MYTH AND TRUTH IN J.R.R. TOLKIEN'S
MIDDLE-EARTH LEGENDARIUM

by

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Abstract

It is the purpose of this thesis to explore the "Truths" that exist in J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle-earth Legendarium. The first chapter will examine the creation myth of Middle-earth, in which Tolkien's understanding of God and other spiritual matters is most clearly revealed. The second chapter will examine the heroes and villains of Middle-earth, through which Tolkien illustrates his view of good and evil. The third chapter will examine the concept of death in Tolkien's stories, in order to identify Tolkien's beliefs about death and the afterlife. Ultimately, the goal of this thesis is to illuminate how the myths of Tolkien's fantasy world can lead us to understand the most essential Truths of our own world.
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J.R.R. Tolkien's fantasy world of Middle-earth has become a significant part of our own world. Tolkien's works are so ingrained into our culture that many people who have never read his books or seen the movie adaptations have some level of familiarity with his stories. Yet while most people associate his works with their fantasy setting and magical characters, few recognize his stories with their deeper underlying themes of spirituality and morality. It is this essential yet often-forgotten element of Tolkien's Middle-earth that this thesis seeks to explore.

John Ronald Reuel Tolkien was a British author and academic who lived from 1896 to 1973. While we most often associate him with his novels, Tolkien initially studied and taught Anglo-Saxon and Medieval literature at the University of Oxford, an experience that engendered in him a passion for mythology, early English epics, and perhaps most importantly, language. His love of language and his study of philology led him to create his own languages, complete with a complex etymological history. However, he wished to provide his languages a setting in which they could be spoken, as well as a context for their evolution, and thus he created the fictional world of Middle-earth.

In 1937 Tolkien published his first novel, *The Hobbit*, which he based largely on fairytales that he created for his children. *The Hobbit* wasn't originally set in Middle-earth, but as Tolkien was writing a sequel to his first book he decided to include both *The Hobbit* and its much lengthier sequel in the larger fictional world of his languages. This sequel, of course, is Tolkien's best-known work, *The Lord of the Rings*, which we often think of as a trilogy but is in
fact a single book published in three parts between 1954 and 1955 due to a paper shortage. Tolkien continued to develop Middle-earth and its history throughout most of his life, but he did not have a chance to publish much of his work in his lifetime. Tolkien's son Christopher compiled his father's notes, and in 1977 published *The Silmarillion*, a book that essentially serves as the "Bible" of Middle-Earth, chronicling its fictional history from its creation to the events of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. These three main works, together with various poems and short stories published both during and after his lifetime, are collectively referred to as Tolkien's Legendarium, the complete set of stories set in Middle-earth.

Tolkien did not merely write a series of novel, he created an entire mythology. Yet as someone who spent much of his life studying ancient literature, Tolkien believed that all myths are, in a sense, inherently true. As Tolkien wrote in one of his letters, “After all, I believe that legends and myths are largely made of 'truth', and indeed present aspects of it that can only be received in this mode; and long ago certain truths and modes of this kind were discovered and must always reappear” (*The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien* #131). Tolkien understood that myths and legends reflect the human condition as it was understood by the people telling the myth, and through these legends, people of all cultures and ages can recognize truth in the form of stories.

So then if Tolkien saw myth as a way to communicate what is true, what "Truths" did he infuse into his own mythology? It is the purpose of this thesis to explore J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle-earth Legendarium to discover these Truths. The first chapter will examine the creation myth of Middle-earth, in which Tolkien's understanding of God and other spiritual matters is most clearly revealed. The second chapter will examine the heroes and villains of Middle-earth,
through which Tolkien illustrates his view of good and evil. The third chapter will examine the concept of death in Tolkien's stories, in order to identify Tolkien's beliefs about death and the afterlife. Ultimately, the goal of this thesis is to illuminate how the myths of Tolkien's fantasy world can lead us to understand the most essential Truths of our own world.
Chapter I: The Creation of Middle-earth

A mythology's greatest truths are often present in stories of the world's origin, an idea epitomized by the Aïnulindalë, the "creation myth" of J.R.R. Tolkien's legendarium. Placed in the opening pages of The Silmarillion, the Aïnulindalë ("the Music of the Ainur") chronicles, much like a Biblical or mythological account, the creation of Middle-earth and the cosmos in which it exists. Tolkien was a devout Catholic throughout his entire life, and he acknowledged that his works often reflected his faith, at one point saying that "The Lord of the Rings is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision" (The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien 172); for him, a creation myth similar to the one found in the Book of Genesis would have been a perfect way to explore the spiritual Truths that he considered to be at the heart of all that he believed. By crafting the story of how his fictional universe came into being, Tolkien establishes the Truths about God, the world, and mankind that are essential to his entire Legendarium.

Tolkien begins the Aïnulindalë by introducing his legendarium's ultimate being: "There was Eru, the One, who in Arda is called Ilúvatar" (The Silmarillion 3). Eru Ilúvatar simply "was", having no beginning himself, and the fact that Tolkien refers to him as "the One" illustrates that he alone has always existed. Tolkien's decision to make a single eternal deity the "prime mover" of his cosmogony is an obvious reflection of his Christian sensibilities, and indeed Tolkien refers to Eru as "God" in his letters (The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien 146) This suggests that Tolkien did not imagine Ilúvatar as an invented deity but rather as a fictional
depiction of the Judeo-Christian God, something that would allow Tolkien to explore his understanding of God in his mythology.

Ilúvatar's first action is to create the Ainur, spiritual beings described as "the offspring of his thought" (*The Silmarillion* 3). He then conducts the Ainur in a Great Music, and when their song is over he makes it visible to them, revealing the Music to be the unfolding history of a new world. While Tolkien's depiction of a "heavenly choir" seems to identify the Ainur as angels, their participation in creation alongside Ilúvatar and their "mastery" over specific elements of the world makes them seem more godlike than angelic. Tolkien's inclusion of a "pantheon" of godlike entities may not be surprising given his study of ancient mythologies, but it does seem to conflict with his Catholic belief in a single God. However, it is important to recognize that while the world is formed by the Ainur's Music, that Music originated in a theme proclaimed by Ilúvatar (and of course, the Ainur themselves were created by Ilúvatar); more importantly, the vision of the Music only becomes a reality when Ilúvatar kindles it with the "Flame Imperishable" (9). This establishes that only Ilúvatar can truly create, just as Tolkien believed that God was the sole creator of the universe. The Ainur may be holy beings, but they are not divine, and they can only shape what Ilúvatar has created. The Ainur's subservience to Ilúvatar allowed Tolkien to reconcile his Catholic faith with his appreciation for pagan mythologies, as his legendarium could including a pantheon of powerful entities resembling polytheistic gods while remaining monotheistic in nature.

The "Flame Imperishable" with which Ilúvatar kindles the Ainur's music and turns it into reality is also called the "Secret Fire" (4), and while Tolkien does not give a clear description of
what this Flame is, it is almost certainly meant to be a symbol of God's infinitely creative
essence. The Flame, which is described as being "with Ilúvatar" (4), in many ways parallels the
Christian idea of the Logos ("the Word"), which according to the Gospel of John both "was with
God" and "was God" (King James Version, John 1:1). This connection is reinforced by the fact
that Tolkien's cosmos shares its name with the word spoken by Ilúvatar when he kindled the
Ainur's Music with the Flame Imperishable and brought the world into existence by: Eä, meaning "Let these things Be" (9). Tolkien also refers to Eä as "the World that Is" (9), which reflects another passage at the beginning of the Gospel of John that states, "All things were made
by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made" (John 1:3). This is meant to
illustrate God's unique power to engender being. The flame takes on an addition significance
when Ilúvatar declares that "'it shall be at the heart of the World, and the World shall Be'" (9);
thus, the creative essence of Ilúvatar serves as the ontological foundation of the new world. This
suggests that Tolkien believed God to be present in His creation, and as such perceived the world
as intrinsically sacred.

The Ainur themselves were kindled by the Flame Imperishable, which granted them
autonomy and individuality. This allows each Ainu to provide a unique interpretation of
Ilúvatar's theme, resulting in a beautiful and harmonious Music. But the greatest of the Ainur,
Melkor, chooses to "interweave matters of his own imagining that were not in accord with the
theme of Ilúvatar, for he sought therein to increase the power and glory of the part assigned to
himself" (4), bringing discord to the otherwise flawless Music. When Ilúvatar reveals the vision
of the Music to the Ainur, Melkor's pride ignites a desire to rule the new world and to shape it in
accordance to his own designs rather than Ilúvatar's, and he is afterwards known as Morgoth
("the Dark Enemy"). Melkor serves as another example of how Tolkien's legendarium was influenced by his Catholicism, as there are many clear similarities between Morgoth and Satan, who was also a great angelic being whose pride compels him to rebel against his Creator and corrupt a new world. However, Tolkien created Morgoth not only to provide his legendarium with an equivalent to the Devil or to give the heroes of his mythology a primary antagonist, but also to define evil and explain its existence. Melkor's decision to disregard Ilúvatar's theme and substitute his own music is emblematic of what a Catholic such as Tolkien would have seen as the essential sin: the rejection of God's will. In proud pursuit of power and greatness, Melkor places himself above Ilúvatar, just as Tolkien would have believed that we sin when we place our selfish desires before God.

Tolkien's theodicy, his attempt to solve the "problem of evil" by reconciling the existence of evil with the existence of God, begins to emerge here. Essential to Tolkien's justification (as well as his legendarium as a whole) is the concept of free will. Ilúvatar did not make Melkor evil, but rather gave him a choice to do good, a choice that Melkor willingly refused. It is here that Tolkien begins to demonstrate the importance of free will, a theme that would echo throughout his mythology. While Melkor's free will enabled him to do evil, he also would not have been able to do good without it, as anything he did would have been forced rather than willingly chosen. Similarly, Melkor was able to choose to ignore Ilúvatar's theme, but without that free will the Ainur would not have been able to, as Ilúvatar instructed, "show forth your powers in adorning this theme, each with his own thoughts and devices, if he will" (3); in other words, without free will the Ainur would not have been able to produce their own unique interpretations of Ilúvatar's theme, and the Great Music would have been monotonous rather than harmonious.
To a Catholic such as Tolkien, a world without free will is a world without true faith and love, and while free will allows us to choose evil, it also enables us to choose a greater good.

In addition to explaining the existence of evil, Tolkien also affirms that it cannot overcome the will of Êl (and by extension, God). When the Ainur are shown the vision of the Great Music, Êl declares:

'And thou, Melkor, shalt see that no theme may be played that hath not its uttermost source in me, nor can any alter the music in my despite. For he that attempteth this shall prove but mine instrument in the devising of things more wonderful, which he himself hath not imagined.' (6)

Ilúvatar's assertion that Melkor's discord, no matter how cacophonous it may be, will be instrumental to a more wonderful music reflects Tolkien belief that God will turn evil into a greater good. This can briefly be seen earlier during the Ainur's Music, when Melkor's discord attempts "to drown the other music by the violence of its voice, but it seemed that its most triumphant notes were taken by the other and woven into its own solemn pattern" (5). Tolkien believed that, just as Ilúvatar weaves Melkor's discord into his own theme to create an even more beautiful Music, so does God incorporate choices to do evil into his plans to produce further good. Tolkien provides us with a more illustrative example of this later, when Ilúvatar talks to Ulmo, the Vala ("greater" Ainu) of Water:

'Seest thou not how here in this little realm in the Deeps of Time Melkor hath made war upon thy province? He hath bethought him of bitter cold immoderate, and yet hath not destroyed the beauty of thy fountains, nor of my clear pools. Behold the snow, and the cunning work of frost! Melkor hath devised heats and fire without restraint, and hath not dried up thy desire nor utterly quelled the music of the sea. Behold rather the height and glory of the clouds, and the everchanging mists; and listen to the fall of rain upon the Earth!' (8-9)

Melkor attempts to corrupt water by subjecting it to extreme cold and heat, but not only does he fail does he fail to do so, but he also inadvertently produces snow and rain, beautiful and useful.
phenomena that were not a part of Ulmo's original plan for water. While this incident is unlikely to satisfy anyone looking for a thorough explanation for the existence of suffering, it nevertheless is an expression of Tolkien's belief that God will ultimately transform evil into good in ways that we may not imagine.

It is during the vision of the Ainur's Music that Ilúvatar reveals to the Ainur the true purpose of the new world: the habitation of sentient life. These beings, the immortal elves and the mortal human, are called "the Children of Ilúvatar," as rather than being products of Ainur's music they were directly created by Ilúvatar himself. To Tolkien, this distinction would have been theologically significant: just as only God can endow being, so too is He alone able to create sentient life. Tolkien almost certainly recognized a connection between these two God-exclusive powers, suggesting that sentient life is the ultimate manifestation of "being," the creation that is most similar to its Creator. We can see this in the Ainur's reaction to first seeing the Children of Ilúvatar in the vision of the Music:

Therefore when they beheld them, the more did they love them, being things other than themselves, strange and free, wherein they saw the mind of Ilúvatar reflected anew, and learned yet a little more of his wisdom, which otherwise had been hidden even from the Ainur. (7)

Though the Ainur themselves are great holy beings, they look at the Children with an almost religious reverence, seeing these new beings as reflections of their common Creator. Like the world itself, all people are intrinsically sacred, an illustration of Tolkien's Catholic belief that humanity was created in the image of God.

The creation of the Children of Ilúvatar is so awe-inspiring that even Melkor attempts to replicate it, albeit with dark intentions. This results in the breeding of the orcs, an act that "may
be was the vilest deed of Melkor, and the most hateful to Ilúvatar" (47). Melkor, after all, could not truly create sentient life, only mock and distort, and the beings he produced did not have "life of its own, nor the semblance of life" (47). The Orcs are alive in a basic sense, and can speak and multiply, but they lack free will; as such they can not distinguish between good and evil, and they obey their "maker" not out of choice but out of a fear and compulsion. Melkor's act of breeding the Orcs is mirrored by another of the Valar, Aulë, who crafts the Dwarves. Like Melkor, Aulë wished to make sentient life of his own, but while Melkor wanted a race of servants to obey his will, Aulë was motivated by a genuine admiration of the Children and a desire to have as companions "'things other than I am, to love and to teach them, so that they too might perceive the beauty of Eä'" (37). For Aulë, the Dwarves are a tribute to the Children, not a mockery of them, but Ilúvatar tells them that, while his intentions were good, it is still beyond his ability to create sentient life, saying, "For thou hast from me as a gift thy own being only, and no more; and therefore the creatures of thy hand and mind can live only by that being, moving when thou thinkest to move them, and if thy thought be elsewhere, standing idle" (37). Like the Orcs, the Dwarves only mimic the will of their "maker," and have no will of their own, but because of Aulë's intentions Ilúvatar chooses to "adopt" the Dwarves and grant them sentience and true life. The making of the Orcs and the Dwarves reinforces the notion that only Ilúvatar can truly create.

The importance of free will is apparent with both the Orcs and the Dwarves; both initially lack it, and it is not until Ilúvatar grants free will on the Dwarves that they truly become autonomous beings. Free will is perhaps the defining characteristic of all the Children of Ilúvatar, the quality that connects them with their Creator. One of Ilúvatar's final acts of creation before leaving Ea in the hands of the Ainur is to bestow this gift upon mankind: "Therefore he willed
that the hearts of Men should seek beyond the world and should find no rest therein; but they should have a virtue to shape their life, amid the powers and chances of the world, beyond the Music of the Ainur, which is as fate to all things else” (35-36). Tolkien once again explains why free will is essential to our being: without it, we cannot look beyond the world, cannot shape our lives, and cannot seek God. While Ilúvatar knows that giving free will to mankind allows for the possibility of evil, he reaffirms that all evil will ultimately be used for good, saying "'These too in their time shall find that all that they do redounds at the end only to the glory of my work'” (36). Here, Tolkien not only reconciles the existence of God with the existence of evil, but also reconciles free will with divine providence, and he will illuminate this idea throughout his entire mythology.
Chapter II: Heroes, Villains, and Morality

The figures who inhibit a mythology are often just as essential to it as the myths themselves. Almost all characters in a mythology, whether good or evil, represent some element of that mythology's moral values: the heroes serve as paragons of virtue, providing us with an example to follow, the villains are used as illustrations of vice, helping us to understand what is truly wrong, and fallen heroes serve as examples of the consequences of choosing vice over virtue. This chapter (which, due to its length, is divided into three parts, each one examining one of Tolkien's three major works) will demonstrate how the figures of Tolkien's Legendarium serve a similar moral purpose, as Tolkien's understanding of good and evil reveals itself through his many different characters.

The Heroes and Villains of The Silmarillion.

The saga of The Silmarillion unfolds over the course of the entire First Age of Middle-earth. It is a period dominated by a seemingly unending war, the rise and fall of several great civilizations, and numerous figures of legendary stature. However, the events of The Silmarillion are primarily driven not by any one hero, but rather by the Great Enemy: Morgoth. As discussed earlier, Morgoth (formally known as Melkor) is the "Devil" of Tolkien's Legendarium, a fallen Ainu whose pride compelled him to rebel against his Creator and corrupt all of creation. Again, Tolkien does not use Morgoth merely as an antagonist to his characters or as an instigator of the plot's drama, but rather as an embodiment of evil through which his readers can better
understand the nature of good and evil. Morgoth's dark intentions emerge even before he openly declares war upon the Valar, particularly when he descends into the newly-created world:

And he feigned, even to himself at first, that he desired to go thither and order all things for the good of the Children of Êlúvatar, controlling the turmoils of the heat and the cold that had come to pass through him. But he desired rather to subdue to his will both Elves and Men, envying the gifts with which Êlúvatar promised to endow them; and he wished himself to have subject and servants, and to be called Lord, and to be a master over other wills. (The Silmarillion 7-8)

Here, Tolkien shows us that evil is, at least in part, the choice to dominate and destroy rather than to create and coexist. However, what truly makes Morgoth stand out as a "greater evil" is his desire to control not only the World, but its people as well; Morgoth seeks to deprive the Children of Êlúvatar of their gift of free will, which Tolkien would have considered the ultimate sin, as it is our free will that allows us to distinguish between good and evil. Once again Tolkien demonstrates the importance of free will to our being, this time by establishing it as the most essential element of our morality.

Tolkien also illustrates through Morgoth the internal and external effects of evil, as Morgoth begins to be distorted by his own wickedness, corrupting the world around him as well. As Tolkien writes:

From splendour he fell through arrogance to contempt for all things save himself, a spirit wasteful and pitiless. Understanding he turned to subtlety in perverting to his own will all that he would use, until he became a liar without shame. He began with the desire of Light, but when he could not possess it for himself alone, he descended through fire and wrath into a great burning, down into Darkness. And darkness he used most in his evil works upon Arda, and filled it with fear for all living things. (23)

Tolkien illustrates here that evil has a mutative effect on those who commit it. Morgoth's continued sins steadily deprive him of any sense of goodness, to the point where he seems to lose the very free will he sought to take from others. To Tolkien, evil is inherently destructive,
corrupting everything around it as well as the those who commits it, ultimately depriving them of their humanity.

Fearing that Morgoth would attempt to corrupt or destroy the newly-awakened elves, the Valar imprison Morgoth and take a good number of the elves to their land of Valinor. There, free from the threat of Morgoth and inspired by the holy light produced by two sacred trees, the elves become far more advanced and skilled than any other people in the history of Middle-earth. The most skilled of all these elves is Feanor of the Noldor tribe, whose masterwork was his encapsulation of the sacred light of the trees in three jewels called Silmarils. However, Feanor has far more in common with Morgoth than he would like to admit, as both were considered the greatest of their people, and as a result both were consumed by a fiery pride. Tolkien uses Feanor to demonstrate the danger of pride (the worst of the deadly sins in Catholicism), as his pride will soon lead to his downfall, as well as the destruction of many others.

The main struggle of *The Silmarillion* begins when, following his release from imprisonment, Morgoth destroys the two sacred trees and steals the Silmarils before fleeing to Middle-earth. Feanor swears revenge on Morgoth and vows to reclaim the Silmarils from him, but at the same time he leads a group of Noldor to turn against the Valar, their minds poisoned by the lies of Morgoth. However, the Noldor's defiance of the Valar is nothing compared to the atrocity they committed afterwards; when the Noldor's request for ships is denied by another tribe, Feanor leads his people to take arms against them, and for the first time in the history of Middle-earth the Children of Ilúvatar take the lives of one another. Tolkien refers to this massacre as the "kinslaying," and given this name, as well as the nature of the incident, the
Noldor's actions seem to be a reference to Cain's murder of Abel, the first incident of one person taking the life of another in the Bible. That said, the term "kinslaying" may have a greater significance: to Tolkien, all people were "Children of God," and as such, one man taking the life of another is no different than killing one's own brother. With the kinslaying, Tolkien is illustrating that killing is among the worst of evils not only because it deprives another of life, but also because we destroy our own kin by doing so.

As punishment for this atrocity, the Valar issue the "Doom of the Noldor," which curses all those who follow Feanor in pursuing the Silmarils to suffer and die. In their pride, the Noldor ignore this warning, passing into Middle-earth anyway, but sure enough almost every prominent Noldo is killed over the course of the war with Morgoth. While the fate-like nature of the Doom seems to contradict the emphasis that Tolkien has place on free will, the reality is that each of the Noldor dies as a result of choices they have made; Feanor, for example, is killed when he attempts to attack a group of Balrogs (demon-like beings) on his own, a consequence of his fiery pride. Here, Tolkien is suggesting that any act of evil distorts us as it did Morgoth, making us more inclined towards sin and thus more likely to be destroyed by sin. For the Noldor, their prideful act of violence was returned in kind by violence. In a way, the Doom of the Noldor seems to reflect the Catholic doctrine of Original Sin, which holds that we are all inclined towards sin because of Adam and Eve's disobedience in the Garden of Eden; here we see once again the influence of Tolkien's Catholic faith on his works.

Many heroic elves and men become caught up in the Doom of the Noldor and lose their lives in the war against Morgoth. However, this war is brought to an end by Eärendil, the last
great hero of the First Age. Guided by the light of a recovered Silmaril, Eärendil and his wife Elwing sail to the forbidden land of Valinor, and once there he appeals to the Valar to help the Children of Ilúvatar in their struggle against Morgoth. As a half-elf (having had a human father and an elven mother), Eärendil proves to the perfect advocate for all of the Children, and the Valar decide to lift the Doom of the Valar and wage war against Morgoth. In a truly mythological fashion, the Valar then place the last remaining Silmaril upon Eärendil's brow and lift his ship into the sky, allowing the light of the Silmaril to be seen by all as the brightest star in the sky.

As for Morgoth, the Valar imprison him in the "timeless void" beyond the world, where he shall remain until the End of Days. However, Tolkien makes it clear that while Morgoth is no longer a physical threat, his dark influence lives on in the world:

Yet the lies that Melkor, the mighty and accursed, Morgoth Bauglir, the Power of Terror and of Hate, sowed in the hearts of Elves and Men are a seed that does not die and cannot be destroyed; and ever and anon it sprouts anew, and will bear dark fruit even unto the latest days. (305-306)

Here, Tolkien is emphasizing the fact that evil is not merely an external entity that can be defeated or destroyed; it is a "seed" of potential sin that exists in every man and woman, and all it needs is a single evil choice for it to sprout. The Great Enemy may be gone, but a new enemy will carry on his legacy, and the people of Middle-earth will continue to struggle in their choice between good and evil.
The Heroes and Villains of *The Hobbit*

When considering the great heroes of mythology, one would not think to include in this pantheon a character like Bilbo Baggins, the titular protagonist of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*. Like most hobbits, Bilbo has a small stature, a lack of physical prowess, and a preference for food and comfort over adventure and exploration - characteristics not typically associated with heroism. Yet over the course of Bilbo's adventure, in which he finds himself "doing and saying things altogether unexpected" (*The Hobbit* 2), he experiences a significant growth, discovering within himself courage, compassion, wits, and willpower: qualities that are truly heroic. Bilbo's journey transforms him into a hero both familiar and unique, and Tolkien uses the hobbit's story to illustrate what his understanding of true heroism.

Bilbo's story begins in the world of the ordinary and the expected. Life in the Shire is peaceful but meticulously routine; conformity is admired, irregularity is frowned upon, and adventure is almost altogether unthinkable. Only rarely would a hobbit, often one of Bilbo's more outlandish Took relatives, venture outside of the Shire, but such adventures were regarded as dark family secrets. In contrast with the Tooks, the Bagginses (including Bilbo himself) are in many ways the Shire's quintessential residents, and were highly respected "not only because most of them were very rich, but also because they never had any adventures or did anything unexpected: you could tell what a Baggins would say on any question without the bother of asking him" (2). This description of the Baggins family establishes the almost deterministic extent to which Bilbo has become entrenched in his routine, as if he has allowed himself to become so comfortable with the "expected" that he has lost any sense of individual will.
Bilbo's oppressively comfortable existence is interrupted with the arrival of Gandalf, who asks the hobbit to join him on an unspecified quest. Gandalf's invitation to Bilbo is, in the words of Joseph Campbell, the hobbit's "call to adventure," the moment at which he is summoned to depart the ordinary world and embark upon the journey that will make him a hero. True to his adherence to the "expected," Bilbo refuses Gandalf's request, speaking for both himself and the entirety of the Shire when he declares, "'We are plain quiet folk and have no use for adventures. Nasty disturbing uncomfortable things! Make you late for dinner! I can't think what anybody sees in them" (4). Bilbo's condemnation of adventures as "uncomfortable" and his rather humorous concern of a delayed meal reflect his rigid devotion to routine, and it might seem that Bilbo's refusal of his "call" has ended his adventure before it has begun.

However, Gandalf is hardly discouraged by the hobbit's initial refusal, and takes it upon himself to bring the adventure to Bilbo, inviting Thorin Oakenshield and his company of dwarves to gather at Bag-End (much to Bilbo's surprise and displeasure). As Bilbo hosts this unexpected party, he learns about the dwarves' quest to reclaim their home of the Lonely Mountain from Smaug the dragon, and the danger involved only seems to deter him further from joining them. He also learns that he has been chosen as the company's burglar, a role that neither he nor the dwarves believe he is capable of fulfilling. Gandalf never fully explains his selection of Bilbo, and to both the hobbit and the dwarves the choice certainly seems to be an odd one; Gandalf himself acknowledges that the Shire is a poor place to look for such adventurers, noting that "'in this neighborhood heroes are scarce, or simply not to be found.'” (22) and the dwarves see Bilbo as particularly ill-suited to the task they wish to give him. But Gandalf affirms that he
has chosen the correct burglar, and assures the dwarves that "there is a lot more in him than you
guess, and a deal more than he has any idea of himself" (19). This is the first of many instances
where Gandalf near-omnisciently asserts that there is something "unexpected" about Bilbo,
suggesting that there is a truly heroic hobbit for Bilbo to discover within himself.

Interestingly, there never seems to be a definitive moment where Bilbo consents to join
the dwarves' quest. Even in the morning following the unexpected party, Bilbo's abrupt departure
from Bag-End, together with Gandalf's sense of urgency and the fact that Bilbo "could never
remember how he found himself outside" (29-30), gives the scene an automatic, almost
dreamlike feel, as if Bilbo was forced out the front door by an unseen power without any say in
the matter. There does seem to be something otherworldly at work during Bilbo's departure from
Bag-End, but in a sense Bilbo had already willingly departed the night before, upon hearing the
song of the Dwarves:

And as they sang the hobbit felt the love of beautiful things made by hands and by
cunning and by magic moving through him, a fierce and a jealous love, the desire
of the hearts of dwarves. Then something Tookish woke up inside him, and he
wished to go and see the great mountains, and hear the pine-trees and the
waterfalls, and explore the caves, and wear a sword instead of a walking stick.
(15-16)

It is at this moment that his spirit is awakened by his imagination, freeing his will from the
enslavement of routine and igniting a desire within him to seek an existence outside of the
expected. His body may not leave Bag-End until the next morning, but it is here that his heart
embarks, leaving the comfort and confines of the Shire for the unknown world beyond. Through
the fundamental change that takes place in Bilbo's soul, his departure becomes an act of free will,
rather than simply the result of an involuntary "nudge out of the door," a distinction that is
essential to the hobbit's journey, as it is Bilbo's willpower that will come to define him.
Though the Shire is where Bilbo first departed on his journey, it is during his adventure in the Misty Mountains that he crosses the threshold to heroism. After being separated from his companions and stumbling by chance onto a magical ring, Bilbo encounters a creature named Gollum, who many ways is Bilbo's shadow: a distorted mirror image of what Bilbo might become if he rejects his gift of free will and allows himself to be enslaved by impulse. Bilbo wins a game of riddles with Gollum and uses the Ring to escape Gollum's appetite, but he finds himself facing his dark reflection both literally and symbolically when Gollum unknowingly blocks his only way out of the mountain, forcing Bilbo to choose whether or not to kill Gollum for his own self-preservation. This leads to perhaps the most poignant passage in the book:

Bilbo almost stopped breathing, and went stiff himself. He was desperate. He must get away, out of this horrible darkness, while he had any strength left. He must fight. He must stab the foul thing, put its eyes out, kill it. It meant to kill him. No, not a fair fight. He was invisible now. Gollum had no sword. Gollum had not actually threatened to kill him, or tried to yet. And he was miserable, alone, lost. A sudden understanding, a pity mixed with horror, welled up in Bilbo's heart: a glimpse of endless unmarked days without light or hope of betterment, hard stone, cold fish, sneaking and whispering. (86-87)

This is Bilbo's defining moment of spiritual maturation, the point at which he ceases to be an ordinary hobbit and finally grows into a heroic adventurer. Unseen by anyone and thus unburdened by any accountability, Bilbo is free to kill Gollum and ensure his own safety without suffering any repercussions. However, he is overcome with pity, empathizing with and seeing himself in the fallen hobbit, and he decides to spare Gollum. While many "heroes" are praised for their feats of strength and violence, Bilbo's act of mercy anoints him as a true hero for the opposite reason: it is a willful demonstration of self-control, peace, and in its deepest meaning, love. Bilbo's simple act of compassion, his choice to preserve the life of another at the risk of his
own, completes his metamorphosis from a creature of routine to a being of will, and would ultimately change the course of Middle-earth.

Bilbo emerges from the mountain a changed hobbit, with his transformation engendering a significant growth in the hobbit that will continue over the course of his adventure. A newfound sense of courage immediately evident by his willingness to go back into the mountain to look for his friends, something that he determines to be "his duty" (91). By the time Gandalf parts ways with Bilbo and the dwarves, he seems to subtly acknowledge the change in the hobbit when he playfully (although, as always with Gandalf, with an underlying sincerity) places the dwarves in Bilbo's care (138). While Bilbo bemoans Gandalf's departure, the wizard's absence is essential to his journey, as it forces Bilbo to rely more on his own skills and intuition, allowing him to grow even further.

Bilbo himself slowly comes to recognize the transformation he is undergoing, particularly when he defeats the giant spiders in Mirkwood and christens Sting, after which "he felt a different person, and much fiercer and bolder in spite of an empty stomach" (156). Following this, he becomes increasingly bold, clever, and confident in his exploits, saving the dwarves from both the webs of the spiders and the prisons of the elves. Through these misadventures, it becomes clear that his courage, wits, and above all, will to act, are what make him a true hero, not physical prowess.

At last, Bilbo's journey takes him and the dwarves to Erebor, the Lonely Mountain, with Bilbo arriving at his destination as "a very different hobbit from the one that had run out with a
pocket-handkerchief from Bag-End long ago " (214). As Bilbo enters the secret passage and prepares to fulfill his role as a burglar, we are once more reminded of the heroic qualities that have brought Bilbo this far, and that keep Bilbo going in spite of the immense danger he faces:

It was at this point that Bilbo stopped. Going on from there was the bravest thing he ever did. The tremendous things that happened afterwards were as nothing compared to it. He fought the real battle in the tunnel alone, before he ever saw the vast danger that lay in wait. (214-215)

As before, it is Bilbo's will and courage that lead him forward, this time to the gilded inferno of Smaug's chamber, where he finally confronts the great dragon.

Smaug is an utterly devilish dragon, possessing not only a malevolent intellect but also a hypnotic gaze that allows him to serve as a "tempter" to the hobbit:

Bilbo was now beginning to feel really uncomfortable. Whenever Smaug's roving eye, seeking for him in the shadows, flashed across him, he trembled, and an unaccountable desire seized hold of him to rush out and reveal himself and tell all the truth to Smaug. (224)

Despite Bilbo's invisibility, Smaug comes uncomfortably close to snaring him, and it is a testament to Bilbo's willpower that he is able to resist the dragon's temptation. Smaug's powers of influence do not end with his gaze: his words are equally poisonous. When his attempt to seduce Bilbo into the open fails, he instead tries to turn Bilbo against his friends, warning him of the dwarves' greed and planting the idea in Bilbo's mind that the dwarves were merely using him; the fact that this seed grows into suspicion illustrates the potency of Smaug's manipulation. Smaug's ability to subvert free will makes him the perfect adversary for Bilbo, whose will has proved to be his defining characteristic.
Yet for all his intelligence and guile, Smaug's impulsiveness and lack of self-control expose him as nothing more than a primal animal. Though he is demonic in his attempts to subvert Bilbo's will, he possesses none of his own, with his pride, greed, and anger dictating his every action. Upon noticing that a single cup has been stolen, he is consumed with by a fiery wrath, exhibiting "the sort of rage that is only seen when rich folk that have more than they can enjoy suddenly lose something that they have long had but have never before used or wanted" (217), and he becomes single-mindedly focused on finding the thief and exacting his vengeance. Fortunately, Bilbo manages to exploit Smaug's nature by appealing to the dragon's pride, feigning disbelief at the claim of Smaug's bejeweled underbelly; with an instinctive arrogance, Smaug shows the invisible hobbit his armored chest, allowing Bilbo to spot the weak spot that the Bowman Bard would later use to kill the dragon.

Bilbo's adventure, however, does not end with the dragon's demise, and in the events that followed, Bilbo would once again demonstrate his distinctive heroism. Surprisingly, Bilbo's friends and companions, the dwarves, serve as the initial source of conflict in the aftermath of Smaug's death. There are numerous references throughout the story to the terrible power that gold holds over the hearts of dwarves, and after recovering their lost treasure the dwarves quickly begin to show signs of being infected by the "sickness" for gold that had plagued Thorin. Nobody is more affected by this than Thorin, the newly crowned King under the Mountain, who despite his earlier displays of valor falls victim to the corrupting influence of gold; he refuses to share his gold with Bard and the displaced Lake-men, barricades himself in the Mountain, and summons the army of his cousin Dain, willing to fight for his treasure if necessary. Just as
Thror's greed had first brought Smaug to the Mountain, so now does Thorin's lust for gold bring his newly-reclaimed kingdom to the brink of destruction.

Thorin's fall makes Bilbo's heroic virtues all the more clear: while Thorin almost deterministically succumbs to his greed, Bilbo never loses self-control when tempted by treasure or reward, not even seeking recognition for his discovery of Smaug's weak-spot (265). In a particularly striking example of the hobbit's virtue, Bilbo willingly gives the Arkenstone, the "Heart of the Mountain" and the object of Thorin's deepest desire, to Bard with the hope that he can use it to negotiate a deal with Thorin. Bilbo's act of simply giving away an immensely valuable object, in addition to leading Gandalf to reassert that "there is always more about you than anyone expects" (274), reinforces the contrast between Thorin and Bilbo. Thorin feverishly sought the Arkenstone so that he alone could possess it, and he almost certainly would have fought to recover it; Bilbo, however, took it not for his own selfish use, but for the sake of using it for a better purpose. Just like with Gollum and Smaug, Thorin's uncontrollable impulses are antithetical to Bilbo's control over his will.

Bilbo's pursuit of a nonviolent resolution illustrates another dimension of his heroism: he is not a warrior, as many traditional heroes, but a peacemaker. While Bilbo will draw his sword in self-defense or to protect his friends, his primary weapons have always been his wits and his words. Though war does eventually break out, Bilbo's efforts to broker peace between the dwarves, elves, and lakemen manage to prevent fighting between them long enough for the orcs and wargs to arrive, allowing them to join together without any previous casualties and battle their common enemies. And Bilbo plays an even more important role than either soldier or
diplomat during the Battle of Five Armies itself: that of a beacon of hope, heralding the coming of the Eagles and renewing the spirits of the desperate army.

Bilbo wakes up after being knocked unconscious to find that that battle had been won, but that Thorin had been mortally wounded. Bilbo and Thorin make their peace with one another, and with his final breathes Thorin reminds the grieving hobbit, "There is more in you of good than you know, child of the kindly West. Some courage and some wisdom, blended in measure. If more of us valued food and cheer and song above hoarded gold, it would be a merrier world" (290). Thorin is a truly tragic figure, and in his last words he comes to understand that while his intention to reclaim his home was genuinely noble, but upon achieving this goal he was consumed by greed and pride, leading to his downfall. In Bilbo, however, Thorin recognizes both virtues familiar to him, such as courage and wisdom, and virtues that he long overlooked: simplicity, humility, and a desire to bring goodness and joy in the world. Many great heroes may have fallen to violence and hubris, but Bilbo's good-natured spirit has kept his heart pure and his will uncorrupted, enabling him to become a true paragon of heroism.

Having completed his adventure, Bilbo at last returns to his home at Bag-End. However, as Bilbo and Gandalf enter the Shire, the wizard observes that "something is the matter with you! You are not the hobbit that you were" (302). Bilbo's journey is indeed a transformative one, and in the course of going "there and back again" he changed from a hobbit concerned with comfort and conformity to a courageous adventurer. Yet, while the hobbit who returned to Bag-End was not quite the same hobbit who found himself outside without knowing how, he is not entirely different either, just as a tree is not entirely unlike the seed from which it sprouted. Bilbo
was always a hero at heart, even if he did not know it or want to admit it, and his adventure did not convert him into someone completely different, but rather allowed him to grow into a more complete version of himself. Gandalf saw the potential within Bilbo from the beginning, but he could not force the hobbit to change; Bilbo had to willingly seek his transformation himself. In a sense, that is what Bilbo's journey is truly about: discovering the "unexpected" within himself, and becoming the heroic hobbit he was born to be.

The Heroes and Villains of *The Lord of the Rings*

The story of *The Lord of the Rings* begins long before its opening chapter, this time driven by a new enemy: Sauron, the protégé of Morgoth and the titular "Lord of the Rings."

After Morgoth's defeat, Sauron inherits his former master's title of the "Dark Lord," and though he is not as powerful as Morgoth (being a Maia, a lesser Ainu, rather than a Vala like Morgoth) he still shares his master's malevolence and his desire for absolute domination. As Tolkien writes of Sauron's rise to power in *The Silmarillion*:

> Now Sauron's lust and pride increased, until he knew no bounds, and he determined to make himself master of all things in Middle-earth, and to destroy the Elves, and to compass, if he might, the downfall of Númenor. He brooked no freedom nor any rivalry, and he named himself Lord of the Earth. A mask he still could wear so that if he wished he might deceive the eyes of Men, seeming to them wise and fair. But he ruled rather by force and fear, if they might avail; and those who perceived his shadow spreading over the world called him the Dark Lord and named him the Enemy. (*The Silmarillion* 346-347)

Sauron succeeds Morgoth as the greatest evil of his time, but like his former master he distinguishes himself from "lesser evils" not only by the success of his conquest or the extent of the destruction he wrought, but also by his subversion of free will through fear, deception, and
force. Once again Tolkien demonstrates the importance and sanctity of free will through his primary antagonists' attempts to distort the free will of others for their own ends.

The events of *The Lord of the Rings* are set into motion by Sauron's plan to accomplish this end using the Rings of Power. Using his shape-shaping abilities, he manipulates the elves into crafting magical rings for the greatest elves, dwarves, and men, and then he creates the One Ring, a master ring that would allow him to rule all of the others:

Now the Elves made many rings; but secretly Sauron made One Ring to rule all the others, and their power was bound up with it, to be subject wholly to it and to last only so long as it too should last. And much of the strength and will of Sauron passed into that One Ring; for the power of the Elven-rings was very great, and that which should govern them must be a thing of surpassing potency; and Sauron forged it in the Mountain of Fire in the Land of Shadow. And while he wore the One Ring he could perceive all the things that were done by means of the lesser rings, and he could see and govern the very thoughts of those that wore them.

(344)

Forging the Ring in Mount Doom, a volcano in Sauron's realm of Mordor, Sauron pours his malice and his evil will into the Ring, so that when he wears the Ring it enhances his power and allows him to control those wearing the other rings. His greatest victims are kings of men, whose desire for power compelled them to take their rings; through the One Ring, Sauron manipulates and corrupts the kings, transforming them into his most feared servants, the Nazgûl (or Ringwraiths). The fact that Sauron has the greatest success in subduing humans is intentional on Tolkien's part, as it demonstrates mankind's tendency to sin and to be corrupted by the pursuit of power. Sauron's use of the Ring to completely enslave the wills of others to his own will establishes him as Tolkien's quintessential villain, a malevolent force with the desire and capacity to not merely subvert the gift of free will, but to destroy it entirely.
Sauron is eventually defeated by an alliance of elves and men, and the Ring is taken from him. However, Sauron had poured so much of his own power into the Ring that he has become bound to it, so that even though his body is destroyed, his spirit remains tethered to the world as long as the Ring survives. But because of this bond, the Ring also possesses Sauron's will and malevolence, so that even when separated from Sauron it attempts to fulfills his destructive ambitions. Describing the Ring to the hobbit Frodo, Gandalf says,

'A mortal, Frodo, who keeps one of the Great Rings, does not die, but he does not grow or obtain more life, he merely continues, until at last every minute is a weariness. And if he often uses the Ring to make himself invisible, he fades: he becomes in the end invisible permanently, and walks in the twilight under the eye of the dark power that rules the Rings. Yes, sooner or later - later, if he is strong or well-meaning to begin with, but neither strength nor good purpose will last - sooner or later the dark power will devour him.' (The Lord of the Rings 47)

Acting as both an extension of Sauron's will and an object with a will of its own, the Ring seduces all who are drawn to it with delusions of power and greatness only to corrupt and consume them. As such, the Ring becomes the central entity of The Lord of the Rings, and all of the characters who encounter it must contend with its malicious influence, some resisting it and others succumbing to it. The Ring is ultimately a symbol of the sins that lead us to abuse and abandon our free will, and it is through the characters' choices when faced with the Ring's temptations that Tolkien illustrates both virtue and vice.

The first character to fall victim to the Ring's influence is Isildur, the human prince who defeated Sauron. When he is given the opportunity to destroy Sauron for good by casting the Ring into the fires of Mount Doom, he refuses to do so, claiming the Ring to be the "were-gild" for the deaths of his father and brother (an important concept in Anglo-Saxon literature); however, Tolkien makes it clear that Isildur was captivated by the Ring's beauty and the idea of
wearing his great Enemy’s weapon, as "the Ring that he held seemed to him exceedingly fair to look on; and he would not suffer it to be destroyed" (*The Silmarillion* 353-354). It is easy to condemn Isildur for his choice, especially considering the countless deaths that would later result from it, but for Tolkien, Isildur's temptation by false beauty and grandeur is often our own. However, as it is an extension of Sauron, the Ring has a will of its own, and when Isildur uses it to become invisible in the middle of battle it slips from his finger and he is killed by archers. Here, Tolkien is attempting to illustrate that, no matter how attractive it may seem, sin will always betray us.

Following Isildur's death, the Ring fall into the river Anduin, and there it remains lost for centuries until it is accidentally discovered by a river-Hobbit named Déagol. However, Déagol makes the mistake of showing the Ring to his cousin Sméagol, who immediately becomes entranced by the Ring and kills Déagol in order to take it for himself. Retreating into the Mountains, Sméagol is slowly transformed into a shell of his former self and becomes known as Gollum - the same creature whom Bilbo encounters in *The Hobbit*. The Ring utterly corrupts Gollum and he becomes single-mindedly obsessed with it, even though he knows how it has ruined his life; as Gandalf says of Gollum's relationship with the Ring, "He hated it and loved it, as he hated and loved himself. He could not get rid of it. He had no will left in the matter" (*The Lord of the Rings* 55). As the Ring’s ultimate victim, Gollum serves as an example of what happens when we allow ourselves to be consumed by sin: we become enslaved by it, devoid of both our free will and our humanity.
When Sauron begins to return to power centuries later, the Ring abandons Gollum, seeking to answer its master's call. However, in a chance occurrence that Gandalf calls "'the strangest event in the whole history of the Ring so far,'" (55), the Ring is discovered by someone it never expected: Bilbo Baggins. In light of the revelation that the ring Bilbo finds in *The Hobbit* is in fact the One Ring, Bilbo's act of mercy towards Gollum gains an additional significance. Unlike the Ring's previous holders, who began their ownership of the Ring with acts of violence, Bilbo begins his ownership of the Ring with an act of mercy, something that marks an essential shift in the entire course of the Ring. Although Bilbo is not immune to the Ring's seduction, his willpower and compassion mitigate its influence, allowing him to give up the Ring where others would have kept it for themselves. Interestingly, Frodo fails to comprehend Bilbo's act of pity at first, and when he expresses regret that Bilbo did not kill Gollum, Gandalf admonishes him, saying,

'Many that live deserve death. And some that die deserve life. Can you give it to them? Then do not be too eager to deal out death in judgement. For even the very wise cannot see all ends. I have not much hope that Gollum can be cured before he dies, but there is a chance of it. And he is bound up with the fate of the Ring. My heart tells me that he has some part to play yet, for good or ill, before the end; and when that comes, the pity of Bilbo may rule the fate of many - yours not least.' (59-60)

Here, Tolkien uses Gandalf as his moral mouthpiece, emphasizing once more the importance of mercy and compassion. Through Gandalf, Tolkien also challenges our assumptions of who "deserves" death, implying that such a judgment is not one for any human to make. But perhaps most important is Gandalf's prophetic suggestion that Bilbo's choice to spare Gollum's life will help decide the fate of Middle-earth; this allows Tolkien introduce to *The Lord of the Rings* the idea of grace, through which Divine Providence turns a single good act into a significantly greater good.
When Bilbo departs the Shire in the opening chapter of *The Lord of the Rings*, he passes down to Frodo not only the Ring, but his mantle as the story's hero as well. However, when the existence of the Ring becomes known, Frodo is summoned to the Council of Elrond, where the leaders of the free people of Middle-earth discuss what to do with the Ring; at last, it is decided that the Ring should be cast into Mount Doom so that Sauron will be destroyed, but none who are present volunteer to take on this task. It is here that Frodo has his moment of heroic awakening:

Still no one spoke. Frodo glanced at all the faces, but they were not turned to him. All the Council sat with downcast eyes, as if in deep thought. A great dread fell on him, as if he was awaiting the pronouncement of some doom that he had long foreseen and vainly hoped might after all never be spoken. An overwhelming longing to rest and remain at peace by Bilbo's side in Rivendell filled all his heart. At last with an effort he spoke, and wondered to hear his own words, as if some other will was using his small voice. 'I will take the Ring,' he said, 'though I do not know the way.' (270)

Here, Frodo experiences a moment of transformation that allows him to take on a perilous task that no one else dares to attempt. He is surprised by this transformation himself, mistaking his own voice as belonging to another; however, like Bilbo, Frodo does not change into a new person entirely, but rather he grows into the person he is meant to be.

Nevertheless, there is an underlying sense of destiny surrounding Frodo. Tolkien suggests numerous times that Frodo has been "chosen" for this quest, a fact that Frodo bemoans given the incredible danger he will face. When he asks Gandalf why he has been chosen, Gandalf responds by saying that while he does not know, "'You may be sure that it was not for any merit that others do not possess: not for power or wisdom, at any rate. But you have been chosen, and you must therefore use such strength and heart and wits as you have.'" (61). The implication here is
that there is something uniquely special about Frodo, and that the role of "ring-bearer" is one that only he could ever take. However, it is important to understand that while fate (or perhaps more accurately, providence) certainly has a hand in Frodo's journey, he is still an agent of free will. Fate and free will converge in Frodo; he may have been chosen for this role, but it is his own choice to accept it, willing to make the necessary sacrifice for the sake of Middle-earth. Similarly, Tolkien may have felt that we all have our own unique calling, and that it is ultimately our choice whether or not to accept it.

Frodo faces many dangers on his quest, but the greatest by far is the Ring itself. Throughout *The Lord of the Rings*, Frodo finds himself struggling against the Ring's influence, at times fighting an instinctive urge to slip it on his finger. Once again Tolkien makes clear the importance of free will, as Frodo must constantly push his willpower to its limits in order to complete his quest. In a sense, Frodo's quest is not so much about the destruction of the Ring as it is about resisting temptation; symbolic, the quest could even represent our struggles against the temptations that seek to deter us from our "chosen roles." Nevertheless, this struggle takes its toll on Frodo, and as he and his companion Sam get close to Mount Doom the Ring's influence over him grows stronger. Through Frodo's slow decline we see that Frodo is not merely a chosen hero, but a sacrificial hero, a fact that he has come to accept.

When Frodo at last gets to the summit of Mount Doom, the Ring's power proves too much for him and he succumbs to it, taking the Ring for his own. For Tolkien, this is not a demonstration of Frodo's weakness, but rather a reminder that all of us are susceptible to our temptations; the fact that Frodo even managed to get to Mount Doom is an incredible illustration
of his strength of will. However, the quest is not lost, as Gollum had followed them all the way
to Mount Doom in the hopes of reclaiming the Ring, and after he bites the Ring from Frodo's
finger he accidentally falls into the Volcano, destroying the Ring and defeating Sauron once and
for all. Reflecting upon this unexpected end to their journey, Frodo says, 'But do you remember
Gandalf's words: Even Gollum may have something yet to do? But for him, Sam, I could not
have destroyed the Ring. The Quest would have been in vain, even at the bitter end. So let us
forgive him! For the Quest is achieved, and now all is over" (947). While it is tragic that Gollum
is never able to escape his enslavement to the Ring, he nevertheless manages to unintentionally
redeem himself by participating in the destruction of a great evil, something that was only
possible because of Bilbo's act of mercy. Concluding the quest of the Ring as he does, Tolkien
provides his readers with a poignant example of grace, illustrating how divine providence
transformed a freely-chosen act of compassion into a fulfillment of Ilúvatar's words that all evil
will ultimately be used for good.
Chapter III: Death and Beyond

A key element in many mythologies is the attempt to understand death. People in almost every age and culture have seen death as a mystery, and as such have used myths and stories as a way of exploring the otherwise unknown. This exploration is essential to Tolkien's mythology as well, as through his stories Tolkien attempted to illustrate his understanding of the great mystery of death, as well as his beliefs of what ultimately exists beyond this life.

From the beginning of *The Silmarillion*, Tolkien establishes death as a gift given to humans by Ilúvatar, writing "But the sons of Men die indeed, and leave the world; wherefore they are called the Guests, or the Strangers. Death is their fate, the gift of Ilúvatar, which as Time wears even the Powers shall envy" (*The Silmarillion* 36). In contrast with the immortal elves and Ainur, who remain bound to the world until its end, humans are able to escape the pain of the world and move on to something greater. Interestingly, the immortal beings envy this gift, a surprise given how many humans desire immortality. However, Tolkien asserts that the fear of death that many humans have is a consequence of our corruption: having been enticed by the sins of the world, we have no desire to leave it.

Nowhere does Tolkien more thoroughly explore the corruptive nature of the fear of death more so than in the story of Númenor. Founded shortly after the defeat of Morgoth, Númenor was the greatest human civilization in the history of Middle-earth. As Númenor grew in power, its inhabitants becoming increasingly frightened by the thought of their mortality. In the hopes of gaining immortality, they turned to Sauron for help. However, Sauron manipulated them into
devil-worship and human sacrifice, deceiving them into believing that Morgoth would deliver them from death. In a last desperate attempt at immortality, the Númenóreans wage war on the Valar, but they are swiftly defeated by the intervention of Ilúvatar. With the story of the fall of Númenor, Tolkien illustrates the danger of desiring immortality, demonstrating that the refusal to accept death pushes some to preserve their lives at any cost.

Another story in Tolkien's Legendarium that he uses to explore death is the tale of Beren and Luthien. Tolkien presents Beren and Luthien as the ideal romance, and indeed it was his favorite story of his mythology. However, there is a key difference between the two: Beren is a mortal man, and Luthien is an immortal. But because of their great love, the Valar give Luthien the choice to either remain immortal or become mortal, and Luthien without hesitating chooses mortality. As Tolkien writes of her decision,

This doom she chose, forsaking the Blessed Realm, and putting aside all claim to kinship with those that dwell there; that thus whatever grief might lie in wait, the fates of Beren and Lúthien might be joined, and their paths lead together beyond the confines of the world. (222)

For Luthien, sharing her beloved's fate in death is more important to her than living forever without him. The story of Beren and Luthien is later paralleled by the romance between the human Aragorn and the elf Arwen; like Luthien, Arwen chooses to give up her immortality in order to live a mortal life with her beloved. With both romances, Tolkien illustrates that death is truly a gift, as it allows the two pairs to escape the suffering of the world together and join one another in something greater.
Yet Tolkien's most poignant image of death comes at the very end of *The Lord of the Rings*. After the destruction of the Ring, Frodo is allowed to sail west into Valinor, where he will be able to find relief from the many physical and emotional injuries that he sustained during his quest. As Tolkien writes of Frodo's departure,

> And the ship went out into the High Sea and passed on into the West, until at last on a night of rain Frodo smelled a sweet fragrance on the air and heard the sound of singing that came over the water. And then it seemed to him that as in his dream in the house of Bombadil, the grey rain-curtain turned all to silver glass and was rolled back, and he beheld white shores and beyond them a far green country under a swift sunrise. (*The Lord of the Rings* 1030)

Taken figuratively, Frodo's voyage into the west is a clear metaphor for death. Having accomplished his mission in Middle-earth, Frodo is allowed to depart to a beautiful paradise, where he will be able to earn his reward for his struggles in life.

Though Tolkien frequently explores death in his Legendarium, his characters never give any indication of what they expect after death. However, Tolkien gives his readers a hint of what Middle-earth's afterlife might be like at the beginning of *The Silmarillion*, after the Great Music of the Ainur:

> Never since have the Ainur made any music like to this music, though it has been said that a greater still shall be made before Ilúvatar by the choirs of the Ainur and the Children of Ilúvatar after the end of days. Then the themes of Ilúvatar shall be played aright, and take Being in the moment of their utterance, for all shall then understand fully his intent in their part, and each shall know the comprehension of
each, and Ilúvatar shall give to their thoughts the secret fire, being well pleased
(4).

The image of a "Second Music," in which all beings join their Creator in a heavenly
choir, is a perfect symbol of the beatific vision, in which the souls of the departed spend
eternity in the presence of the divine. To the deeply religious Tolkien, such an afterlife
would be a perfect end to a long journey.
Epilogue: Fantasy and Reality

J.R.R. Tolkien believed that we can better understand the Truths of the real world through fantasy stories such as *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. In his essay "On Fairy-Stories," Tolkien reflects upon this purpose of "sub-creation," writing:

> Probably every writer making a secondary world, a fantasy, every sub-creator, wishes in some measure to be a real maker, or hopes that he is drawing on reality: hopes that the peculiar quality of this secondary world (if not all the details) are derived from Reality, or are flowing into it. (*The Tolkien Reader*, 87)

If the role of a "sub-creator" is to infuse reality into fantasy, how has Tolkien woven Truth into his Legendarium?

In crafting a creation story for his mythology, Tolkien gives his readers a way to reflect upon deep questions about the existence of God and the problem of evil, questions that challenge many people every day. By placing a number of different heroes and villains into his stories, Tolkien provides his readers with examples of how to live a moral life based around compassion and willpower. And through his positive depiction of death, Tolkien allows his readers to see death as a gift rather than something to fear. While fantasy stories are often dismissed as whimsical or childish, Tolkien’s works demonstrate that fantasy is simply another way in which to explore the essential elements of our existence.

To truly appreciate the relevance of Tolkien’s mythology, one only needs to look upon the state of Middle-earth at the end of *The Lord of the Rings*: the elves have departed, leaving the world to the care of the humans, magic has faded from the land,
forcing humans to rely on their own skills and inventions, and though great Enemy has been defeated evil remains in the hearts of all. In a sense, Middle-earth becomes the very world in which we live today. And just as the people of Middle-earth would look back at the myths of Bilbo and Frodo for guidance in dark times, so too are we meant to look to these stories for inspiration.

Like all mythologies, J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle-earth Legendarium is a profound exploration of the human experience. These stories of hobbits, elves, and wizards are not meant to simply allow us to escape into a different world, but rather to guide us through our lives in this world. Ultimately, Tolkien uses his mythology to communicate Truths that will help us in our search for what is sacred, in our endeavors to fulfill our destinies in the face of temptation, and in our struggles to embrace our mortality, so that in the end we too may join in the Great Music.
Bibliography


