



Mythopoeic Society

mythLORE

A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis,
Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature

Volume 12
Number 1

Article 6

10-15-1985

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Thomas Egan

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Recommended Citation

Egan, Thomas (1985) "Tolkien and Chesterton: Some Analogies," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 12: No. 1, Article 6.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol12/iss1/6>

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Tolkien and Chesterton: Some Analogies

Abstract

Examines links between Chesterton and Tolkien “developing from a mutually strong religious conviction as regards their Catholicism, especially in its medieval historical experience.” Sees a number of parallels between Chesterton’s poem “The Ballad of the White Horse” and the values and events of Tolkien’s major work.

Additional Keywords

Chesterton, G.K.—Influence on J.R.R. Tolkien; Chesterton, G.K. The Ballad of the White Horse (poem); Tolkien, J.R.R.—Influence of G.K. Chesterton

Tolkien and Chesterton: Some Analogies

Thomas Egan

The influence of Gilbert Keith Chesterton on modern writers has traversed some unusual corners: Karel Capek (science fiction), Max Beerbohm (short story of quiet irony), George Bernard Shaw (plays of drama/comedy), C.S. Lewis (theological apologetics), and Evelyn Waugh (satirical novel) among others. So far though, no one has gone into the relationship and/or similarities between Chesterton's fantasy and that of J.R.R. Tolkien -- the world of "Middle-earth."

I hope to show the links as developing from a mutually strong religious conviction as regards their Catholicism, especially in its medieval historical experience. Then, Tolkien's philosophy of fantasy literature will be matched to Chesterton's fictional work, most particularly the epic poem, "The Ballad of the White Horse". The latter bears not a little resemblance to Middle-earth and its turbulent history and figures. A study of both should give us a better understanding of how modern myth works.

In terms of background influences both of these men came to stress certain common themes and ideas for their fantasy fiction despite sharply contrasting lifestyles. Chesterton (1874-1936) was always the fiercely combative journalist, quick to engage in public controversy (and bring it into his fantasy works). He was the eternal optimist, cheerful and witty to a fault. And an unashamed "medievalist" as a corrective to the public life of his day. [1]

John Ronald Reuel Tolkien (1892-1973) on the other hand was the eternal scholar, a quiet introspective teacher of ancient languages and medieval culture. His beliefs stressed a sense of loss, the tragic quality in life that so many critics have noted in his Middle-earth fiction. [2] Of course, Tolkien was never a philosophical pessimist, nor was Chesterton ever so foolish as to believe transcendent evil could be laughed away with clever wit.

The central link between the two men was their religion. Both were converts to Catholicism. Chesterton converted only after a long internal intellectual struggle as an adult in his 30s (formally only in 1922 at age 48). Tolkien, though, converted as a child along with his mother in 1900 at age eight. Both felt the sharp loneliness of their religious situation in a non-Catholic, often hostile, English culture. But both were fervent believers -- without lapsing into the mire of fanaticism, they both felt that their Catholicism should form the basis of one's total life. Chesterton's works all testify to this, and his Autobiography lets his deepest religious convictions shine forth in detail.

Tolkien's position is more complex withall than Chesterton's. He believed in a common assumption with GKC that the enemies of ordinary decent life were the enemies of the Faith, that England and the Western nations in general were threatened by a series of growing errors and conceits we can call "secular humanism." Both saw the West as a marred and hidden Christendom of independent nations; religious enthusiasm here mixed for both writers with a fierce local patriotism, a pride in ethnic heritage or "roots." Both loved the "little England" of rustic

shires, small towns, eccentric customs and laws; the sense of propriety everywhere and lack of ideology, and finally, the loyalty/love for "hearth and home." Both saw moral and religious values embedded deeply in the above. (They rejected the political/social ideal of a Great Britain with its world-girdling empire where "the Sun never sets" and a society of constant change due to Industrial Progress). Yet Tolkien could not bring himself to the kind of public apologetics Chesterton constantly indulged. [3]

Like Chesterton, Tolkien held no opinion half-heartedly, but his realization of the corruption that lies about each aspect of God's creation, including human "free-will," made him attempt to avoid in his fantasy fiction the clear-cut battle-cry of "Cross and Crusade" that Chesterton's fantasy novels and Father Brown short stories portray. The theme is not so much Heaven versus Hell, but Purgatory -- the need to purge oneself through pain and sacrifice in this life and in the next. Pain here has a purpose, sorrow a transcendent meaning -- and this Tolkien will make his key to the developing Mythos of Middle-earth. [4]

To this Purgatory theme Tolkien added his scholarship in medieval studies and linguistics: the religious ideals of medieval Catholicism brought forth a rich tradition of Natural Law, "right reason" as it applied to the core workings of human life in both its practical and spiritual dimension. All the major studies of Tolkien to date stress this influence of Catholicism and its view of Natural Law in the workings of Middle-earth. [5]

The result, though, has an unusual twist for readers and critics alike: Tolkien's decision to deliberately avoid overt religion in his Middle-earth saga. There are no references to Christ or Catholicism in his pages, and only one reference to God directly ("The One") in his The Lord of the Rings (in an appendix). Yet Middle-earth's social structure of varied beings, its arguments over power, authority and free-choice, the assumption of a basic moral code of absolute values to be accepted or rejected are things deeply linked to traditional Catholic views of metaphysics and Natural Law. Tolkien adapts to his tales the "dress" of life-styles of medieval northern Europe. The life style of the modern and even the ancient city are alien to Middle-earth -- as it is to Chesterton's fantasy works. [6]

The religious coherence between Chesterton's fantasy and that of Tolkien is dependent on this shared assumption of the medieval Schoolmen's use of Natural Law. Tolkien's fear that his Christian ideals could be turned into allegory and a form of clever propaganda against the unwary (one of his criticisms against C.S. Lewis' Narnia tales -- as reported by Humphrey Carpenter in The Inklings) made him grasp this theme of a Natural Law "environment" for his Mythos. Medieval philosophers accepted the unity of all aspects of Truth, assuming a hierarchy of pre-Christian values which embodied implicitly Christian beliefs. Thus, most of the prominent pagan philosophers like Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Seneca, the Stoics, etc. were considered pre-figurations of teachings of the Church;

most pagan cultures were assumed to have a greater or lesser degree of Natural Law truth within them but clouded by men's sins and passions. Within this understanding medieval writers could create works full of implicit acceptance of orthodox doctrine but without overt references to the Church of revealed doctrine: works ranging from Boethius' On the Consolation of Philosophy (A.D. 524) to St. Thomas More's A Dialogue of Comfort (1534); from St. Thomas Aquinas' solemn Summa Contra Gentiles (pure Aristotlean reason) to the raucous animal fables and fabliaux of 1300-1500. As a living culture, medieval Christendom absorbed large elements of pagan culture without serious complaint. Ancient mythic figures and heroes were recast into Christianized literary uses (e.g. the legends of Vergil, the Romances of Alexander the Great, the pagan-Christian symbiosis in Beowulf, etc.) -- and Natural Law ideas entered into a bewildering variety of popular forms, even the strange lapidaries and bestiaries.

Seeing this, Tolkien's implicit use of the Natural Law ethos becomes more understandable. This choice of approach allows him to both touch the very basis of life, human and Creation as a whole, with his deepest beliefs without worrying that Middle-earth might be seen as a proselytizing "trick," as well as to escape the problems of historical accuracy if he linked his fantasy with a real chronological medieval era.

Chesterton used medieval culture as both a model to imitate for its Christian-corporate ideals and as a "stick" to beat down the abuses of modern Industrial Britain. This is quite evident in both his verse and fiction (such as The Ball and the Cross, the Horne Fisher stories of The Man Who Knew Too Much, and The Napoleon of Notting Hill among others). But his greatest work that comes closest to Tolkien was the verse epic "The Ballad of the White Horse." Originally published in 1911, Chesterton revised it a number of times throughout his life -- as Tolkien started his Middle-earth tales in 1917 with poems about The Silmarillion, and was still revising the latter till the day of his death in 1973. [7]

To see the link between Tolkien and Chesterton here we must examine the key essay, "On Fairy Stories." Originally written by Tolkien in 1938, it was revised several times before reaching its final form in 1964, and currently appears in The Tolkien Reader (Ballantine Books, New York, 1966 -- reprinted several times since). Tolkien charts his literary philosophy here, giving his fiction the character of "myth" -- and interpreting the latter implicitly as part of the tradition of a medieval Christian view of Natural Law. This mythic view of Natural Law links Chesterton in his "Ballad" especially with him who is "The Master of Middle-earth".

Chesterton first appears in the above essay in a surprising light. He is praised for his contribution to fantasy literature, but then chided for the limitation of his approach. Tolkien sees that for most folk there is the danger of perceiving everyday reality -- people we know, habits of thought, work that gives one's daily bread, things of Nature, even ideas of the "commonplace" -- as banal and trite. Thus, we tend then to move toward the gaudy, the "showy", the innovative for its own sake in all fields. It's the "junk food" of the soul that Tolkien -- and Chesterton -- despised so much, and which is everywhere so much in our modern life on a mass level. Tolkien then stresses the need

above all else to regain a clear view: -- the need for recovery of the wonder-of-life:

Of course, fairy-stories are not the only means of recovery, or prophylactic against loss. Humility is not enough. And there is (especially for the humble) Mooreeffoc, or Chestertonian Fantasy. Mooreeffoc is a fantastic word, but it could be seen written up in every town in this land. It is Coffee-room, viewed from the inside through a glass door, as it was seen by Dickens on a dark London day; and it was used by Chesterton to denote the queerness of things that have become trite, when they are seen suddenly from a new angle. That kind of "fantasy" most people would allow to be wholesome enough; and it can never lack for material. But it has, I think, only a limited power; for the reason that recovery of freshness of vision is its only virtue. The word Mooreeffoc may cause you to suddenly realize that England is an utterly alien land, lost either in some remote past age glimpsed by history, or in some strange dim future to be reached only by a time-machine; to see the amazing oddity and interest of its inhabitants and their customs and feeding-habits; but it cannot do more than that: act as a time-telescope focused on one spot. Creative fantasy, because it is mainly trying to do something else (make something new), may open your hoard and let all the locked things fly away like cage-birds. The gems all turn into flowers or flames, and you will be warned that all you had (or knew) was dangerous and potent, not really effectively chained, free and wild; no more yours than they were you. [8]

Ironically, this warning against possessiveness is echoed constantly by Chesterton -- although Tolkien doesn't seem to realize it -- in his verse and prose. It is interesting, too, that in an aside Tolkien makes clear his distaste for the worst aspects of our technological era -- "the Robot Age." Chesterton's intense suspicion of the ultimate effects of technology on human culture is well known; besides his writings, he preached and organized for many years a semi-medieval economic system called "Distributism." Tolkien uses a Chestertonian witticism to show the paradox of the continuing obsolescence of the cult of modern change ("Long ago Chesterton truly remarked that, as soon as he heard that anything 'had come to stay,' he knew that it would be very soon replaced -- indeed regarded as pitifully obsolete and shabby"). [9]

Unlike the cult of modern change/flux, Tolkien's essay stresses man's need for wonder and how the Fairy Tale embodies this. Its roots lie in the ancient sagas and epics which give out a spell of awe. The story-teller touches the roots of man's being (a form of Natural Law here) by becoming a true Creator; he molds the facts and sensory impressions of our Primary World of physical Nature into a "sub-creation" of a Secondary World of the human imagination. Through this the contrasting realities of Nature and man are reconciled, and the latter can be freed from the curse of arrogant pride and the love of domination -- until finally, man can touch the Transcendent. This is the ultimate achievement of the Fairy Tale Mythos. [10]

Although the world he deals in is literary

fantasy, Tolkien has molded a true form of Natural Law philosophy here. By a careful rational process of cause and effect, cited empirical evidence (the common-sense nature of man to literature in History), he moves to theology — by way of the strange and wonderful (and terrible at times) realm of Faerie. The latter's literature needs three themes: (1) "recovery" (already noted); (2) "escape"; and (3) "consolation." The first is the re-gaining of a freshness of vision about our world of the senses, to see its "magic." The second involves the flight from evil — from trivial items to death itself. The third is the delight of all readers in a "Happy Ending," the re-creation of a normalcy when things are "put to rights."

This last theme brings the culmination of the eucaastrophe, the greatest of all Happy Endings. It is the "good disaster" which Tolkien uses to go directly into theology. It should be remembered that this is a literary tradition going back to the 14th century Middle-English poets who speak of Adam's "happy fault," i.e. the Original Sin which leads at last to Christ the Second Adam and thus Salvation. The technique of using disaster as a means of salvation from evil (in all its forms) will be constantly invoked in Tolkien's Middle-earth fiction from The Silmarillion to The Lord of the Rings. It has indeed the ring of Christian Providence and, as a technique, is the highest form of fairy-tale and the latter's highest function. For Tolkien indeed, the Christian Story and its doctrine is a veritable Mythos, the greatest Fairy Tale and myth of History ever conceived — since it is really true:

The Gospels contain a fairy-story, or a story of a larger kind which embraces all the essence of fairy-stories. They contain many marvels — peculiarly artistic, beautiful, and moving: "mythical" in their perfect, self-contained significance; and among the marvels is the greatest and most complete conceivable eucaastrophe. But this story has entered History and the primary world; the desire and aspiration of sub-creation has been raised to the fulfillment of Creation. The Birth of Christ is the eucaastrophe of Man's history. The Resurrection is the eucaastrophe of the story of the Incarnation. This story begins and ends in joy. It has pre-eminently the "inner consistency of reality." There is no tale ever told that men would rather find was true, and none which so many sceptical men have accepted as true on its own merits. For the Art of it has the supremely convincing tone of Primary Art, that is, of Creation. To reject it leads either to sadness or to wrath. [11]

As the touchstone, or model, for all others (given the real nature of fairy-tales as a whole), Tolkien cannot fail but make his Middle-earth impressed with the Christian Mythos. For it is indeed a "myth" as Tolkien intended to make his own tales to be.

The importance of Tolkien's convictions above can be seen in Clive Staples Lewis (1898-1963) who gave full credit to Tolkien's arguments on the "realism" of Christian doctrines for his own conversion in 1929-30. It was Lewis who made a life-long cause of defending Christian doctrine and its link of Natural Law. He himself confessed that he owed an enormous debt to the logical structure of the Chestertonian paradox in his autobiographical Surprised by Joy wherein he discusses Tolkien, Chesterton, and the magic of fantasy-myth.

Extensive correspondence between Tolkien and C.S. Lewis on this subject is reproduced in Humphrey Carpenter's The Inklings. One key conversation between the above in September 1931 over the necessity of myth-creation shows the latter's relation to "ultimate truth":

But, said Lewis, myths are lies. even though lies breathed through silver.

No, said Tolkien, they are not.

You call a tree a tree, he said, and you think nothing more of the word. But it was not a 'tree' until someone gave it that name. You call a star a star, and say it is just a ball of matter moving on a mathematical course. But that is merely how you see it. By so naming things and describing them you are only inventing your own terms about them. And just as speech is invention about objects and ideas, so myth is invention about truth.

We have come from God (continued Tolkien), and inevitably the myths woven by us, though they contain error, will also reflect a splintered fragment of the true light, the eternal truth that is with God. Indeed only by myth-making, only by becoming a 'sub-creator' and inventing stories, can Man aspire to the state of perfection that he knew before the Fall. Our myths may be misguided, but they steer however shakily towards the true harbour, while materialistic 'progress' leads only to a yawning abyss and the Iron Crown of the power of evil. [12]

Tolkien seems to have felt that modern England needed a national myth of some kind — to confront its own rootlessness and its lack of connection to its past identity. Carpenter's authorized biography stresses this point in all of the Middle-earth tales. Chesterton, too, constantly harped in his many works on the disharmony between modern Britain and its medieval greatness. As his "Ballad" notes we moderns are indeed a "strange people left on earth after a judgment day." [13]

Chesterton's views on myth seem to strongly coincide with those of Tolkien, most particularly in The Everlasting Man (among GKC's other writings). He explores the universal nature of myth there — and notes how the major threads of pagan myths throughout man's history finally come true in the Christian Story (all the stories of virgin-births of gods come true in the Virgin Mary and the Incarnation; the death-and-rebirth fertility cults come true in the Resurrection of Christ; human sacrifice becomes Christ's Sacrifice, etc.). Chesterton evinces a strong respect for the idea of myth and its relation to truth here — without sacrificing his spirit of enthusiastic "chivalry" against moral and religious evil which he proclaims (and which Tolkien in a quieter way expresses in his fiction). Neither one, of course, had any use for the modern "de-mythologizers" from the Biblical Higher Critics to Rudolf Bultmann and his school of thought.

The idea of a mythic tale identified with an historical warrior-hero and king (Alfred, 871-899 A.D.) was part of Chesterton's imagination for the most of his life. The "White Horse" in the Berkshire Hills of England has much of the mystery and glamour for Britons as Stonehenge, and the untold centuries of its

existence fascinated Chesterton, as his Autobiography notes:

a memory of a long upper room filled with light . . . and of somebody carving or painting with white paint the dead head of a hobby-horse; the head almost archaic in its simplification. Ever since that day my depths have been stirred by even a wooden post painted white, and more so by any white horse in the street; and it was like meeting a friend in a fairy-tale to find myself under the sign of the White Horse at Ipswich on the first day of my honeymoon . . . this image has remained and memory has constantly returned to it, and I have even done my best to deface and spoil the purity of the White Horse by writing an interminable ballad about it. [14]

There are certainly elements similar to Tolkien in the above, the idea of "sub-creation," and even more in the style of imagery conveyed by Chesterton in the poem itself. Elves and dragons and gods of old are evoked (though nothing of folklore or the supernatural ever appears — excepting the two visions of the Virgin Mary); it's a mood for Middle-earth indeed, a somber one, with great battles and heroes and tragedy aplenty to fight gigantic evil forces, shaking a whole world.

The opening stanzas of Book I, "The Vision of the King," show the flowering of mythic imagery that is kept throughout the work:

Before the gods that made the gods
Had seen their sunrise pass,
The White Horse of the White Horse Vale
Was cut out of the grass.

Before the gods that made the gods
Had drunk at dawn their fill,
The White Horse of the White Horse Vale
Was hoary on the hill.

Age beyond age on British land,
Aeons on aeons gone,
Was peace and war in western hills,
And the White Horse looked on.

For the White Horse knew England
When there was none to know;
He saw the first oar break or bend,
He saw heaven fall and the world end,
O God, how long ago.

For the end of the world was long ago
And all we dwell to-day
As children of some second birth,
Like a strange people left on earth
After a judgment day. [15]

"The Ballad of the White Horse" is a celebration of real history when the Anglo-Saxon peoples were fighting for their very lives and culture under their greatest leader against the savage Danish invaders. King Alfred represents the first ruler of a united English people and their resolve to create a Christian civilization in Britain. As such, he is a figure of legend and warrior-heroism throughout the ages. His moral character has always been part of the legend and of the tradition on monarchy in England. Tolkien's Aragorn is the equivalent to Alfred — he represents the beginning of the Age of Man, "the Fourth Age," in Middle-earth. As a "legitimate king" both in exile and

in power, his historical antecedents are carefully stressed as is his warrior-status and heroism. Realism and idealism are carefully balanced in his character — as they are in Alfred. Neither man is made without defects, but both have the moral strength to overcome these.

The sense of history is important to both writers in order to gain their readers' respect for their philosophy of truth and myth. People have to have the sense of the real before going on to the "eternal verities." Thus, in place of the barbarian Danish invaders, Tolkien gives us the savage Orc armies as a destructive force against all types of civilization and moral order. Just as nihilistic effects of the Vikings are stressed by Chesterton all through his Ballad, Tolkien insists on the moral/metaphysical horrors let loose by Morgoth and Sauron in the earliest ages of primeval Earth up to the War of the Ring itself. One basic level of our interest as readers is the age-old storyteller's ability (both Tolkien and Chesterton) to attract our interest and sympathy in the underdog's struggle to survive alien conquerors who vastly outnumber him.

Tolkien insists on the need for a sense of realism in his "On Fairy Stories" and his prose is based on the pretense of using ancient historical records (such as the Hobbit Red Book of Westmarch and the Elf lays and epics of The Silmarillion). It is notable that neither he nor Chesterton in any of their essays or works of fantasy ever suggested their creations were "dream-fantasy". They stressed the concrete details of their worlds, borrowing heavily from the England they knew — and then, expanding on these details, they gave a sense of new creation, yet with links to the old. The Shire is the best of the simple pleasures of the England Tolkien loved, while "The Ballad" relishes the rugged hills and woods without sentimentalizing the hard life of the ordinary man and woman (cf. Chesterton's realistic views of Alfred in part IV, "The Woman in the Forest").

Of course, the transcendent theme of "The Ballad of the White Horse" is the gradual maturing of Alfred's spiritual nature, including his role as a ruler. To this is added the conflict of Christendom versus "heathenness", of human decency and "free-will" against the pagan despair and nihilism of the Viking hordes. Christian references are plentiful and more than surface "dressing."

Tolkien's stress on the transcendent is more complex because his stories are laid in a pre-Christian setting. Yet the sense of evil fought is something more than folklore monsters or barbarian raiders. The entire character of his primeval world — before "our" recorded history — and its races of "beings" maintains a Natural Law ethic with many hints of Christian sacramental aspects (proto-types?). In his original cosmology, The Silmarillion, he sketches the framework of love and moral/physical order combined, which the Divine Creator (Eru/Iluvatar) planned for Arda (Earth) and Ea (the Universe). The whole of the four works collected for The Silmarillion make up a type of Old Testament with a deliberately archaic Biblical style of language adopted by Tolkien for this purpose. Told from the viewpoint of a pre-human race, the Elves, we see all the sins of "man" laid forth; we see here the Eden of Valinor, also temptations of pride and the Fall developed. God/Eru exercises His Providence and intervenes directly in human/elfin history. There are the primal "Wars in Heaven" between the angelic hosts of the Ainur ("Holy Ones"), both good and evil.

Christian angelology is combined with Nature myths of ancient peoples as well as the pagan heroic epics of old. The result can be seen in the character of the Valar and Maiar (Tolkien's guardian-angels of the Earth) and in the acts of Morgoth and Sauron (devil figures combining aspects of the Christian Apocalypse and the Hebraic apocryphal Book of Enoch -- remember Satan is called in the New Testament "the Prince of this world"?). Hell appears in a number of ways, from the ultimate spiritual Abyss to the varied infernal regions on or under the Earth (Mordor in LotR, Angband and "the pits of Utumno" in The Silmarillion). They are described like the medieval art of old churches or the paintings of Hieronymus Bosch.

Tolkien gives the impression of looking at Creation and its aftermath in a way of "filling in" the gaps left by the Bible. It's an alien universe at first sight; yet we are continuously left with the impression we've seen all this somewhere else. [16] Both Chesterton and Tolkien see the evil they fight in their respective works as more than mere destruction and physical slavery -- evil is the essential distortion of reality, of God's plan for His entire Creation. Nothing is evil by its own nature in its beginnings -- it takes an act of will to start one on the progressive road to evil acts and attitudes (Tolkien shows this as cosmology in the "marring" of Arda by Morgoth in his "Ainulindale" and "Valaquenta"; Gandalf the Wizard shows this too in the Ring epic). Chesterton's "Ballas" strives to show that behind the symbol of the Danish invaders as paganism's moral and religious errors, there are real human beings who evoke our pity as well as fear (Cf. Book III, "The Harp of Alfred", wherein the Danish leaders and their varied ideas of the universe are brought forth, and later, the destruction of them in battle with Alfred leads to our pity as they lay about as mutilated corpses).

In his use of paradox in the story of Middle-earth, Tolkien echoes Chesterton. Ironically, his eucaastrophe themes bear in theory not a little resemblance to Chestertonian paradoxes -- although Tolkien never seems to have realized this. (Chesterton in his fiction is generally much more explicit in letting his readers know the nature of his "seeming contradictions" than Tolkien; the latter invites a leisurely reflection rather than wit in his use of the paradox-of-disaster.)

How Chesterton would love the irony involved in seeing the humblest and least sophisticated among the peoples of Arda -- the Hobbit folk represented by such as Bilbo Baggins and Frodo -- effect an entire cycle of History for the world! After all the fierce battles and frenzied contests between great warriors and supernatural evil, it is the "simple" of heart and station in this world-epic who can defeat the superior might and tactics of Satanic evil. Sauron miscalculated at the "littleness" of the Hobbits, and lets loose a chain of events which, with Frodo and Sam's courage and faith, leads to the overthrow of the demon-prince at the Crack-of-Doom. The clever Saruman for all his Machiavellian deviousness and statecraft falls to a stupid ruse by a young "halfling," losing the vital weapon of the palantir. Later overconfidence costs this corrupt wizard his last power and his very life (Cf. "The Battle of Helm's Deep" in Vol. II, and "The Scouring of the Shire" in Vol. III of LotR).

All the figures of evil in Middle-earth are given the initial advantages (as Chesterton does with the Danish invaders and their warchiefs around Guthrum). It is their very power which will act as their weakness --

making them choose deeds whose consequences both authors explore to the full. The figures of paradox include Frodo, Sam Gamgee, Elrond, Galadriel, Boromir, and even the cowardly evil Gollum (whose greed at the end is the instrument of Frodo's maiming, and yet the salvation of both the hobbit and Middle-earth itself). Paradox as used by Tolkien shows us "the Testing of the Hero"; this is the purgatorial cleansing of character which leads to spiritual maturity. Suffering is bitter medicine, but sharply necessary for hobbits and kings alike. Without it, human character remains a paltry thing, human free-will a creation of speculation. With its acceptance as a "thing of the Spirit," it can teach a hobbit to see beyond the mediocrity of his Shire life, and an Aragorn to learn the hard knocks of life from exile and battle as an apprenticeship for real kingship. The very title of the epic, "The Lord of the Rings," is a form of Chestertonian paradox -- the real master of the Ring of Power which can offer the hope to control all life is he who can reject it, and then willingly destroy it.

Chesterton hammers out the character of Alfred's role as king and man in the fugitive existence of the early part of the "Ballad." Alfred must lose his realm to the Danes at first, despite his Christian crusader status and his personal decency. Otherwise, he will never mature into a true understanding of power and its dangers spiritual and temporal. He learns the paradox of the bittersweet joys and sorrows of daily life in exile, and can smile at his situation as a bard singing tales to the Danes in their own camps. He learns the final paradox of humility as his visions of the Virgin Mary progress to an ever sharper reality. His defeats lead to final victory over the pagan enemy -- and he learns all his lessons of rule therein. In Book VIII Chesterton shows a victorious King Alfred tempted by his loyal but complaining subjects -- to resume a path of conquest against the remaining Danes, thus gaining more worldly power and fame. Like Frodo and others in the Ring epic, Alfred resists temptation. Like them too, he does not get total surcease from pain with his moral victory. There is a melancholic note (not pessimism) at the end of "The Ballad," even with Alfred's conquest of London. He knows that his temporal victories, important as they are for Christendom and his people, will not annihilate evil. The White Horse will always have to be scoured against the weeds of the future paganism. And the function of Purgatory will remain thus, too.

The melancholia in the Ring epic is muted by the Hobbit festivals in The Shire ("hearth and home" is celebrated at the beginning and end of the adventures as a sign of normalcy). But the essential tragedy is there, and Frodo realizes it in his own final exile -- after Sauron the Dark Lord and Saruman the corrupted Wizard are both defeated and sent to the final Abyss of the after-life. Victory over the Ring starts "the Fourth Age", the era of Man. This is the end of the Time of Magic, the Faerie -- and all creatures who belong to it (like the Elves) must depart this world for Aman the Blessed where the guardian-angels of the Valar dwell. Frodo has been so touched by evil and suffering that he elects to go with the elves.

Isobel Murray in her recent article comparing William Morris and G.K. Chesterton touches on some of the above points:

In masterly fashion, Chesterton combines the tripartite pattern of old ballads and fairy stories with a careful selection of the

miscellany of men that form Alfred's Christian "England."

The last Book, "The Scouring of the White Horse," covers the rest of Alfred's reign: men wonder that he is content to leave Northern England to the Danes and to govern Wessex, but Alfred yearns for something smaller, "local patriotism" again. The White Horse is scoured, and in Alfred's age the Danes return. His vision tells him that always "the heathen shall return," with Chesterton making a clear contemporary reference. As it happens, Alfred wins again and takes London, but weeds cover the Horse, and the poem ends with an affirmation of the transitory nature of victory. The message is not unlike Tolkien's in The Lord of the Rings, that evil constantly recurs and it is the duty of each man in his time to do his best against it, and have faith. [17]

Both authors stress that the nature of Evil is embodied throughout with an essential despair-of-the-spirit. In Chesterton's poem, Guthrum and his chieftains Harold, Elf, and Ogier all show this cult of nihilism, lacking belief in Man's "free-will." (Cf. Book III, "The Harp of Alfred".) Sauron, too, is described as a being of emptiness for all his power as an incarnate Maiar, an angelic order; those closest to him in power, the Nazgul (wraiths of evil human kings), are similarly described. [18]

The chief cause of this evil that "bedevils" man (and all intelligent beings) is the passion, a veritable lust, to possess things and men alike. Chesterton in his fiction sees this manifested in modern usury which meant the final loss of the traditional small-property owner, and a general movement to "giantism" (from monopolies in business to the idea of "Great Britain" itself). "The Ballad" identifies its conflict as a duel between the desire to possess as domination (Guthrum and his Danes) and the wish to use things in their proper manner, even a country's patriotism (King Alfred and his cause -- he resolves against being an English Imperialism even to fight the heathen Danes).

The lust to possess is the evil curse that certainly haunts all the strange tales of cosmology of The Silmarillion (e.g. the silmarils themselves are not evil, but the desire to possess the jewels corrupts all), the child-like story of The Hobbit (Smaug embodies the folklore tradition of the dragon as greed incarnate, and there are the selfish possessive culture of the dwarves), and the grand tapestry of The Lord of the Rings (the Ring is built out of the evil power of Sauron, and tempts all beings to achieve total power -- even if they wish to use the Ring only for good). Tolkien identifies this lust as the chief reason why modern life has become so trite, boring and meaningless. [19]

There are many other similarities between the "Ballad" and the Ring epic. Thus, King Alfred at the start of the poem forms a fellowship with Eldred (the rugged English farmer), Mark (a Roman villa owner/manumitter of his slaves), and Colan the Gael (a tribal, primitive warrior); they represent the social world of Alfred's England (Book II). This can be put against the Fellowship of the Ring which embodies the society of the legitimate order of Middle-earth: the four Hobbits, the Wizard Gandalf, the Elf Legolas, the dwarf Gimli, and the two human warriors. Rivalries and

tensions exist in both fellowships, but the ideal of comradeship for a grand ideal survives the suffering and deaths that occur till the goal is reached. Both Chesterton and Tolkien respect their protagonists' individuality, but the battles they portray are apocalyptic -- signaling world change and the survival of the moral order. They overflow with a vividness of realistic detail and action and a strong love for human courage.

Besides the above epic elements, there is the question of magic. The supernatural-folklore element is far more muted in Chesterton. In its place we have the two visions of the Virgin Mary to Alfred. With the supernatural, though, human free-will must remain the heart of each of these worlds, the real "hinge" on which Chesterton's and Tolkien's stories depend. Scholars have noted this prominently in the conflicts of Middle-earth when the races of the "free peoples" (hobbit, elf, human) make decisive choices for good or evil both as groups and individuals -- choices which merge into "destiny" and change history into new channels of life. [20]

Chesterton's use of the Virgin Mary in her appearance to King Alfred on the eve of the decisive battle of Ethandune is significant. She is not allowed to become a deus ex machina -- Alfred must trust his own skills and courage (and that of his men) to defeat the Danes (Book VII). The miraculous and human free-will can co-exist here.

Moreover, a raw animal cunning is allowed by both authors to be a realistic part of their theme and use of free-will. As generals, both Alfred and Aragorn (the future True King of Gondor) make use of tricks to outbluff the enemy. They must, since both armies are vastly outnumbered by their respective enemies. Victory will go to the righteous -- but only if they are willing to make full use of the wit God/Eru has given them. (The Hobbit allows Bilbo full use of wit and trickery against evil -- whether it's Smaug, the goblins, Gollum, the wood-elves, or even his allies like Thorin).

The final thrust in both works is the need for social harmony; temporal success re-creates an ideal medieval hierarchy where each community or group within the larger society works out its just duties and privileges without selfishness or cruelty. In Book VIII (the last of the "Ballad") Alfred's victory as king means the restoration of justice and protection to all (with the punishment of evil-doers), as well as the revival of prosperity and civilization for his sector of Christendom -- while reaching out its branches to all the world. Again, the poem's imagery turns mythic:

And he [King Alfred] gathered the songs of simple men

That swing with helm and hod,
And the alms he gave as a Christian
Like a river alive with fishes ran;
And he made gifts to a beggar man
As to a wandering god.

And he gat good laws of the ancient kings,
Like treasure out of the tombs;
And many a thief in thorny nook
Or noble in sea-stained turret shook,
For the opening of his iron book,
And the gathering of the dooms.

Then men would come from the ends of the earth,

Whom the King sat welcoming,
And men would go to the ends of the earth
Because of the word of the King.

For folk came in to Alfred's face
Whose javelins had been hurled
On monsters that make boil the sea,
Crakens and coils of mystery.
Or thrust in ancient snows that be
The white hair of the world.

. . .

And men went forth from Alfred's face,
Even great gift-bearing lords,
Not to Rome only, but more bold,
Out to the high hot courts of old,
Of negroes clad in cloth of gold,
Silence, and crooked swords,

Scrawled screens and secret gardens
And insect-laden skies --
Where fiery plains stretch on and on
To the purple country of Prester John
And the walls of Paradise. [21]

Tolkien's Aragorn, Alfred's counterpart, represents "The Return of the King;" he is as Elessar the crowned monarch, the embodiment of the best of the past -- a conservative reformer. As the True King he expands Gondor (without making it a conquering empire); he renews contacts with all the world of Middle-earth, including the barbarian Easterlings and the negro Haradrim kingdoms (after Mordor is destroyed). He spreads peace and "right-order" to all beings and social orders of Middle-earth (Ents, dwarfs, men, hobbits, and elves). Instead of the symbolism of Chesterton's White Horse, we are given the "White Tree." This mystical plant goes back to the very beginning of the world, being nurtured by the Valar from the light of Creation. Chesterton's opening stanzas in his poem give a primordial mythic quality to the figure of The White Horse -- witnessing like the White Tree the constant changes in our troubled world. Each of these symbolizes both purity of ideals and life, and the ultimate power of righteousness. They are true life-symbols, life not as "survival of the fittest," but as moral order for Christendom (and even for a pre-Christian Natural Law). [22]

Much else could be said about the similarities between Chesterton and Tolkien in their works -- and much too, of how they differ as they use the same themes of "recovery," "escape," and "consolation." This must suffice for now. The Road to Middle-earth has many paths, and Chesterton's fantasy is surely one of these.

NOTES

1 Doubleday still publishes a number of Chesterton's apologetics' writings such as Heretics, Orthodoxy, and The Everlasting Man in its Image Books section of Anchor. Chesterton's Autobiography is quite valuable here (London, 1937) as well as the best biography to date, Maisie Ward's Gilbert Keith Chesterton (London, 1944; Doubleday Image). For his fantasy novels, cf. Rev. Ian Boyd, The Novels of G.K. Chesterton (London, 1975).

2 These critics include: Robley Evans, J.R.R. Tolkien: Writers for the Seventies (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1972); Paul Kocher, Master of Middle-earth: The Fiction of J.R.R. Tolkien (1972), published by Houghton-Mifflin in hardcover and by Ballantine in paperback.-- I use the latter; Randel Helms, Tolkien's World (Houghton-Mifflin, 1974); Humphrey Carpenter's Authorized biography, Tolkien (Houghton-Mifflin, 1977/ Ballantine, 1978 -- I use the latter); Carpenter also has much valuable information on Tolkien's beliefs in The Inklings (Houghton-Mifflin, 1979) through his letter and those of his literary friends, High-Church Anglican and Catholic, in Oxford group.

3 Carpenter, Tolkien, pp. 58-294. Cf. above books also.

4 Ibid., p. 144. On purgatory, cf. Tolkien's "Leaf by Niggle" in Tree and Leaf (1964) and Kocher's study of the Tolkien books. The melancholic note is quite prevalent throughout the five source-books of The Silmarillion (Houghton-Mifflin, 1977) and shows how rational beings created by Eru/God always allow pride and the lust for possessions to destroy the good possible in Life.

5 Cf. references in Note 2, especially Kocher's work, c. III-IV.

6 Carpenter, Tolkien, pp. 99-122, 142-145, 146-158, 186-193; Kocher, Master of Middle-earth, pp. 75-121: "The Free Peoples".

7 The Collected of G.K. Chesterton (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1960), pp. 205-299: "The Ballad of the White Horse"; pp. 16-17, 53-60, 74-75, 77-79, 80-82, 115-117, 122-123, 134-135, 137-139, for e.g.'s of medieval poems; Carpenter, Tolkien, 100 ff.

8 The Tolkien Reader, pp. 58-59.

9 Ibid., p. 61; cf. Chesterton's own newspaper, GK's Weekly.

10 The Tolkien Reader, 17ff., pp. 62-68.

11 Ibid. ("Tree and Leaf"), pp. 71-72.

12 Carpenter, Tolkien, pp. 163-164: emphasis is author's.

13 Collected Poems, p. 208; Carpenter, Tolkien, pp. 100-101.

14 Autobiography, p. 36.

15 Collected Poems, p. 208.

16 Carpenter, Tolkien, pp. 102-103.

17 Isobel Murray, "Pilgrims of Hope: Aspects of the Poetry of Morris and Chesterton" The Chesterton Review, Vol. IV, no. 1 (Fall/Winter, 1977-78), pp. 28, 30.

18 Kocher, Master of Middle-earth, pp. 52-74.

19 Ibid., pp. 60-61; The Tolkien Reader, "Tree and Leaf", p. 58.

20 Kocher, pp. 74-121; Evans, J.R.R. Tolkien, pp. 140-142.

21 Collected Poems, pp. 286-288.

22 Kocher, Master of Middle-earth, pp. 142-151. Cf. The "Quenta Silmarillion" on the history of the original White Tree through the ages.

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