



Mythopoeic Society

mythLORE

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

Volume 21 | Number 2 | Issue 80, Winter

Article 26

Winter 10-15-1996

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Recommended Citation

Schweicher, Eric (1996) "Aspects of the Fall in *The Silmarillion*," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 21 : No. 2 , Article 26.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol21/iss2/26>

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Mythcon 50

Looking Back, Moving Forward

San Diego, California

August 2-5, 2019

Aspects of the Fall in *The Silmarillion*

Abstract

This paper begins with an analysis of the evolution of the Fall in the Western tradition, which will be compared with its image in Middle-earth. The *Ainulindalë* and the *Quenta Silmarillion* will be examined to show how Vala, Elf, Dwarf, and Man fall into corruption, and the consequences of this fall.

Additional Keywords

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There cannot be any “story” without a fall – all stories are ultimately about the fall – at least not for human minds as we know them and have them.
(Tolkien, 1981, p. 147)

This statement by J.R.R. Tolkien has given me much to think about. It seems to imply that Tolkien felt compelled to refer to “a fall” somewhere in his works. On close scrutiny, I soon discovered that *The Silmarillion* did not contain one fall, but a whole panoply of them, hinting at a cosmological complexity unattained in any other piece of writing. This paper aims at exposing the different versions of the Fall we find in J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Silmarillion*, mythologically speaking his most significant work.

In the Judaeo-Christian tradition, the Fall was the occasion when Adam and Eve disobeyed God and were expelled from the Garden of Eden. The serpent’s most effective beguiling affected humanity in that from the Fall came the knowledge of – and thus the existence of – good and evil.

In the Christian tradition, the Fall is linked with temptation, sin, revolt and punishment. The Incarnation and Death of Christ repair the damage caused by the Fall.¹ The Incarnation, Crucifixion and Resurrection thus make salvation possible. But the Middle-earth versions are not always so “eucatastrophic” (Tolkien, 1988, p. 62), to use Tolkien’s own adjective; that is to say they do not offer many clues about salvation, if any. Only the Elves are allowed to cross into Eden, and Men remain stuck in Middle-earth (except for the chosen few), which they inherit from the Elves.

The original Fall in Middle-earth described in the account of Creation, the *Ainulindalë*, is the Fall of Melkor, “mightiest among the Ainur” (Tolkien, 1986, p. 17), one of the Creator’s close servants, angels, or semi-gods in a sense. During the Great Music which gave shape to the world, Melkor started a tune of his own, thereby rebelling against God, Ilúvatar. This situation echoes that of the traditional “Schöpfungsdrama”, as alluded to by Paul Ricoeur in his

Symbolik des Bösen:

der Ursprung des Bösen . . . ist das “Chaos”, mit dem der Schöpferakt Gottes kämpft . . .
(Ricoeur, 1971, p. 197)
the origin of evil . . . is chaos, against which God’s creative act fights . . .²

Melkor fell because he became more interested in himself, in his own “creation”, than in God. Melkor then became the source of uttermost evil, the dark power against which good fought throughout Middle-earth’s history. Melkor’s rebellion marks the birth of evil in Tolkien’s cosmology. Original sin entered the world well before the first Man, or in this case the first Elf, ever set foot on Earth, which Tolkien seems to confirm when he says in one of his letters:

the rebellion of created free-will precedes the creation of the World (Eä); and Eä has in it, *subcreatively* introduced, evil, rebellions, discordant elements of its nature already when the Let it Be was spoken. The Fall or corruption, therefore, of all things in it and all inhabitants of it, was a possibility if not inevitable.
(Tolkien, 1981, pp. 286-7; italics mine)

First to be engulfed in the waves of Melkor’s Fall were his brethren, the Valar. Among them Aulë fell, “for he so desired to see the Children [Elves and Men], that he became impatient and tried to anticipate the will of the Creator” (Tolkien, 1981, p. 287) by creating his own children, the Dwarves. Again we are facing a sub-creative rebellion against God, which this time is incorporated into his creation by Ilúvatar Himself, since He allowed Aulë’s sub-creation to join His own Children in Middle-earth.³ Aulë’s Fall came from a well-intended act, namely the desire to accelerate the inhabiting of Earth, so that Aulë’s skills could be taught and used by the “Children”. Even Melkor’s Fall came from a good intention, if we consider that Melkor only wanted to do a better job as God’s angel by increasing his own power. God’s intervention in Aulë’s favour transforms the potential evil of Aulë’s rebellion into something positive, namely the

¹ One could object that Men still die, though Christ has conquered death through resurrection, and thus has not completely reversed the consequences of the Fall.

² Translation by the author.

³ It is amusing to note in contrast that the Norse Dwarves are created from the “maggots” delving under the earth, almost as an afterthought to the creation of Man (see Kevin Crossley-Holland, 1980, p. 6).

creation of Dwarves⁴ that completed God's own creation. After all, Ilúvatar said that

no theme may be played that hath not its uttermost source in me . . . [and] he that attempteth this shall prove but mine instrument in the devising of things more wonderful, which he himself hath not imagined.

(Tolkien, 1986, pp. 17-18)

This is what happened in Aulë's case, but it is obviously far more complex with Melkor, as it should be!

Other angels fell as well, not as victims of their own rebellion, but rather swept away as a result of Melkor's Fall, because they became his followers and servants. They were also drawn into darkness by their own weakness, by their aspiration to taste of the forbidden fruit of power in Middle-earth. They were Maiar, angelic figures of lesser power, and the Fall worked on them a terrible transformation, for most of them became creatures of fire and destruction, the Balrogs.⁵ Melkor's soul fell at the very instant of his rebellion, but in appearance he remained fair, a tool of corruption that brought the Fall of others. Sauron's appearance served the same ends, when it succeeded in binding to him the Nazgûl, and Ar-Pharazôn, among others, before he became terrifying to look upon as the Red Eye.

The Fall of the Elves, contrary to the biblical Fall of Man, does not affect all Elves, at least not directly. It was mainly the Fall of the Noldor, "the most gifted kindred of the Elves" (Tolkien, 1981, p. 148), who found themselves in Valinor at the time when Melkor, who had been defeated and captured by the other Valar, was being freed to roam in Valinor. In Melkor's eyes the Elves were "the representatives of sub-creation par excellence" (Tolkien, 1981, p. 146), that for which he had rebelled but which he would never be able to achieve, and they became "the special object of his desire and hate" (Tolkien, 1981, p. 146). As with the Maiar, Melkor tried to subdue the Noldor, lying to them, and slowly preparing their rebellion against the Valar. But the Noldor's Fall, as opposed to that of the Maiar, is "into possessiveness and . . . into perversion of their art to power" (Tolkien, 1981, p. 146). According to T.A. Shippey, however, the Noldor's Fall is due to a

variety of pride . . . not quite . . . "possessiveness" or wanting to own things, but rather a restless desire to *make* things which will forever reflect or incarnate their own personality.

(Shippey, 1982, p. 180)

I think the possibility of "clean" sub-creation existed for the Noldor, but it is soon marred by Melkor, who manages to turn the sub-creative desire of the Noldor into a self-oriented quest. This echoes the Bible: the trap is set, and Lucifer has awakened the Noldor's temptation. Unfortunately for the Elves, the Noldor succumbed, and created the Silmarils at the worst possible moment. Out of those jewels of power

came the Noldor's pride but also their sorrow, a Fall that took them into destruction, and with them all those that became involved in one way or another with the Silmarils. Sub-creation, Rebellion and Kinslaying sealed off the Noldor's doom by bringing upon them the curse of the Valar. Thus was Sub-creation perverted and Eden lost to the most powerful of the Elves. Tolkien said that

[*The Silmarillion*] is . . . fundamentally concerned with the problem of the relation of Art (and Sub-creation) and Primary Reality.

(Tolkien, 1981, p. 145)

Sub-creation was born from a strong feeling of love for that "Primary Reality", from the knowledge that life means also death, and that the world as it appears to the sub-creator's senses must pass one day. Thus the sub-creative desire is "filled with the sense of mortality, and yet unsatisfied by it" (Tolkien, 1981, p. 145). And the expression of that very dissatisfaction gives birth to art. Yet it also means a rebellion against the laws of the universe, and this is where Sub-creation may provoke the sub-creator's Fall. This raises the problem of "Primary Reality", and mortality applied to the Elves.

One cannot help speaking of a *memento mori* motive while referring to Man. Yet *The Silmarillion*, as stated before, is primarily concerned with Elves, who are immortal and thus cannot yearn for a state of being where death does not exist. Humphrey Carpenter points out that

Old age, disease, and death do not bring [the Elves'] work to an end while it is still unfinished or imperfect. They are therefore the ideal of every artist.

(Carpenter, 1978, p. 101)

But because their work reaches uttermost perfection, they may fall into possessiveness. Elves do not experience death, even when they are slain in battle, but they are confined to Valinor. They witness the death of Man, and with him that of all living things in the world. This causes the Elves to desire to keep alive the memories of the past and of things that were by putting them into works of art. The Silmarils themselves, though they soon become the instruments of the Noldor's Fall, are meant to preserve the light of the Two Trees of Valinor, the symbol of a pure, prelapsarian world.

In fact, one could even argue that immortality sharpens the sense of brevity and mortality, as all things in the world seem to whirl still swifter into the abyss of Time. Tolkien seems to confirm this by putting the following words into the mouth of Legolas:

For the Elves the world moves, and it moves both very swift and very slow. Swift, because they themselves change little, and all else fleets by: it is a grief to them. Slow, because they do not count the running years, not for themselves. The passing seasons are but ripples ever repeated in the long stream. Yet beneath the Sun all

⁴ Of course, one could argue that the Dwarves themselves are not the friendliest people and the epitome of good in Middle-earth. For this one need only look at the war which tore apart the Kingdom of Doriath and that of the Dwarves, or at some extracts from *The Hobbit*, particularly those involving Thorin Oakenshield, in which the Dwarves appear as some greedy, overproud and easily-angered creatures who would sooner hack your head off than give you a scrap of bread.

⁵ Incidentally, Saruman's Fall is related to the Fall of the Maiar, being himself one of them (though no physical transformation takes place in this instance. This offers us yet another facet of the Fall).

things must wear to an end at last.

(Tolkien, 1969, pp. 408-9)

Yet it is true that, though Elvish Sub-creation may express dissatisfaction with the state of things in the universe, the rebellion that that dissatisfaction presupposes cannot reach the intensity of human rebellion, since Man also yearns to leave something in time, to scratch the marble of eternity before death takes him. This is made clear by the story of the Númenóreans.

The Noldor's punishment (and that of all those entangled in the quest for the Silmarils) could not be death, for the Elves are immortal, as I have already mentioned. "Weariness of life" (Shippey, 1982, p. 179) was their punishment, sorrow and grief in Middle-earth under the shadow of Lucifer. The fact that the Elves do not die is not something which has any parallel in Judaeo-Christian ideas about the Fall. "Accordingly," says Shippey, "they do not have to be rescued from death by a Saviour" (1982, p. 177), which, of course, makes their sorrow and punishment all the more unbearable. To achieve some sort of Redemption, the Elves need to overcome their pride and to be able to surrender the object of their pride to the Valar, namely the Silmarils. With the jewels they have to give up supra-human or indeed supra-elvish power. In the *Quenta Silmarillion*, Eärendil whose blood is both human and Elvish assumes by right, and some would say by fate, the difficult task of bearing not the Red Arrow to the Valar, but one Silmaril (with much the same effect!). But Eärendil is not a Saviour, rather a messenger. Thus with the Fall of Elves Tolkien has introduced a new dimension into the question of the Fall. The *Quenta Silmarillion* is primarily concerned with the Fall of Elves, but we should still ask ourselves what happens to Man in that world. As stated before, Man also appears in the story, yet of his Fall in Middle-earth not much is said.⁶

As a matter of fact, Man "does not originate 'on stage' in Beleriand, but drifts into it, already sundered in speech, from the East" (Shippey, 1982, p. 176). In a longer version of the Tale of Túrin we are told of Men in Beleriand that

a darkness lies behind [them], and out of it few tales have come. The fathers of [their] fathers may have had things to tell, but they did not . . . The Mountains stand between [Men in Beleriand] and the life they came from, flying from no man now knows what.

(Tolkien, 1980, p. 61)

As Shippey rightly suggests, one could assume that the exploit of Morgoth of which the Eldar never learnt was the traditional seduction of Adam and Eve by the serpent, while the incoming [Men] are all sons of Adam flying from Eden.

(Shippey, 1982, p. 176)

This seems to be attested by the fact that some Men who arrived later in Beleriand, when their predecessors and kindred had already established themselves as friends and allies of the Elves, were mostly servants of Morgoth, fallen men who betrayed the league of good forces in their greatest

battle, the Nirnaeth Arnoediad. Man seems to have a Fall in Middle-earth. Tolkien does not deny its existence, and he does not try to replace the Fall of Man by the Fall of Elves. Men are human in the *Quenta Silmarillion*, and accordingly they are mortal. But death is neither a punishment, nor a direct consequence of their Fall. The condition of Man, like that of the Elves, was determined long before the world was created, in the Great Music of the Ainur. Man's fate is not clear in the Elves' minds, nor is it really clear to the Valar. Only Mandos, Lord of the Dead, knows what happens to Men once they die, but not much is said of that; it is as if Tolkien went thus far in the telling of a cosmology that might appear pagan from more than one perspective, and did not want to tell us more, or to go beyond a specific point.

The brief span of human life on Middle-earth is considered as a wonder by the Elves, for whom life has no limits in time. In that sense, one should ponder over Lúthien's decision, when offered to choose between the Elven or the human condition for her second life, to join the daughters of Eve. Of course, her love for Beren, who remains mortal, has influenced her decision. But there is more to it than appears to the eye: would she not prefer to share the wonder of death rather than experiencing weariness of life, as some among the Elves did?

As indicated by the Music of the Ainur, immortality and death seem to be tokens given respectively to Elves and Men. Yet there is a fear of death on Middle-earth, which is paradoxical if one considers death as a gift. Sador, for example, one of Húrin's servants, leaves the walls of an Elven fortress to escape a more than probable death at the hands of the enemy, and becomes a woodcutter (Tolkien, 1980, p. 60). This example, associated with a secondary character, shows that the fear of death is common among Men. Yet, as I said earlier, death cannot be seen as a punishment for the Fall of Man. The Fall must have had an influence on the attitude of Man towards death, and there one must see Melkor's influence, which lures Men into believing that what they have been given as a gift is but a bitter fruit. Hence also the envy of Men, and sometimes their jealousy and hate, for the immortality of the Elves.

When I say that the Fall of Man in Middle-earth is not shown explicitly by Tolkien, that is only a half-truth. Of course, there is the suggestion that the Edain who arrived in Beleriand in the First Age were flying from the growing shadow in the East, where something terrible had happened to their people. However, there is also a tale about the Fall of Man in Middle-earth, perhaps a second Fall; the *Akallabêth*, or *The Downfall of Númenor*. Tolkien does not explicitly tell us what happened to Man in the East. But the Downfall of Númenor is developed in detail as the story of the second Fall of Man in Middle-earth. Tolkien said that:

The Downfall is partly the result of an inner weakness in Men – consequent, if you will, upon the first Fall (unrecorded in these tales), repented but not finally healed . . . Its central theme is (inevitably, I think, in a

⁶ If it is true, and it is sometimes acknowledged to be so even by Tolkien himself, that the Elves are a reflection of humanity, they are also Elves. The difficulty consists precisely in distinguishing their "elvishness" from their humanity.

story of Men) a Ban, or Prohibition.

(Tolkien, 1981, p. 154)

In *The Silmarillion*, “the Lords of Valinor forbade [the Númenóreans] to sail so far westward that the coasts of Númenor could no longer be seen” (Tolkien, 1986, p. 315), and the land where once the Two Trees had stood should come into view. Here, as in the Bible, the Ban is soon defied, as “the Númenóreans began to murmur, at first in their hearts, and then in open words, against the doom of Men” (Tolkien, 1986, p. 317); for though they had been given a longer life span than other Men in the world, the Númenóreans still had to die one day, and where the serpent was not (at least in the beginning of their bliss), its shadow still lingered until it took shape again with Sauron’s coming. This prompts Tolkien to say that

Reward on earth is more dangerous for men than punishment!

(Tolkien, 1981, p. 154)

And later:

Their reward is their undoing – or the means of their temptation. Their long life aids their achievements in art and wisdom, but breeds a possessive attitude to these things, and desire awakes for more *time* for their enjoyment.

(Tolkien, 1981, p. 154)

Possessiveness is something I have already alluded to in the case of the Elves. But the motives of Men are obviously quite different. Possessiveness declares itself in works of Númenórean art, and in the accumulation of riches, as the former “helpers and teachers” (Tolkien, 1986, p. 320) to the Men of Middle-earth become “lords and masters and gatherers of tribute” (Tolkien, 1986, p. 320). Possessiveness expresses itself mainly in a desperate attempt to escape death. Death is thus far from being seen as a divine gift, and signifies rather the passage into a very dark and frightening unknown. The attack against Valinor attempted by the glorious fleet of Ar-Pharazôn is then nothing more than the last convulsion of an old man enraged by the approach of death. In this, as in much of the evil that afflicted Middle-earth, the work of Lucifer is clearly revealed, and more precisely Sauron’s beguiling lies. According to Tolkien, “a good Númenórean died of free will when he felt it to be time to do so” (Tolkien, 1981, p. 205). That is exactly what Aragorn did, having been given “not only a span thrice that of Men of Middle-earth, but also the grace to go at [his] will, and give back the gift” (Tolkien, 1969, p. 1100), bitter though it may seem to Queen Arwen. Yet Aragorn also added:

Behold! we are not bound for ever to the circles of the world, and beyond them is more than memory.

(Tolkien, 1969, p. 1100)

With Aragorn’s death the gift is given back, and the example set for Man. Reward has disappeared, only hope remains, and the Fourth Age.

Beside Elves and Men, there are also Dwarves in Middle-earth. The Dwarves appear before Man, at the same time as the Elves, and yet we know nothing of their Fall. If a Fall there was, then it must have been their creation itself, the sub-creative rebellion of Aulë. We know very little of their fate, but “the Elves [say] that [the Dwarves have] no life beyond Arda and the death of their bodies” (Foster, 1978, p. 100) which would seem logical. They are not considered to be God’s Children, and thus were given neither death nor immortality.

However, the Dwarves “themselves claimed that Aulë would bring them to the halls of Mandos, whence they will join the Children of Ilúvatar” (Foster, 1978, p. 100). This indicates that Aulë tries to imitate God not only in giving life but in giving death as well. Yet since the Dwarves live longer than Men in Middle-earth (about 250 years, according to Foster (1978, p. 100)), we might consider that this was their gift, their *ersatz* for the lack of salvation after their death. For this reason it is uncertain whether they fell.⁷

Finally, and rather illogically, I admit, let us turn our attention back to the main culprit, namely Lucifer. The Archvillain personified by Morgoth (and later by Sauron) has a grand design that exemplifies the purpose of evil in general: to corrupt and destroy the land and its creatures, and to rule over the whole world. Yet this has not always been his intention. Melkor’s Fall was essentially an attempt to increase his own power, by doing better than the other angels in the tending and embellishing of Earth. It was an action which complemented rather than challenged God. The Fall transforms this ambition into a will to fight and destroy what God has created and what the Valar have made fair. It is prompted by the realization that he cannot match the beauty of their works. As Tolkien writes:

The Enemy in successive forms is always “naturally” concerned with sheer Domination . . . but the problem: that this frightful evil can and does arise from an apparently good root, the desire to benefit the world and others – speedily and according to the benefactor’s own plans – is a recurrent motive.

(Tolkien, 1981, p. 146)

This would explain why the Fall is a recurrent motive throughout *The Silmarillion*. But repetitive Falls do not lessen the gravity of their consequences. Let us recognize that though it is all too easy for good to become evil through a Fall, it is impossible for evil to regain a prelapsarian condition. However, I am not saying that it is impossible for Elves or Men, who have suffered the Fall, to be redeemed (which is something true evil cannot imagine let alone understand). The Fall of Man has not automatically turned Adam into an evil creature, for only Melkor became utterly evil when he fell. The sin of Men was allegedly a rebellion against God, but that did not make Orcs out of them. Men were simply thrown out of the Garden of Eden, free to wander on Earth where some may fall prey to evil. The Fall

⁷ One could argue that the Dwarves in Middle-earth are not really a paragon of virtue. They spend their lives digging for precious ores and gems, creating powerful kingdoms under mountains, and establishing commercial links with Elves and Men, gathering more and more riches, and power. They always stand at the edge of the chasm, and it would not take much to push them down. Somehow, they themselves never really fall, though their realms often do. Their very creation made them a living paradox.

of the Elves does not make them Lucifer's minions either, since their sole desire once in Middle-earth is to oppose and to eradicate evil. Nevertheless the Fall brings woe and suffering among the peoples of Middle-earth.

I started this paper with a quotation by Tolkien insisting on the fact that all stories written or made up by humans had to have a Fall in them. After reading his work, we have reasons to believe, I think, that Tolkien remained true to that principle: though he carefully avoids mentioning directly the first Fall of Man (perhaps because he takes "as read" the myth of Adam and Eve), he tells us about *five* other Falls, which affect all inhabitants of Middle-earth, and even angels.⁸

We do not know if there ever was a tree of knowledge in Middle-earth of which Man sinfully tasted. We know at least of two other trees that might fit the image, but they were cut down before Man could dream of setting foot on the lands where they used to grow. When the idea of landing in Valinor did come to his mind, it was already too late;

nevertheless Man was punished for daring to do so.

If there is a Fall in Middle-earth, is it really because of Man, or of his neighbours and sometimes representations, Elves and Dwarves? It would be too easy to say that Man alone has the potential for a new Fall. There must always be a Dark Lord prowling around.⁹ There has been a Dark Lord since long before the Children of Ilúvatar ever "awoke" on Arda. In other words, evil has always existed "without" Man in and around Arda. It has designs of its own that are not those of Man, and though evil can, and will, use Man in its designs, it does not need Man. Evil could simply have destroyed Man. But it prefers to corrupt slowly for its own pleasure.

The Silmarillion is thus a far cry from the Bible, in that it is, in my opinion, far richer in possibilities and scope. But, like the Bible, it tells us that all things must pass, though some hope always remains, whatever the consequences of the fall, and the might of evil.

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⁸ One might argue that there can only be one Fall, followed by a series of chain reactions. But it is difficult to find a fact that could explain or justify such a theory. The only link between those events is the influence of Morgoth, and the pattern of the Falls (a "good" intention, temptation, and some part of possessiveness). The only way, in my opinion, in which those repetitive Falls might be regarded as a one and only event is to see them as a deliberate arrangement by Tolkien to look at the traditional image of the Fall from different angles.

⁹ And thus the Fall is *not* a biological flaw in human nature!