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It's a Wonderful Life as Faërian Drama

Abstract

Applies the principles of faërian drama Tolkien developed in "On Fairy-stories" to analysis of the perennial Christmas film *It's a Wonderful Life*.

Additional Keywords

Tolkien, J.R.R. "On Fairy-stories"; Faërian drama; *It's a Wonderful Life* (Motion Picture)

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It's a Wonderful Life as Faërian Drama¹

Christopher Garbowski

TOLKIEN is primarily known for his enormously popular *The Lord of the Rings*, which seems less a work of literature than a ticket to an imaginary world with an uncanny reality. Somewhat unfairly—except as a key to interpreting his work—little attention has been paid to his thinking on the nature of fantasy itself. Martha Sammons uses some of Tolkien's concepts from "On Fairy-Stories" to look at the religious dimension of contemporary fantasy writing in her book *A Better Country*. I would like to extend the use of Tolkien's thoughts and concepts to an analysis of artforms other than fiction writing.

The focus of my analysis will be on what I think is a major insight of the author, namely, Tolkien's claim that the primary mode of fantasy is comedy. If we accept this premise, an interesting question is: to what extent is the reverse true, i.e. is comedy largely fantasy? In order to explore this problem, I would like to examine an area of narrative art where this thesis might be tested. One of the primary artforms where comedy (if not dominates, then at least) holds a strong position is film. And I think one of the major films where comedy and fantasy meet in a splendid example of sub-creation is Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life* of 1946. More precisely, the film could be viewed as an approximation of Tolkien's suggestive notion of Faërian Drama.

To introduce the latter concept, it is helpful to first look at Tolkien as an artist. It should be pointed out that writing—or tale-telling, as he phrased it in *The Lord of the Rings* introduction—was not his only artistic pursuit. His interest in drawing and painting are well documented (e.g. Hammond and Scull). Far from accidental, this latter experimentation seems to have been an intimation of what the artist perhaps felt was the ideal artform. Befitting a writer of fantasy, this "artform" did not actually exist. In his lecture "On Fairy-Stories," he spoke of it by intimating what its effects were on those present during its—as yet!—imaginary performance:

Now "Faërian Drama"—those plays which according to abundant records the elves have often presented—can produce Fantasy with a realism and immediacy beyond the compass of any human mechanism. [. . .] If you are present at a Faërian Drama you yourself are, or think you are, bodily inside its Secondary World. The experience may be

very similar to Dreaming and has (it would seem) sometimes (by men) been confounded with it. [. . .] This is for them a form of Art, and distinct from Wizardry or Magic, properly so called. ("On Fairy-Stories" 72-73)

What may confuse a reader not familiar with the rest of the essay is the distinction between Faërian Drama and *wizardry* or *magic*. A major difference involves intent: in the vernacular of the author both of the latter use similar effects for manipulation, not *recovery*, a concept I will return to.

At the most obvious level, the passage is rather whimsical. Tom Shippey even criticizes this aspect of the essay/lecture, claiming that Tolkien talks down to his audience by pretending "that fairies are real" (45). In the context of Tolkien's comparison of drama and fantasy Faërian Drama plays the role of a kind of metaphorical construct to illustrate why he felt fantasy must remain in the realm of the written narrative: people lack the "elvish craft" to make it plausible in a more theatrical-visual sense ("On Fairy-Stories" 73). Yet there remains a visionary quality to the passage that I feel betrays a deeper notion. As it stands, Faërian Drama depicted above seems prescient of an almost plausible artistic interactive virtual reality—elvish craft has advanced considerably, even though in our Middle-earth it is indeed often inextricable from wizardry or magic. But taken together with his claim that fantasy is perhaps the highest art, for Tolkien it seems to have been the fledgling conception of an ideal artform or total art that he only hinted at.

Thus if Tolkien (with good reason) criticized fantasy in visual art as somewhat pathetic (cf. "On Fairy-Stories" 70), but nonetheless constantly fell under the temptation himself of producing it, it might be counted as simply the normal human faculty for holding certain ideals while indulging in harmless practices that betray them. At another level, however, could it not have been an expression of the striving for total art that permeated his creative consciousness? And so we might say that the artforms that he either dabbled in, such as the visual ones, or concentrated on—i.e. writing—were something of a substitute for a virtually unattainable art.

At the very least the passage on Faërian Drama suggests that Tolkien had not said his last word on fantasy and sub-creation and that his ideas on the subject can possibly be applied to other forms of artistic expression. At the visionary level, Faërian Drama can be considered the fullest embodiment of sub-creation, or Art. I think it is also worth searching for further clues on its potential in the Second

Music of the Ainur of *The Silmarillion*, where Tolkien suggests that in heaven people would act as sub-creators in harmony. Here on Middle-earth, the closest major artform of the twentieth century that approaches Faërian Drama is film. Almost from the beginning the dream-like quality of film has been noted by the critics. Moreover, its production can also be seen in relationship with the Second Music of the Ainur in that a fiction film has a multitude of authors. It is, of course, impossible in an earthly art to attain the depth, where “all shall understand fully [Ilúvatar’s] intent in their part, and each shall know the comprehension of each” (*Silmarillion* 16); nonetheless, each of the artists leaves a personal stamp on a narrative art that acquires a uniform though, at its best, polyphonic nature. And, as I will attempt to prove, Frank Capra seems to have been aware of this dimension of filmic sub-creation.

At a time when there is much excitement among Tolkien fans concerning the film adaptation of his novel, an intriguing problem arises. Is there any relationship in the fact that a number of Tolkien’s concepts are readily perceived in an artform that has most successfully imparted the concept that imbues the author’s major opus, i.e. eucatastrophe? Not to mention the fact that the concept is a key to his claim that fantasy is comedy. More precisely, Tolkien asserts that “Tragedy is the true form of Drama, its highest function; but the opposite is true of the Fairy-story” (“On Fairy-Stories” 85), and this claim introduces his discussion of the concept eucatastrophe. Thus his concept of comedy can be roughly summarized as the story that leads to the ‘good catastrophe.’

Tolkien critic Brian Rosebury summarizes the concept of eucatastrophe—which he proves to be crucial for the comprehension of *The Lord of the Rings*—as “the happy ending, against the odds, which has emotional intensity and moral fittingness” (95, cf. also 64). The “moral fittingness” is of major significance, since Tolkien understood eucatastrophe to possess an ethical-eschatological import when he suggested that the story that evoked it “may be a far-off gleam or echo of *evangelium* in the real world” (“On Fairy-Stories” 88).

If we think of the happy ending in a major artform, primarily film comes to mind. In the novel, few works of the twentieth century have matched Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* in attaining it. Perhaps that factor has contributed to its being one of the rare works of literature in the past century that has gained the popularity normally associated with cinematic works.

At its peak, Hollywood has attained impressive aesthetic successes with the happy ending. And where it works artistically, and is not simply a matter of

convention,² it seems to be related to eudaimonism, the moral philosophy positing that happiness has a solid ethical base, or some exposition of the good life, which is a major factor in the successful achievement of eucatastrophe.

Tolkien's work has also influenced Hollywood, but generally the more direct the inspiration (not to speak of the animated adaptations of his work) the more disappointing the results. For instance, there is the artistic mediocrity of George Lucas's *Willow* (1988), which takes so much literally from Tolkien, right down to halfling heroes; some scenes are utter failures, especially the battle of the white and black witches. The movie reminds us of the author's warnings concerning the banality of fantasy in visual art.

Whether Peter Jackson overcomes this barrier in his film adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings* is open to interpretation. At this stage, I feel it is best to look at fantasy in film from a more structural perspective, which is also why I have chosen to explore the question of comedy and film.

Why is comedy so important in film? The art of film contains a number of paradoxes. Firstly, one of the key elements that pulls film away from comedy is its reliance on photography and the subsequent naturalism this entails. Naturalism is hardly conducive to comedy as such.

Nonetheless, this naturalism of film was tempered in classical Hollywood productions by the *mise en scene*, i.e. the reality the camera was pointed at was transformed through the construction of theatrical sets, the placement of the actors, the use of special lighting, etc. For instance, Capra himself mentions how sets were changed so that an actress might look her best on the screen in a given shot (263-66). Perhaps this is why present day comedies, although largely forced to a greater degree of naturalism—e.g. by color photography, a minimum of studio shooting, etc.—paradoxically seem more 'artificial,' and, I would guess, have less chance of becoming classics. Take, for instance, the romantic comedy *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993), where everything seems so right, yet flat at the same time.

While discussing how historical figures are absorbed into folklore, Tolkien implies the subordination of naturalism to the 'Cauldron of Story,' i.e. to the art of storytelling ("On Fairy-Stories" 52-57). The naturalism of photography may distract us from the fact that this is also what occurs in most, if not all, fiction-film art, but in classical Hollywood in particular. The story is most important, even visually.

Perhaps more important than 'subordinating' naturalistic effects, however, is the fact that the fiction film must tell a story in a relatively short period of time -

approximately two, perhaps three hours. This means its narrative is much closer to the short story or novella than to the novel, to which it is often compared. The short story as a form has been thought of as approaching the fairytale, i.e. it is structurally quite close to fantasy. I would think it also not without meaning that the motion picture is often viewed in company, thus it is of necessity a more extroverted art than, say, the novel, which is typically read—and created—alone, thus prone to musing on the tragic side of experience.

Although it is largely coincidental to my argument, it is worth remembering that Tolkien felt *The Lord of the Rings* should be read aloud. This signifies that in such a presentation his story could potentially likewise be open to a communal reception, and though this does not necessitate its comic import, it is more than congruent with comedy.

As suggested above, a film with a number of elements of Faërian Drama is *It's a Wonderful Life*. Most Americans are familiar with the story of the ambitious George Bailey, who, seemingly trapped in his hometown of Bedford Falls, in a moment of despair is driven to attempt suicide; and how after encountering his guardian angel, Clarence Oddbody, Angel Second Class, the despondent hero is eventually convinced of the worth of his life. The film is also a cinematic *tour de force*, with a breath-taking narrative pace in the naturalist opening sequence, and then a brief but intense fantasy sequence—called the Pottersville or Dreamland sequence by critics—where the entire preceding story is effectively overturned, both at a narrative and stylistic level.

Before proceeding with the film's analysis, it is worth looking at Capra's relationship to fantasy. With hindsight, it becomes relatively easy to see that much of the filmmaker's work is permeated with a sense of fantasy. His *Lady for a Day* of 1933 is an obvious reworking of the Cinderella story, a common enough theme in Hollywood. Capra's fairly simple story—with the mother working among the 'cinders' so the largely absent daughter can believe she is a princess—has an interesting climax. At a late juncture in the film the heroine realizes her clever ruse, which was supposed to ensure her daughter's happiness, will likely fail. After a heroic inner struggle, Apple Annie decides to tell her daughter's fiancé's wealthy father the truth about her poverty and only child's background. Of course she is never allowed to tell this truth—even Capra could not have pulled off an ending where Apple Annie tells the truth and her daughter still marries her handsome prince. Nevertheless, her resolve to tell the truth at the critical juncture is beyond doubt, and this almost gives the crucial moment an air reminiscent of that of the

Biblical story of Abraham not being allowed to sacrifice Isaac once he has demonstrated his resolve to carry out God's will. And, not unsimilarly, Apple Annie is rewarded at that very moment with the highest reward Hollywood can bestow upon a heroine: happiness. It is this moral moment that gives the film its strength and leads to the genuine eucatastrophe of the ending.

Capra himself seems to have realized the close connection between film and fantasy, yet the audiences of the Depression era did not possess the self-awareness to allow the fantasy to be served in a less adulterated form. Since they wanted a naturalist coating to their fantasy, when Capra dared explore the potential of film in this direction, as in *Lost Horizon* (1937), he was punished at the box office.³ In some ways this was also the case with *It's a Wonderful Life*, which was only modestly successful commercially, and suffered a couple of decades of near-oblivion. More significantly, in his masterpiece Capra was able to find a formula where he could give vent to the potential of film for fantasy while satisfying the audience's demand for naturalism.

However, before concentrating on *It's a Wonderful Life*, it is worth examining more closely *Lost Horizon*, Capra's most unadulterated fantasy before the classic that particularly interests us. Tolkien claimed that myth has three main concerns: the Fall, Mortality, and the Machine (*Letters* 145). Superficially, Capra's Shangri-La treats our desire for Eden, the earthly paradise. More accurately, the focus of the tale is on the eternal relevance of the theme of the Fall. The passengers of the high-jacked plane are given a chance to re-enter Eden, and while some minor characters take this opportunity, Robert Conway, the protagonist, ends up leaving. Instead of heeding his deepest intuition concerning the truth of Shangri-La, he listens to his alter ego, embodied in his egotistical and cynical brother. It is worth noting that George Bailey is in no small measure a composite of these two brothers, which makes him a full protagonist, whereas the others are complimentary characters.

In reference to our earlier mention of the comic structure of film, *It's a Wonderful Life*, a black and white Hollywood classic, possesses the discussed attributes simply by virtue of being what it is: an approximately two-hour studio film comedy. There is also, as mentioned above, the pure fantasy sequence of the film. As I will try to demonstrate, there is another perspective that makes the film far more interesting for us.

Tolkien has written that much of the early part of the Silmarillion mythology concerns the nature of sub-creation (*Letters* 188). The same could be said in relation

to a good deal more of the Middle-earth mythology. This is also true in the case of *It's a Wonderful Life*. The reflexive nature of the film has not escaped the critics (e.g. Sklar 212); following the opening prayer sequence, it seems as if 'God' the director is presenting a film within a film to the viewers. Paying closer attention to the sequence where George Bailey's "guardian angel" is selected, it can be noted that Capra in fact presents what is quite close to a definition of sub-creation. It is not God, or even the superior angel, referred to as "Sir," that presents the "flashback" sequence for Clarence's education, but Joseph, who himself is in a subordinate position to both. Joseph, obviously Capra's alter ego, is a filmmaking sub-creator.

Like a filmmaker, Joseph struggles with limitations. Despite the gravity of his task, he must work with an angel who possesses "the IQ of a rabbit." His superior, however, sees deeper into the qualities of the angel, and it is up to Joseph to be able to bring these to the fore, much as a director must bring out the best in his (or her) actors and crew.

Clarence is more like a mixture of hobbit and elf than a traditional angel. One of Shippey's observations concerning Tolkien's use of sources is also valid in the case of Capra: "The strong point of [his] 're-creations' is that they take in all available evidence" (55). In particular, Capra utilizes the common folk tradition of the spirits of the departed becoming angels. Clarence, who as a person apparently lived most of his life before the American War of Independence, becomes something of a latter-day Rip Van Winkle in the film. Capra also takes advantage of the technical limitations of cinema at his time. Traditionally (although not in Biblical tradition itself), angels are represented with wings. Capra, obviously aware of how ludicrous this would appear on screen with the available cinematic effects, came up with the brilliant story device of Clarence needing to 'earn' his wings, thus not requiring them for the visual narrative. And there is the effective made-up folk-like belief of bells ringing when angels finally do get their wings, which tests whether a character is open to the enchantment of life.

Joseph must prepare Clarence for his 'role' as guardian angel, which gives rise to the superb flashback sequence making up the body of the film. At the crucial moment of the film when they meet, George Bailey simulates a difficult audience that must be won over, while Clarence embodies the 'actor' who has this extremely difficult task, for which he seems ill equipped, to say the least. This again relates an important truth about filmmaking sub-creation: the director is behind the scenes, while the actor actually confronts the audience.⁴ In *It's a Wonderful Life*,

however, the actor and the audience meet head on, sans intervening screen. Thus the situation has evolved to something approximating pure Faërian drama.

Tolkien wrote of fantasy that one of its primary functions is what he called recovery, which he summarized as helping people in not simply “seeing things as they are,” but rather in “seeing things as we are (or were) meant to see them” (“On Fairy-Stories” 77). In *It's a Wonderful Life* Capra also asks himself the question: what is the primary goal of art? Much as with Tolkien, the answer is ultimately ethical, or rather a meeting of the aesthetic and the ethical. The key problem in the film is not so much what leads George Bailey to attempt suicide, the alleged focus of its naturalist sequence, but rather his declaration that he wishes he had never been born. This declaration is George's ticket to Faërie, which the reader of “On Fairy-Stories” knows is a perilous realm.

In *The Lord of the Rings*, the sequence in which the protagonists most intensely experience Faërian drama is when they look in Galadriel's mirror. Galadriel declares that the mirror can show many things, but it is most profitable to see things unbidden. In Capra's Pottersville sequence, George sees that which he fears most: his own social non-being which separates him from the ones he loves.⁵

Much as in Middle-earth, the happy ending, or “joyous turn,” in *It's a Wonderful Life* seems temporary. Critics have noted, among other things, that Potter is actually stronger at the end of the film than at its beginning. Thus we do not have closure in the traditional sense, but rather a juncture after which nothing can remain the same. As Tolkien (parenthetically) claimed, fairytales never really end (“On Fairy-Stories” 86), which is one of the signs of their hidden realism.

One of *It's a Wonderful Life's* critics implies that Capra does not really answer the key question of why one should live (Sklar 219). This is hardly surprising, since it is not something an artist can answer for us. Through Faërian Drama, however, our awareness of the potential enchantment of life can be heightened. The artist who produces it must be on the side of life, and this can scarcely be doubted in Capra's classic. As psychologist David Myers epigrammatically puts it, one of the keys to happiness “isn't getting what we want, it's wanting what you have.” The theme of *It's a Wonderful Life* could hardly be stated more succinctly, and it is not difficult to see how this is consistent with the concept of recovery, which in (Tolkien's and the Inklings') practice has often meant focusing on the miracle of the ordinary.

As cited above, Tolkien wrote of Faërian Drama that the “experience may be very similar to Dreaming and has (it would seem) sometimes (by men) been

confounded with it.” What this implies about its nature is the person’s freedom to discount or reject it, much as does Nokes, the cynical cook in Tolkien’s *The Smith of Wootton Major*. The consequence of such a rejection is being robbed of the opportunity of *recovery* that has been proffered with its corollary of grasping the potentiality of the present. When second-class angel Clarence grants George Bailey participation in Faërian Drama, the latter is also free to reject it—which he almost does. Equally free is the viewer when we see the protagonist rubbing his eyes while he leans on a bridge railing, as if waking from the Pottersville dream.

Leland Poague astutely observes that George’s main antagonist is not Potter, but his own indecisiveness over what he wants from life (208-22). In the engagement sequence, Mary Hatch forcefully asks George: “What *do* you want?” There are a number of hints in the film that what he really wants is not what he actually verbalizes. His experience of Faërian Drama and ultimate acceptance of it allows him to transcend the inertness of his ego to learn that what he had wanted was so close at hand.

Many years after completing the film, Capra cited the five-century-old words of Fra Giovanni as a kind of motto to *It’s a Wonderful Life*: “The gloom of the world is a kind of shadow. Behind it, yet within reach, is joy. There is a radiance and glory in the darkness, could we but see, and to see we have only to look. I beseech you to look!” (qtd. in Bassinger ix).

Critics often prefer darkness. Jenny Diski is not alone among them when she claims that *It’s a Wonderful Life* is one of the “darkest films I know.”⁶ Her arguments have considerable force: aside from the miraculous (or ‘Faërian’) intervention, the film paints a dire picture of George Bailey’s life indeed. Thus from the so-called realist’s stance, the happy ending is easy to discount, whereas the artist who uses it must painstakingly create the dark side of his or her world in order for the eucatastrophe to be genuine. It might be added that this is undoubtedly true of Middle-earth as well: even with its ‘joyous turn’ in *The Lord of the Rings*, the extended denouement of the novel evokes the sense of the mere fleeting respite from evil, more evidence that the imaginary world stands on terra firma.

Faërian Drama is where the aesthetic and the ethical meet. With the importance of storytelling to its essence, Faërian Drama is often entertaining, which helps ensure that the moral does not degenerate into moralism, and in itself it has the ethical import of the affirmation of life. The reader or viewer is free to accept or reject this affirmation. Nonetheless, the task of the artist is to “beseech us” to look toward the light.

Notes

1. This article extends a couple of ideas that were suggested in my book on Tolkien, *Recovery and Transcendence for the Contemporary Mythmaker*, and extracts several passages from it. At the time of writing I was also teaching a film course, which accounts for my slightly unusual association of Tolkien's ideas on fantasy with film comedy. I believe the field can be explored considerably further.

2. Of course, Hollywood has also bastardized the happy ending for commercial reasons, as is brilliantly expressed in Robert Altman's *The Player* (1992) in the corrupt Hollywood executive Griffin Mill's formula for the successful movie: "violence, laughter, sex, nudity, hope, the happy-ending." In other words, moral fittingness is replaced by having your cake and eating it too. A popular moral philosophy, if not a very ethical one.

3. For evidence that Capra was not alone in this respect, we should remember that despite the fact that it was aimed at children, the most famous pre-war fantasy classic, *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), did not do particularly well at the box office when it was released.

4. The German director Wim Wenders in his film *Wings of Desire* (1987), a film that is something of a remake of *It's a Wonderful Life*, also uses this angel/actor metaphor to drive his story. In the film, Peter Falk plays "Peter Falk," who claims to have been an angel who decided to become a human being "about thirty-five years ago." In relation to the time of the film's production, this would be approximately when Falk launched his screen existence. It may be a coincidence, but Falk in his comic everyman character is not all that unlike Henry Travers, the actor who plays Clarence in *It's a Wonderful Life*.

5. Leland Poague makes this point in one of the best analyses of *It's A Wonderful Life* (186-222). The critic observes that the overt purpose of his visit to 'Pottersville', i.e. to show George how much good he has done in life, barely seems to make an impression on him (196).

6. Jenny Diski's brief article on *It's A Wonderful Life* is quite revealing. She openly admits to being embarrassed by her infatuation with such a heartwarming classic—with the recognizable quality that earned Capra's art the derisive term "Capracorn"—so she concentrates on the film's dark side. This dark side is undoubtedly present and attests, among others, to its less apparent sophistication. It is my contention that such criticism often throws the baby out with the bath water. One is reminded that Tolkien's observation—"that the heroic or tragic story on a strictly human plane is superior [to myth]" ("*Beowulf*" 15)—is largely a matter of taste. Moreover, one element of alleged 'darkness' merely reveals the critics' bias: George's marriage to Mary is frequently considered his falling into the trap of a conventional life. Refreshingly, Poague states the obvious and proves that George and Mary were meant for each other (211-12).

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