Maria University, I became enamored of the Russian realism of Dostoevsky. This attraction was not completely out of the blue, since my parents, although raised Roman Catholic, were drawn to the Byzantine rite of the Catholic Church around the time of my birth. My mother became an iconographer under the tutelage of Fr. Damien Higgins and my father eventually became a Melkite deacon before his death in 2011. I had read *Brothers Karamazov* my senior year of high school, and four years later for my senior thesis in college, I chose to elaborate on Pope Benedict XVI's comment in *On the Way to Jesus Christ* that Dostoevsky means Christ when he has a minor character in *The Idiot* say: "Beauty will save the world." Although I was a seminarian for the Diocese of Savannah for three years, a FOCUS missionary for two, and I remain a practicing Roman Catholic, I have never lost my love for the Eastern Rites of the Church. When I eventually went on to complete an MA in English at Georgia Southern University, I chose to continue studying Dostoevsky and the Lutheran pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer with my thesis, "Semiotics and Christian Discipleship in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* and Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *The Cost of Discipleship*". As a sidebar, I was rather anxious when I realized I was scheduled to defend my thesis on April 9, 2013, the 68th anniversary of Bonhoeffer's execution. My

doctoral defense on Catholic literary theory at another secular institution, the University of Denver, would up the ante—April 14 of 2017 was a Good Friday.

I was tempted, once again, to focus on Dostoevsky for my doctoral dissertation, but finally returned to my Southern roots with O'Connor. At first, I tried to split the difference by writing an extended comparison of O'Connor and Dostoevsky but ended up keeping the Russian master as an ancillary figure. (I later discovered a 2017 book called *Giving the Devil his Due: Demonic Authority in Flannery O'Connor's and Fyodor Dostoevsky's Fiction* by Dr. Jessica Hooten Wilson, which seems surprisingly similar to what I wanted to do for my dissertation.) Rather, I argue in the dissertation that according to Catholic literary theory, the novelist (like God to some extent) "creates her characters freely and free with the possibility and probability that they may speak against their creator and even finally rebel". I then proceed to show this done through O'Connor's Christian realism and in works as diverse as Mary McCarthy's *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* and Walker Percy's *Moviegoer*.

Although I could have used Tolkien just as well as O'Connor to discuss this god-like power to create, I don't think I even mention Tolkien's name. Notwithstanding his explicit absence in the dissertation, anyone can see that Tolkien has already so beautifully argued this precise theory under the name of "sub-creation", especially in his masterpiece of literary criticism, "On Fairy-Stories", where he states: "An essential power of Faerie is thus the power of making immediately effective by the will the visions of 'fantasy'. Not all are beautiful or even wholesome, not at any rate the fantasies of fallen Man. And he has stained the elves who have this power (in verity or fable) with his own stain." Tolkien's notion of "fairy" clearly precludes the over-sentimentalized fantasy that sin does not exist. At the same time, he notes the final reality of God's mercy and grace.

At the risk of ostensibly contradicting both Tolkien and O'Connor (since both naturally maintain their respective genres as uniquely equipped to best proclaim the gospel truth), I find that both fantasy and realism can, in the right hands, execute this common purpose superbly, and I, for one, am at a loss as to which one does it better. I love them both! In "The Grotesque in Southern Fiction", O'Connor certainly seems to claim and proclaim the same "es-

sential power" for her own art (shall we call it Christian realism?) that Tolkien ascribes particularly to his; nevertheless, O'Connor wisely observes: "All novelists are fundamentally seekers and describers of the real, but the realism of each novelist will depend on his view of the ultimate reaches of reality." Both Tolkien and O'Connor did not shy from writing "the fantasies of fallen Man," and O'Connor had a particular penchant for it. Think of the ranting of the Misfit in "A Good Man is Hard to Find", when he says,

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for instance: "Jesus thrown everything off balance. It was the same case with him as with me except He hadn't committed any crime and they could prove I had committed one because they had the papers on me." The Misfit's "truth", no doubt what he truly believes, is a malignant fantasy.

Perhaps here I can pull in Pope Benedict XVI to point to what I think is the common—yet rather *uncommon* in twentieth century fantasy and fiction—essential power of both Tolkien's fantasy and O'Connor's fiction. In "The Word of the Lord", Benedict XVI says, "The historical fact [of the Incarnation] is a constitutive dimension of the Christian faith. The history of salvation is not mythology, but a true history". This historical fact of Christ's death and resurrection saving us from sin is just as present, albeit in quite distinctive ways, in both Tolkien and O'Connor. Pope Benedict's insight that salvation history is not merely a myth simultaneously evokes O'Connor's bold proclamation that the eucharist is not merely a symbol, and perhaps even more pointedly, Tolkien's famous revelation to Lewis on Addison's Walk that the myth of Christianity is also a historical fact.

Didn't I say that Tolkien and Lewis would re-emerge as prominent figures in

my life? After receiving my PhD in Literary Studies at the University of Denver in 2017, I began teaching at Kansas State University and Manhattan Christian College. There amidst the Flint Hills, I became friends with a certain Catholic librarian, Mr. Ron Ratliff, who had been an evangelical Protestant, educated at Dallas Theological Seminary, and very interestingly began his conversion to Catholicism after watching *The Lord of the Rings* movies. (Of course, he has now read the books.) In the process of his conversion, Ratliff began corresponding with the late Walter Hooper, Lewis's friend and literary executor. By the time I befriended the Catholic librarian from Kansas, he had already visited Hooper a number of times and was planning another trip with an erudite Catholic priest that summer. Guess who got to tag along? Since meeting Mr. Hooper for two weeks in Oxford, listening to his stories about Lewis (and Pope St. John Paul II), and visiting the amazing Tolkien exhibit that was on display at the Bodleian Library in 2018, my love for Tolkien and Lewis has been reawakened, and I cannot help seeing more and more similarities between their tales of fantasy and the realistic stories of O'Connor and Dostoevsky. The similarity lay in their common "view of the ultimate reaches of reality", a view that I, too, am trying to maintain as a Christian husband and father of four amidst the awe-inspiring Rockies. My wife Caitlin, a Colorado native and a fellow FOCUS missionary alum, is a graduate of the Augustine Institute and works in Catholic healthcare administration. This unity of vision is the "nothing more real" light of Christ and the "Great Eucatastrophe" of Christianity. As Tolkien reminds us, "But this story is supreme; and it is true. Art has been verified. God is the Lord, of angels, and of men—and of elves. Legend and History have met and fused." It seems to me that fantasy and realism have as well, but then again, this kind of journey—whether it's in the Misty Mountains, the Great Smoky Mountains, Mount Doom, or Longs Peak—will continue well past my or anyone's eleventy-first birthday.

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