

All Tales May Come True: Tolkien's Creative Mysticism

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It is only (as yet) an incompletely imagined world, a rudimentary 'secondary' world; but if it pleased the Creator to give it (in a corrected form) Reality on any plane, then you would just have to enter it and begin studying its different biology, that is all. (*Letters* 189)

In all of Tolkien's works, this may be a favorite line: "All tales may come true..." (*Tree* 73). They begin the final sentence of "On Fairy-Stories", Tolkien's 1939 essay on the value of fantasy literature. I do not simply love these words for their aesthetical value, nor do I call them "wonderful" in a merely sentimental or whimsical way. I indeed mean that they both delight and perplex me, excite and confound me. For years, they have aroused within me a deep curiosity. Just what could Tolkien have possibly meant by them? How, exactly, could he say that "All tales may come true"?

When I first read *The Lord of the Rings*, I was captivated by its heroic and pastoral beauty. Here was a world of true friendship and clear purpose, of great adventure and exquisite beauty, of transcendent good and horrifying evil. Indeed, here was a world of obvious fantasy that *seemed real*. As I journeyed deeper into Tolkien's other works, I began to discover a fascinating philosophy lurking in the shadows, humbly suggesting that maybe, just maybe, our creative works are destined for a glorious final reality, just as Tolkien's Catholic faith taught that human beings are.

In this article, I argue that Tolkien's main body of work sets forth a creative mysticism grounded in his Catholic faith. The pillars of this creative mysticism can be most clearly discerned from a close reading of three works that have been grouped together in the book *Tree and Leaf*: the poem "Mythopoeia"; the afore-mentioned essay "On Fairy-stories"; and the short-story "Leaf By Niggle." These works supply the three primary dimensions of Tolkien's Creative Mysticism. "Mythopoeia" hints at the mysterious origins of our musings; "On Fairy-Stories" connects human creativity with the eternal perspective of Christianity; and "Leaf By Niggle" presents Tolkien's view as to the glorious destiny of our creative works.

Mysticism: To Discover Hidden Realities

The term "mysticism" encompasses a wide variety of phenomena. Etymologically, it is related to the more common term "mystery", both words springing from the Greek *mystikos*, which has to do with introduction to or initiation into an otherwise hidden thing (*Wikipedia*, "Mysticism"). Traditionally, the word "mysticism" has had an explicitly

supernatural and religious connotation. The "hidden things" the mystic gains access to tend to be divine, or at the very least concern greater realities transcending the material realm.

Concerning Tolkien's own faith and spiritual practice, Catholicism contains a long and rich history of mysticism. Indeed, one might argue that Catholicism is a thoroughly mystical religion, grounded as it is in doctrines concerning greater realities masked by lesser ones. One need only consider the centrality of the Eucharist in Catholicism to realize that, from a young age, Tolkien's mind was shaped to regard the deeper and hidden meaning in things. Catholic doctrine teaches that the Eucharist, under the *appearance* of common bread and wine, becomes, through the consecrating action of the priest, the glorified body, blood, soul, and divinity of Jesus Christ. Indeed, Tolkien's own love for and devotion to the mystery of the Eucharist is quite evident as a 1941 letter to his son Michael attests:

Out of the darkness of my life, so much frustrated, I put before you the one great thing to love on earth: the Blessed Sacrament There you will find romance, glory, honour, fidelity, and the true way of all your loves upon earth, and more than that: Death: by the divine paradox, that which ends life, and demands the surrender of all, and yet by the taste (or foretaste) of which alone what you seek in your earthly relationships (love, faithfulness, joy) be maintained, or take on that complexion of reality, of eternal endurance, which every man's heart desires. (*Letters* 53-4)

What we find here is not merely religious love and devotion, but evidence of Tolkien's own mystical views concerning his Catholic faith. Though Tolkien was no cloistered contemplative, he set forth a mystical web of thought having to do with ultimate human destiny and with greater realities hidden from plain sight.

Thus, I define Tolkien's Creative Mysticism as the idea that one's creative works are inspirations of supernatural origin destined for a final perfection beyond the creator's devising and vision.

The first aspect of this definition (regarding *inspiration*) can be seen in "Mythopoeia", where Tolkien claims, of ancient men, "Great power they slowly brought out of themselves, and looking backward they beheld the elves that wrought on cunning forges in the mind", and furthermore "The heart of man is not compound of lies, but draws some wisdom from the only Wise, and still recalls him" (*Tree and Leaf* 86-7). We see in these passages Tolkien advocating for an inspiration of supernatural origin. On one hand, the

ancients looked backwards and beheld “the elves”, or “fairies”, working on their minds. On the other hand, “the heart of man”, and specifically the creative and fantastical aspect of his heart, does not spew forth lies, but “wisdom from the only Wise.”

The second aspect (regarding final perfection) can be seen in numerous places, even in personal correspondence, as in Tolkien’s 1954 letter to Peter Hastings: “[B]ut if it pleased the Creator to give it (in a corrected form) Reality on any plane, then you would just have to enter it and begin studying its different biology, that is all” (*Letters* 189). Tolkien says this so matter-of-factly it appears that he has been completely comfortable with the idea for some time. This particular idea will be examined through the works “On Fairy-Stories” and “Leaf By Niggle.”

Mythopoeia: Hints and Inspirations

Though of the three primary works of concern “Mythopoeia” was published last (it was not included in the original *Tree and Leaf* published in 1964, but added in 1988), it precedes the other works in conception, and is perhaps the first strong evidence of Tolkien’s Creative Mysticism. Composed in response to a 1931 conversation between Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, and Hugo Dyson, “Mythopoeia” serves as a short manifesto for Tolkien’s creative worldview.

Responding to Lewis’ assertion that myths are “lies

breathed through silver”, Tolkien constructs a view of mankind’s creative aspirations that he would eventually come to call *subcreation* (*Tree and Leaf* vii/85). As previously noted, Tolkien contends that “The heart of man is not composed of lies / but draws some wisdom from the only Wise.” In other words, mankind draws imaginative influence from the original work of the Creator, and through his imagination begins to see in the things of creation the world as the Creator intended it to be seen. The process of *subcreating* then is not one of creating something entirely original, but rather of developing and drawing forth the inspired vision from within a previously created thing.

For Tolkien, this act of subcreating is of vital importance to human nature: “Yes! ‘wish-fulfilment dreams!’ we spin to cheat / our timid hearts and ugly Fact defeat!” (*Tree and Leaf* 87). Through subcreating and myth-making, mankind does battle in creative (rather than destructive) ways against the philosophies that degrade us and the rest of creation. Tolkien is establishing the primacy of subcreative action, claiming it as vitally important, for in the middle section of the poem, he lays out three beatitudes (“Blessed are...”) rendering creativity in various forms as acts of resistance against different evils.

Though as consequence of the Fall, mankind is “disgraced” (and thus his subcreations can be a mixture of moral good and moral evil), he is nevertheless not “dethroned”



from the great position in which he has been placed: that of apprenticeship to the master Creator. Indeed, it is in this apprenticeship that we come to see things “as they were meant to be seen” (as Tolkien later puts it in “On Fairy-Stories”): stars as “living silver”, the sky as a “jeweled tent”, the earth as “the mother’s womb.” As we create, we learn how to see things in proper fashion. This is of vital importance for Tolkien’s mysticism, for it is by this action that “ugly Fact”, the sickly and anemic view of reality, is defeated.

On Fairy-Stories: The Spiritual Purpose of Fantasy

If “Mythopoeia” was Tolkien’s first significant attempt to elucidate his mystical views, it was also an intellectual stepping stone that would achieve greater clarity in “On Fairy-Stories.” Tolkien begins his classic essay by taking issue with several errors that plague the study of fantasy literature. Modern scholarship, he contends, has an utterly condescending and anachronistic perspective on fantastical storytelling: condescending because it wants to relegate it to the nursery; anachronistic because it fails to first appreciate it as its original and intended audience would.

Instead, Tolkien argues, one must approach such works as the products of great and insightful creative minds. He argues that fantasy literature helps us to see things not “as they are” but “as we are (or were) meant to see them” (*Tree and Leaf* 58). This is of course an utterly mystical notion, for what human can say just how things are *meant* to be seen?

Certainly, for Tolkien, this would be a Divine function, for it is to the creator of some artifact that the right of ascribing meaning primarily belongs. However, Tolkien would contend that through sub-creative process, human beings gain deeper insight into the nature and reality of a thing.

Tolkien also dealt with one of the perennial charges levelled against fantasy: that it is *escapist*. In a Chestertonian rhetorical move, Tolkien embraces the vice as virtue, arguing that it is like unto the prisoner of war escaping from the enemy’s prison (*Tree and Leaf* 60). He goes on to flesh out *Escape* as an attribute of good fantasy, chiding fantasy’s critics for being like guards who try to convince their prisoners that nothing good exists beyond the prison walls. Tolkien explicitly connects all of this to Christianity, establishing it as the transcendent and true fairy-story encompassing human history and enabling the escape from death. Tolkien held the central claim of Christianity (the Resurrection of Jesus Christ) to be real and factual, and for him Christianity was the philosophy that ultimately endowed our creative endeavors with real and lasting value.

Through the process of sub-creating, Tolkien contends, we become primary contributors to the “effoliation and multiple enrichment of creation” (*Tree and Leaf* 73). “Effoliation” has to do with the removal or fall of leaves from a plant. One has the image of a gardener pruning a great shrub to make it more viable and beautiful. Thus, to “effoliate” creation is to labor upon something so as to further beautify and glorify it.



It is the work of the Elvish architect striving for Lothlórien.

In the “multiple enrichment of creation”, one beholds exponential possibility. The work of the subcreator is an additive work, not parasitic, fully intended and appreciated by the original Creator. The subcreator, by the supernatural vision mysteriously granted to him, works to beautify and glorify the world before him, to realize the greater realities that only they can see by their mind’s eye.

Leaf By Niggle: To Dwell In One’s Own Creation

Nowhere does Tolkien flesh all this out so well as he does in the short story “Leaf By Niggle.” Composed quickly in a fit of waking inspiration in the early 1940’s, looking back Tolkien attested to its autobiographical nature in a 1957 letter to Caroline Everett:

Leaf by Niggle arose suddenly and almost complete. It was written down almost at a sitting, and very nearly in the form in which it now appears. Looking at it myself now from a distance I should say that, in addition to my tree-love (it was originally called The Tree), it arose from my own pre-occupation with *The Lord of the Rings*, the knowledge that it would be finished in great detail or not at all, and the fear (near certainty) that it would be ‘not at all.’ (*Letters* 257)

Niggle is the story of a painter obsessed with one painting. More specifically, he is obsessed with *finishing* the painting, but he cannot determine how to finish it, nor can he find the time to achieve its completion to his satisfaction. In the process of the story, he is taken away from his painting and, after a series of trials, eventually comes to dwell in a land that we learn is the full realization of his original, unfinished work:

Before him stood the Tree, his Tree, finished. If you could say that of a Tree that was alive, its leaves opening, its branches growing and bending in the wind that Niggle had so often felt or guessed, and had so often failed to catch . . . All the leaves he had ever laboured at were there, as he had imagined them rather than as he had made them; and there were others that had only budded in his mind, and many that might have budded, if only he had had time. (*Tree and Leaf* 110)

Here we find a central tenet of Tolkien’s Creative Mysticism: that one’s creative works will take on *actual* reality. Indeed, the very completion sought by Niggle is not of his own doing at all but is, in his own words, “a gift!” (*Tree and Leaf* 110).

Over the course of the story, Niggle runs afoul of the local authorities and is eventually sent to a labor camp. Concerning his painting, the authorities are antagonistic and condescending, finding no practical value in it whatsoever. Though a fragment of it is preserved for a short while in this world, the full reality of it in the lasting and eternal world becomes a place of true joy and happiness. Though Tolkien would go on to have far more success in this world than Niggle did, nothing, not even something as indelibly memorable as *The Lord of the Rings*, has the capability of lasting

forever in our present reality. However, in Niggle’s eternity, even the simplest of landscape paintings takes on a glorious, real, and lasting reality.

Conclusion

In all of this, we again hear echoes of the mystical dimensions of Christianity. Just as Niggle lives in a humble village but comes to dwell in a glorious and perfected version of his handiwork, the trajectory of the biblical story is from a garden solely created by God to an eternal city ultimately fashioned by God but created in conjunction with the saints. Again, when we learn that Niggle was destined for “the high pasturages . . . to look at a wider sky, and walk ever further and further toward the Mountains, always uphill” (*Tree and Leaf* 115), we hear echoes of an ancient mystical name for Christ: “the desire of the everlasting hills.”

Furthermore, these notions are all quite bound up with what Tolkien sought to achieve in his Middle-earth tales. Indeed, the entire metaphysical boundary of Middle-earth is laid out similarly with “Ainulindalë”, where reality begins with the ultimate Divinity creating and inspiring lesser divinities in order to fashion a world which He allows them to glimpse in a beautiful and glorious vision. Their world too goes wrong, and war ensues, but we are assured that, in the end, all will reach its intended perfection. As to the Elves themselves, they are of course Tolkien’s great race of subcreators, and warriors all the same.

The facets of Tolkien’s Creative Mysticism are not easy to speak of nor to comprehend, for they surpass our present reality, the things we behold every day. Yet even so, in the contemplation of the things before us, we often see hints of these greater possibilities, whether it be the humble caterpillar and his transformation into the glorious butterfly, the acorn’s dying to rise again as the powerful oak tree, or the abilities of human beings to transform dirt into great art or raw sound into transcendent and moving song. Even now, we dwell in a place of shadows, dimly hinting at everlasting realities. Tolkien’s life work blazed a trail by which we may arrive at the knowledge of the eternal purpose of our works, the great and glorious destiny of our inspirations.

Works Cited

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