Gondolin, Minas Tirith and the Eucatastrophe

Lisa Anne Mende
Gondolin, Minas Tirith and the Eucatastrophe

Abstract
Comparing the tragic end of Gondolin with the eucatastrophic rescue of Minas Tirith. Similarly, other tales in The Silmarillion end tragically while parallel stories in Lord of the Rings have happier resolutions.

Additional Keywords
Sarah Beach

This article is available in Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature: https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol13/iss2/8
Soon the canvas became so large that he [Niggle] had to get a ladder; and he ran up and down it, putting in a touch here, and rubbing out a patch there.

From "Leaf by Niggle" [1]

Like his autobiographical character Niggle, J.R.R. Tolkien was a perfectionist. Indeed, his perfectionism and obsessive revising made him a publisher’s nightmare. To Tolkien, his finished works were "...wholly unsatisfactory, and yet very lovely...." (Ibid., p. 89) The fact that he was an obsessive reviser is well known to scholars and has led to the popular interpretation that his later fictional works are actually revisions of his earlier ones. This case can successfully be made for The Lord of the Rings as a revision of The Silmarillion. Upon closer observation, however, when we take into consideration Tolkien’s religious beliefs and morals, it can be argued that The Lord of the Rings is a resolution rather than a revision of The Silmarillion. To illustrate this point, the relationship between several myths which appear in both The Silmarillion and The Lord of the Rings will be examined. In all cases, the tales are essentially the same in both books. Their ends, however, are usually polar opposites; the Silmarillion myths have a tragic ending, while the same tales in The Lord of the Rings are given a happy ending.

The means by which these tales are resolved vary, but they are all distinctly Christian. They include confession and absolution, resurrection, and, most importantly, eucatastrophe. An example of each type of resolution will be examined.

One means of resolution is confession and absolution. This is best exemplified by comparing Isildur’s death at the Gladden Fields with Boromir’s demise at Parth Galen. In terms of similarities, both tried to take and/or keep the Ring; both were in some way betrayed to their deaths by the Ring; and both were shot and killed by the Orcs in or near the River Anduin. However, as in all cases of resolution, the major difference in the tales is their endings.

Isildur succeeds in cutting the Ring from the hand of Sauron and insists on keeping it, even against the advice of Cirdan and Elrond:

This I will have as reparation for my father, and my brother," he [Isildur] said; and therefore whether we would or no, he took it to treasure it. But soon he was betrayed by it to his death. [2]

Boromir tried first to persuade Frodo to give him the Ring, and then he tried to take it by force:

...If any mortals have claim to the Ring, it is the men of Numenor, and not Halflings. It is not yours save by unhappy chance. It might have been mine. It should have been mine. Give it to me! (FotR, p. 516)

In the end, both Isildur and Boromir were betrayed to their deaths by the Ring, and both died near the Anduin (in Isildur’s case, in the Anduin). However, there is no record of any repentance on the part of Isildur. Boromir, however, twice confesses to Aragorn that he tried to take the ring, the first time halfheartedly, and the second fully:

...I urged him to come to Minas Tirith and not to go to the east. I grew angry and he left me." (FotR, p. 523)

'I tried to take the Ring from Frodo.' he
Glorfindel is instrumental in defending Frodo against company meet a High Elf named Glorfindel, and Gandalf ended up on the pinnacle of Zirakzigil. The Eagles, bears Fingolfin’s body to a mountain-top which overlooks Gondolin from the north (S, p. 154), and the Nine Riders during his crossing of the Ford of Bruinen. In The Silmarillion, another High Elf named Glorfindel slays a Balrog in the Eagle’s Cleft during the flight from Gondolin. The Glorfindel of Gondolin is slain in his battle with the Balrog. This begs the question, is this the same Glorfindel? If so, he would be the only example of one of the Eldar being reincarnated in Middle-earth. However, because The Silmarillion as we know it was incomplete, I have a feeling that something would have changed. Perhaps the name of the Elf in Gondolin would have changed when Tolkien revised The Silmarillion to bring it into consistency with The Lord of the Rings. In any event, it is an interesting inconsistency.

Resurrection is one of the most sacred Christian events and is tied very closely with the third, and most important, means of resolution in The Lord of the Rings: the eucatastrophe. The Lord of the Rings is rife with eucatastrophes. We see it in the appearance of the Huorns and Gandalf at Helm’s Deep; in Gandalf’s return from death; and most certainly, in Frodo’s destruction of the Ring. However, eucatastrophe as a means of resolution is best exemplified in the relationship between Gondolin in The Silmarillion and Minas Tirith in The Lord of the Rings. The cities are structurally, politically, and historically similar; in some cases, Tolkien even uses the same language to describe the two. The ultimate fates of each city, however, are radically different. It is this difference that holds the key to resolution.

The physical descriptions of Minas Tirith and Gondolin are strikingly similar. The view of Minas Tirith that greeted Pippin, "...the walls passed from looming grey to white, blushing faintly in the dawn...." [5], echoes Tuor’s first sight of Gondolin: "...the white walls of the city, flushed with the rose of dawn...." [6] The way into Gondolin was "...barred by seven gates. Minas Tirith was "...built on seven levels... and about each was set a wall, and in each wall was a gate." (RK, p. 25) The highest level of Gondolin was the Tower of the King, before which were a fountain and images of the Trees of Valinor (S, p. 240). The Citadel of Minas Tirith contained the same elements (RK, pp. 26-27). Both cities also had secret exits. Idril had a secret way prepared out of Gondolin prior to its fall (S, p. 241), and a secret path led out of Minas Tirith to the mountain hallow "...where only the kings had been wont to go." (RK, p. 307)

Both Gondolin and Minas Tirith were in the unique political position of being the last survivor of three realms. Of the three great Elven realms of the First Age, Gondolin alone remained after Doriath and Nargothrond were sacked (S, p. 313, 237-240). In Gondor, Minas Ithil was taken by the Ringwraiths, Osogiliath was deserted, and Minas Tirith was the sole survivor (RK, p. 320).

It is interesting to note that the rulers of the two cities were related, although of different kindreds. Aragorn, the rightful heir of Gondor, was descended directly from Turgon, the king of Gondolin (S, pp. 305-306). The rulers of the cities (or their descendents) also bore the brunt of the hatred of their respective ages’ Enemies: "Now the thought of Morgoth dwelt ever upon Gondor; for Turgon had escaped him, of all his foes that one whom he most desired to take or destroy." (S, p. 196); "But his most hated, had escaped him... therefore, after a while he made war upon the exiles...." (RK, p. 393) Here we must note that Aragorn was the heir of Elendil, and that when Sauron found out that an heir of Elendil lived, it was a great blow to him (RK, p. 62).
Historically, Gondolin and Minas Tirith share one important element: in origin, both were remnants of realms in exile. Turgon was among the Noldor who were exiled from Valinor (S, pp. 78-90); Elendil and his sons, Isildur and Anarion, were the leaders of the Faithful, the exiles of Numenor (Ibid., pp. 279-281). It is in their histories, however, that the difference between Gondolin and Minas Tirith lie. Gondolin was a city of Elves and Minas Tirith a city of Men. This is a relatively minor point because the differing fates of the cities were far more important. Gondolin, through treachery, was besieged and destroyed by the forces of Angband (Ibid., pp. 238-245). On the other hand, Minas Tirith survives the assault of Mordor and 'passed into a new age' (RK, pp. 95-126, 139-152, 290).

The question must now be asked: Why do the tales of the Third Age (Boromir, Gandalf, and Minas Tirith) have positive endings if their historical and literary predecessors (Isildur, Pinglofin, and Gondolin) have tragic ends?

Perhaps the answer is that Tolkien wanted to resolve the tragic tales in The Silmarillion, rather than revise them. To understand further the difference between resolution and revision, some explanation is necessary. Revision is defined as the preparation of a newly edited version or a modification; a corrected or new version. Resolution can be defined as a conclusion, or in a musical sense, the progression of a dissonance (i.e., tragedy) into a consonance (i.e., the happy ending). Resolution implies the end of a cycle, started in the First Age and ending in the final overthrow of Sauron in the Third Age.

In each case, the resolution of the examples cited earlier is a Christian belief or sacrament. Confession and absolution is one to the holiest sacraments; resurrection is, perhaps, the very root of Christianity; the belief in the eucatastrophe is the optimistic message of the resurrection.

Minas Tirith was saved by perhaps the most sacred of Christian beliefs, the eucatastrophe. The city was besieged by the hosts of Mordor... The battles of Gondolin and Minas Tirith are alike in many respects. As with any battle, the sieges of Minas Tirith and Gondolin both had their share of disasters. The fall of the High Nazgul was accompanied by the death of Théoden and the serious injury of Eowyn and Merry. In the fall of Gondolin, Turgon was killed; in Minas Tirith, Denethor is driven to madness and commits suicide. In both cities, the defenders are outnumbered, the gate is destroyed, and the ruler of the city gives up before all is lost (LT, pp. 172-197; RK, pp. 95-126). The tale of Túr's rescue of Ecthelion (LT., p. 181) is even retold as Gandalf's rescue of Faramir (RK, pp. 114-115). There was, however, no cavalry to ride to the rescue of Gondolin; no fleet sailed up Sirion to its aid.

At this point, we should note an important difference between the placement of the earlier myths in their Age and the later myths in their Age. For the most part, the Silmarillion myths occur in the middle of the Age, whereas The Lord of the Rings resolutions occur at the end of the Third Age. In the case of The Silmarillion, the story is not yet far enough along for resolution. The eucatastrophe of the First Age is Earendil's successful voyage to Valinor — the eucatastrophe is not for Turgon's generation, but for his grandson's. In the case of Isildur and the Ring, his tragic end comes in the middle of the history of the Ring. Again, the story is not yet ripe for a final resolution.

Eucatastrophe, "...the good catastrophe, the sudden joyous 'turn'..." [7] is very closely related to Tolkien's religious beliefs and to what he called "sub-creation." Sub-creation, as defined by Tolkien, is the art of creating a secondary world and a belief therein. For sub-creation to be successful, it should mirror true creation; for the secondary world to be believable, it should mirror our primary world.

Probable 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; and hopes that the peculiar quality of this secondary world (if not in all the details) are derived from Reality, or are flowing into it. If he indeed achieves a quality that can be fairly defined by the dictionary definition: "inner consistency of reality," it is difficult to conceive how this can be, if the work does not in some way partake of reality. The peculiar quality of the "joy" in successful Fantasy can thus be explained as a sudden glimpse of the underlying reality or truth. It is not only a "consolation" for the sorrow of this world, but a satisfaction, and an answer to the question, "Is it true?" In the "eucatastrophe" we see in a brief vision that the answer may be greater — it may be a far-off gleam or echo of Evangelium in the real world. (Ibid., pp. 70-71)

Tolkien adhered to a faith founded on eucatastrophe: "The Birth of Christ is the eucatastrophe of Man's history. The Resurrection is the eucatastrophe of the story of the Incarnation. The story begins and ends in joy." (Ibid., p. 72) This belief in the sacredness of resurrection and eucatastrophe, coupled with his view of sub-creation, gives an insight into why Tolkien might have chosen to resolve The Silmarillion.

First of all, to Tolkien, the Christian story "... is supreme; and it is true... Legend and History have met and fused." (Ibid.) Secondly, because Tolkien believed that sub-creation should mirror our primary...
world, why should there not be a sort of "Christianity" in his secondary world? The answer is that there should be, as evidenced by Boromir's abdication. Gandalf's resurrection, and the eucatastrophe of Minas Tirth. The Christian influence brought to Middle-earth is evidenced in ways other than resolution. It is a strange coincidence that the day Frodo sets forth from Rivendell on his quest is December 25, Christmas Day, and the day on which the Ring is destroyed is March 25, the Feast of the Enunciation.

The very nature of Christianity is optimistic, based on the ultimate triumph of good over evil. The sub-creator of Middle-earth was a devout Catholic and believed in this optimistic faith, and he passed this belief into his sub-creation. Tolkien, the Christian, could not in good conscience allow evil to triumph again.

In each example, we see evil trying to work its will, only to be beaten off by some Christian belief. For Boromir, the lust for the Ring was too much to fend off. Yet in the end, Boromir confesses this sin to Aragorn and dies with a clean conscience. I personally have no doubt that he finally passed over the sea. He was forgiven.

Gandalf fell defending the members of the Fellowship against one of the most powerful evil beings left in Middle-earth, and it appeared that his guidance, wisdom, and motivation were taken from the Free Peoples of the world too soon. Yet he was sent back to complete his task, truly a eucatastrophe, and a miracle to those who thought he was gone.

Minas Tirith was on the brink of disaster, and the Rohirrim suddenly appeared to turn the course of the battle. Each time that evil is on the verge of a victory, there is some sort of saving grace, a eucatastrophe, just as the eucatastrophe of Christ's resurrection saves Man in the Bible. The Christianity of the primary world is mirrored in Tolkien's secondary world.

As shown by examples above, the dissonances of the first victory of Evil (in The Silmarillion) are resolved into the harmony of the victory of Good (in The Lord of the Rings) by the Christian influence brought into Middle-earth by its sub-creator. Tolkien, the Christian and the sub-creator, it seems almost inconceivable that The Lord of the Rings would end in any way other than a happy ending:

The Evangelium has not abrogated legends; it has hallowed them, especially the "happy ending"... So great is the bounty with which he has been treated that he [man] may now, perhaps, fairly dare to guess that in Fantasy he may actually assist in the efflorescence and multiple enrichment of creation. All tales may come true.... (Ibid.)

NOTES

ACKNOWLEDGMENT
I would like to thank Dr. Robert Boenig of Rutgers University for his advice and assistance in the preparation of this paper.

Old Germanic Ethics, continued from page 12

Submissions of art are strongly encouraged and requested. They may be drawings of scenes from, or thematic treatments of, the works of Tolkien, Lewis, and/or Williams, as well as general treatments of fantastic and mythological themes. Art should be 4 1/2" wide and from 1 to 5 1/2" tall. Full page art should be 7 1/2" wide by 10" tall. Address inquiries to the Art Editor (see page 2 for address).