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Abstract

Examines Tolkien's shorter fiction as representations of what he calls in "On Fairy-stories" the three faces of fairy-stories: "the Mystical towards the Supernatural" ("Leaf by Niggle"); "The Magical towards Nature" (*Smith of Wootton Major*); and "the Mirror of scorn and pity towards man" (*Farmer Giles of Ham*).

Additional Keywords

Magic in *Smith of Wootton Major*; Satire in *Farmer Giles of Ham*; Supernatural in J.R.R. Tolkien; Tolkien, J.R.R. *Farmer Giles of Ham*—Relation to "On Fairy-stories"; Tolkien, J.R.R. "Leaf by Niggle"—Relation to "On Fairy-stories"; Tolkien, J.R.R. *Smith of Wootton Major*—Relation to "On Fairy-stories"

The Three Faces of Faërie in Tolkien's Shorter Fiction: Niggle, Smith and Giles

Eric S. Graff

J.R.R. Tolkien makes a small comment in his essay "On Fairy Stories" about the three dimensions in which a fairy-story operates:

Even fairy-stories as a whole have three faces: the Mystical towards the Supernatural; the Magical towards Nature; and the Mirror of scorn and pity towards Man. The essential face of Faërie is the middle one, the Magical. But the degree to which the others appear (if at all) is variable, and may be decided by the individual story-teller. (p. 52)

Though he does not explain the implications of these conditions in the article, it is clear that Tolkien regards the 'three faces' as part of the religious make-up of fairy-stories. In short, they are meant to be a vehicle for Man's experience of God, his wonder at Nature, and his compassion for all Humanity. A glance at Tolkien's work as an individual story-teller will show all three faces represented in many degrees throughout his fiction of Middle-earth. But Tolkien wrote several short stories that more plainly demonstrate the role of his theoretical 'faces,' as Richard Purtill suggests in his article "Heaven and Other Perilous Realms." This paper takes "Leaf by Niggle" as an example of the first face, the Mystical; *Smith of Wootton Major* as an example of the second face, the Magical; and *Farmer Giles of Ham* as an example of the third face, the Mirror of scorn and pity. It attempts to show that these stories exhibit a clear preference towards one particular dimension, and that the author specifically tailored his fiction to fit attitudes and sympathies that were near to his personal life. I project two goals; first, that I might inspire an interest in Tolkien's shorter fiction; and second, that I may shed light on the creative process by which the author's imagination was transformed into story.

During the years 1938-39, Professor Tolkien wrote "Leaf by Niggle" after awaking one morning, as he says, "with it already in mind" (*The Tolkien Reader* p.31). For many reasons this story assumes the Mystical face of a fairy story that looks on the problem of the Supernatural. What Tolkien meant by "Mystical" conforms with the tradition of contemplative thought in the West. Niggle is a mystic like the monks of the Middle Ages, whose calling included the illumination of sacred texts. Both spent long hours in seclusion, perfecting details that most people consider extraneous, devoted to an art that exalts the beauty of individual forms. The repetition of forms provides an occupation for the self which is meant to free the mind to seek heavenly thoughts. Niggle's mind suffered

unwarranted interruptions; however, he continued to strive for the state of mind that offers a glimpse of the divine. To keep at his picture and perfect it were for him to know God.

As to the Supernatural, Tolkien says it "is a dangerous and difficult word in any of its senses, looser or stricter," ("On Fairy-Stories" p.34) because using it forces us to understand "nature" on a common ground. The natural, according to Tolkien, does not include man. It is the world over which man is placed as an imitator of God, as a "Sub-creator." Man is a lower participant in the Supernatural, and he is endowed with capabilities and desires by which he is drawn out of the physical world to the presence of God. Tolkien points out that prohibitions are an essential part of the character of humankind, specifically because we have the need to grow beyond our boundaries. The Forbidden Tree of Genesis serves us by providing the fortunate fall from grace without which our free will and creative force are meaningless. The Supernatural, then, denotes all that lies beyond the range of our understanding, the emptiness outside our human limits. Niggle's humble mysticism leads him to desire that which is beyond him:

He was the sort of painter that can paint leaves better than trees. He used to spend a long time on a single leaf, trying to catch its shape, and its sheen, and the glistening of dewdrops on its edges. Yet he wanted to paint a whole tree, with all of its leaves in the same style, and all of them different. (pp. 100-101)

Although the story of Niggle clearly wears the Mystical face, as a whole it challenges the idea of total seclusion as a means to meditation. Niggle fails repeatedly in his relationship to Parish. The help he gives his lame neighbor is more often because of expedience than generosity. Niggle sees his odd jobs with Parish as interruptions of his private work that might be avoided with a more callous disposition. We know that Niggle has a kind heart, and from the beginning he wishes he could be more "strong-minded." Parish comes to him the first time with some loose tiles and a leak in his roof, which has caused his wife to catch cold. Annoyed, Niggle makes the journey on his bicycle to the town to bring a doctor, and leave a note for the builders. He too becomes ill, much worse than Mrs. Parish, and his work on the picture stops. The builders do not come. Niggle wrestles with the thought of helping patch Parish's roof, but resumes his painting as soon as he is well. Suddenly, the building inspector pays a visit, and the law pronounces judgement over Niggle's occupation.

Another man enters behind the inspector, and as quickly as dreams change scenes, Niggle is put in his carriage for his mysterious journey. Then the tone of the story darkens; we are in the Workhouse Infirmary, and Niggle is put to a series of meaningless tasks and subjected to long hours without light. During these times, his only thought is that helping Parish sooner might have prevented the whole trouble; he would not have gotten ill, and he may have been able to finish his picture. In the Infirmary he learns to manage his time without waste, and to focus in his mind in spite of various interruptions. Niggle atones for his short-comings in this strange place that is just a stop along a railway; as though Purgatory was merely a lay-over on the line to Paradise. He acknowledges the truth, "The first loose tiles would have been easy to fix." (p. 108)

More than this, Niggle grows into the understanding that Parish is not the foil of all his artistic endeavors. The two voices that debate Niggle's merits wrangle over the little acts of compassion and the sighs of annoyance that made up his relationship to Parish. When he is given a chance to speak, Niggle asks after his neighbor's health, and his lame leg. Mercy is the final judgement of the Second Voice. Niggle moves on to the next stage, into a spring sunshine and a new world that can only be associated with Heaven. (Purtill p. 5) In fact, it is the world of his picture translated into many trees, and a forest, and in the distance, mountains. There Niggle meets Parish, and at last their relationship is mutually appreciative. Where before Niggle treated his neighbor as a burden, he now sees that Parish is a gardener of some skill. Parish finally realizes the beauty of Niggle's visions made real. Together they tend the garden, plan its development; they share the Epicurean responsibilities of maintaining beauty and tranquility. Their differences are resolved when each has made the journey through death and purgation into redemption.

This journey is announced in the opening sentence of the story, and its mysterious quality determines the course of Niggle's mystical experience of coming outside himself through art. "There was once a little man called Niggle, who had a long journey to make." Tolkien's style is simple, yet it compacts the theme of the story into very few words. He is aided by his philologist's ear for words that both sound and mean the same, such as the name "Niggle." The word is deceptively non-assuming; it commands the development of the story in tone and theme. In tone, it conforms to the story's basic appeal, encouraging our view of the character as child-like, innocent, and trifling. *The Oxford English Dictionary* lists four definitions for "Niggle" that explain the role of the word in forming the major themes of the story, and also its remarkably close relationship to the author's artistic life.

First, it can mean "To work or do anything, in a trifling, fiddling or ineffective way;...To spend work or time unnecessarily on petty details." Niggle's manner of work is perfectly suited to this idea, just as his attitude towards his journey fits the second definition: "To trot about, keep

moving 'along' in a fiddling or ineffective manner." Third, "Niggle" means "To get 'on' in a kind of way 'with' one (hence to Niggle along in a relationship)." These three definitions precisely describe the story of Niggle; as a tale about a painter who fiddles with leaves, as a story about a man who worries and puts off his confrontation with death, the journey, by trotting about without purpose, and as an account of the relationship of two men "niggling" along in life. The fourth definition describes handwriting that is spidery or spare, and imprecise. Possibly, this is a subtle self-criticism by the author. Tolkien was an accomplished calligrapher, but made several remarks about his own thin script. In any case, the rest of these explanations may certainly be applied to the Professor's professional work ethic, which he admitted was not so industrious as he would have liked.

The work which Tolkien calls "Sub-creation" becomes a dominant theme within the story, and it too is compacted into the first sentence. The infinitive "to make" refers to both the act of journeying and the object of the quest, for "Leaf by Niggle" is essentially a quest story. Death and selfishness are confronted on the way of seeking truth in artistic creation. The fulfillment of Niggle's quest arrives in the after-world that will become Niggle's Parish, when Niggle is reconciled to his picture and Parish joins him in the work of creating. Then the imagination that inspired the painter's visions of leaves and trees, and finally mountains, is intimately connected to the real product of his labor. The rightful place of the Art is recognized by both men when they accept their indebtedness to the love of the Second Voice. Parish wonders at having come to such a beautiful land, and Niggle says to him, "You owe it to the Second Voice. We both do." (p. 116) This echoes what is found in the essay "On Fairy-Stories," that the real joy in creation comes from an imitation, or a translation through the personality of the artist, of "Primary Art," the work of God the Creator.

Smith of Wootton Major has been called "a conscious attempt to tell how it is, it's...being a magical imagination." (Rogers and Rogers p. 58) *Smith*, more than any of the other stories, employs the face of Magic directed towards Nature. Magic as a power of the imagination makes a "green Sun" possible, the heightened power of Man's perceiving mind, which creates incongruities of Nature. These compose the essence of myth, in which "Something really 'higher' is occasionally glimpsed... Divinity.... Religion." ("On Fairy-Stories" p. 51) Nature is our experience of the physical world; the material in this world is but a shadow to the ideal; and Magic conjures up the divine when these shadows are intermingled and produce the image of God. The philosophy that infuses *Smith* is directly related to Plato's dialogues; the conversation between Alf and Smith on the return from Faërie closely resembles the Greek philosopher's form.

"Do you not think, Master Smith," said Alf, "that it is time for you to give this thing up?"

"What is that to you, Master Cook?" he answered. "And why should I do so? Isn't it mine? It came to me, and may a man not keep things that come to him so, at the least as a remembrance?" (p. 41)

Smith is the story of two shadow-worlds colliding; our own, which follows the realm of heaven, and Faërie, the "Perilous Realm," which is a mirror of our own.

Wootton Major is a prosperous town, "and a fair number of folk lived in it," says the author, "good, bad, and mixed, as is usual." (p. 9) Tolkien makes a point that Magic is neither common nor easily available to all, but it is rich and leads to wonder. The child that is touched by it and enters Faërie can be sure of endless discovery and adventure. At the feast of twenty-four, a little child is chosen to receive a fay-star that has been baked into the great cake by Alf, the mysterious apprentice. Nothing perceivable comes of this until months afterwards; indeed, not even the little ten-year-old boy knows he has swallowed it, but the star will change him.

"It reminds me of Faërie," he heard himself say; "but in Faërie the people sing too." Then he began to sing, high and clear, in strange words that he seemed to know by heart; and in that moment the star fell out of his mouth and he caught it on his open hand. It was bright silver now, glistening in the sunlight; but it quivered and rose a little, as if it was about to fly away. Without thinking he clapped his hand to his head, and there the star stayed in the middle of his forehead, and he wore it for many years. (p. 22)

This autobiographical reference sheds light on the creative process as Tolkien understood it. Though singing was never a strength of Tolkien's, the strange words known by heart had entered into his mind while he was younger than Smithson. Tolkien had been inventing languages since the onset of his schooling; he was fascinated with new words and fresh sounds. Later at King Edwards he would discover philology, and the heroic Earendil, the man bearing a star on his forehead. That image of a star-marked hero, appointed by the magic of Faërie, stayed with Tolkien a long time, and finds its way into much of his fiction, most notably in *The Silmarillion*. (Helms p. 62)

The extent of personal detail slipped into the making of this story does not end with the star or the words. Consider the chance meeting of Star-brow, "Smith," with the Queen of Faërie, who is dancing in the Vale of Evermorn. It reminds an avid reader of Tolkien of Lúthien Tinúviel's dancing in the "Lay of Beren and Lúthien." Both scenes are rooted in the figure of Tolkien's wife, Edith, who danced; and Tolkien wrote to his son Christopher at her death that she had always been his "Lúthien." (Carpenter p. 96) Cooking and smithing were two occupations that Tolkien likened to his method of writing; cooking resembled the mythical blending of stories that intrigued him (the "Cauldron of Story," "On Fairy-Stories" p. 52), and smithing he compared to his manner of creating stories

from words which retained their individuality, but inevitably linked themselves into chains of meaning. (Carpenter p.145) Last, the story is laced with signs of the author's personal credibility and experience in Faërie. The word "Wootton" is derived from the Old English 'witon,' and its applied meaning is "I have seen, hence, I know."

The Magical presence of the story is centered on the Prentice Alf (or 'elf'), who we learn is the King of Faërie. His strange arrival in Wootton Major can be justified by the keeping of the fay-star by the Master Cook. Alf is content to work under the egotistical Nokes (whose name is an archaic approximation of 'blockhead') because the inheritance of the gift of Faërie is at stake. He restores the neglected Great Hall, which represents the grandeur and vision of workmanship, because it is adjacent to the prestige of the Master Cook, and in the celebration of the Cook's creation at the twenty-four feast, the vital passing on of the star takes place.

Reverence for the Perilous Realm is important to its ruler. The end of the story brings Prentice together with Nokes to set their relationship aright. Nokes is by now far into old age, doubtful of the legitimacy of Magic and stuck on his former position as Master, though even that rested primarily on the skill of his assistant. The scene of their last meeting shows Alf patiently explaining the fate of the fay-star to Nokes, who assumed it had been lost in the baking of his one great cake. Nokes dismisses the story of young Smithson having gotten it, for, he says, "Smith was a quiet slow boy then....No risks for him. Chews twice before he swallows, and always did, if you take my meaning." (p.53) Nokes prefers to believe that Alf reserved the star for another time, an accusation of falsehood which is not received with humility. Alf reveals his majesty for the old man in ungente brilliance, growing physically taller and luminescent. Kindness is his nature, and he does not harm Nokes; rather he grants him the wish he made in spite — to become thinner, but Nokes still never takes it as a sign: "King o' Fairy! Why, he hadn't no wand. And if you stop eating you grow thinner. That's Natural. Stands to reason. There ain't no magic in it." (pp. 56-7)

Tolkien was a careful artist. The reader might take a hint from the story, in which even the fool talks about Nature and Magic. Nokes' error in understanding within the context of the story is not in experience, but in perspective; he has seen the effect, but denied its significance. His comment that it only "Stands to reason" reveals his refusal to make a leap of understanding over the breach between himself and the world.

The Magical face of this fairy-story likewise confronts the reader's perception of what is "Natural," and persuades him (if the story has achieved its goal) to venture outside the rules of strict material life. If Nokes is the ideological villain of the tale, then the victory over him is subtle but pronounced in passing the star on to one of his descendants, a little boy named Tim. The reader knows in the last paragraphs that Nokes is defeated, but just like a

teacher, Professor Tolkien saves him for the end as an example. His disgust for Alf, which is based on his artfulness, engenders in the reader a preference for Art over bitterness and sloth.

I turn to the story *Farmer Giles of Ham* with an interest in the nimble mind of the author, here at play in broad daylight. The details that produce the tale's sophisticated word-play and satire are of foremost concern to Tolkien. Its architecture is based on philology and low-brow folk humor; and unlike "Niggle" it returns to the North European tradition for certain characters and incidents. The half-submerged plan of geography and the calendar suggest both a clever derivation of the names in the heart of modern England and a personal understanding of faith modelled after Roman Catholic theology. "Giles" is constructed to be a flawless Mirror of scorn and pity towards man.

The story is an account of the robust Farmer Giles, an enemy to trespassers, who shoots a Giant in the nose with a Blunderbuss for coming on his land. Garm, the Farmer's talking dog, tells everyone of his master's battle, and Giles becomes a village hero, a position he does not dislike because of its advantages. He receives an old sword from the King, and a red letter of commendation, but his advantage lands him in bigger trouble when a Dragon enters the Kingdom. Giles is chosen to kill it or drive it off; actually he wounds it with his sword, which the Parson discovered was Magical, and chases it into town on his old grey mare. The bargain that is struck with Chrysophylax the Rich leaves him to fly back to his cavern, and the poor farmer is forced to go in search of the lair. Many things happen, but the Worm is tamed, and the riches brought into town. Giles takes on twelve men-at-arms, and sets up a "Little Kingdom." At last the angry King, without the treasure and no brave knights to fight for him, yields to Giles and his Dragon. It is explained that the Little Kingdom in time became the center of the true Britain that endures today; a happy thought, that good things come to even the worst of us (Giles is certainly not the best), if we are courageous.

The title appears in Book Latin, then the "Vulgar" tongue for two reasons: one, the use of Latin helps establish a time for the action that is distantly past but non-specific; and two, it pokes fun at the notion of an official language that pretends to set itself above the speech of the people. In the Foreword, the author is careful to draw out the context of the story in time and place; centered in the south-east corner of Britain, what is now the Thames valley, and occurring sometime between the reign of Kings Coel and Arthur. Tolkien calculates the effect of this to give no clear parameters, and so to open up the possibility of an encounter with Faërie.

Tolkien's meticulous art has crafted a suitable name for every character from Garm, "wretched or lowly," to the Dragon, to Master Aegidius himself. Giles' full name, "for people were richly endowed with names in those days," was Aegidius Ahenobarbus Julius Agricola de Hammo. In other words, the "son of Theseus, red-beard, ruler, friend

to the people, who hails from Africa." The comic application of such a magnificent name to Giles is the author's first aim, but the title reflects important points about his intent which should not be ignored, most notably that Tolkien knew his mock-heroic farmer was a mix of strange things (Julius=Agricola?), and also saw in Giles a good deal of himself. The word "Hammo" passes well enough for the English "Ham," which would later be combined with "Tame" to become Thames, but understood in the light of *The Oxford English Dictionary*, a favorite tool of Tolkien's, "Hammo" connotes rather the Egyptian God Ammon, whose temple was said to be in "Darkest Africa." This buried reference to the author's own childhood origins lends credence to my belief that in Giles, the rounding, fussy, gruff and courageous farmer, Tolkien saw a part of himself.

The story is full of comic contrasts, a device that Tolkien uses for satire. Even as the people are hailing Giles as a hero, he is weak-kneed and unsure, but when he collects himself he wallows in the praise. The King is high on court-sy but is moved by low intents. Garm and the Grey Mare, loth sentient, even vocal characters, perfectly foil the Dragon's implicit threat with their earth-bound practicality. Even Chrysophylax himself is putting up a front while he shies from danger on the inside. The high-blown heroicism of traditional tales, in which the hero slays a dragon, is converted into ruddy humor and realistic human portrayals. The Miller and the Blacksmith are far more real in their spite and pessimism than they could have been as idealized citizens. The most appropriate weapon that Giles can wield, aside from Caudimordax, is his skill at Bargaining, for "few had ever outlasted Farmer Giles at Bargaining." (p. 135)

The geographical delimitations of *Giles*, as I've already said, contribute to the history lesson, somewhat twisted, that accompanies the end of the story. A careful ordering of dates and occurrences also establishes a time-line that mirrors the Roman Catholic calendar.

Chrysophylax accepted, after a plausible show of hesitation. He even shed hot tears, lamenting his ruin, till there were steaming puddles in the road, but no one was moved by them. He swore many oaths, solemn and astonishing, that he would return with all his wealth on the feast of St. Hilarius and St. Felix. That gave him eight days, and far too short a time for the journey, as even those ignorant of geography might well have reflected. (pp.118-119)

The Blacksmith believes in the Dragon's insincerity. "Ominous Names," says he, "Hilarius and Felix. I don't like the sound of them." (p. 119) In addition to this play about Saints' names, Giles manages to tame the Dragon on the very eve of the Epiphany, when the beast lays down exhausted in front of the Parson and his Church. The religious ingredient in the story also includes the Parson's fortunate skill with the runes on the Magic sword, and his uncanny prediction that Giles will need a long rope on his adventure. Yet the Parson is the same kind of man, if a little

keener and more courteous, as the Miller and the Blacksmith. Tolkien has written into the story a small humorous parody of the Church's role in that time long ago.

As a mirror held up in both scorn and pity to man, Giles reveals the baseness that must travel with our notions of grandiosity. The egoist who presumes to take credit for everything, the King, is scorned; the Farmer who knows his limits is pitied. This fairy-story divides the appearance of deserved good fortune, exposing its honor and its debt to happenstance, settling on a vision of mixed humanity, though with a good inclination. As these several fairy-stories primarily show one face out of three, they contain the other two in "variable" degrees. "Niggle" not only shows the mystical journey of a painter toward heaven, it details the wonder of Natural things in the porter's fairy-catch, and while it pities the vice of Parish, it scorns Councilor Tompkins in the end. *Smith* does more than talk of Magic. The mystical implications of a journey into the Perilous Realm become a distinguishing mark of those that have been there. Nokes is as good a character to scorn and to pity as any in these stories. Likewise, Farmer Giles has his touches of Mystical revelation, as when his right to power is established and he finally confronts the King. The Magical world touches him with its creatures, the Giant and the Dragon, but arms him against them with Tailbiter.

Each story contains as well the Eucatastrophe that Tolkien made a trademark of his work. This "Good Turning" of events often appears to be a sorry lack of fortune. We are saddened that Niggle loses his picture to the building inspector, but this destruction seems to bring about the ultimate completion of the picture in a subsequent world. In *Smith*, the star is given over to Alf willingly, a sad act

in itself, but the continuance of the gift redeems its value. Giles sees the farmer's accidental and near fatal fame lead to his founding of the "Little Kingdom."

Tolkien's shorter fiction may lack the universal luster of *The Lord of the Rings*, yet it is no less applicable to our modern world. For the individual reader who falls under this storyteller's spell, the short tales represent memorable accomplishments. They display a broad scope of understanding, offer a trustworthy evaluation of our identity as people. They contain, as is proper to Faërie, "both joy and sorrow as sharp as swords." ("On Fairy-Stories" p. 33)

Tolkien's ability as a narrator, to bring us to the point of joy, established him as a figure of mythic stature to young readers around the world. Hope is appealing to anyone caught in the throes of life. In the modern world it is essential to our sanity, and sweetest when it gives us visions of slower times and richer lands, when the machine of industry that now surrounds us was no more than a simple blunderbuss. The humor of these stories recreates such a time and place, and colors everything with wonder. ☛

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1992 is the 100th anniversary of the birth of J.R.R. Tolkien. 1992 is also the 25th anniversary of the founding of The Mythopoeic Society. Since the Society began in the Autumn of 1967, we will devote the Autumn 1992 issue to marking this anniversary.

Whether you are a very recent member, a member of a few years, a member of many years, or a member since the beginning, you are invited to share your appreciation of The Mythopoeic Society in the next issue. Appreciations or tributes may be as short as one paragraph to as long as two typewritten pages. They may include your first encounter, your first thoughts or reactions, what influence the Society

has had in your life, how your response has changed over the years, what role the Society plays in your life today, and finally your appraisal and appreciation of its nature and accomplishments. It will be gratifying to see many people share their thoughts and feelings with other readers. The announcement for Tolkien Tributes was made in two issues; this appeal is only being made once. The deadline for Society appreciations is August 12th, but you are asked to please write as soon as possible.

Please send these appreciations and tributes to
 the Editor: Glen GoodKnight
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