

# J.R.R. Tolkien's "Leaf by Niggle": A Fantastic Journey to Afterlife

AHMET MESUT ATEŞ

The genuine *beauté* of nature is in how a bud blooms into flowers and leaves in the spring and gradually grows into a whole tree, a living, breathing body cherishing life – bees buzzing around, birds singing and chirping, and the sun radiating through the dewdrops on the edges of the leaves. Tolkien's Niggle, a humble little painter, is captivated by that magic as much as any romantic human being could be. Though not being an artist everyone would admire, he is rather unique with his overtly consuming obsession with scenes of nature, turfs and leaves. Alone in his house and a little far from all the commotion of the town, he spends his days painting a canvas that, like a bud, turns into something bigger than he had dreamt. But this does not inure him against the nuisances of daily life and especially of his lame neighbour, Parish. Between the painting and everyday life, Niggle feels reluctant to prepare for the mysterious journey which he will embark on before long. "Leaf by Niggle" demonstrates a dystopia in which the practical world interferes with imagination, the self, and consequently, art. Niggle represents the isolated image of the self and the artist in "Leaf by Niggle," J.R.R. Tolkien's assumingly biographical short story, in which Tolkien employs the four elements of fantasy – fantasy, recovery, escape and consolation – skillfully to narrate the spiritual development of Niggle and subduing his subsequent fear of death.

J.R.R. Tolkien defines fantastic tales (fairy tales) as narrations of "images of things that are not only 'not actually present,' but which are indeed not to be found in our primary world at all, or are generally believed not to be found there;" these tales create "secondary worlds" and "secondary belief" which should sustain "the inner consistency of reality" meaning that the world created by the author should look and feel real enough to charm the reader while preserving its connection with the reality (47-9). Tolkien refers to four elements in a fairy tale: fantasy, recovery, escape and consolation (46). He rebuffs the opinions of critics who see all fairy tales as escapism and argues that the escape is not a flight but rather the noblest endeavour for the fulfilment of desires (60). "Leaf by Niggle" exhibits these four elements and will be analysed accordingly in the following paragraphs.

Tolkien insists that fairy tales should not be taken as allegories (24-25) however, I will provide a few allegorical notes regarding the story after all. Allegories constitute more profound symbolic meanings to apparent images. "Leaf by Niggle" includes Christian allegories and allegorical names: Niggle (and also footler), Parish, Inspector, the First and Second Voice, diminutive suffixes in Tompkins, Atkins and Perkins (Dickerson and Evans 176), the station

and the workhouse. Niggle as a verb form signifies "to argue about something unimportant" which implies Niggle's "kind-hearted" nature, though "it made him uncomfortable more often than it made him do anything; and even when he did anything, it did not prevent him from grumbling" (87). Niggle is the kind of person who cannot refuse people's requests and cannot confront them – though he constantly wishes to do so – he is the imperfect embodiment of the Good Samaritan. Parish, Inspector, the First Voice, the Second Voice, the station, the workhouse are also Christian allegories. The lame neighbour Parish typifies a small Christian community where every member is responsible for others' well-being and should attend to those in need. Parish's handicap seems to hint at an underlying dysfunction or deterioration in the community which heals only when he starts to appreciate Niggle for what he has been doing for a long time. Inspector can be perceived as a priest or pastor who inspects and refines relations amongst the members of the parish. When Inspector comes to Niggle's house he says, "You should have helped your neighbour to make temporary repairs and prevent the damage from getting more costly to mend than necessary. That is the law" (95) and reminds Niggle of his civic responsibilities. The First Voice and The Second Voice can be viewed as guardian angels who judge Niggle's acts. The Second Voice is more authoritative and has "the last word" (101) whereas The First Voice makes harsh judgements about Niggle's inactions: "his head was not screwed on tight enough: he hardly ever thought at all. Look at the time he wasted, not even amusing himself" (99). The station and the workhouse symbolize Niggle's journey to the afterlife. The station seems to be the funeral service and the workhouse symbolizes a purgatorial experience (Alfred 2). The diminutive suffix (-kins) devalues Tompkins, Atkins and Perkins' remarks on Niggle and in a way criticises their attitude of lacking appreciation for the beauty of nature or for Niggle (Dickerson and Evans 176). These allegorical readings help the reader to more readily understand the underlying relations of the characters and their roles in the story.

Fantasy is the unrealistic and the imaginative part of fairy stories. It includes notions of the supernatural, and unprecedented events. Tolkien defines fantasy as the art of sub-creation (47-8) and in "Leaf by Niggle," Niggle is the sub-creator of Niggle's Parish – a heavenly place that he created in his painting. The story uses a sizeable number of fantastic figures: Niggle's journey and Tree, the driver, the Porter at the train station, both train stations, the hospital, the tonic given to Niggle and Parish; and spring, forest and mountains in Niggle's Parish. The first unrealistic

image is Niggle's journey. It is unrealistic because Niggle does not actually know the destination and the date: "he had forgotten where he was supposed to be going, or what he was going for" (96) yet he consistently thinks of it and "now and again, he remembered his journey, and began to pack a few things in an ineffectual way" (87-8). Niggle's lazy and ambivalent nature makes him indecisive and he never finishes his errands on time. The sheer dread of the journey alludes to the notion of an ultimate journey rather than a casual vacation – passage to the afterlife:

I have to go on that *wretched journey* (...) he was beginning to see that he could not put off his start indefinitely (...) His acquaintances in the distant town began to remember that the little man had to make a *troublesome journey*, and some began to calculate how long at the latest he could put off starting. [*italics added*] (89-90)

But of course he cannot postpone it for long. One day, while he is painting and also arguing with Inspector about his civic duties, a driver arrives and takes him away. The Driver here seems also unrealistic because Niggle has not yet called for a carriage nor a driver. The Driver does not let Niggle pack anything except a bag in which there is only a paint box and Niggle's sketch book (96). Grounded on the assumption that Niggle's journey is the passage to the afterlife, the driver can represent Death. After that point of the story, Niggle sets his foot into a secondary world. The train station acts as a spiritual gate – the kind you would have to pass through to gain entrance into Rohan or Gondor. The Porter at the train station calls out Niggle's name at once, to his astonishment, and after he gets on the train it "ran almost at once into a *dark tunnel* [*italics added*]" (96). Niggle arrives at a hospital. The hospital is "more like being in a prison than in a hospital" (97) because he constantly engages in hard labour without any rest. In time he starts to live a well-organized life and masters his time. The most curious detail about the hospital is that there are almost no other persons there – Niggle rests in a dark room and works but he has no human interaction of any sort. He eventually faints on the job and a doctor places him on "complete rest – in the dark [*sic*]" (99). The tonic he is given when he is tired, is also important because it fulfils a long-desired dream of human beings – to live independently of food and water.

For a second time, Niggle gets on a train without a destination. When he disembarks onto some marvellous turf he realizes that he is walking in his unfinished painting, but the most powerful fantastic image occurs later with his Tree. Niggle instantly recognizes his tree and watches it in awe: "Astonishing birds: how they sang! They were mating, hatching, growing wings, and flying away singing into the Forest, even while he looked at them" (104). The central imagery is bound with tree – the tree grows and the birds on its twigs hatch and fly away all at the same time. He observes that the tree is different from his painting – it is in the form he envisioned, the perfect form of his imagination. In the forest Niggle finds a spring which he never drew but only imagined and as he walked away, he discovered an odd thing: the Forest, of course, was a distant Forest, yes

he could approach it, even enter it, without its losing that particular charm. He had never before been able to walk into the distance without turning it into mere surroundings. (104-5)

Dickerson and Evans suggest that tree is a passage to "wilderness" but at the same time a familiar beauty – "mere surroundings" – are not diminished by proximity" (201). Thayer explains that the tree reaches its perfect form when its "mimetic quality (...) is revealed" – the way it tries to represent an idea of tree – and adds "Tolkien's view of imagination assimilates and inverts Plato's theory of forms" (4). Niggle's painting achieves eternal perfection. His forests which lay to the edges of known and mountains which are always peeking a little further... represent Niggle's journey into his secondary world.

Imagery and fantasy dominate the visual level of the story but recovery reaches readers on a deeper level. Recovery introduces a new aspect to the things most familiar. Tolkien suggests "Of all faces, the ones we are familiar with are the most difficult to really see. Only art can give this aspect" (57). The characters in the story understand the events and surroundings in a more complex but unified way. Niggle's understanding of Parish, the journey and daily errands; townspeople's view of Niggle; Niggle's perception of the train stations and the leaf, fall into the category of recovery. Before his stay at the hospital, Niggle does not actually appreciate or like Parish. He calls Parish "Old Earth-grubber" (109) and from his depictions the reader may get the idea that Parish uses his handicap to his advantage to exert power over Niggle. He does not show any interest in painting and "refrained from giving any opinion of the pictures. He thought this was very kind, and he did not realize that, even if it was kind, it was not kind enough" (91); but these are all impressions of Niggle which he later understands to be wrong. When Niggle looks at the leaves of the tree he sees that "Some of the most beautiful – and the most characteristic, the most perfect examples of the Niggle style – were seen to have been produced in collaboration with Parish [*sic*]" (104) and realizes how much Parish means to him. Parish turns out to be a dear friend in the secondary world. Niggle experiences the transformation of his life; a new life emerges before him. The "wretched journey" turns out to be the best thing that ever happened to him – his "painting has been given the gift of primary existence" (Dickerson and Evans 172) – and the daily errands he once called "interruptions" paved his way to *Niggle's Parish*. The townspeople's view of Niggle transforms as well. Atkins confesses that he has found a piece of Niggle's painting and he finds it beautiful but Tompkins cannot understand his reasons. Niggle's understanding of the train station is also important. Though they are depicted as completely different places it can be assumed that they are the same place and the difference lies not in the station but in Niggle. On his departure from the primary world, Niggle regards the station as a dark, tedious place and barely observes the train itself. But his last day in the hospital changes his perspective. The same room he wakes up in everyday is now full of sunlight; he leaves the hospital and

discovers this lovely station and one-coach train. And this time he is no longer disturbed with the Porter (102). Niggle experiences the world afresh; he is content with life, his surroundings and more importantly he is content with himself.

Fantasy literature has always been associated with the idea of escapism which Tolkien also confirms, though he warns the critics beforehand not to confuse the escape with “the flight of the Deserter” (60). In his dystopian environment, Niggle first seeks shelter in painting. He starts with a leaf but in time he desires to create a tree; “it became a tree; and the tree grew, sending out innumerable branches, and thrusting out the most fantastic roots. Strange birds came and settled on the twigs and had to be attended to” (88); soon it becomes his only pursuit. Esch states that “the leaf in particular seems to represent a transcendent achievement, a mystical breakthrough—a recognition of the simplicity which lies at the heart of art and at the heart of beauty” (3). Niggle tries to escape from his social position and civic responsibilities, as well as the society’s attitude toward the art and the artist. He becomes addicted to the painting and even builds a shed where he used to grow potatoes – meaning that painting became of primal value. Esch asserts that the story is about the art and the value of the artist and Niggle exhibits the “stereotypical characteristics” of being isolated, distracted and captivated by the process of creation (3). But Niggle’s escape from society seems trivial next to the main escape of the story – escape from the Death. As Dickerson and Evans point out, the readers can readily recognise that Niggle’s “wretched journey” is death (198). When Niggle works at painting and digging at the hospital, through these labours he overcomes both his fear of death and discrepancies of his character. The atmosphere of the train station expresses Niggle’s state of mind more than enough. He finds himself in a train travelling into a “dark tunnel” and rests in a dark room where he can only think of his past life before he accommodates to the hospital and his labours. However, the happy and vivid atmosphere of the train station on the second leg of his journey demonstrates Niggle’s transformation. Dickerson and Evans explain that “Tolkien clearly suggests that issues of artistic integrity, kindness to one’s neighbours, and the beauty and value of the natural world are not merely isolated, mundane concerns; they are interrelated, and they have transcendent spiritual significance [sic]” (198).

The final element of fantasy is consolation, which Tolkien defines as “the joyous turn of events at the end of the tale ... It can give to child or man that hears it, when the “turn” comes, a catch of the breath, a beat and lifting of the heart” (68-9). The element of consolation should be unpredictable and sustain “the inner consistency of reality” at the same time. “Leaf by Niggle” offers a seemingly trivial consolation – Niggle’s actualization of Parish’s importance in his life and contributions to his paintings:

All the leaves he had ever laboured at were there (...) there were others that had only budded in his mind (...). Nothing was written on them, (...) yet they were dated as clear as a calendar. Some of the most beautiful — and the most characteristic, the most perfect examples of the Niggle style

— were seen to have been produced in collaboration with Parish: there was no other way of putting it. (104)

Niggle is rewarded not only for his art but also for his relationship with Parish and others. He never said no to anyone even though he had secretly wanted to. Dickerson and Evans cites Tom Shippey: “Leaf by Niggle” “is a comedy (...) but in the classical and Dantean sense of having a happy ending, a eucatastrophic one with a suggestion of final fulfilment in celestial harmony [sic]” (204). At the end he realizes that Mr Parish has become an indispensable part of his life and indeed influenced his paintings – though he never spoke a word – and he needs Parish for *Niggle’s Parish*. *Niggle’s Parish* is another symbol of this unique friendship where each pole helps the other to transform and develop. And this event is unpredictable on the premise that up to the point of Niggle’s realization, Niggle never feels any sense of incompleteness. The Tree reminds him of Parish and the way he needs Parish.

Niggle portrays an isolated image of the artist in a community that neglects the beauty of the art. He tries to escape from the community and his ultimate journey – death. He becomes obsessed with the painting and ignores his civic duties and his neighbour Parish who in fact is a dear friend. Niggle’s tree reaches its perfect form in the secondary world. The train station and the hospital act as gateways to this secondary world. Tolkien seems to imply that art can please us while providing a pragmatic use as well. He skilfully depicts this spiritual development. He waves a well-established web of allegories and images to sustain “the consistency of reality” while offering the reader a unique way to cope with the fear of death. Tolkien reveals the human experience at the heart of the fantasy and once more answers to those who claim that the fantastic works of literature do not provide a human connection at any level.

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**Ahmet Ateş** is a graduate of English Language and Literature from Karadeniz Technical University, Turkey. He has studied J.R.R. Tolkien’s theory of fantasy literature and the Hobbit in his B.A. thesis and plans to further his study of the entire Tolkien canon and theories of fantasy literature in his MA and PhD programs.