In The Forge of Los: Tolkien and the Art of Creative Fantasy

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Abstract
Examines a number of concepts in Tolkien’s works—fall and redemption, good and evil, transcendence and transformation, touching on creativity, fate, and the hero’s journey along the way. Relates the final stage of the hero-journey, bringing back the boon, to the role of the artist in maintaining a sense of Recovery in our relationship with the world.

Additional Keywords
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Hope that you may understand:
What can books of men that wive
In a dragon-guarded land,
Paintings of the dolphin-drawn
Sea-nymphs in their pearly wagons
Do, but wake a hope to live
That had gone with the dragons?

W.B. Yeats

J.R.R. Tolkien begins his essay "On Fairy-Stories" by saying that he is an "a. a. th. attempting to speak on such a subject is a rash adventure. "Faerie", he says, "is a perilous land, and in it are pitfalls for the unwary and dungeons for the overbold. It is a realm of beauties both enchanting and dangerous, and of "joy and sorrow as sharp as swords." Tolkien states that although he has long read and thought about fairy-stories, he has never studied them professionally and has been a "wandering explorer" in the Perilous Realm, "full of wonder but not of information."

Faerie is not a land in which one can travel and return with a survey map. While there it is "dangerous to ask too many questions lest the gates be shut and the keys be lost." (Ibid.) To use fairy stories or tales of creative fantasy "as a quarry from which to dig evidence or information", no matter what the approach, is to go contrary to their very nature, and is likely to "lead such inquirers into strange judgements." (Reader, p. 18.) The Perilous Realm is so called because it exists outside the bounds of Reason, even though the two provinces exist symbiotically. Essential to the real understanding of the mythic dimension is that sense of wonder which is a part of human nature and much older than archaeology or scientific analysis.

In keeping with Tolkien's counsel, this is not an analytical study which proposes to dig for information and tie ends together. It is a journey, a reflection on the human adventure through the focus of some of Tolkien's ideas on Good and Evil, the Fall, and the Redemptive process, both artistic and Christian. Leaving traditional map and tools behind and with only the Star of Earendil (or Bethlehem) for guide, we will join in partnership with him and his friends of Middle-earth in their heroic effort to keep the flame of imagination kindled in the face of the Shadow. Finally, we will experience the process by which the people of the Enchanted Country transcend the barriers between their world and ours, and return with us in spirit to be our allies against our own kind of darkness.

I. "The mind inside us is vaster than the world outside."

As beings made in "the image and likeness" of God, we are endowed by our Creator with absolute freedom of will and imagination. The human sub-creator has the right to exercise this gift at any time in the formation of its own universe ex nihilo. We have at our command one of the most powerful tools of Enchantment conceivable: language. The moment the mind frees itself from preformed notions and fits words together in a new way, whole worlds open up. Tolkien reminds us of the origin and literal meaning of the word "image-ination"—the creation of images in our minds and the projection of them onto the world around us on our own internal world. (Reader, p. 46.) This power is as awesome as anything in Faerie, if we are only reminded that we have it.

Less "civilized" men and women made much greater use of imagination and evocative language than we do. Their close relationship with trees and animals, their personification of nature and awareness of its force and immediacy are seemingly lost to us. But the longing for these abilities is still with us no matter how deeply we sink into forgetfulness. It is on the "shadowy marches" of Faerie that we sometimes manage to recover them. (Ibid., p. 9.)

Our "fairies" may have been banished to the nursery and forcibly diminished into flower-sprites who "either try to be funny and fail or try to preach and succeed", but the Perilous Realm itself is another matter. That country has an existence which is unaffected by the changing nature of our world and perspectives. ...elves are not primarily concerned with us or we with them. Our fates are sundered and our paths seldom meet. Even upon the borders of Faerie we encounter them only at some chance crossing of the ways."

But besides elves, dragons, and other beings whose existence is held to be dubious by the so-called "real" world, Faerie holds the seas, sun, moon, sky, earth, and all things in it...and ourselves, mortal men, when we are enchanted." (Reader, p. 9.)

It is our ability to enter at will into this state of Enchantment which enables us not only to read tales and fairy-stories, but also to exercise our gift of sub-creation. But both the enchanted and sub-creative states require a basic lack of self-absorption. We must be able to move easily outside ourselves, to conceive of unlikely situations and empathize with other created beings even as primitive people could with animals, trees, and rivers. We have the power to "make immediately effective by the will the visions of fantasy" (Ibid., p. 22.) but we must be willing to allow our creatures the same freedom of movement as we ourselves are given.

Creative fantasy...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. (Ibid., p. 59.)

The "elvish" art of Enchantment "produces a Secondary World into which both designer and spectator
can enter in perfect freedom. No enslavement or possessiveness of spirit can possibly exist there. We see this come to life in Middle-earth where the Elves are reluctant even to give advice. (Fellowship, p. 123.) Theirs is "not to counsel, only to know what is, and was, and what may be," (Ibid., p. 462.) only to maintain the beauty and peace of Lothlorien and Rivendell against the growing power of Evil. The land of the Elves is the realm of imaginative truth. Magic, by contrast, (in the sense that Tolkien employs the term, "pretends to produce an alteration in the Primary World", and desires power over the spectator rather than a shared experience. The Magician becomes the Necromancer (Sauron) in Tolkien's fiction. He seeks control of the "ontological" world (Ibid., p. 53.) through a "Morbid Delusion" (Ibid., p. 55.) of power to which he himself ultimately falls prey because of his own inability to conceive of the workings of any mind but his own. The parallel to Christian mythography is obvious. Jesus' "Kingdom" is a Secondary World, a realm of the Spirit which we can inhabit freely as we walk the earth if we so choose. Satan, however, demands our enslavement in return for his aid in altering our situation in the Primary World, as demonstrated in the legends of Theophilus, Faust, and others.

II. Fall and Redemptive Process

In the cosmography of William Blake, the Fall comes about through the separation of the reasoning principle (Urizen) from imagination, sensuality, and emotion. Western man has concentrated almost exclusively on the cultivation of the rational side of human potential. This has brought about a loss of intuitive perspective. The principle of poetry and imagination, whom Blake names Los, is himself in a fallen state because our perceptions are fallen. We suffer a great diminishment of our ability to empathize, to conceive of "otherness"; a decrease in communication with other living creatures and with the kingdom within us (or Perilous Realm). We even forget that such abilities are part of our human heritage.

In Tolkien's cosmography it is this "Fall from Imagination" which is the root cause of all forms of sin, and this proves true in both primary and secondary worlds. When we stop seeing the world through the clearness of imagination, we begin to appreciate only the material. We seek to turn the intangible into something tangible and we account what we can securely "possess" of much greater value than what we cannot. No mere object is intrinsically evil, but our attitude can quickly make money and valued objects appear so in the sense that they foster the desire to possess and dominate things and other people. We easily fall prey to what Bilbo Baggins would call the "dragon-sickness", a total enslavement of the mind to our "treasure-board". Sometimes this happens so slowly that we are hardly aware of the process, or of the fact that things could be any other way.

A more subtle danger than pure gold-lust is the tendency toward "appropriation" of our surroundings, where they become so familiar that we cease to notice them. We become possessive of our experiences, and own them so completely that they become trite, "like all the things which once attracted us...and we laid hands on them, and locked them in our hoard, acquired them, and acquiring cease to notice them." (Reader, p. 58.) We lose our sense of wonder at perceiving the Earth and its creatures; they become mere objects for us to exploit at will. If we still remembered our Celtic heritage, would we have behaved so unfeelingly toward our great forests? And one can imagine the horror of the "primitive" native Americans at the sight of the white barbarians riding over the plains, slaughtering the sacred buffalo for no reason except that they were there!

Nor does the evil brought about by this lack of ability to empathize with other life forms stop with animals and trees. Its worst manifestation is its divisive effect on races and individual human beings. Perception of differences without imagination leads to judgement without empathy or compassion and to the idea that one's own beliefs and knowledge are superior and should be imposed upon others. On an individual scale, this leads to intolerance and unhappiness; on a larger scale, to intolerance and war. Tolkien would agree with Dante that sin is basically a wilful rejection of the unified whole, which is God, or the Kingdom of Spirit. This rejection comes about through self-obsession, loss of the clear vision: "I flung him down the labyrinthine ways of my own mind." The Redemption, or regaining of the clear vision, comes about through a communion of some kind, be it human love, or grace, or art. Or we may enter the Secondary Realm of the Spirit and "bring back the Boon." This is not a one-time occurrence; we are susceptible to repeated falls into possessiveness and ego-obsession, and fortunately also eternally open to experiences of "grace" if we choose to be. Through the conscious decision to hold on to that redemptive experience and turn it into art and a more sensitive approach to life, Los is redeemed.

The Redemptive process in works of fantasy such as the Lord of the Rings takes place not only in the actual story, but in the spirit of the reader, who is also spectator and participant. We enter the Fellowship voluntarily. As we respond to the call to adventure, (Cf. Campbell in Hero) we disappriopriate ourselves from our familiar world and see it in a new way just as Frodo saw the Shire during his conversation with Gildor at the beginning of his journey.1 Then, with the hobbits, we embark on the Quest and travel into wild unknown country. We undergo trials, "initiation" in Campbell's terms, and find our identity along with our companions. We share in the joy of their victory over Evil and return to the world of Men, feeling the same sadness the hobbits feel at the passing of Gandalf and the Elves. But we bring back a glimmer of elvenlight from that world to ours. Through our participation in the experience we have re-established contact with our own "inner Kingdom" and are slow to sink back into possessiveness and familiarity.

According to the ideas put forth in "On Fairy-Stories", Peanor's proud attempt to "turn the flames back into gems" by capturing the light of the "Fairy-Stories" of Valinor can be seen as a reversal of the creative, imaginative process. His act constitutes a fall into possessiveness which sets the pattern for all successive Fall stories in the epic. Peanor's vain pursuit of the thief of the Silmarilli caused himself and his Elvish kindred to be condemned to exile in Middle-earth. Nor did they learn from his mistake. In a later age, the Even smiths were persuaded by Sauron to put power and beauty which should have remained intangible into the Rings of Power. Then Sauron himself poured most of his own strength into the One Ring by which he hoped to gain total mastery of Middle-earth. But unfortunately for him, and indicative of the built-in flaw of his plan, the Ring was lost and remained so for a long age during which he
moment. It can be seen as another type of Fall through victory. But there is still no excuse for despair.

motive. By nature "Good" is something that is born of mastery.

offered the Che Ring by Frodo at some point and each is between success and failure for the Quest. But even for power and domination. He looked in the Seeing Stone and was caught by the Shadow just as Denethor was.

The force of Darkness is much stronger than the Free Peoples. Even Gandalf, the active principle among the great powers of freedom, is by no means sure of victory. But there is still no excuse for despair. Indeed, despair is the "work of the Enemy", a divisive agent which causes waste of time and energy. The destruction of his enemies also proves his own undoing. The only real hope of the allies is in their knowledge of this flaw in Sauron's nature. Sauron is so completely self-obsessed and deluded by his own twisted vision that he is incapable of perceiving their intention of destroying the Ring. (Fellowship, p. 282.) While his enemies understand him and his ambition perfectly, he understands them not at all, and not until Frodo stands at the Cracks of Doom does he see his mistake.

Not only acts, but intentions are all-important in the struggle against Evil. The "right choice" is always determined by the chooser's motive. The choices of Gandalf, the super-human Champion, and Aragorn, the Hero-King, are consistently founded in love and compassion. When Gandalf meets the Balrog he knows it means his death, but he sacrifices himself so that the others may escape. Consequently, when he comes back from the dead he is more powerful than before: no longer the Grey Pilgrim but the White Rider. He has assumed the place of the renegade Saruman as the greatest of the Wise, and unlike Saruman will fulfill the trust placed in him.

Perhaps the key to the contrast between the two Wizards is to be found in their names. Saruman means "man of Skill", and he is the embodiment of Rabelais' admonishment: "Knowledge without wisdom is the ruin of the soul". He seems to have begun his time in Middle-earth with the best of intentions, but at some point he fell under the Delusion of Sauron and wished for power and domination. He looked in the Seeing Stone and was caught by the Shadow just as Denethor was.

Gandalf is the Grey Pilgrim, with all the humility
that the name implies. In the Chronicles of Rivendell we learn that he was sent from the Far West with Saruman and other Wizards "to contest the power of Sauron, and to unite all those who had the will to resist him; but they were forbidden to fight power with power, or to seek to dominate Elves or Men by force or fear." (Return, p. 365.) We learn also that upon his arrival Gandalf was given the third Elven-Ring to be his suport in his labors: the Ring of Fire to "rekindle hearts in a world that grows chill." He is the Rekindler of Imagination, the unifier of the divided kindreds, and the guide of the Fellowship. But even after his death and resurrection he retains his humility; revealing his full power for the first time he seems to grow in kindliness as well as stature.

The influence of the teacher Gandalf is clearly evident in the person of his pupil Aragorn as he grows from Ranger (Wizard's Apprentice) to leader and war-captain and finally to kingship. After Gandalf's "death" Aragorn assumes leadership of the Company, but he is in a confused state which intensifies after the death of Boromir and the abduction of the young hobbits. He has grave doubts concerning his ability to make the right decision, and feels torn in two directions—toward his destiny and toward his own ambition. This is partly because it is his by right of inheritance; he does not have to possess it. But more importantly, unlike Saruman and Denethor, Aragorn's motives are totally unselfish. He is thinking more of distracting Sauron's attention from the Ring-bearers than of his own ambition. This is the turning point in the War; Sauron is caught off guard and unprepared. It is the Paths of the Dead and summon the shades of all those who had broken their oaths to stand by his ancestors in the recent past. The growth of this experience can be termed "religious" in that they help us recover our lost (or buried) contact with the supernatural aid, he is able to enter his Kingdom from an unexpected direction and also to release them from their long debt.

Another area in which love proves stronger than the discord precipitated by Sauron's influence is shown in the deep friendship which develops between Legolas and Gimli in the course of the journey. This bond brings about the resolution of the age-old enmity between Elves and Dwarves, in which their own fathers had been involved in the recent past. The growth of this reconciliation stands out in marked contrast to the perpetual feuding of the Elves' twisted counterparts, Sauron's orcs. Nowhere else in Tolkien's fiction do we see as clearly the contrast between the unifying power of empathy and imagination and the divisiveness caused by the lack of it. Here again Sauron is defeated by his own methods. On two occasions it is only the inflighting of the orcs which saves the quest. It allows Frodo and Sam to cross, into Mordor and arrive at the Cracks of Doom. Perhaps the most touching illustrations of love and sacrifice in the epic are to be found in some of the actions of the hobbits. They are closest to the reader, we readily identify with their situation. Feeling out of their depth in a hostile universe, they nevertheless set themselves to perform their appointed tasks. Their loyalty and valor win them the admiration of even the greatest of the Wise, and their total lack of worldly ambition makes it possible for them to deal with the Ring without becoming slaves to it. It is true that at the very last Frodo is overcome by it, but there is his own compassionate act which saves him. If he had killed Gollum earlier as he had often been urged to do, the story would have a very different ending.

IV. Transcendence and Transformation: Bringing Back the Boon.

We have been exploring Tolkien's theory that Evil comes about through loss of the powers of imagination, which include empathy, compassion, love, and respect for other life forms. When we fall away from our knowledge of these powers, other considerations take their place in our lives and we become obsessed with material things and egocentric, desiring control and ownership of our world. This is a dangerous trap into which we all fall at times, and it takes some sort of "rekindling" experience to help us recover the higher view. This sometimes comes about through a tragedy, sometimes through joy, a dream, or revelation or "escape" into fantasy. Each of these diverse types of experience can be termed "religious" in that they help us recover our lost (or buried) contact with the Kingdom within.

Let us return briefly to Middle-earth to catch a glimpse of the final resolution of the Quest and then make the homeward journey through the borderland where the two worlds meet. Each member of the Fellowship achieves mastery over temptation and the power of Sauron through some courageous act motivated by compassion. Even Boromir redeems himself by dying in defense of the young hobbits. With the success of Frodo's mission, the Dark Power is thrown down and the new Age begins.

But the evil already done cannot be reversed. The power of Sorcery is gone; Enchantment and the Elven-Rings must also fade. It is the time of Men. Gandalf's work is done, and it is for Aragorn King Elessar, the Renewer, to rebuild Middle-earth. But Gandalf has taught him well; he is a poet and loremaster as well as a warrior. He has the power of healing on both a grand and individual scale, and he and his descendants will keep Gandalf's flame burning.

The other members of the Fellowship also undertake the task of healing the wounds inflicted by the long Shadow. The Elf Legolas brings some of his folk to Gondor to bring the forests back to life. Gimli returns with some of his Dwarf-smiths to repair the damage in the city, and then removes to the Glittering Caves of Rohan not to mine them in former Dwarvish fashion but to tend them like a beautiful garden. Thus we see the fulfillment of Galadriel's prophecy; (Fellowship, p. 393.) Gimli manifests the liberation of his people from their long slavery to riches.

The hobbits return to their beloved Shire only to find Saruman, bent on revenge, turning their homeland into an industrial desert. But they have greatly increased in courage as well as size, and make short work of him. With the help of Galadriel's gift to Sam, the Shire is soon blooming again.
As Sam brings back the seeds of Elvish trees as a "boon" from the Perilous Realm, so does the reader return from the shared experience in Middle-earth with a valuable legacy of renewal. In the Epilogue to the essay "On Fairy-Stories", Tolkien writes: "The peculiar quality of the 'joy' of successful fantasy can be explained as a sudden glimpse of underlying reality or truth." But more than that, "it may be a far-off gleam or echo of 'evangelium' in the real world." (Reader, p. 71.) The use of this Christian term "Good News" comes out of Tolkien's vision of that Redemption as the prototype of all redemptive process. He points out that the Gospels "contain a story...which embraces all the essence of fairy-stories. But this story is unique: it has entered History and the Primary World; the desire and aspiration of sub-creation has been raised to the fulfillment of Creation." He proposes that "there is no tale ever told that men would rather find was true or for which they more willingly suspend disbelief...to reject it leads either to sadness or wrath." (Ibid., p. 72.) The essence of his Epic is the Christian message. We come away with a deep hope that on some level its outcome is possible for us.

Tolkien believes that the merging of the Primary and Secondary worlds in the Christ story is the perfect form of Redemption for sub-creative beings like ourselves. It presents the opportunity for re-uniting our material existence with our spiritual life. Jesus our Rekindler has passed from the physical world, as Gandalf left Middle-earth to return to the Undying Lands, but his legacy to us is alive for all time if we allow ourselves to perceive it. Of course we frequently consign even this story to the Realm of Urizen; we leave Los Howling in exile and darkness even here. But the door is forever open, and the nature of the story makes the message difficult to ignore.

We live in the Kingdom of Imagination as completely as in the world of atoms and molecules. History, memory, legend, myth; these things make us human. Accepting the Call to Adventure we understand that the light of the Star of Bethlehem (or whatever name we give it) knows no bounds of "objective reality." We follow it into that borderland where the fantastic can seem commonplace and the commonplace miraculous. Here, we are like the dreamer who is walking in a dark wood on a winter day and meets Jesus clad in denim and faded flannel, looking very ordinary. And yet the dreamer knows, and suddenly sees him on another level, all in white and radiant. Like Frodo at the ford with Glorfindel, he appears "for a moment as the prototype of all redemptive process. He points out that "there is no tale ever told that men would rather find was true or for which they more willingly suspend disbelief...to reject it leads either to sadness or wrath." (Ibid., p. 72.) The essence of his Epic is the Christian message. We come away with a deep hope that on some level its outcome is possible for us.

The role of the artist is to keep the Boon, the rekindled flame, alive. In a world where the desolation of Smaug and Saruman is too much with us, the poet, minstrel, and fantasy writer are perhaps the only one who can remind us of the beauty that still exists within and without. In "On Fairy-Stories" Tolkien has nothing but contempt for those critics who condemn works of fantasy and the kingdom of Faerie as irrelevant to our time. In the land of the heart, Elves, sailing-ships, and forests (enchanted or otherwise) are much more real than mass-produced street lights. "The maddest castle that ever came out of a giant's bag in a wild Gaelic story is not only much less ugly than a robot-factory, it is also....a great deal more real." (Reader, p. 63-4.) Regarding the situation of the primary world, it is very easy to fall into despair, to see with the eyes of Denethor. In such a case the only thing between us and suicide is the power of Imagination, whether it take the form of love, creativity, or even the defiance of Camus' Sisyphus.

It is also easy, says Tolkien, for the student/artist to despair of the possibility of creating anything new. This is a pitfall of a too-analytical approach, of trying to apply the methods of Urizen to the Kingdom of Los. In order to achieve a truly sub-creative state we need that Recovery of the clear view that enables us once again to see that "Spring is...not really less beautiful because we have seen other like events: like events, never from world's beginning the same event." (Ibid., p. 56.) Then we understand that we "need not despair of drawing because all lines must be either curved or straight, nor of painting because there are only three primary
colors," (Ibid.) or of composing because "a finite number of tones exist. By venturing into the Perilous Realm or along its borders we keep ourselves aware of the need for constant recovery and of the danger of falling into possessiveness.

Of course as long as we are human we will be faced with the temptation to fall into a Sauron-like mentality, to want too much of the world and to turn the "gleam" into something rigid and lifeless. We forget that we can involve ourselves in the material world and not allow it to rule us, that needing nothing we are turly free to love everything. Or as Camus phrased it: "Nothing is sacred, there everything is." Following our Star, we are tempted to turn aside into firelit rooms with velvet couches, or to flee into the labyrinth of our selfish ambition. But there is hope as long as some spark of imagination and comprehension survive. "The endurable future is a product...born of compassion and of inward seeing." (Eiseley, p. 74.)

We should always guard against Feanor's mistake of trying to concretize something which "was not in a bodily manner to be wrought." (Ibid.) Our right of creation is a perpetual gift of imagination, to continue turning gems into flowers. Just as over-valued objects when lost transcend appropriation and take on a much greater worth as personal symbols, so our creatures take on an autonomous existence which cannot be defined by the written word. They (and we) live freely somewhere in that region vaguely described as the borders of the Perilous Realm.

Being an artist does not necessarily imply a formal act of creation. It is a perspective, a frame of reference, a way of life. The situation of the world may be desperate, but the gleam of Faerie still shines through the plastic and concrete. All who would relight the flames and fan them are artists and minstrels on a quest to lose the confinement of possessiveness and rediscover Los. As Tolkien's hobbits leave their familiar comforts behind and venture into the unknown Wild, not knowing the way or the journey's end, so can we travel as Pilgrims through our internal and external spheres. "It is...upon journeys that man in the role of the stranger must constantly confront reality and decide his pathway." (Eiseley, p. 62.) Perhaps it is this idea that has made the Quest story and traveler's tale so popular as a literary device and why life strives to imitate Art on this point. Placing ourselves in the mode of traveler gives us a heightened awareness of everything both inside and around us. Powers of imagination are greatly stimulated, we are not allowed to take anything for granted. In the literary Quest the Hero attains his full humanity through great deeds; in ours we triumph over all the symptoms of our normal complacency: possessiveness, insensitivity, egotism, power-greed. We listen to other travelers with real empathy, re-establish contact with nature, truly perceive things without the shady coloring too much familiarity puts on them. Our sub-creative faculty grows out of this attitude of mind, and through it we are able to "reach out in thought to regions where pain and delight flow together and tears are the very wine of blessedness." (Return, p. 232.)

"Come all ye roving minstrels and together we will try
To rouse the spirit of the Earth and move the rolling
Sky..." (17)