

# Creation and Subcreation

MARTINA JURÍČKOVÁ

Christian religion played a very important role in Tolkien's life. The basis of his faith was founded in his early childhood by his mother Mabel who, grieving by the sudden death of her husband and John's and his brother's father, was seeking some spiritual help and support in religion. Although born and raised as an Anglican, Mabel found it in Roman Catholicism, and soon she with both her sons converted to it. Tolkien's faith strengthened even more after his mother's death, when he was only twelve years old. He, along with his brother became the wards of Father Francis Morgan, according to Mabel's last Will. He was a priest from the Birmingham Oratory. Father Francis was a close friend of the Tolkiens and he provided assistance to Mabel and her family after her conversion to the Roman Catholic faith. At that time the Oratory became J.R.R.T.'s second home and the Catholic religion an everyday part of his life (Carpenter, 2002, pp. 40-51) Even as an adult he regularly attended Catholic masses and his faith was a source of his inner consolidation.

As Tolkien himself noted, "[a]n author cannot remain [...] wholly unaffected by his experience" (Tolkien, 2011, p. xxii). It is conceivable then that he, like many others, incorporated his life's beliefs into his writings. He might have done this unconsciously at first, but soon it turned into a fully conscious and purposeful process, possibly as a result of his self-assessed goal to use his books to better the world.<sup>1</sup> In

the later years of his life he concentrated still more and more on the spiritual aspects of his works and their interrelation with religion.

In his essay *On Fairy Stories* he not only established the basic principles of his work, but also explained his insights on the purpose of literature as a means of, and the role of writers as tools for revealing the divine truth. He stated that it is a right of every man as a "sub-creator" to contrive a secondary world that is "derived from Reality, or [...] flowing into it" and so "may actually assist in the effoliation and multiple enrichment of creation," (Tolkien, 2001, pp. 37, 71, 73). In other words: "it may be said that the chief purpose of life, for any one of us, is to increase according to our capacity our knowledge of God by all the means we have, and to be moved by it to praise and thanks," (Carpenter, 2006a, p. 400). He believed that man, being created in the image of God, is in his image summoned to create new things of his own, thus contributing to His overall plan of creation. And because "we make still by the law in which we're made" (Tolkien, 2001, p. 55) we should beware misusing our creativity for unholy purposes, but rather aim at promoting goodness and beauty via our work, each according to his capabilities and opportunities.

However, Tolkien distinguishes between the terms creation and sub-creation, the first being exclusive competence of God, because he is the only one who can actually make



things out of nothing, and what's more, he can give them life. Man, on the contrary, is just a sub-creator for he himself is a product of God's creativity; that means that he could not create anything if God had not created him first. Moreover, according to the Christian belief, man can only do what God wants him or allows him to do with respect to the man's free will; much in the same way as characters in a literary work do only what the writer designs them to do.<sup>2</sup> One of the most remarkable interpretations of our total dependence on God's will is that we cannot actually invent anything new and unique, because everything has since ever been in God's mind, so we are only re-inventing or re-discovering his ultimate knowledge.<sup>3</sup> This would justify Tolkien's feeling, that was rather "recording what was already 'there', somewhere: not [...] 'inventing'" (Carpenter, 2006a, p. 145). Nonetheless, in the essay *On Fairy Stories* he explains his understanding of sub-creation in terms of literary art as an ability to make a Secondary World - some kind of alternative reality which, though often altering it and enriching it with fantastic elements, remains true to the laws of the Primary World in which we physically live and is thus believable. In other words, man is called sub-creator, because his creation is subordinate to God's plans.

Returning to the previously mentioned quote with which I began this discussion on sub-creation<sup>4</sup>, the most crucial term in the statement is "Reality" which Tolkien understood to be the principal Christian Truth – the story of Jesus Christ. He called this story "the true myth", because it describes a real historical event, but at the same time it "embraces all the essence of fairy-stories" (Tolkien, 2001, p. 72) and qualities of written art as it is indeed a piece of literature. And all the other myths, religious and pagan as well, complement it as in them "God express[ed] Himself through the minds of poets, using the images of their 'mythopoeia' to reveal the fragments of His eternal truth," (Pearce, 1998, p. 59). This view is based exactly on the idea that man, created in God's image, in his essence possesses the ultimate truth, which is, consequently, reflected in his making even though he might not be aware of it. So even the pagan myths are not entirely mistaken, but contain fragments of the true light (Carpenter, 2006b, p. 43).

The relation of myths and fairy-stories to the eternal Truth is, as its primary focus, thoroughly elaborated in the essay *On Fairy Stories*. Indisputably, myths arise from the need to explain the world. The most distinguishable feature of ancient myths is the enormous use of personification, which Tolkien says is a result of the fact, that the first primitive people were much more closely linked to nature and they were more spiritual than modern man is nowadays. They appreciated all living things; fauna and flora, often recognizing them as equally conscious beings, and which embodied natural processes as gods. Yet, the main value of myths was rather to act as teaching and guiding tools on morals, goodness, and social appropriateness. From the Christian point of view, under close inspection we can notice that, although wrong in the execution, myths are often good in their philosophies as they comprise many

truthful ideas. The only problem with the veracity of myths is the limited knowledge of their authors of science as well as the true God. Often it happened, that ancient world-views and philosophies seemed somehow incomplete, but after the introduction of Christianity, when the pagan elements were confronted, they suddenly started making sense.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, the pagan myths too complement the glorification of God, as they reveal the ultimate truth in a way and manner corresponding to the level of knowledge of their creators and recipients.

Consequently modern authored stories should do likewise. In concordance with the formerly mentioned purpose of everyone's life, for writers it is almost a must to use their gift of writing to supplement God's creation and so to glorify him. That is how Tolkien viewed his own task and the purpose of his invented mythology, which he privately called the *Legendarium* - to "[express] his love of God's creation" (Fimi, 2009, p. 45) via his writing. And he chose for it the form of myth because in his opinion it is the form which best suits the human nature. Moreover, myths and fantasy have ever been used to present the truth and teach goodness and morality in an acceptable and unobtrusive way to people who otherwise restrain from any religious content.

## Notes:

1. see Garth, 2003, p. 105
2. see Kreeft, 2005, p. 613
3. This is, in fact, very similar to Plato's philosophy of anamnesis. He believed that the process of learning is actually a process of remembering, re-discovering the universal knowledge within us. See Samet, 2008.
4. see Tolkien, 2001, p. 71
5. Something similar can be observed with the ideas of many antique philosophers, for example Aristotle's view that the purpose of life is to search for the ultimate wisdom and beauty, the source of which in Christian understanding is God. See his *Nicomachean Ethics*.

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**Martina Juričková** has earned a Master's degree in English and Mathematics. Both her bachelor and diploma theses focused on Tolkien's work, exploring the concepts of friendship and false friendship in *The Lord of the Rings*. She is from Slovakia.