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An Allegory Unveiled: A Reading of *The Lord of the Rings*

Abstract

Sees *The Lord of the Rings* as an allegory—not of a particular situation, but of “the universal human condition as seen from a Christian (Roman Catholic) point of view.”

Additional Keywords

Allegory in J.R.R. Tolkien; Roman Catholic theology in *The Lord of the Rings*.; Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings*—As allegory; Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings*—Religious aspects (Roman Catholic)

An Allegory Unveiled

A Reading of *The Lord of the Rings*

Kath Filmer

Humphery Carpenter recalls J.R.R. Tolkien expressing a distaste for the allegorical form of literature. "I dislike allegory wherever I smell it", he is recorded as saying [1]. In particular, Carpenter points out that Tolkien "made a careful distinction between allegory and applicability". A quote from C.S. Lewis is included to defend Tolkien's epic work The Lord of the Rings from the imposition of an "allegorical" label:

"These things were not devised to reflect any particular situation in the real world. It was the other way around; real events began, horribly, to conform to the pattern he [Tolkien] had freely invented. [2]"

The weak element in Lewis's defensive statement is the word "particular"; The Lord of the Rings may be read as an allegory, but an allegory of the universal human condition as seen from a Christian (Roman Catholic) point of view.

Tolkien's own dislike of allegory and his notion of "applicability" suggest a narrow definition of allegory — the representation of virtues and vices by means of personification, examples of which are found in medieval miracle plays, John Bunyan's The Pilgrim's Progress and Lewis's The Pilgrim's Regress [3]. If the term is extended to include symbolic representation of the human condition by fictional characters, The Lord of the Rings may certainly be read as allegory as this paper sets out to demonstrate. If the term "allegory" seems disrespectful to Tolkien, it may be replaced by the word "parable"; but its length precludes my usage of the latter — the parables of Christ were brief and incisive, while Tolkien's work is of epic proportions.

The allegory contained in The Lord of the Rings outlines the pilgrimage of the human soul in a fallen world as indeed all mythic writing does according to Tolkien's Catholic Weltanschauung. In a poem addressed to C.S. Lewis before the latter's conversion to Christianity, Tolkien acknowledges that human-kind is "long estranged" and "dis-graced", but that we struggle still to regain our proper place in the cosmic scheme of things. We do this, Tolkien believes, by the act of sub-creation: "we make still by the law in which we're made" [4]. Catholic theology expresses the notion of the Edenic fall in terms of "original sin" which human beings inherit at birth, it is a bondage to evil which is replaced, at baptism, by an infusion of grace, which in effect restores the soul to its essential integrity. To the Catholic, the Christian life then depends upon the constant replenishing of sanctifying grace through the sacraments of the Church. Grace supplies the soul's refreshment and strength and the symbolic forms of the sacrament of Communion — bread and wine — permit the image of the Church's supplying the "food" for the soul [5]. Like other Christian churches, Catholicism emphasises the need to be free from the bondage of evil, and the theology of The Lord of the Rings is consequently not significantly at variance with a broader concept of Christian theology.

One of the most striking issues arising from a consideration of Tolkien's epic work comes from its title: the "Lord of the Rings" is the evil entity, Sauron. On many editions of the book the cover features Sauron's "evil eye". The question which demands attention is why Tolkien needed to focus in this way upon the evil power, rather than the good. Even before the reader is engaged with the text, the atmosphere of evil pervades. I think this is a deliberate focus, a conscious attempt to make the reader aware of the pervasive nature of evil and the association of power (from the word "Lord") with evil.

When the reader is introduced at last to the hobbits, Tolkien reinforces the idea of evil at large in his fantastical world. He "shoots the sheriff on the first page", so to speak; in other words, he warns us that all is not well. Bilbo's unnatural youth is commented upon thus: "It will have to be paid for," he said. "It isn't natural, and trouble will come of it!" [6] And of course, as we who are familiar with the book know full well, trouble does come of it. Bilbo passes on his evil heritage to his nephew Frodo (p.43), but not before we learn that despite his youthful appearance, he feels "all thin, sort of stretched, if you know what I mean: like butter that has been scraped over too much bread" (p. 39).

Though these intimations of evil are significant in relation to the Ring itself, there are other indications of a general malaise or ill-will abroad in the shire. John Strugnell refers in this context to the offensive behaviour of Lobelia Sackville-Baggins over Bilbo's gift to her of the silver spoons, where she disturbs Frodo in his study. Strugnell goes on to observe that:

Evil, as Tolkien describes it, is seen in terms of the breakdown in the regular pattern of existence. No longer can we take things for granted, nor be certain of our judgements. We imagine furtive black figures on lonely roads. We cannot tell friend from foe. The next man we meet may call himself Strider but we have no means of knowing whether he be good or evil. [7]"

The dissolution of natural forms is an expression of the pervading evil which focusses in some way upon Frodo and the mysterious ring. As Strugnell points out, the first volume of The Lord of the Rings concludes with further dissolution: the breaking of the fellowship. This again is caused by the influence of the Ring — on Boromir as well as on Frodo. In a sense, though Frodo is the Ring-Bearer, all bear the effects of the Ring. So it is with original sin. And, like the Ring, sin must be destroyed before humanity can be freed from its pervasive influence. Frodo is "Everyhobbit", forced to leave the complacency of the shire, a shire which appears idyllic but which has its share of discontent, jealousy, suspicion and bickering, as the opening chapters make clear.

The shire is, moreover, an uncannily human domain,

with its miller (Sandyman), its farmer (Maggot), its gardener (the Gaffer), and the activities of trade, commerce and the smoking of Longbottom leaf. Frodo is a symbolic Everyman, and his role in The Lord of the Rings is effective in the way all good symbols and metaphors are effective; it draws attention to the parallels between the mundane and the imaginary worlds by the process of defamiliarisation. The humanity of the Hobbits is apparent precisely because they are hobbits and not human. Further, it may be said that in a sense Frodo is a "little man", a battler, a struggler, pitting himself against vast powers of which he has only the vaguest comprehension -- in the beginning, at least. Readerly sympathy is won easily for such a figure; it calls to mind also the "wayfaring Christian" of Milton's Areopagitica.

If The Lord of the Rings is seen to have any significant apologetic message, it is that of the five times iterated message of the gospel and indeed the overwhelmingly unified message of orthodox Christianity that "he who holds on to his life shall lose it, he that loses his life shall find it" [8]. The Ring's power is directed at the self, the ego, or in Biblical terms, the carnal nature. All those who are tempted by the Ring are tempted in terms of self-aggrandisement and the notion of unlimited power. A "little man" is in less danger from such effects than a man who already possesses great pride and power, but even so, Frodo succumbs to the power of the Ring. At the very moment when he is poised to destroy it, he cries loudly, "I do not choose now to do what I came to do. I will not do this deed. The Ring is Mine!" Using the power of the Ring, Frodo then disappears. He has failed in his quest (III: p. 223) [9].

The effects of the Ring are most vividly depicted in the character of the Gollum. Greed and selfishness have warped his hobbit-human shape until he appears to be a kind of Caliban, crippled by his over-weening self. Thus Gollum is heard to ruminate:

"Arch, sss! Cautious, my precious! More haste less speed. We musn't rissk our neck, mustt we, precious? No, precious -- gollum!" He lifted his head again, blinked at the moon, and quickly shut his eyes. "We hate it", he hissed. "Nassty, nassty shivery light it is -- sss -- it spies on us, precious-- it hurts our eyes" (II: p. 193). [10]

The serpentine sibilance of Gollum's speech serves to draw attention to the narrow focus of his mind. There is only his "self", thus the use of the first person plural; his sole concern is "not to risk his neck"; he is his own "precious". Nevertheless, it is the self-encapsulated Gollum who achieves the destruction of the Ring in the moment of his own destruction. Frodo realises that the quest has been fulfilled by negative, rather than positive, actions: Gollum's death comes about through his final attempt to possess the Ring; that Gollum was there to make that attempt is the result of Frodo's earlier inner struggle as he stands poised to kill the wretched creature who has been following Frodo and Sam since the breaking of the Fellowship:

What a pity Frodo did not stab the vile creature, when he had a chance! Pity? It was Pity that stayed his hand. Pity, and Mercy: not to strike without need.

I do not feel any pity for Gollum. He deserves death.

Deserves death! I dare say he does. Many that live deserve death. And some die that deserve life. Can you give that to them? Then be not eager to deal out death in the name of justice, fearing for your own safety. Even the wise cannot see all ends. (II: p. 194).

Frodo's mercy to Gollum proves ultimately a mercy to himself; his surrendering of the self-motivated desire to kill, his "dying to self" in other words, ensures that his life is spared on Mt. Doom.

This passage also suggests the subtle operation of a Divine presence. The capital letters for the words Pity and Mercy and the transitive verb "stayed" allow for personification; while the link between this passage and that following Gollum's demise certainly indicates the possible existence of "a Providence that shapes their ends":

"But do you remember Gandalf's words: Even Gollum may have something yet to do? But for him, Sam, I could not have destroyed the Ring. The Quest would have been in vain, even at the bitter end" (III: p.225).

The implied Deity of The Lord of the Rings does not intervene directly in the affairs of humans or hobbits, but as in the mundane world, that intervention takes place through the advice of Gandalf the wizard. It also becomes clear from the text of Tolkien's work that there is a sub-agency at work even in a world beset by evil which sustains and strengthens the wayfarers and which may be seen to parallel the Church in its role as the dispenser of Grace.

If spiritual strength is symbolised in the church through the use of bread and wine in its most sublime sacrament, the same kind of strength is symbolized in The Lord of the Rings by the images of miruvor, the cordial of Imladris, and of the lambas, the elven way-bread, which sustain and strengthen the members of the fellowship in times of difficulty. At Rivendell, the fellowship is allowed a respite from their journey, and receive counsel. There they are warned about the dangers ahead of them and there Frodo officially accepts his role as Ring-Bearer. Again at Lothlorien, care and counsel is given and moral and spiritual strength renewed. The elves, then, may be seen to fulfill an ecclesiastical role in function if not in structure and ceremony. Galadriel in particular embodies the role of the church in the aspect of its femininity as "the bride of Christ"; Catholics refer to "our mother the Church". Galadriel cannot be a figure of the Virgin Mary, since Galadriel is not virginal, and because of her role in the narrative is one of active participation and counselling. Though maternal rather than virginal, Galadriel is "holy": she rejects the offered Ring and its promises of power (I: pp. 345-47). Just as the elves leave Middle-earth for the West once their roles have been fulfilled, the Church too will cease to function on earth when its purpose has been accomplished. The parallels are therefore seen to be consistent and further confirm the operation of an allegorical meaning in Tolkien's text. Of course, The Lord of the Rings is not merely allegory; but it may certainly be seen as a work of Christian apologetic through an allegorical reading.

As an apologetic work, however, The Lord of the Rings is a kind of "Mooreffoc" of Chestertonian fantasy: as Tolkien writes:

Mooreffoc 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. [11]

In other words, when the mundane world is clothed with myth or fantasy, we are permitted a new, fresh vision of that world and are able to see in ordinary things the qualities of the marvellous and the wonderful. When Tolkien gives us a picture of the wayfaring Christian set in the fantastical world of Middle-earth, we see that it is an image of ourselves and our own world that he is holding up to us. He shows us our fallen selves and the effects of evil in the world about us, and shows us how strength, comfort and finally freedom might be found.

Thus Sauron, the evil one, must be the focus of Tolkien's title: though he does not appear in the text as an integrated persona, he appears throughout in the atmosphere of doubt and dissolution and in every act of self-aggrandisement the characters perform. There is very clearly a sense in which all are Sauron until the Ring's power is finally broken; that for each of us there is the possibility that our star might fall, as did that of the legendary elven king Gilgalad, "into Mordor where the shadows are" (I: p. 183). There is no guarantee that the succour of the church or other divine agencies will keep us from Mt. Doom. Ultimately the victory must be an individual one, the conquering of the evil "self" within.

Tolkien's protests notwithstanding, then, I believe that The Lord of the Rings is a work of Christian apologetic, which if read allegorically can lead us to recognition of the Frodo and the Gollum within ourselves, and a glimpse of a forbidden Ring clutched in our hands. It leads us beyond that too, to the victory of self-surrender that takes us to the High Sea and on into the West, though for the moment we may stand on Mt. Doom.

Notes

- [1] Humphrey Carpenter, J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biography (London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1978), p. 99.
 [2] *Ibid.*, p. 193
 [3] J.A. Cuddon, A Dictionary of Literary Terms, Revised Edition. (London: Andre Deutsch, 1978), pp. 24-26.
 [4] J.R.R. Tolkien, "Tree and Leaf" from Tree and Leaf, Smith of Wootton Major, and the Home Coming of Beornthoth Beornthelm's Son (London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1975), p. 56.
 [5] H.M. Carson, "Roman Catholicism", in The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church, eds. J.D. Douglas, et al. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), pp. 853-56.
 [6] J.R.R. Tolkien, The Fellowship of the Ring Being the first Part of The Lord of the Rings (London: Unwin Books, 1974), p. 30. References will be cited in the text hereafter as (I: [for vol. no] followed by page number). Other volumes of the book will be acknowledged similarly, i.e. (III: page).
 [7] John Strugnell, "The Forms of Evil", in The Ring Bearer: Journal of the Inner Ring, the Mythopoeic Literature Society of Australia Vol. 1 No. 3, Spring 1983, p. 15.
 [8] Matt. 10:39, 16:25; Mark 8:35; Luke 9:2; 17:33; John 12:25; (R.S.V.).
 [9] J.R.R. Tolkien, The Return of the King being the Third part of The Lord of the Rings (London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1974).

[10] J.R.R. Tolkien, The Two Towers being the Second part of The Lord of the Rings (London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1974).

[11] "Tree and Leaf", p. 20.

Where Words Fall Short, continued from page 18

The character in which Evil is centered -- Simon -- makes use of language to exercise the power of the evil he possesses, and which in turn possesses him: "He knew sounds and the roots of sounds, almost the beginnings of sounds; the vibrations that overthrew and the vibrations that built up." Through his mastery of sound-in-language, Simon makes the "Relaxations" a lethal means of controlling others. The singular most deadly tool he has at his disposal is the utterance of a "Name," the "anti-Tetragrammaton," the "tongue-thrusting Death." But alas, the reader never hears this name itself -- just as he never sees what Conrad's Kurtz sees in the end -- nor hears the manner in which Simon changes the language he utters. Williams can only suggest the effect in general terms.

Williams is perhaps most effective in applying seemingly contradictory imagery to Simon in order to reveal something essential about the essence of evil. Richard's early impression of Simon is that of a god (p. 104), yet Simon is a man. Later, Richard remarks: "... Simon control Lester? Simon couldn't control a real beetle" (pp. 149-150). Lester, too, on first perceiving Simon, believes him to be superhuman. But she soon realizes his limitations. In Jonathan's painting, Simon is alternately genius and imbecile, evangelical leader and beetle.

He professes love; he practices hate. He heals; he murders. He is alternately Clerk and Father. He provides shelter for the needy; he exploits them. He is ascetic, yet he lusts for power. He is either material or insubstantial. His power is seemingly awesome for some, but for others, he is utterly powerless. Indeed, he is master of the central force within him, yet he is slave to that force.

Ultimately, the image which Simon conveys depends on the perceiver's choice of perspective. The nature, presence, image, and power of Evil depend, according to Williams, on the mortal individual herself. Evelyn and Lester, who as mortals were not drastically distant in character, represent uncompromising polarities in the paranormal world. Their views of Simon, and their respective susceptibility, or invulnerability, to his power depend on their own choices. Simon's image has substantial impact on those in the waking, living, corporeal world, as well. Richard and Jonathan, who at first are unable to determine the nature of Simon's power, eventually see Simon the way Lester sees him -- as powerless, base, and corrupt. For Williams, there seems to be no middle ground in our struggle with Evil. For each consciousness, Evil will at a given moment be either overpowering or powerless -- powerless -- powerless, if the perspective is undistorted. At the moment in which the object of temptation is seen for what it is; at the moment in which the temptation wanes; the object becomes repulsive.

At least, this part of what Williams had to say is clear. If by the limitations of language he must fail in trying directly to illuminate his experience of the paranormal world and the autonomous appearance of Evil, he is able to say something about Evil's relation to the individual in very definite terms. For Williams, in countless situations in which we grapple with Evil's temptation, we will, for each encounter, either vanquish it, or be vanquished by it. There can be no compromise.