J.R.R. Tolkien's "Leaf by Niggle": An Allegory in Transformation

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Abstract
Nelson demonstrates that Tolkien's allegorical short story, "Leaf by Niggle," owes a debt to the medieval play *Everyman* as its primary spiritual ancestor, and discusses changes Tolkien makes to its message in the light of concepts he developed in "On Fairy-stories," along the way touching on the differences between works meant for performance and silent reading.

Additional Keywords
J.R.R. Tolkien’s “Leaf by Niggle”: An Allegory in Transformation

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J.R.R. Tolkien’s essay “On Fairy-Stories,” with its presentation of the essential features of the fantasy genre, and his story “Leaf by Niggle,” which I intend to show is a re-telling of the story of the late fifteenth century play Everyman, were both first separately published. Tolkien explains in his “Introductory Note” to their re-publication together in Tree and Leaf. My primary purpose here is to present a reading of “Leaf by Niggle” with reference to its apparent source and to terms Tolkien defines in “On Fairy-Stories,” but, since Tolkien tells the Everyman story in ways that can readily be related to his own life story, I will also give attention to this story as Humphrey Carpenter and T.A. Shippey tell it in J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biography and J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century; as Wayne G. Hammond and Christina Scull tell it in J.R.R. Tolkien: Artist and Illustrator; and as it can be read in Carpenter and Christopher Tolkien’s edition of The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien.

As the following sequence of parallels shows, Tolkien re-tells the basic Everyman story in “Leaf by Niggle.”

Everyman1
God decrees that each man must face a “rekenynge” (lines 45-46).

“Leaf by Niggle”2
Niggle has “a long journey to make” (87). Aware that little time remains, he nevertheless allows frequent interruptions to keep him from completing his painting of his Tree.

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1 Everyman, reprinted by W.W. Greg from the edition by John Skot, will be the source for line citations to the play.
2 Page citations are to The Tolkien Reader. “Leaf by Niggle” was first published in The Dublin Review, January 1945, while the essay “On Fairy-Stories” was originally composed as an Andrew Lang lecture delivered at the University of St. Andrews in 1938 and “eventually published” by Oxford University Press in 1947 in Essays Presented to Charles Williams. The story and essay then appeared together under the title Tree and Leaf “when the Lord of the Rings was beginning to unroll itself,” Tolkien writes, and were republished in The Tolkien Reader when Tree and Leaf had become “no longer easy to obtain” (2).
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*Everyman*
Death appears and says to Everyman, “thou must take a longe journey” (103).

Everyman offers Death a thousand pounds to delay his departure. He asks that Fellowship, Kindred, Cousin, and Goods be allowed to accompany him. All refuse, but Good Deeds, if he were not so “sore bounde” (487) by Everyman’s sins, would be willing to help.

Knowledge leads Everyman to Confession, who gives him a “precyous Iewell [...] Called penaunce voyder of aduersyte” (557-58).

Everyman accepts the gift and the duty to scourge himself that accompanies it.

Good Deeds and Knowledge accompany Everyman as he continues his journey.

Beauty, Strength, Discretion, and Five Wits appear and offer support, but cannot go with Everyman as he continues his journey.

Everyman travels on and meets an Angel who will lead him on to heaven.

*“Leaf by Niggle”*
An Inspector and Driver appear. They announce that Niggle must set forth (94-95).

The Driver refuses to grant Niggle’s request for delay and takes him to the train station from which he must depart (96).

Niggle is transported by train through a “dark tunnel” to a place where he is put in an ambulance that takes him to a “Workhouse Infirmary” (96-97).

Niggle learns through confinement and hard work how to “take up a task the moment one bell rang, and lay it aside promptly the moment the next one went, all tidy and ready to be continued at the right time” (98).

Niggle, awakening from a “gift” of Gentle Rest, hears two Voices debating his fate. His complaints may negate their redemptive value but he has often performed good deeds, and the First Voice reluctantly agrees to let him “go on to the next stage” (102).

Niggle’s unaccompanied journey by train continues—now through a world of bright daylight—to a place where “Before him [stands] the Tree, his Tree, finished” (103).

A shepherd comes who may, when Niggle is ready, guide him to the Mountains he has glimpsed between the leaves of his Tree.

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As Shippey observes, “Allegorical meaning is signaled at once by the first sentence [of “Leaf by Niggle”]” (267). This sentence reads “There was once a little man named Niggle, who had a long journey to make” (“Leaf” 87), and it is immediately evident that Niggle’s story will be the story of Everyman retold. And if there is any doubt about this, when Tolkien, having told of Niggle’s preoccupation with his life work—the painting of his Tree—and of the many interruptions to his progress, writes that “At length Niggle’s time became really precious. His acquaintances in the distant town began to remember that the little man had got to make a troublesome journey, and some began to calculate how long at the latest he could put off starting” (90), we know that Niggle, like Everyman, has come very close to the end of his life.

The “acquaintances in the distant town” who anticipate Niggle’s departure do not assume the status of Fellowship, Kindred, or Cousin, personified abstractions who, along with Goods and Good Deeds; Knowledge and Confession; and Beauty, Strength, Discretion, and Five Wits, make Everyman a clear example of the type of allegory M.H. Abrams defines as “the allegory of ideas, in which the literal characters represent abstract concepts and the plot serves to communicate a doctrine or thesis” (A Glossary of Literary Terms 4-5), but, as we read “Leaf by Niggle” and see the parallels between Everyman and “Leaf” unfold, this question comes to mind: Why would J.R.R. Tolkien, who is often quoted as saying that he “cordially dislike[d] allegory in all its manifestations” (Lord of the Rings Foreword xxiv), choose to re-tell the story of Everyman?

Before beginning to try to answer this question, I should note that Tolkien was more specific about the kind of allegory he couldn’t stand in a letter to publisher Milton Waldman in which he wrote “I dislike Allegory—the conscious and intentional allegory [italics mine]” (Letters 145). And, judging from a statement of intention that survives in a draft of a letter to Peter Hastings, the manager of the Newman Bookshop in Oxford, in which he wrote “I tried to show allegorically how [sub-creation] might come to be taken up into Creation in some plane in my ‘purgatorial’ story Leaf by Niggle” (Letters 195), it would seem that Tolkien did find allegory that served a justifiable intention—like helping him to understand and explain his own creative process—to be acceptable.

Letters Tolkien wrote to publisher Stanley Unwin and to Caroline Everett, who was engaged in research for a thesis about his work, can, however, be read as denials that he had any purpose like this in mind when he wrote “Leaf by Niggle.” In a letter to Unwin dated circa 18 March 1945, Tolkien wrote that “that story was the only thing I have ever done which cost me absolutely no pains at all.” Here, contrasting the composition of “Leaf” with his usual “difficulty and endless rewriting,” Tolkien wrote “I woke up one morning (more than 2 years ago) with that odd thing virtually complete in my head” (Letters 113). And years later, in his 24 June 1957 response to her request for information
about other stories he might have written, he wrote to Everett, "I have not published any other short story but *Leaf by Niggle*. They do not arise in my mind. *Leaf by Niggle* arose suddenly and almost complete. It was written down almost at a sitting, and very nearly in the form in which it now appears" (*Letters* 257). But Shippey, having noted that Tolkien received a request from the editor of *The Dublin Review* on 6 September 1944 for "a story which would help his magazine to be ‘an effective expression of Catholic humanity’" and that he sent "Leaf by Niggle" to him on 12 October, which "by Tolkien’s standards [. . .] was practically by return of post" (266), expressed his doubts that Tolkien could have written the story so quickly. It seemed more likely to Shippey, taking his normal composition processes into account, that Tolkien had already written "Leaf by Niggle" when he received the request that led to its first publication.

Of course more was involved in its composition than the sudden appearance of "Leaf by Niggle" on the page. If in fact he had not already written it when he received the *Dublin Review* editor’s request, the basic *Everyman* story would nevertheless have been stored in Tolkien’s mind, ready to be retold. By this time, Paul H. Kocher notes, Tolkien had a deep and comprehensive understanding of medieval literature; and, referring to his glossary for Kenneth Sisam’s *Fourteenth Century Verse and Prose*, adds that Tolkien “obviously knew medieval drama well” (234). So more than a “sudden appearance” must have been involved. Tolkien did not just write "Leaf by Niggle" as an almost immediate response to a request from its first publisher. His groundwork preparation included years of careful, dedicated scholarship.

And another source—Tolkien’s own life experience—merits consideration as well. The "Kindred" of *Everyman* may or may not be the ancestor of Councillor Tompkins, Perkins, and Atkins, who briefly appear in "Leaf," but the name "Niggle," Shippey points out, is derived from a verb defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as “‘To work . . . in a trifling, fiddling, or ineffective way . . . to work or spend time unnecessarily on petty details, to be over-elaborate in minor points,’” and he adds that “This was certainly a vice of which Tolkien could be accused” (267). Tolkien’s personal “vice,” then, becomes an element that helps to define the central figure of his retelling of the *Everyman* story. And this is just one aspect of his own experience that Tolkien incorporates in his *Everyman* transformation.

But let us, for the moment, turn back to *Everyman*. The opening lines of Tolkien’s source are considerably more dramatic than the opening lines of "Leaf by Niggle." The first speaker is a Messenger who issues a command to members of his audience to listen with reverence to a “morall playe [called] The somonyge of eueryman” (*Everyman* lines 3-4) that will show how transitory the lives of men on earth are, and how fellowship and jollity, strength, pleasure, and beauty will fade as quickly “as floure in maye” (16-18). The stern voice of an angry God
determined to “Haue a rekenynge of every mannes persone” (46) is the next to be heard, and then Death appears, ready to obey God’s command to summon Everyman for his day of reckoning. Fellowship, Kindred, Cousin, and Goods communicate a single message: They will not accompany Everyman when he is required to set forth on his journey. Good Deeds would accompany him if he were not so strongly held back by Everyman’s sins, but at this early point in the sequence of events there is little that he can do to help. But Knowledge leads Everyman to Confession, who gives him a “precyous Iewell [...] called penaunce voyder of aduersyte” (557-58), a gift Everyman gratefully accepts along with the duty to scourge himself that comes with it. Knowledge and Good Deeds now accompany Everyman as he continues his journey. Beauty, Strength, Discretion, and Five Wits appear briefly, but they do not join Everyman as he travels on to a place where he meets an Angel who will lead him on to heaven.

And now, turning to Tolkien’s Everyman story, we find that no Messenger calls for our attention here. Generations after the play was regularly performed by traveling actors, we simply open to the printed page of The Tolkien Reader. We may, however, hear echoes of the ominous voice of Death when the Inspector and Driver appear, and it is possible, borrowing a word Shippey uses to refer to the process Tolkien, who was both a writer and a visual artist, called upon to create the painter Niggle, to see a “bifurcation” of Death in the “Niggle” Inspector and Driver. Death, whose part was performed by a single actor in Everyman, becomes two characters in “Leaf by Niggle.”

The Inspector presents Niggle with his summons. Supporting his authority as “Inspector of Houses” by holding up his “appointment card,” he reprimands him for not having helped his neighbor properly repair the damage to his home caused by a recent storm. “That is the law,” the Inspector says, and he says it twice (95). The Driver, who appears almost immediately after the Inspector’s knock on his door interrupts Niggle’s work, then takes on the role of Death with this announcement, “You start today on your journey, you know” (96). The two-word ending of the Driver’s speech may slightly undercut the seriousness of his summons, but, though his utterance hardly equals the stern command of Death to Everyman, a man he sees as one who pays little heed to his [Death’s] “cummynge” and whose “mynde is on flesshely lustes and his treasure” (81-82), the Driver’s assertion nevertheless functions as a command Niggle must hear and, whether or not his bag is packed, obey. He should have packed, the Driver tells Niggle (heeded the lesson Everyman spectators were obligated to learn?), but the “little bag” in the hall that Niggle grabs as he is ushered out contains “only a paint-box and a small book of his own sketches” (96).

This last minute act may be an unspoken, unintended further expression of his verbal response to the Driver’s announcement that it is time for
him to go. The weeping Niggle’s words at this point are “Oh dear! [...] And it’s not, not even finished!” (96). The “it” of this sentence is Niggle’s life work, his painting of a Tree that began with just “a leaf caught in the wind” and became a tree that “[sent] out innumerable branches” that grew into a vision that required a canvas to continue its creation and a tall shed to shelter the work in progress (88). But in any case the tired, sleepy Niggle, suffering from a cold presumably caused by his grudging venture into a driving storm to summon a doctor for his neighbor Parish’s ailing wife and a builder to patch his roof, is forced to abandon his painting. And his little bag is lost, along with his ability to move of his own volition, when Niggle is bundled into a compartment on a train that takes him through a long dark tunnel to his first stop, a railway station from which he is immediately sent to “the Workhouse Infirmary,” where he is sentenced to what can be read as a parallel to the “penaunce voyder of aduersytyle” of *Everyman* II. 557-58. Niggle’s penance is “digging, carpentry, and painting bare boards all one plain colour” (97). Hard labor for an artist!

I hesitate to equate the two voices Niggle hears when he awakens from the Gentle Treatment rest he is allowed after his time in the Workhouse Infirmary (Purgatory) with the voices of God the Father and God the Son, as Paul Nolan Hyde reads them in his essay “Leaf and Key” (29); as an update of a Dante’s *Purgatorio* debate between the four daughters of God, with Righteousness and Truth opposed to Mercy and Peace, as Paul H. Kocher reads them in *Master of Middle-earth* (164); or as the voices of Justice and Mercy, two of the daughters of God, as Tom Shippey suggests in *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century* (276), but it seems clear that Tolkien is again making use of bifurcation to tell his story. This time the splitting in two is not the creative process that enabled Tolkien the writer to tell a story of another side of himself as Tolkien the visual artist, but a separation of the single voice of the sternly judgmental God of *Everyman* into two voices. And this results in a debate that can almost be heard as a trial scene involving two Judges who are not seen, but only heard by Niggle as he awakens.

The First Voice is severely judgmental and the Second Voice speaks in Niggle’s defense. Careful not to overstate his case, the Second Voice says that Niggle has, albeit unwillingly, helped his neighbor Parish a number of times with his problems with property maintenance and with his own health concerns and those of his wife; and his assertion that Niggle never expected any gratitude for this makes a positive impression on the First Voice. But Niggle is not helped simply by the good deeds he himself has performed during his time on earth. He is also helped by his attribution of generosity to his neighbor Parish. And it is the Second Voice’s report of Niggle’s concern for Parish, who, he says, was “a very good neighbor, and let me have excellent potatoes very cheap, which saved me a lot of time” that leads to the First Voice’s “Did he? [...] I am glad to hear it” (101).
And as we later see, Parish believes that Niggle’s report of his generosity was a good deed that helped him when his turn to set forth came. The Good Deeds character of Tolkien’s source may survive, then, not as a personified abstraction, but in the grudging help Niggle provides for his neighbor, in Parish’s down-to-earth generosity, and in Niggle’s willingness to speak well of Parish and his inquiry about his neighbor’s well being. And these can be seen not precisely as a sequence of transformations perhaps, but as traces of a primary virtue members of the Everyman audience were, as a “Doctour” who delivered the final message of the play told them, obligated to remember. They were to forsake “pryde” and remember that “beaute,” “[five] wyttes,” and “strength” all finally forsake “euery man,” and that they can take only their “good dedes” with them to heaven (904-7).

So—Tolkien said he hated allegory, but he retold the Everyman story. In a number of letters Tolkien, the apparently constant writer, also responded in negative terms to questions that seemed intended to lead to interpretation of his fiction in terms of events in his own life. He may have written in his Tree and Leaf “Introductory Note” that one of the sources of “Leaf by Niggle” was “a great-limbed poplar tree that [...] was suddenly lopped and mutilated by its owner” (2), and Hammond and Scull provide abundant evidence of Tolkien the visual artist’s dedication to capturing the essence of individual trees and forests, but in an October 1971 draft of a letter to Peter Szabo Szentmihalyi he declared, “One of my strongest opinions is that investigation of an author’s biography (or such glimpses of his ‘personality’ as can be gleaned by the curious) is an entirely vain and false approach to his works—and especially to a work of narrative art, of which the object aimed at by the author was to be enjoyed as such” (Letters 414, italics original). But, as the following sequence of parallels from Shippey’s J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century suggests, it is difficult not to make connections between “Leaf by Niggle” and Tolkien’s life story. Tolkien may have opposed efforts to read an author’s life into his fiction, but “Leaf by Niggle” can be read not just as a transformation of an allegory from an earlier time, but as Shippey reads it, as a story of Tolkien’s own life.

"Leaf by Niggle"

"Niggle" (proper noun): name of central character.

The “long journey” Niggle must take (87).

Life of Tolkien

"‘To niggle,’ according to the OED, means ‘To work . . . in a trifling fiddling, or ineffective way . . . to work or spend time unnecessarily on petty details; to be over-elaborate in minor points’” (267).

No doubt about what “journey” means — the long journey is death (267).
Shippey first gives attention to the verb-proper noun connection between Tolkien’s apparently almost compulsive re-writing and the name he gives to Niggle. He then shows how Tolkien “bifurcates,” or calls upon two different sides of his own creative life. Tolkien, Shippey writes, was “pre-eminently” a writer, and this is what enables him to tell Niggle’s story, but in telling his story he focuses on Niggle’s skills of visual representation.

Tolkien consistently downplayed his own skills as a visual artist in letters to publishers, but Humphrey Carpenter gives attention to early demonstrations of his drawing skill in the “Birmingham” sequence of “Part II, 1892-1916” of his Tolkien biography, noting that the young Tolkien was especially good at drawing trees and that “he liked most of all to be with trees” (22). And Wayne G. Hammond and Christina Scull, having begun “Early Work,” Chapter I of J.R.R. Tolkien: Artist and Illustrator, with a reference to Tolkien’s description of Niggle as a painter, “but not a very successful one, partly because he had many other things to do,” provide representations (none of which are larger than the drawings and paintings themselves, which never exceeded twelve inches in height or width), along with descriptions of his work in support of their assertion that though Tolkien “was by no means a professional artist [...] he was no dilettante” (9). Hammond and Scull observe, as Carpenter does, that trees were one of Tolkien’s central passions, and trees can be seen to play a major role in the
topographical drawings they present in their opening chapter. And here they also write that Tolkien "would struggle through several versions of a picture, if needed, to capture his inner vision" (9). And thus we have a double connection between Tolkien the visual artist and the painter of "Leaf by Niggle": his love of trees and his Niggle-like willingness to spend the time and effort required to give form to his thoughts.

As for Shippey's "autumn" connection to Tolkien's age at the time he wrote his story, "the autumn of our years," with its suggestion that we may not have much time left, is a commonly used metaphor, and Tolkien frequently expressed his concern that he might not be able to complete and achieve publication of The Lord of the Rings in his letters. As for the criticism of his colleagues, just as Niggle knew that neighboring townsmen were critical of the way he kept his garden, Tolkien knew that, despite the fact that (as Shippey points out) he had published about a dozen scholarly articles before 1939, some of his colleagues talked about his failure to continue to publish at this rate (272). (The fact that a single Beowulf article is cited as "One Essential Essay" and "The most influential literary criticism of the poem ever published" in Bruce Mitchell and Fred C. Robinson's Beowulf: An Edition [235-6] would not seem likely to have impressed them.) All these connections, then, can be seen as results of what Shippey calls the "bifurcation" of Tolkien the writer and Tolkien the artist.

And Tolkien was also a gardener. He provided this short self-description in a letter to Deborah Webster dated 28 October 1958: "I am in fact a Hobbit (in all but size). I like gardens [emphasis mine], trees, and unmechanized farmlands" (Letters 288), and he refers in a number of letters to family members to work he has done in his garden. In an 11 May 1944 airgram to his son Christopher Tolkien, for example, he gives attention to LotR progress and writes of "time filled with lectures, house, garden (very exigent just now: lawns, hedges, marrow-beds, weeding)" (Letters 79), and writes again on 21 May to report "I have taken advantage of a bitter cold grey week (in which the lawns have not grown in spite of a little rain) to write" (81). Maintenance of his garden may not have been a matter of comparable concern to Niggle, but Tolkien nevertheless includes gardening in his Everyman transformation. He assigns this aspect of his own complex personality to Parish, Niggle's neighbor.

And bicycling was also part of Tolkien's everyday life.3 An October 1944 letter to Christopher Tolkien suggests the role that riding his bicycle played in the creative process that led to the publication of "Leaf by Niggle":

3 It is apparent from a reproduction Hammond and Scull include in their "Early Life" chapter that in addition to seeing himself as a writer and an artist, Tolkien also saw himself as a bicycle rider. In "High Life at Gipsy Green," a pencil and coloured pencil drawing that presents different aspects of the Tolkiens' daily life in the early years of their marriage,
I was riding along on a bicycle one day, not so long ago, past the Radcliffe Infirmary, when I had one of those sudden clarities which sometimes come in dreams (even anaesthetic-produced ones). I remember saying aloud with absolute conviction: ‘But of course! Of course that’s how things really do work.’ But I could not reproduce any argument that had led to this, though the sensation was the same as having been convinced by reason (if without reasoning). (Letters 101)

Niggle relied on his bicycle for errands like contacting a builder to repair his neighbor’s roof and summoning a doctor for Parish’s wife. And, turning to the time when he awakens after completing his “penance” and receives permission to go to the railway station and embark on the next stage of his journey, we learn that the train takes Niggle to a place that seems familiar. Here he sees a bicycle that seems to be his and in fact has a yellow label with NIGGLE written on it. He swiftly rides downhill, falls off his bicycle, and a green shadow falls upon him. He looks up and sees “the Tree, his Tree, finished” (103).

Tolkien’s October 1944 letter to Christopher tells of a sudden “Aha!” moment that I, since I have been bicycling to school to teach my classes for more years than I wish to recall, can relate to. I don’t know how many times I have had a sudden insight when, after hours of floundering, I finally took time to go out doors and get on my bike. But what is relevant here, as far as the “Leaf”/Life connection is concerned, is that Niggle has just been released from the Workhouse Infirmary and Tolkien was riding past the Radcliffe Infirmary. And what is more significant, as far as Tolkien’s transformation of the Everyman story is concerned, is what Niggle sees when he looks at the Tree. All its leaves are beautiful, but the most beautiful are the ones he knows were “produced in collaboration with Mr. Parish” (104).

Niggle (a representation of Tolkien’s visual artist side) and his neighbor Parish (a representation of his down-to-earth gardening side) are able, once they have emerged from their Purgatory experience, to work together to create an ideal setting that will serve, in the Second Voice’s later words, as “a holiday, and a refreshment [...] splendid for convalescence, and not only for that, for many it is the best introduction to the Mountains” (“Leaf” 112). But this is getting ahead of the story. I should note before continuing that it is at this point that Parish, who has now gained an ability to see beauty that he did not have before, says to Niggle, “This is grand! [...] I oughtn’t to be here, really. Thank you for putting in a good word for me” (“Leaf” 106). Niggle refuses to take credit for what Parish sees as the good deed that got him out of the purgatory phase of his journey sooner than he would otherwise have been able to emerge. He gives credit

Tolkien shows his wife Edith playing the piano and engaging in other activities, his young son John in his cot, and himself, in two very small representations, riding a bicycle (27).
instead to the Second Voice for their opportunity to work together to create an ideal world, an appropriate setting for Niggle’s completed Tree, with “a house in the hollow, the garden, the grass, the forest, and all the country [...] nearly complete, in its own proper fashion” (107-8).

This of course is not a precise equivalent to an appearance of Good Deeds any more than the shepherd (who will appear when Niggle and Parish have completed their garden and Niggle is almost ready to go on while Parish chooses to remain and wait for his wife) is a reincarnation of the Angel who guides Everyman on to heaven. But Tolkien does, even as he tells the Everyman story his own way, continue to include the essential features of his source.

In a letter to his son Michael dated 9 June 1941 Tolkien wrote, “There is a place called ‘heaven’ where the good here unfinished is completed; and where the stories unwritten, and the hopes unfulfilled, are continued” (Letters 55). This, it would seem, is a statement of belief that can be directly related to Shippey’s presentation in “The Silmarillion: The Work of His Heart” (J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century 226-263) of Tolkien’s commitment to tell the whole story that began with The Silmarillion and the creation of Arda, and it leads to yet another “Leaf”/Life connection.

So far I have focused on ways that Tolkien said he did not want his stories to be read. He did not like allegory of the Everyman type, allegory intended to force a message upon the reader; and he did not want readers to read his fiction with the intention of deducing what in his personal life caused him write it—even though, I might add, he sometimes pointed to the connections himself. I will turn now to consideration of what his essay “On Fairy-Stories” suggests about how he would like his story to be read.

Both the essay “On Fairy-Stories” and the story “Leaf by Niggle,” Tolkien writes, develop the symbolism of tree and leaf, and both accomplish this through “sub-creation,” a word he found useful for reference to human endeavor that relies upon the gift of imagination.

Tolkien defines the more familiar word “imagination” upon which the meaning of “sub-creation” depends as the capability of the human mind to form “mental images of things not actually present” (“On Fairy-Stories” [OFS] 46). This “gift” enables Niggle to see a vision of what his Tree can become in just “a leaf caught in the wind” (“Leaf” 88), and it can enable readers to see “the little man Niggle” as he continues to look beyond his everyday life obligations.

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4 The Oxford English Dictionary, citing the publication of “On Fairy-Stories” in Essays Presented to Charles Williams, gives credit to Tolkien for introducing this word to the language with the following definition of sub-creation: “J.R.R. Tolkien’s word for the process of inventing an imaginary or secondary world, different from the primary world but internally consistent.”
Tolkien's definition of "Imagination," then, is directly related to the way he enables us to see the single wind-blown leaf with which Niggle's vision of his Tree begins, and then to see him when he sees the completed Tree and looks forward to the Mountains and what lies beyond.

As Tolkien continues his definition of the genre in which he chose to write he finds "Escape" to be one of the main functions of fairy-stories (60), and sees no fault in this (there were things in his own world like electric street lamps that he would be happy to escape from). He then turns to "the oldest and deepest desire, the Great Escape: the Escape from Death" (67). Niggle of course cannot escape from death. The Inspector of Houses and the Driver come to his door and he knows that it is time. But the "consolation of the happy ending," or the "good catastrophe, the sudden joyous 'turn'" (68-69) is also an element of Fantasy as Tolkien defines it, and this "eucatastrophe" is what Niggle experiences when he emerges from the Workhouse and is transported to the wondrous place where he sees his Tree, completed.

In "Leaf by Niggle," Niggle's skill as a painter is a manifestation of his "sub-creative art," the "operative link" between "Imagination" and "Sub-creation," the making that human beings are capable of. And the "hard recognition" of "creative fantasy" would seem to relate to an acknowledgement that life in this world has certain requirements: gardens that provide sustenance require care, shelters from storms require maintenance, and everyone has a responsibility to respond to the need of his neighbor. But Tolkien, willing to accept its realities, is also determined to see beyond the everyday world. "We should look at green again," he writes in "On Fairy-Stories," "and be startled anew (but not blinded) by blue and yellow and red" (57), and, since Niggle is a sub-creation of Tolkien, he can be granted a "Recovery," a renewed capability to see, when he experiences his vision of the completed Tree and the beauties of the world that surround it; and Parish, also a sub-creation, is able to see beauty that he could not see before.

Tolkien gives attention to two more critical terms in the "Fairy-Story" sequence that bears the title "Recovery, Escape, Consolation." Here, having first distanced himself from the "tone of scorn or pity with which 'Escape' is now so often used" (60), he turns to consideration of "the oldest and deepest desire, the Great Escape: the Escape from Death" (67). Niggle is no more able to escape death than Everyman was. He is a mortal man and he must die. But this is not the end. After his purgatorial experience he is allowed a "Great Escape," and his story ends with the "consolation of the happy ending," or "Eucatastrophe," which, as Tolkien, the constant philologist, explains, is a word "that does not deny the existence of dyscatastrophe, of sorrow and failure" (68). Both possibilities are present in the story of Niggle. He could have accepted the scorn of the townsmen, but he does not do this. He persists in his great ambition, his
intention to complete the task to which he has dedicated himself. And this leads him to “a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief” (OFS 68).

The “primary world,” as Tolkien defines it, is the world created by God, and here he acknowledges the debt of human beings to their Creator just as the creator of Everyman acknowledged it. Tolkien’s “secondary world” is a world created by the writer of fantasy, who thus becomes a “sub-creator.” The sub-creator is a human being, himself a creation of God, who wishes in some measure to be a real maker, or hopes that he is drawing on reality. In “Leaf by Niggle” Tolkien enables us to enter a “real world” in which townsmen—with one exception, a man named Atkins who finds a fragment from the canvas on which Niggle was painting his tree, gives it the title “Leaf by Niggle,” and has it framed and placed on display—see Niggle as a “little man who never amounted to much.” And he leads us to a place where Niggle and his neighbor Parish recognize each other’s strengths and take great pleasure in working together to create, or sub-create, another world.

As Tolkien ends the story in which he extends his own abilities to sub-create to Niggle and his neighbor (and this is a radical difference from his source—Everyman had no choice but to obey Death’s command), the two are said to hear the Second Voice (who from the time he first appears takes on a role as Niggle’s defender) tell what the place Niggle and Parish have made is now called. The artist and the gardener learn that the Driver of the train who takes travelers to this place where they can find respite calls it “Niggle’s Parish,” and we, as we come to the end of “Leaf by Niggle,” hear the Porter’s report of their response: “They both laughed. Laughed—the Mountains rang with it!” (112).

And if we can take pleasure in their laughter Tolkien has accomplished his story-telling purpose. What is remarkable, or one of the things that is remarkable, in Tolkien’s transformation of a fifteenth century play intended for oral performance to a twentieth-century text to be silently read is the fact that the reader—if she listens as she reads—can hear the authority in the voice of the Inspector as he identifies himself. This is not the voice of the Messenger who serves the Creator of Everyman, Who announces that He, in His majesty, perceives that the creatures to whom He has given life are so drowned in sin that they do not know Him as their God, but the Inspector leaves no doubt that he strongly disapproves of Niggle’s failure to use the “canvas, wood, waterproof paint” (95) he has on hand—and he points to Niggle’s painting in process to show what he means when he says this—to repair damages from a recent storm sustained by his neighbor’s home, and the Driver’s two word order, “Come along!” resonates with a no-nonsense brevity as well (96).

Niggle hears the First and Second Voice debate his fate as he lies in the dark, and his hearing, though Tolkien does not say this, may be sharpened by his
dependence on this sense alone. He cannot see the two speakers, and he does not
know what is happening. All he can tell is that “There seemed to be a Medical
Board, or perhaps a Court of Inquiry, going on close at hand, in an adjoining
room with the door open, possibly, though he could not see any light” (99). And 
our hearing is enhanced by what almost seem to be stage directions. The first
voice is “a severe voice,” while the second is “a voice that you might have called
gentle, though it was not soft—it was a voice of authority, and sounded at once
hopeful and sad” (99).

When Niggle sees his Tree completed this is what Tolkien enables us to
see: “He gazed at the Tree, and slowly he lifted his arms and opened them wide”
(104), and, though we may silently read Niggle’s words from the page, when he
says “It’s a gift!” (104) we can almost hear the joy in his voice. The pleasure
Niggle and Parish take in working together when Parish arrives at the stopping
place that suddenly materialized when Niggle was freed from the Workhouse
Infirmary becomes both visible and audible, and it would be remarkable, I think,
if we could not hear their laughter when they later learn that their sub-creation
has been named “Niggle’s Parish.” We may have been long conditioned to read
words silently from the page on which they are written, but this is a joyous
laughter that we can hear in our minds.

Hammond and Scull’s closing reproduction of Tolkien’s pencil and
watercolour “The Misty Mountains” (J.R.R. Tolkien: Artist & Illustrator 208)
provides us with an opportunity to see a result of Tolkien the visual artist’s own
persistent effort to give visible form to what he envisioned as a life beyond the
world in which we live. We may not have the ability to see that Tolkien’s Niggle
had acquired by the time he was able to look beyond his completed Tree and see
the mountains of a further distance; and the men who live on in the world from
which Niggle and Parish have been transported (and this world of course is also
a product of sub-creation) have certainly not acquired that ability. Returning
briefly to that world we hear Perkins say that he never knew that Niggle painted
and Councillor Tompkins dismiss the man whose house he has taken over as “a
silly little man [...] Worthless in fact, no use to Society at all” (110). But we can
take some small comfort in learning that Atkins at least, despite the fact that
Tompkins dismisses his usefulness—Atkins is just a schoolmaster, a member of a
group the Chancellor feels might be better put to work “washing dishes in a
communal kitchen or something” (110)—valued Niggle’s life work enough to
save a leaf, or fragment, from his Tree and have it framed and placed in the
Town Museum. That Museum may have burned to the ground, taking with it the
“leaf” that Atkins rescued, but Tolkien’s story, with its lesson of persistence
rewarded, lives on.
J.R.R. Tolkien's "Leaf By Niggle": An Allegory in Transformation

Works Cited


About the Author

Marie Nelson has taught Old English, Chaucer, Heroes in Transformation, and History of the English Language, along with a number of other literature and linguistics courses at the University of Florida. She has published two books on Old English literature and a number of essays in *Speculum, Neophilologus, Oral Tradition, Mythlore* and other journals. Now a Professor Emerita, she teaches Writing about Language for the University of Florida Honors Program.

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