1984

Invasion from Eternity: Time and Myth in Middle-earth

Sally Bartlett

Follow this and additional works at: https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore

Part of the Children's and Young Adult Literature Commons

Recommended Citation


This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Mythopoeic Society at SWOSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature by an authorized editor of SWOSU Digital Commons. An ADA compliant document is available upon request. For more information, please contact phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu.

To join the Mythopoeic Society go to: http://www.mythsoc.org/join.htm
Invasion from Eternity: Time and Myth in Middle-earth

Abstract
Compared to the creation story and history of Middle-earth and of our world as set forth in the Bible, shows “how every age of Middle-earth mirrors the Christian tale through [...].” creation, degeneration, sacrifice, and renewal” without descending to allegory.

Additional Keywords
Myth, nature of; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Christian symbolism; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Settings—Middle-earth—Creation; Sarah Beach
Myths are "lies and therefore worthless even though breathed through silver," C.S. Lewis once said before his conversion to Christianity. It is J.R.R. Tolkien's reply that interests us. "No," said Tolkien, "they are not lies," adding that man is not ultimately a liar. He comes from God, and although he may "pervert his thoughts into lies," his imaginative inventions (i.e., myths) originate in God. Therefore, man is fulfilling God's purpose when he creates these stories. He is reflecting various colors refracted from the white light of truth. The pagan myths are never just lies; Tolkien said, "there is always something of the truth in them." After some discussion, Lewis commented that Christianity is the old myth of the "dying god" all over again, to which Tolkien replied:

Yes, except that here is a real Dying God, with a precise location in history and definite historical consequences. The old myth has become a fact. But it still retains the character of myth.

Tolkien's point can be seen more clearly in this statement: Myth became fact through history in the person of Jesus Christ. We can, therefore, call the Christian story the Mythic Fact (my term), because, for Christians, it is fact with mythic significance.

Tolkien used this principle when he forged Middle-earth. He wanted to create a myth, so he followed the example of the ancient mythic poets. Middle-earth, then is a refraction of truth. It is not just fiction, for it does what all myth does; it reflects the Mythic Fact, and therefore, has fragments of truth in it.

Tolkien looks at himself as a "sub-creator" creating because he was made in the image of a creator. Richard Purtill explains this view in Lord of the Elves and Eldils:

Like all good stories, it [Tolkien's story] echoes of others, including the greatest of all stories—which Tolkien believes is a true story—the life of Christ.

Because the life of Christ is eternity and history combined, any story which mirrors that life must reflect all of history and a bit of eternity as well. G.K. Chesterton supports this statement in saying:

The only right way of telling a story is to begin at the beginning—at the beginning of the world. Therefore, all books have to begin in the wrong place for the sake of brevity.

Tolkien opens his story even before the beginning of the world, and thus reveals the creation of the universe. In The Silmaril-
lion, the mythical backdrop for The Lord of the Rings and its prelude, The Hobbit, both the eternal and historical elements are revealed:

There was Eru, the One, who in Arda is called Iluvator; and he made the first, the Ainur, the Holy Ones, that were the offspring of his thought, and they were with him before ought else was made.

Then the voices of the Ainur, like unto harps and lutes and pipes and trumpets, and viols and organs, like countless choirs singing with words began to fashion the theme of Iluvator to a great music; and a sound arose of endless interchanging melodies, woven in harmony that passed beyond hearing into the depths and into heights, and the places of the dwelling of Iluvator were filled to overflowing, and the music and the echo of the music went out into the Void, and it was not void.5

This is the creation of a new World. There is, within this story, both a vision of eternity and an account of the beginning of history. Both these dimensions are necessary if the nature of myth is to be revealed in the nature of Christ. And Tolkien believed that if a story is to have mythic significance, it must echo the true story, the life of Christ; it must deal with eternal things and unveil a history permeated with eternity.

The Genesis account of creation also has elements of history and eternity. The Mythic Fact or what C.S. Lewis calls the chosen Mythology (i.e., a myth told by God, Himself),6 sets an example of good story telling by using eternity and history as indispensible parts of its narrative. The Biblical statement "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth"7 reveals an eternity that exists before creation and a history that begins at creation.

Thus when Christ says, "I am the Alpha and the Omega—the first and the last,"8 Christians can find support for their view that Christ started history as the word of God by speaking creation into existence and that He will be the One Who will end history when time has run its course. In order to fulfill the purpose of myth, both the Bible and Tolkien's tale will not only have to show history's origin; they will have to reveal the end of history as well, and include enough information about the period within history's boundaries to show a purposeful systematic condensation of eternity into history. The events to be included in Tolkien's work are specifically those which mirror the major components of the Christian story, nature of myth into contain an echo generation, sacrifice, and renewal. Genesis illustrates the creation and the degeneration which occurs when Adam and Eve disobey God and eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Consequently, not only man but creation itself is subject to corruption. The sacrifice of the Christian story occurs when Jesus, the God-man, dies to atone for man's sin which has become a congenital disease, passed down through the ages. Christ thereby saves humanity and the result of this victory is renewal for both the souls of men and the created universe as well. Every good myth may be seen to contain these elements. The Bible, as God's chosen mythology, reveals that it is the Christian myth that reflects truth more perfectly, because it is God telling people about himself.

Tolkien's myth, on the other hand, does not cover such a vast expanse of history. It recounts only the First, Second, and Third ages of Middle-Earth; the end of history is not clearly foretold. Yet this imperfect vision is still a myth because all the elements of the Christian story are present on a smaller scale in each age. Tolkien provides hints of what is to come as all good myth has always done. Each age of Middle-earth contains an example of creation, degeneration, sacrifice, and renewal.

Since all these components occur in every age of this pre-Christian history and because Tolkien has placed his world within our own, we can assume that he is unveiling a systematic view of history, in which each mythic tale constitutes an age, and each age is a reflection of the Chosen Mythology, the boundaries of which are the ends of time. All previous and future myths, then, have a place in history's progression toward eternity. This essay will now examine The Silmarillion, pointing out each of the four major components of the Christian myth as revealed in each of the three ages of Middle-earth.

The creation component is revealed in the first age of Arda when the Valar, Ainur which Eru had sent to Earth to tend and to continue his creative process, worked until the world was circular and flat, with symmetrical dimensions and temperate weather. At this point, Melkor again enters the picture making war upon the Valar, and mars the symmetry of the lands and waters of Arda. Thus ends the Spring of Arda (p. 37). After the birth of the Elves, Melkor conjures lies and jealousies in the minds of these First Children toward those who come later, a race known as Men. The first folly of listening to lies which cause strife between races continues to work its maleficium until elf fights with elf in the Kinslaying at Alqualonde, where the hosts of Peanor kill their own relatives, in their willful rejection of the Valar's command to remain in the Blessed Realm. They steal the white ships of the Teleri for use in crossing over to the lands of Middle-earth. Elves continue to strive against other races and even their own kin throughout the First Age. Their disobedience of the Valar's command results in an exile imposed by the Valar so that they can no longer return. This act resembles Adam and Eve's exile from the Garden of Eden.
Many sorrows come upon Middle-earth as a result of this prideful disobedience, including the kinslayings that persist throughout the age. This willful rebellion is the fall, which marks the degeneration component of the First Age. Valínor is excluded from this degeneration and can thus be considered heaven on earth, a reminder of what the world could have been.

Eärendil takes it upon himself to make the sacrifice which ultimately results in the renewal of Arda and the crowning of Melkor. He decides it is necessary to disobey the Ban of the Valar by sailing to the Blessed Realm to ask forgiveness and aid for Middle-earth. In sailing west he risks death. This selfless act and plea for pardon parallels Christ's selfless death for the forgiveness of men's sins in the Christian mythology. Like Christ, Eärendil does not die; unlike Christ neither does he return from Valinor, heaven on Earth. This shows that Eärendil's story is only a hopeful approximation of the sacrificial component of the Christian myth. It does however, contain the most important element of this tale; his prayer is granted. Upon his return, Eärendil's quest emphasizes Eärendil's conquest of death in living after reaching the undying lands: "For this he was born into the world," says Ulmo (p. 249). "For this I was born and for this I have come into the world..." says Christ in St. John 18:37. Therefore, Ulmo's statement indicates providential and purposeful control of history.

After the pardon, Valar prepares for battle; the Hosts of Heaven on Earth march against those who want to turn Arda into a living hell. Morgoth is hurled upon his face and bound in Angainor; his crown is turned into his collar and his head is bowed to his knees in forced humility. Now the world is ready for renewal. This section echoes the Last Battle, which the Book of Revelation tells us will occur at the end of time. Christ will be victorious and the world will be restored. The renewal of Middle-earth comes at the beginning of the Second Age when the island, Numínor, is molded. This event constitutes the renewal component of the First Age and the creation component of the Second Age. The First Age of Middle-earth has now been revealed as a summary statement of the "theme of Ilúvatar", a revelation of his plan for the fullness of time. This theme, revealed to us in the Christian story, is the same theme that the Ainur play out in their symphony to Eru before the creation of Arda. "Behold your Music," Ilúvatar says as he reveals the history of a world yet to come, "this is your minstrelsy; and each of you shall find contained herein, amid the design that I set before you, all those things which it may seem that he, himself, devised or added. And thou Melkor, wilt discover all the secret thoughts of thy mind, and wilt perceive that they are but a part of the whole and tributary to its glory" (p. 17). Here the cyclical theme of creation, degeneration, sacrifice, and renewal is manifest.

The creation of Numínor, as we have said earlier, is the beginning of the Second Age and the end of the First Age, creation and renewal in the same act. The Silmarillion states that although Morgoth was shut beyond the world in a void, "his will remained and guided his servants, moving them ever to thwart the Valar and to destroy those that obeyed them" (p. 260). Melkor's omnipresent will provides an opportunity for Ilúvatar's cyclical theme to again be played out in history. Without the catalyst of Melkor's will to oppose the Valar's will, out of the renewed state, degeneration would not occur, and the cycle would stop, never reaching the historical events with eternal significance. That is, Christ would not perform the Christian sacrifice in history and the four-fold theme of Ilúvatar would remain incomplete. We now see that Morgoth's devices truly are woven into Eru's ultimate thematic statement.

The fall of the Second Age happens in much the same way as the fall of the First Age. The actual fall of the First Age is not Feanor's disobedience, but the elves' listening to the lies of Melkor. This causes all the future troubles of the Second Age. The Second Age, men not only strive against their own kin and exercise domination over them, but they cease even to recognize their own dependence on Valar. The king of Numínor foolishly listens to Sauron, the chief servant of Morgoth, who sets up his own realm sometime after the ending of the First Age. The King of Numínor, wishing to become world ruler, and hearing of Sauron's strength, demands his obedience. Sauron, realizing the king's lust, seeks to use it by feigning submission.

As chief advisor to the king (p. 211), Sauron says of the Valar:

For they are the oracles of this Eru, which speaks only what they will. But he that is their master shall yet prevail, and he will deliver you all from this phantom; and his name is Melkor, Lord of All, Giver of Freedom, and he shall make you stronger than they (p. 272).

Listening to this advice is the first and greatest sin of the men of Numínor in the Second Age. The worship of Ilúvatar and the upkeep of his temple is subsequently abandoned. In their pride, the men of Numínor break the Ban of the Valar and sail westward to take 'from them eternal life within the confines of Arda. In their foolishness, they make war upon even the Valar. Amandil makes the archetypal sacrifice, that of going to the Blessed Realm to ask deliverance for Numínor, but Numínor as a whole can not be saved by his plea. The Valar have done this once with the elves and will not do it again. Still, just as in Noah's time, the Faithful, those who remained friendly with the elves who bring messages and gifts from Valínor, are spared in answer to Amandil's prayer (p. 275). As a result of the salvation of the Faithful,
Gondor is established on the shores of Middle-earth. This constitutes the renewal of the Second Age and the creation story of the Third Age.

Although every age has a renewal, it never quite brings the world up to the standard of goodness that existed at the beginning. Each creation is somewhat less glorious than the one that preceded it. As we shall see, the elves must lose many good things in order to conquer evil in the Third Age because the world is winding down. Illuvatar creates a perfect world which Melkor corrupts. The Valar do the best they can, but can never bring it to its original grandeur. Numinor is only an island in remembrance from the wide world. In the Third Age, not even an island, but a city within an imperfect continent, is created. Thus, the renewal archetype degenerates from Perfect World to Symmetrical World restored by the Valar, to an Island within a World, to a City besieged on all sides by evil.

The need for the Great Sacrifice of the Christian story exists because of this delayed but inevitable degeneration, caused by original sin. Gandalf supports this notion of the degeneration of the world with this statement in The Two Towers: "The evil of Sauron cannot be wholly cured nor made as if it had not been."

The establishment of Gondor, then, is the creation story in the Third Age. During this time of glory in Gondor, Sauron's spirit returns to Mordor. He rebuilds it upon its old foundations which have never been destroyed, even though Mordor has been leveled by the men of Numinor. Sauron can no longer make himself lovely in the eyes of the different races, so he takes a form of horror and becomes the bearer of the evil wishes of Melkor. Even in this secondary role, he fancies himself his own master and seeks to totally dominate the whole of Arda. He teaches the elves of the Second Age the craft of making magic rings for this purpose. At this time his form is fair and he gains their trust. These magic rings, made by elf-craft, have never been touched by Sauron and therefore, are able to prolong the magical in Middle-earth. The magic of these rings lies in their ability to preserve all that is good and to bring good out of good and evil alike. Sauron, seeing his chance to dominate these rings and thus the elves as well, forges the One Ring, the Ring of Power, which is the cause of the War of the Ring in the Third Age. This Ring contains a great amount of Sauron's own power, power which he allows to pass from him into the ring, so that the Ring can control the elvish rings and, thus, bring them under his command. With the Ring, Sauron can control the world; without the Ring, Sauron loses control, but retains much of his own power. If the Ring is destroyed, however, Sauron is disarmed. To destroy the Ring, then, is the major objective of the allied races who oppose Sauron in the War of the Ring.

Sauron's Ring should have been destroyed at an earlier time. This failure causes the degeneration of the Third Age. Isildur, prince of Gondor, during the final battle with Sauron, cuts the One Ring from Sauron's finger, but does not throw it into Mount Doom, its place of forging and the only fire hot enough to destroy it. Instead, he keeps the Ring for his ship. This is the Ring of the Sin of the Third Age which brings on the degeneration of the world. Consequently, Sauron's power remains and the Ring is drawn back to its maker. While the prince is being pursued by Orcs, Isildur's Bane slips from his finger. Invisible until now, he is revealed and killed. The Ring passes from owner to owner, from Gollum, to Bilbo, to Frodo, and it is Frodo who finally carries it to its destruction at the end of the War of the Ring. This fuzzy-footed, tiny Hobbit performs the sacrifice that is the secular salvation of the Third Age. The Ring's strange power of attraction causes anyone who possesses it to make a final claim of ownership. This desire for the Ring consumes those who carry it. Bilbo is the only being to ever willingly give it away; Frodo is pressed to destroy it. But this self-sacrifice brings on the regeneration of the Third Age. The exiled Ring is restored to power and Sauron is finally destroyed. But we can be assured that Evil will arise again, for as Gandalf says in The Return of the King: "Other evils there are that may come; for Sauron is himself but a servant or emissary." 10

Sauron is the unwitting emissary of Morgoth, the Melkor of The Silmarillion. By this time Sauron seeks to dominate completely and forgets that he, himself, is dominated by the will of another. The Persuasive Will that dominates the world of the Christian mythology is Satan. It is he who directs the evil in the world. Tolkien's myth, as well as the Christian story, waits for the coming of a savior who will destroy this source of evil and thus bring the historical cycle to an end. Time will be caught up in eternity. We see, then, that Tolkien's myth reflects the Christian view of history, for Christ is the central figure of both tales, although not clearly foreseen either in Middle-earth or in the Old Testament. The world would disintegrate apart from divine renewal.

Although elfish magic is gone from the world by the end of the Third Age, the Resurrection of Christ brings a new kind of spiritual awareness to rational beings. It is no longer emissaries of Illuvator, the Valar or angels, who dwell among men and direct their paths, but the Spirit of God, Himself, the Holy Spirit of Christianity and the Secret Fire in Tolkien's myth. In The Silmarillion it is called Ea, which means "Be!" (p. 20). This Spiritual Fire causes Sauron to "be" and thus receives its name. Christianity claims that in Christ's resurrection and ascension, humankind has that Spirit working in it. An upward movement in the cycle of history is the result. Although evil continues to thwart good, Good, that is Christ, has already prevailed and the Spirit of God is now directing lives and moving them toward
perfection. When the source of death is destroyed at the end of time, Christ will reign in a perfected world.

Tolkien speaks of Christ's resurrection as the eucatastrophe of the Gospel story. Analogously it could be said that Christ's second coming is the Eucatastrophe of all history. It is the sudden happy turn which surprises everyone. Every myth has it in its retelling of the regeneration story. When right is about to fail, right prevails, and the world is restored. In the Christian myth, which Tolkien says all stories mirror, right is completely victorious, and the universe is eventually returned to the completeness which existed at the dawn of time.

We have seen how every age of Middle-earth mirrors the Christian tale through the four components of creation, degeneration, sacrifice, and renewal which are present in some form in every age. Each age is not presented as Christian allegory, however. This tale is of a pre-Christian world and does not allow for a one-to-one correspondence of its characters and events with those of the Christian myth. But because Tolkien feels that any good myth reflects its Christian counterpart, he has created a world permeated with messages from this deeper reality. The three ages of Middle-earth do not retell the life of Christ, but they parallel the Christian story. Tolkien has remained true to his mission of being a storyteller; he uses it as an example for his own creative efforts because he is, as he says, "made in the image and likeness of a maker." 12

NOTES

1Humphrey Carpenter, The Inklings (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1979), p. 44.
6All further references to this book will be cited in parenthesis following the information given.
8Genesis 1:1
9Revelation 1:7-17
12Ibid. p. 55.