



Mythopoeic Society

mythLORE

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

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Volume 21 | Number 2 | Issue 80, Winter

Article 37

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Winter 10-15-1996

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## Recommended Citation

Barkley, Christine (1996) "The Realm of Faërie," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 21 : No. 2 , Article 37.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol21/iss2/37>

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## Mythcon 50

### Looking Back, Moving Forward

San Diego, California

August 2-5, 2019

## The Realm of Faërie

### **Abstract**

Middle-earth is not the only glimpse we get of Tolkien's view of Faërie. This paper examines his definition of Faërie and how it applies to Niggle's Parish and to the forest in *Smith of Wootton Major*. Once we are aware of certain aspects of Faërie (for example the double vision possible), we can appreciate them in Middle-earth.

### **Additional Keywords**

Faërie; fairies; fantasy; nature; peril; space; time; wonder

# The Realm of Faërie

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Still round the corner there may wait  
A new road or a secret gate,  
And though we pass them by today,  
Tomorrow we may come this way  
And take the hidden paths that run  
Towards the Moon or to the Sun.  
(Tolkien, 1991, p. 91)

In Tolkien's work, Faërie can be just around the corner, at least to anyone privileged enough and perceptive enough to recognize it. It will look just like the Natural world, yet contain wonders almost unimaginable. What is the Realm of Faërie? Where can it be found? What can be found in it? And what is its purpose? First we should turn to "On Fairy-Stories" to see what Tolkien himself said about the purpose of Faërie. And then I would like to explore a few different realms of Faërie, some that aren't referred to as much as Middle-earth itself: that found in *Smith of Wootton Major* and Niggle's Parish from "Leaf by Niggle".

Tolkien was less concerned with "fairies" themselves than with Faërie, the place. I should like first to mention a few general misconceptions about fantasy or faërie worlds: that they are places where magic is prevalent and which defy the natural laws, that in them fairies play tricks but not life-threatening ones on humans, or that they are wishes-can-come-true places. Certainly actions which defy our laws of time and biology, such as the immediate growth and blooming of flowers at the feet of a dancing Faery Queen, will seem magical to us. Yet though this is present in Tolkien's Faërie, it is by no means the focus. Of more importance are works of nature such as the King's Tree or the willow in *Smith of Wootton Major* or Niggle's tree, the Forest, or the Mountains in "Leaf by Niggle". Another misconception about Faërie is that it is thought of only as a place of goodness and light, and in Tolkien's Faërie certainly wonders almost beyond belief are found, beauty and joy are present, but it is hardly the entire story; there is also much that is dangerous and even evil. Tolkien called it "a perilous land" containing "pitfalls for the unwary and dungeons for the overbold". What did he mean by "perilous"? There is physical peril, certainly, in all reality, and this is true in Faërie as well. Niggle never really suffers from danger,

though his illness, he believes, hastened the day of his departure on his Journey. Smith encounters physical danger from the Mariners near the Sea of Windless Storm and also peril from physical forces such as the wild Wind near the lake in the Outer Mountains. While travelling in Faërie, Smith learns of many weapons that would cause great devastation in his world, yet he chooses never to reproduce any of these, though as a smith he might well have had the skill, or even to bring back knowledge of such weapons to his own world.

Though in time he could have forged weapons that in his own world would have had power enough to become the matter of great tales and be worth a King's ransom, he knew that in Faery they would have been of small account. So among all the things that he made it is not remembered that he ever forged a sword or a spear or an arrow-head.

(Tolkien, 1967, pp. 24, 26)

As Gimli pointed out when the Fellowship left Lothlórien, however, the greatest dangers are often not physical. Surely Tolkien realized, as did Shakespeare before him, that for joy to be more poignant, the possibility and sometimes the reality of sorrow must also be strong. Thus one of the pitfalls, something that made this a perilous realm, is that its joys are enhanced, but so are its sorrows and the grief at the loss of such joy. Thus even the poignancy of the joy Niggle feels when he encounters his tree or Smith feels while dancing with the Faery Queen make the realm of Faërie a more perilous place. Were there nothing but dangers in Faërie, leaving it would not be difficult. The loss of joy is a far more powerful grief.

To Tolkien the realm of Faërie is a place where one can satisfy

certain primordial human desires. One of these desires is to survey the depths of space and time. Another is . . . to hold communion with other living things.

(Tolkien, 1966b, p. 13)

Certainly the realms of Faërie in *Smith of Wootton Major* and Niggle's Parish in "Leaf by Niggle" function this way. How can one "survey the depths of space and time"? As with everything, one misses the wonder of a thing unless one

“recovers” it, that is, sees it in a new way, not unlike Tolkien’s example of “mooreeffoc” or coffeeroom spelled backwards. Both Smith and Niggle see space and time differently while in Faërie. In the Vale of Evermorn, Smith sees across space, that

the air is so lucid that eyes can see the red tongues of birds as they sing on the trees upon the far side of the valley, though that is very wide and the birds are no greater than wrens.

(Tolkien, 1967, p. 31)

After Smith is given the white flower by the Faery Queen, when he gets it home and his wife Nell looks at it in her hand,

it seemed like a thing seen from a great distance, yet there it was, and a light came from it that cast shadows on the walls of the room, now growing dark in the evening.

(Tolkien, 1967, p. 35)

Not only is there a dual view of the flower – far away and up close – but another of its characteristics is shown: its ability to glow brightly.

Niggle also saw space with a new perspective when he got to the landscape which had been the inspiration for his painting and began to walk toward the Forest in the background of the painting.

As he walked away, he discovered an odd thing: the Forest, of course, was a distant Forest, yet he could approach it, even enter it, without its losing that particular charm. He had never before been able to walk into the distance without turning it into mere surroundings.

(Tolkien, 1966a, pp. 104-5)

For both Smith and Niggle the recovery of space and time involved a juxtaposition of two views of an object or place seen simultaneously: the flower or the birds seen from a distance and yet up close; the Forest remaining a distant Forest even up close.

In the two short stories I am examining, there is not as much holding of “communion with other living things” as we can see in *The Lord of the Rings* with the ents, dwarves, elves, hobbits, Istari and men working together against orcs, wargs, balrogs, and spiders. We do get a glimpse of the entire mating cycle of the birds in Niggle’s Parish as

they were mating, hatching, growing wings, and flying away singing into the Forest, even while he looked at them.

(Tolkien, 1966a, p. 104)

Smith has meetings, though no words, with Mariners beside the Sea of Windless Storm and with dancing maidens. He encounters a young birch tree to which he clings when driven by the wild Wind. This encounter proves disastrous to the birch, for it is stripped of its leaves and left in sorrow. Also, both heroes encounter some sort of authority figures who seem supernatural: the First and Second Voice in “Leaf by Niggle” and the King and Queen of Faery in *Smith of Wootton Major*.

Not all encounters in Faërie are filled with happiness and joy. Thus it contradicts the fact that some critics have associated both Niggle’s Parish and Smith’s Faery with

Heaven. Jane Nitzsche claimed:

All secondary worlds, all realms of Faërie in such fairy-stories ultimately are modelled upon Heaven. Entering Paradise remains the deepest fantasy of man because it constitutes the most important escape from death and from the stranglehold of this world on his life.

(Nitzsche, 1979, p. 53)

In agreeing with a Richard Purtill article in *Mythlore*, Eric Graff states that Niggle’s Parish “can only be associated with Heaven” (1992, p. 16). Purtill, however, did make the distinction that Niggle’s journey into the mountains was “Tolkien’s metaphor for ‘exploration into God’” (1979, p. 5). However, later Purtill claims “the country beyond the journey . . . can be taken as a metaphor . . . for an image of Heaven” (p. 5). Though all three writers are willing to establish Niggle’s Parish as Tolkien’s view of Heaven, I believe Purtill was closer to the truth when he suggested it was the mountains beyond that are more closely aligned with Heaven if we were to read the story as an allegory. After all, Niggle’s Parish is said to be the “best introduction to the Mountains” (Tolkien, 1966a, p. 112). Once Niggle’s work was done, he accompanied the shepherd to explore the “high pasturages, and look at a wider sky, and walk ever further and further towards the Mountains, always uphill” (Tolkien, 1966a, p. 109). It would be more in keeping with Tolkien’s own modesty to suggest that the Mountains might represent Heaven (if one were to choose to interpret the story allegorically, which, of course, Tolkien disavowed). The concept of the Mountains as Heaven is reinforced when Smith is leaving Faërie and “far off he heard the echo of a trumpet in the mountains” (Tolkien, 1967, p. 39) as he was headed back to his real world. Faërie, then, is an introduction to the Mountains (to Heaven) but is not Heaven itself.

So beyond its role as a way to re-evaluate time and space and interact with other living beings, what is the purpose of Faërie? It is clearly a more enchanted place than our humdrum world, yet I would say it does not represent Tolkien’s view of Heaven, though it might help to prepare us for that wonder. Yet, as well because of the “perilous” quality of Faërie, it also prepares us for loss, for bereavement. Tolkien’s view is that not all is either joy or sorrow, but that both emotions are juxtaposed, most strongly in Faërie itself. It is the combination of the two which best allows us to recover or better appreciate the joy. As Smith gets ready to leave Faery for the last time, he encounters once again the Faery Queen.

Then he knelt, and she stooped and laid her hand on his head, and a great stillness came upon him; and he seemed to be both in the World and in Faery, and also outside them and surveying them, so that he was at once in bereavement, and in ownership, and in peace.

(Tolkien, 1966b, p. 38)

The great joy of a place can be measured by our own sorrow at its loss, yet also by our willingness to suffer that loss for the sake of the joy. Lúthien and Arwen both chose death, “the gift [or the doom] of Ilúvatar,” over separation from the one loved. Sam’s last line in *Return of the King*, “Well, I’m

back" (Tolkien, 1991, p. 1069), is fraught with the same kind of juxtaposed sorrow and joy that I always feel at finishing my umpteenth reading of the tale. Smith's loss of the star, the willow tree's loss, even Atkins' recognition that the community had lost something of value when it ceased to respect the need for art in "Leaf by Niggle," all these show a reiteration and recovery of the value of the joy, or of nature, or of art, through an awareness of our sorrow at its loss.

Faërie then becomes a place to recover strong emotions, to realize that sorrow and joy are a yin and yang that must be combined to be understood fully. The realm of Faërie to Tolkien is also a wondrous place in which to see the value of nature, of trees and birds; also, through Niggle's painting, we see that art itself, though often an inaccurate or at least incomplete vision of Faërie, can be an introduction to it. We discover or recover Faërie by seeing a double view of nature, a juxtaposed view of the thing as it is and as it would be in Faërie. Thus we might see its true nature (the splendour of a tree), its complete existence (the life cycle of the wrens), or its emotional nature (the sorrow of the willow). This is not unlike the Renaissance view of earthly or human beauty and

Heavenly or Ideal beauty. But rather than separating the two, Tolkien suggests the need to juxtapose them.

I have shown that Tolkien's shorter works – "Leaf by Niggle" and *Smith of Wootton Major* – illustrate quite well the theories about Faërie which he stated in "On Fairy Stories," notably that Faërie provides an opportunity to satisfy "certain primordial human desires": to understand time and space and other living things more clearly. I have gone beyond what Tolkien stated as the purpose of Faërie to suggest that nature itself and works of art could be considered a part of a wider and more mysterious world, part of the realm of Faërie itself, if we can look at them and rediscover through them the wonder of our own world. By implication, then, as we recover or become aware of the wonders of time and space, of communion with other living beings, of nature, and of art, we enter the world of Faërie. Thus in answer to the question of "Where is Faërie?" our answer could be "anywhere". We can expect to find Faërie around each corner, down a new road, through a secret gate, on a hidden path anywhere in our own world if we look with the eyes of wonder.

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