Parallel Paths and Distorting Mirrors: Strategic Duality as a Narrative Principle in Tolkien's Works

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One of Tolkien's most important decisions regarding plot and character development, as well as the intertextual links to his other works, is Lúthien's choice to abandon the immortality of the Elves and share in the mortality of Men to be with Beren. Like the Elves mourn for the loss of her whom they loved most, (cf. *LotR*: 253), readers may have similar trouble coping with the irrevocable death of these two characters. In that respect the story of Idril and Tuor becomes relevant: It is said in *The Silmarillion* that Tuor is "numbered among the elder race, and Tuor's fate is sundered from the fate of Men" (Silm 245). In a sense, Lúthien's Elvish immortality is lost but, in exchange, Tuor as the only Man is allowed to share in the immortality of the Elves. For the reader, there is a peculiar sense of satisfaction to 'keep' Idril and Tuor after having to give up Beren and Lúthien.

Tolkien himself explained this effect in his essay on fairy stories in which he argues for the necessary coexistence between catastrophe and eucatastrophe (cf. *Fairy-Stories*: 153-154). This careful balancing of this scale permeates all of J. R. R. Tolkien's works, and as Flieger puts it: "No careful reader of Tolkien's fiction can fail to be aware of the polarities that give it form and fiction" (Flieger 2002: 2). Moments of loss and catastrophe are always interwoven with notions of comfort and hope, and each seemingly happy ending seems to be accompanied by the poignant pang of sadness.[1]

However, in order to identify the eucatastrophic counterpart to a catastrophic moment in the narrative or vice versa, these incidents must be structurally related. My argument therefore is that the balance between catastrophe and eucatastrophe, which I will henceforth call strategic duality, forms a central narrative principle in many of Tolkien's works and is achieved through patterns of correspondences and oppositions. While the aesthetics of parallels and opposition are an inherent structural part particularly of epic narratives in general (cf. Martin 1987: 37), there are, in my opinion, two specific patterns that are repeatedly employed in Tolkien's Arda narratives: (1) Parallel paths and (2) distorting mirrors. The first denotes not only analogies between character traits, or situations, but also describes the similar development two characters may undergo, and who are thereby virtually treading *parallel paths*. This pattern emphasizes similarities whereas the second pattern I would like to discuss rather relies on the concurrent impressions of correspondences and oppositions. I would like to use the term *distorting mirrors* for it in order to grasp the

idea of a pattern that maps out structural differences but simultaneously retains an inherent likeness between narrative elements such as characters, events, and motifs. Unlike the concept of a foil character from drama theory that usually only highlights contrasting features between characters, *distorting mirrors* account for the unison of parallel and opposite features. Moreover, it is more widely applicable because it is not restricted to the concept of character. By means of six examples, I will subsequently show how these two patterns are employed in Tolkien's works to create this all-encompassing strategic duality of catastrophe and eucatastrophe.

The first example of *parallel paths* is concerned with key scenes from *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Book of Lost Tales*. Both works feature a fatal combat between good and evil represented by Balrogs of Morgoth on one side, and, on the good side, by Gandalf the Maia and the Elf Glorfindel of Gondolin. When comparing these two scenes, striking correspondences can be identified: Gandalf and Glorfindel face the Balrogs in the mountains, both cover the escape of their friends and allies, and both perish with their enemies by falling in the abyss together. On closer inspection even more parallels emerge: The imagery of light is very prominent in both cases. In *The Book of Lost Tales* Glorfindel's sigil is described as "a rayed sun," (*BoLT II*: 173) and Gandalf's defiant words to the Balrog identify the Istari as the "Wielder of the flame of Anor" (*LotR*: 430). Anor, of course, is the Elvish word for sun. Being descended from the golden tree Laurelin, the sun is associated with a pure fire, warmth, and hope, and thus provides a strong contrast to the destructive "dark fire" of the Balrogs (*LotR*: 430).

Moreover, both scenes interestingly see an initial draw. Good and evil neutralize each other by their mutual demise. The score seems even. Yet Gandalf and Glorfindel are both rewarded for their sacrifice. Both are sent back even more powerful than before, and again they are both associated with a radiating light: Glorfindel is described by Frodo as "a shining figure of white light," (*LotR*: 280) and "a white figure that shone and did not grow dim like the others" (*LotR*: 290).[2] Likewise, Gandalf the White is described as follows: "His hair was white as snow in the sunshine, and gleaming white was his robe; the eyes under his deep brows were bright, piercing as the rays of the sun" (LotR: 645).

Again, the symbol of the sun is taken up to signify the special grace of both characters. The strong resemblance between both scenes emphasizes the balance between good

and evil and the perpetual struggle between both powers, but it also underlines the concept of self-sacrifice as something that cannot be understood, and thus not be overpowered by evil. Due to the similar construction of their climactic fights with the Balrogs, and their connection to the imagery of sun and light, Gandalf and Glorfindel can be said to walk parallel paths, and the return of both characters after the painful experience of their deaths is a particularly powerful eucatastrophic moment.

Another interesting case of *parallel paths* concerns the development of Lúthien and Arwen. Not only do they resemble each other in their looks, their fate is quite similar, too. Aragorn's and Arwen's first meeting in the woods of Rivendell mirrors that of Beren and Lúthien in the woods of Neldoreth. Beren and Aragorn are likewise enchanted by the appearance of the women; their respective fathers, Thingol and Elrond, are against the relationship and set a quest as brideprice.

One of the most famous scenes in the tale of Lúthien and Beren tells of Lúthien's journey to the Halls of Mandos where she pleads for Beren's return to life. This case of intercession evokes the Christian belief that the Virgin Mary or other saints may intercede on on behalf of others. The same motif is repeated in Arwen's story though less prominently. She offers Frodo to take a place on the Ship to the West in her stead, so in a way she offers him an escape from the grief and hurt of his life in Middle-earth and a form of redemption (cf. *LotR*: 1276).

Ultimately, Arwen's choice "is the choice of Lúthien" (*LotR*: 1276): to spend a lifetime with the man she loves but to part from the circles of the world forever. But again, their loss is alleviated by another couple's choice of immortality: After his successful mission to acquire the help of the Valar, Eärendil the Mariner asks his wife Elwing to make the choice for them between the fate of Men and the doom of the Elves. Elwing, "chose to be judged among the Firstborn Children of Ilúvatar […] because of Lúthien" (*Silmarillion*: 249) although her husband felt more akin to his father's people. The motif of the ultimate choice between mortality and immortality is repeated in the generation of Half-Elves that descended from Beren, Lúthien, Idril and Tuor, and, like their ancestors, the score is evened by their respective choices. Of course there many differences between the individual characters but the emphasis seems to lie on the striking parallels. With these couples and their similarities, an intertextual link is established that functions like a golden thread across the enormous time periods of the different ages, adding further significance to the union between the Children of Eru, and, concomitantly, to the centrality of themes such as love and commitment in Tolkien's works.

In order to illustrate the second narrative pattern, I would like to start with an example from the tale of Beren and Lúthien. One protagonist of the tale is Húan, the wolfhound of Valinor. Húan is described as extremely faithful, a skilled hunter, and capable of human speech (cf. *Silmarillion*: 172-173). His evil counterpart is presented in the shape of the hideous wolf Carcharoth. Guarding the gates of Angband

like Cerberus the gates of hell in Greek mythology, Carcharoth is described as a "devouring spirit" "tormented, terrible, and strong," (*Silmarillion*: 180) and, at least in the Lay of Leithian, also capable of human speech (cf. *Lay of Leithian, Ct. XII*: 290). While Húan and Carcharoth represent antithetical powers, the angelic power of the Valar from the Blessed Realm on the one hand, and the demonic corruption of Morgoth on the other, their juxtaposition works precisely because of their correspondences. Both are canine creatures, both are bred by a Valar, both their destiny is preordained, and both their fate is tied to the Silmaril.

The fact that Caracharoth is the mocking counterfeit of Húan (cf. *Silmarillion*: 179-180), and that they are each the nemesis of the other, poignantly corroborates the image of a distorting mirror. Taking into account the earliest drafts of the story of Beren and Lúthien, it seems hence consistent to drop the idea of Tevildo, the Prince of Cats, as a second antagonist to Húan. The omission of Tevildo allows for a stronger emphasis on the parallels and simultaneous opposition between Húan and Carcharoth, as well as on the theme of divine creation and demonic imitation.

Two characters that also convey the image of distorting mirrors but do not simply contrast good and evil are the cousins Túrin and Túor. The two heroes have much in common: They are both princes of Dor-Lómin, both lose their fathers in the Battle of Unnumbered Tears, both are fostered by Elves, both lead a part-time life as outlaws, both gain admittance and renown in hidden Elvish kingdoms, and both win the love of an Elf-maid. All this underlines their close kinship and importance as heroes of Men, but their paths soon diverge into opposite directions.

Just like their contrasting looks (Tuor is golden-haired whereas Túrin is black-haired), their epithets also indicate their different fate. Tuor is called 'The Blessed' and Túrin's self-chosen in Nargothrond name is 'Bloodstained, son of Ill-fate'. Not only does Túrin cause the death of his best friend Beleg, and of Finduilas the Elf-maid who falls in love with him, he accidentally marries his own sister. When she kills herself and their unborn child out of shame, Túrin finally takes his own life. Tuor on the other hand is strangely lucky. He is Ulmo's chosen one, loves and is loved by Idril, manages to save his family from the Sack of Gondolin, and is eventually granted access to the Undying Lands.

Few other characters portray the two sides of the same coin, the blessing and curse of fate, catastrophe and eucatastrophe, so powerfully as Túrin and Tuor do. The tragedy of Túrin is highlighted by the good fortune of his cousin. Through the strong similarities in their development but the direct oppositions in terms of their character disposition and their fates, the two cousins form distorting mirrors of each other, and effect strategic duality in *The Silmarillion*.

The second to last example takes a closer look at the characterisation of Gandalf and Saruman. They are both Maiar sent by the Valar to Middle-earth in order to assist the free peoples against the domination of Sauron. In addition, they are both accounted as wise and are respected by the free peoples, they both take on the physical appearance of old men,

and they are both member of the White Council.

In spite of these obvious correspondences, the two wizards become the paragons of vice and virtue in the course of the Third Age. Saruman is corrupted by thoughts of power and the Ring whereas Gandalf passes the test when being offered the Ring by Frodo. Gandalf regards the Hobbits of the Shire with respect, and is able to see more in them than their rural façade of coziness initially suggests. Saruman's wisdom, on the other hand, turns to arrogance and contempt for the Hobbits' perceived simplicity. Eventually, Gandalf and Saruman both experience temporary disembodiment after Gandalf's fight against the Balrog and Saruman's death in the Shire. The consequences of their deaths are totally different though, and reflect their moral nature. Gandalf is sent back to Middle-earth to complete his task, and is rewarded for his sacrifice with the highest rank among the Istari. Saruman's spirit, in contrast, is denied by the powers of the West because of his evil deeds, and subsequently vanishes into oblivion.

In his corruption Saruman thus represents a distorted image of what the highest of the Istari should be like, and he is consequently replaced by Gandalf: "'Yes, I am white now,' said Gandalf. 'Indeed I *am* Saruman, one might almost say, Saruman as he should have been'" (*LotR*: 645). Similar to Húan and Carcharoth, Gandalf and Saruman are constructed as personifications of good and evil, and due to their strong resemblances, they furthermore embody the potential for corruption that can even threaten some of the highest spiritual authorities.

I would like to conclude my overview with a biblical motif that is employed in the *Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings* but to different purposes and outcomes. The motif of the fight between David and Goliath finds its first correspondence in the duel between Fingolfin and Morgoth after the Battle of the Sudden Flame, and its second correspondence in *The Lord of the Rings* when Éowyn fights the Witchking of Angmar. Both scenes seem to project a hopeless cause for the heroes as they are pitted against an enemy far beyond their power.[3]

In addition, both scenes show remarkable parallels in terms of vocabulary and imagery. Éowyn and Fingolfin, both armed with sword and shield, are strongly associated with light, they "gleam" beneath their enemies, Fingolfin as an Elf is compared to a star whereas Éowyn as a Human figure is linked to the light of the sunrise (cf. *Silmarillion*: 153; cf. *LotR*: 1102]. In contrast to them, Morgoth and the Nazgûl are tall as "towers," wholly clad in black and cast a shadow over their opponents like a cloud (cf. *Silmarillion*: 153; cf. *LotR*: 1099; 1102]. The latter furthermore wear a crown made of metal, either iron (Morgoth) or steel (Ringwraith) signifying their status as highest authority of evil in the respective scenes. This huge discrepancy in height stresses the small chance of the hero's victory, and the image of the cloud visualises the nightmarish nature threatening to enshroud the tiny light of hope embodied by Fingolfin and Éowyn. In terms of language, both Éowyn and Fingolfin utter defiant insults which again appear very

similar: Fingolfin's words to Morgoth, "craven" and "lord of slaves," (*Silmarillion*: 153) are echoed in Éowyn's address of the Nazgûl as "foul dwimmerlaik" and "lord of carrion" (*LotR*: 1100).

There are, however, also significant differences between both scenes which again substantiate the idea of distorting mirrors as a means of strategic duality. The divergent results of these duels (Morgoth triumphs over Fingolfin whereas Éowyn is able to defeat the Witchking) could derive from the different motivation that drives both characters. After the calamitous Battle of the Sudden Flame, Fingolfin is seized by a mad rage that causes him to challenge the Dark Lord (cf. *Silmarillion*: 153). His action could hence be interpreted as an act of aggression and despair. Éowyn, on the contrary, faces the Witchking out of love for Théoden whom she seeks to protect from a fate worse than death (cf. *LotR*: 1100-1101). Her motives are therefore essentially altruistic, and her victory over the Nazgûl signifies a victory of love and hope. In connecting both scenes by means of the David and Goliath motif, an intertextual link from the First to the Third Age is established that corroborates the idea of history repeating itself. However, the different outcome of the fight between Éowyn and the Nazgûl balances the catastrophic death of Fingolfin, and substantiates the eucatastrophic message.

These examples served to exemplify how the narrative patterns of *parallel paths* and *distorting mirrors* work together to achieve strategic duality. Due to the heterogeneity of characters, situations, and, in fact, stories, it could also be shown that strategic duality affects all peoples and beasts across all ages in Middle-earth, and enmeshes characters, scenes and motifs in an intertextual net. It is an essential narrative principle in Tolkien's Arda-related works. Not only does it mitigate the catastrophes encountered in the courses of the stories, it also functions as a catalyst for Tolkien's eucatastrophic effect that lies at the heart of every good fairy story.

Notes

1   Michael Drout observes this pattern for *The Silmarillion*. However, he does not include Tolkien's other Middle-earth tales in his remark and he does not link the pattern to Tolkien's concept of eucatastrophe (cf. Drout 2007: 55).

2   There has been an ongoing debate as to whether the Glorfindels from *The Book of Lost Tales* and *The Lord of the Rings* are the same person. In a later manuscript, however, Tolkien etsbalished the idea that Glorfindel was reincarnated and returned to Middle-earth (cf. *The Return of the Shadow*, 214-215).

3   The importance of this scene in terms of characterizing Éowyn as well as the comparisons between her and Fingolfin are taken from my unpublished manuscript *"And yet I know not how I should speak of her": The Characterisation of Three Female Figures in Tolkien's Works.*

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