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The Sense of Time in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*

Abstract

Discusses the importance of time, death, and/or immortality for various races of Middle-earth.

Additional Keywords

Death in The Lord of the Rings; Immortality in The Lord of the Rings; Time in The Lord of the Rings



The Sense of Time

in J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*

Kevin Aldrich

J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* is a deeply religious work despite the almost complete lack of reference to the sacred. Tolkien was a Roman Catholic and the mythology behind *The Lord of the Rings* is consonant with the book of *Genesis* and Roman Catholic moral theology. Indeed, Tolkien's moral vision is essentially the Roman Catholic moral vision, though the coloring in which it is seen is Tolkien's own. This is not to say that the story was consciously meant to be didactic or allegorical. Quite the contrary. It is a story which exists for itself, one which contains and out of which shines certain religious and moral truths.

This was Tolkien's own view. At the end of a letter dated 14 October 1958 to Rhona Beare, he said:

Theologically (if the term is not too grandiose) I imagine the picture [of reality in Middle-earth] to be less dissonant from what some (including myself) believe to be the truth. But since I have deliberately written a tale, which is built on or out of certain 'religious' ideas, but is not an allegory of them (or anything else), and does not mention them overtly, still less preach them, I will not now depart from that mode, and venture on theological disquisition for which I am not fitted. But I might say that if the tale is 'about' anything (other than itself), it is not as seems widely supposed about 'power'. Power-seeking is only the motive-power that sets events going and is relatively unimportant, I think. It is mainly concerned with Death and Immortality; and the 'escapes': serial longevity, and hoarding memory. (Let.283-84)¹

What Tolkien is saying is that he believes that the picture of reality presented in *The Lord of the Rings* is consonant with the vision of reality of Christianity. *The Lord of the Rings*, in his view, is not about power, but really has to do with "Death and Immortality" and escaping from death or trying to, which in the story is a foolish and wicked thing to attempt. Much of the poignancy of the end of *The Lord*

of the *Rings* arises from our sense of the inevitable passing of time which sweeps away everything. Perhaps the most powerful temptation for both men and Elves in Tolkien's world – and one which touches us because it reaches to the depths of our being – is to deal with death and time on their own terms rather than the Creator's. Drawing upon both *The Lord of the Rings* and some of the myths behind Tolkien's romance, my aim will be to explore, though certainly not exhaustively, the way men and Elves respond to the mystery of Time, a mystery of our own lives.

What may seem to be a ridiculous question, but on second thought I think is not, is Does *The Lord of the Rings* have a happy ending? Indeed, there is the joy of the victory over evil in "The Field of Cormallen" (Chapter IV of Book Six) in which Sam asks Gandalf, "Is everything sad going to come untrue?" (III:230).² There are the marriages of Faramir and Eowyn, Aragorn and Arwen, and later, Samwise and Rosy. There is the restoration of Gondor and of the Shire. Yet my feeling is that the main note that the book leaves us with is one of poignancy, in which sorrow overpowers joy.

This can be seen in the denouement of *The Lord of the Rings*, which lasts roughly six chapters. It begins after the destruction of the Ring in the Chapter called "Mount Doom" (Chapter III of Book Six), at the end of which Frodo says to Sam, "I am glad you are here with me. Here at the end of all things, Sam" (III:225). It ends when we stand with Sam at the Grey Havens watching those we love most, Frodo, Gandalf, Galadriel – among others – sailing off to Valinor, to a place of happiness, healing and (apparently) immortality, while we are left behind with Sam in the "real" world, subject to every sorrow and finally death.³

And so the joy of the "eucatastrophe" of the destruction of the Ring and of Sauron, of evil, the "good turning" in

which the Quest succeeds beyond all hope bringing with it great joy, gives way in the denouement to sadness.⁵ The world Sam returned to after Frodo and Gandalf departed, according to Tolkien's fiction, has since been totally swept away by time with no trace remaining, just as our world and we ourselves will one day be lost. A line from an Old English poem Tolkien the medieval scholar was certainly aware of called "Widsith" epitomizes what some might call the gloomy but realistic pagan "Germanic" view of life: "Till all things vanish, light and life/Passing together." Or consider the Anglo-Saxon poem "The Wanderer" in which the sage concludes his lament,

Here wealth is fleeting, friends are fleeting,
Man is fleeting, maid is fleeting;
All the foundation of earth shall fail!⁶

This seeming pessimism in both *The Lord of the Rings* and Old English literature has led at least two critics to conclude that *The Lord of the Rings* is a "Germanic" work. C. Stuart Hannabuss sees in *The Lord of the Rings* a "working out of a quasi-Christian morality in pagan terms" in which the ultimate victory goes to the good. Yet, he says, "the victory over bad is almost Pyrrhic: so clearly do the heroes anticipate and acknowledge defeat that we are in the world of *Beowulf* and the Norse sagas."⁷ Similar to Hannabuss' theory is that of Patricia Meyer Spacks. Claiming that *The Lord of the Rings* is "by no means a Christian work" (though admitting that the hero grows in specifically Christian virtues, that free will is exercised and there is the possibility of grace, and that Tolkien's universe, unlike the Anglo-Saxons' is ultimately affirmative), Spacks views the book as a northern heroic myth which takes a dark view of life. "The Anglo-Saxon epic hero operates under the shadow of fate; his struggle is doomed to final failure — the dragon at last, in some encounter, will win."⁸ Tolkien's remarks in his classic essay, "Beowulf: The Monster and the Critics," are the best I have seen on the "Germanic" vision, but he considered *Beowulf's* author to be a Christian who was looking back at a heathen-heroic past, and his theme, "man at war with the hostile world, and his inevitable overthrow in Time" is one "no Christian need despise."⁹

A good place to begin an examination of the theme of death and immortality is the Ring Rhyme that begins each of the volumes of *The Lord of the Rings*. I'd like to focus on the first three lines:

Three Rings for the Elven-kings under the sky,
Seven for the Dwarf-lords in their halls of stone,
Nine for Mortal Men doomed to die . . .

We have here three pithy descriptions of essential characteristics of the three major races of rational beings found in Middle-earth. First are the Elves who are "under the sky." The Elves are the first born of the rational being on Earth who awoke under the night sky before the sun or moon, whose characteristic stance was walking in the star-

light when darkness held no evil. (This, by the way, is how we first meet the Elves in *The Lord of the Rings*, when the hobbits encounter Gildor. The Elves' singing under the stars rescues the hobbits from the Black Riders.)

Then there are the Dwarves "in their halls of stone." As we think of men created out of dust or clay, the Dwarves are made of stone (*Sil*:44). They lived most happily under the earth, workers of metals and carvers of elaborately beautiful palaces or "halls" under the ground.

And finally, how are men presented? We are "Mortal Men doomed to die." The heavily stressed alliterative syllables "Mortal Men" and "doomed to die" sound ominous. And in the space of six syllables we are told three times of man's mortality. We are "mortal," we are "doomed," and we will "die." The main note of man's existence, then, in this apparently simple little poem seems to be his mortality.

Tolkien's mythological origin for man is not difficult to harmonize with *Genesis*. Tolkien's story of Middle-earth is feigned history: "The Fall of Man is in the past and off stage; the Redemption of Man in the far future" (*Let*:387). The same can be said of his creation, for, in Tolkien's world, all of the early records come from the Elves who are concerned mainly with their own history. According to the Eldar (the first-born Elves),

Men came into the world in the time of the Shadow of Morgoth and they fell swiftly under his dominion; for he sent his emissaries among them, and they listened to his evil and cunning words, and they worshipped the Darkness and yet feared it. (*Sil*:259)

Some men "turned from evil" and wandered westward, and because of the aid they gave the Elves in their war against Morgoth, were rewarded by the Valar with many gifts, including the land of Numenor, an Eden-like island near Valinor, the friendship of the Valar, and a life span three times that of normal mortals (*Sil*:259 ff.). It was perhaps as close to a heaven-on-earth as men are capable of. The one prohibition placed upon the existence of these men was that they were never to sail west towards the home of the Valar and never to set foot upon that land, for the Valar, they said, had not the authority to remove what was once a "gift" and is now a "Doom," death (*Sil*:262 and 265).

As generations passed and the Numenorean culture grew in splendor and power, a discontent began to develop over the fact that they, as mortal men, must leave their joyful lives and all their works behind them, while the Elves and the Valar had unending bliss.

. . . Why should we not envy the Valar, or even the least of the Deathless [the Elves]? For of us is required a blind trust, and a hope without assurance, knowing not what lies before us in a little while. And yet we also love the Earth and would not lose it. (*Sil*:265)

Later, the Numenoreans were seduced by Melkor's chief servant Sauron, a fallen angelic being. By exploiting the Numenorean's growing envy of the apparently unending bliss of the Elves and the Valar in Aman (Valinor), Sauron incited them to disobey the prohibition which the Valar had imposed upon them. Part of Sauron's lie was that Melkor, not Eru, was the one true God (*Sil*:271) and that if they would conquer the Blessed Realm they could possess immortality (*Sil*:274-75). Yet they knew that death was Iluvatar's will for them, against which they should not rebel (*Sil*:264-65). A few Numenoreans who remained faithful to Iluvatar and the Valar – as one said, "there is but one loyalty from which no man can be absolved in heart for any cause" (*Sil*:275) – were allowed to escape from the ruin of Numenor and became the rulers of the West of Middle-earth. By the end of the Third Age, however, it was thought that the line of kings of Numenorean descent had died out (*I*:257-58).

Aragorn, the last man in whom the blood of Numenor ran true, possesses three preternatural gifts. His longevity is the result of the gift the Valar gave his ancestors. His ability to heal – "The hands of the king are the hands of a healer" (*III*:136) – may be the result of the maiarian (angelic) and elvish strain in the line of Elros (*Sil*:306) or it too may be the Valar's gift.

As a Numenorean, Aragorn also possesses the gift of dying voluntarily, not suicide but surrendering his life when the end is approaching (*III*:343-44). Tolkien thought this was a gift that unfallen man might have possessed.

It was also the Elvish (and uncorrupted Numenorean) view that a 'good' Man would or should die voluntarily by surrender with trust before being compelled (as did Aragorn). This may have been the nature of *unfallen* Man; though *compulsion* would not threaten him: he would desire and ask to be allowed to 'go on' to a higher state. The Assumption of Mary, the only *unfallen* person, may be regarded as in some ways a simple regaining of unfallen grace and liberty: she asked to be received, and was, having no further function on Earth. (note to *Let*:286, his italics)

Of course Aragorn's gift is not an assumption of body and soul together into heaven but rather a willing separation of them. He could give back the gift of longevity he had been given and not without hope. When he is about to lay down his life and his half-Elven wife Arwen is in despair, he says, "Behold! we are not bound for ever to the circles of the world, and beyond them is more than memory...." (*III*:344).

Each of Aragorn's gifts, it may be noticed, have to do with man's mortality – with increasing life's length, restoring health, and finally, accepting death.

In direct contrast to mortal men are the Elves, who enjoy a seeming immortality, which is actually a special kind of longevity. The Elves' fate is in a way like the Valar's. The

Valar are angelic spiritual beings who at Eru's invitation chose to enter into the world and take part in its shaping:

But this condition Iluvatar made, or it is the necessity of their love, that their power should thenceforward be contained and bounded in the World, to be within it forever, until it is complete, so that they are its life and it is theirs. And therefore they are named the Valar, the Powers of the World. (*Sil*:20)

The Valar are bound to the world as long as its lasts. Similarly, the Elves do not die until the world dies:

[T]he Elves remain until the end of days, and their love of the Earth and all the world is more single and more poignant therefore, and as the years lengthen ever more sorrowful. For the Elves die not till the world dies, unless they are slain or waste in grief (and to both these seeming deaths they are subject); neither does age subdue their strength, unless one grow weary of ten thousand centuries; and dying they are gathered to the halls of Mandos in Valinor, whence they may in time return. (*Sil*:42)

The Elves' sadness arises out of love for their lands and works which cannot be held on to because of the ravages of time, whether through natural changes or the injuries of their enemies. For this reason, as Galadriel says, "their regret is undying and cannot ever wholly be assuaged" (*I*:380). The desire to halt the passage of time was one of the motives behind the forging of the Three Elven Rings. As Elrond says, those who made them desired "understanding, making, and healing, to preserve all things unstained" (*I*:282, cf. *Sil*:288). Galadriel had achieved this in Lothlorien. After the Travellers' blindfolds were removed and they beheld the mound of Amroth,

Frodo stood awhile lost in wonder. It seemed to him that he had stepped through a high window that looked on a vanished world. A light was upon it for which his language had no name. All that he saw was shapely, but the shapes seemed at once clear cut, as if they had been first conceived and drawn at the uncovering of his eyes and ancient as if they had endured for ever. He saw no colour but those he knew, gold and white and blue and green, but they were fresh and poignant, as if he had at that moment first perceived them and made for them names new and wonderful. In winter here no heart could mourn for summer or for spring. No blemish or sickness or deformity could be seen in anything that grew upon the earth. On the land of Lorien there was no stain. (*I*:365)

Lorien is a sanctuary in the midst of the transient world where not only is there no evil, but time itself appears to be halted. It is as if the garden Frodo is in is the garden of Eden before the Fall, and Frodo is like Adam beholding the splendor of creation with the power to name creatures: "and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name" (*Genesis* 2:19).

But while from our mortal point of view what the Elves have done in Lothlorien seems utterly wonderful, Tolkien

saw a darker side to both their presence in Middle-earth and their attempts to halt time.

They wanted the peace and bliss and perfect memory of The West (Valinor), and yet to remain on the ordinary earth where their prestige as the highest people, above wild Elves, dwarves, and Men, was greater than at the bottom of the hierarchy of Valinor. They thus became obsessed with 'fading', the mode in which the changes of time (the law of the world under the sun) was perceived by them. They became sad, and their art (shall we say) antiquarian, and their efforts all really a kind of embalming—even though they also retained the old motive of their kind, the adornment of earth, and the healing of its hurts. (Let:151-52)

Tolkien saw an element of pride in the Elves, an unwillingness to be just Elves, not Valar or "gods." It is at first, perhaps, hard for us to see why they would not gladly accept the place assigned to them in the world, since from our point of view to be an Elf in Valinor seems a more excellent fate than to be a mortal man. But then to an Elf, of course, it could seem better to be a Valar than a mere Elf. The problem is the same as Adam's. Why would he, considering all the excellent gifts he was given by God, still rather be a "god"? Or, why would Morgoth or Satan want to usurp God's place?

At any rate, while there is nothing wrong with the Elves' "old motive" of adorning the earth and healing its hurts, they perceive change itself as an evil. This is wrong because change or "the law of the world" is Eru's will. Further, it is Eru's will that the Elves should "fade," that is, become less and less important in the affairs of Middle-earth, and go to the West. Finally, behind their desire to halt time is perhaps also an unwillingness to accept their own mortality, since time will eventually bring about their end. Yet the Elves of Middle-earth have not fallen; they haven't directly rebelled against Eru's will. Rather, they have been prolonging their days in Middle-earth as long as possible.

By the end of the Third Age the Elves can no longer put off whether they will accept or reject Eru's will for them. Should Sauron regain the One Ring he will destroy all their works; and even if the One is destroyed, the Three will lose their power and the "tides of Time will sweep" their works away (I:380). The Elves choose to give up Middle-earth for the Blessed Realm. Galadriel, who has desired the Ring, rejects it and will not try to become a goddess, "beautiful and terrible as the Morning and the Night! Fair as the Sea and the Sun and the Snow upon the Mountain! Dreadful as the Storm and the Lightning! Stronger than the foundations of the earth" (I:381). Instead she will remain just herself: "I will diminish, and go into the West, and remain Galadriel" (I:381). Again it is hard for "Mortal Men doomed to die" to understand the sorrow and regret of the Elves, since they will be going to a kind of natural paradise. But though we admire and envy the life span of the Elves, it is nevertheless finite, and as the world comes to its end, they will come to theirs: they apparently will die utterly, though "Iluvatar has not revealed what he purposes for the Elves after the World's end" (Sil:42).

On the other hand, Iluvatar gave to men what are in the Elves' opinion "strange gifts" (Sil:41). Eru "willed that the hearts of Men should seek beyond the world and should find no rest therein" (Sil:41). He also willed that they would

have a virtue to shape their life, amid the powers and chances of the world, beyond the Music of the Ainur, which is fate to all things else; and of their operation everything should be, in form and deed, completed, and the world fulfilled unto the last and smallest. (Sil:41-42)

I am not sure what the first part of this statement means—not, I think, that men possess free will and Elves don't, since Galadriel obviously does. Perhaps it means that men alone of all earthly creatures are supernatural. The Elves are natural, bound to the world, while men are meant to leave it. The second part, that the world—the earth, not the universe—should be fulfilled through them, seems to be the Biblical notion that the earth is made for man: "Be fruitful and increase, fill the earth and subdue it, rule over the fish in the sea, the birds of heaven, and every living thing that moves upon the earth" (Genesis 1:28). As Aule says to Yavanna,

Eru will give them [his "Children"] dominion, and they shall use all that they find in Arda: though not, by the purpose of Eru, without respect or without gratitude. (Sil:45)

To this Yavanna replies, "Not unless Melkor darken their hearts" (Sil:45). Though in this context the Children who will have dominion include the Elves (and dwarves) as well as men, Aule's statement seems to apply preeminently to the latter, because eventually all the peoples except man died or leave the circles of this world.

But, according to the Eldar, Iluvatar knew that men, "being set amid the tumults of the powers of the world, would stray often, and would not use their gifts in harmony" (Sil:42). To this he said, as he said in regard to Melkor's evil, "These too in their time shall find that all that they do redounds at the end only to the glory of my work" (Sil:42).

Consonant with this "gift of freedom," whether from purely natural ends or to dominate their environment, men live only a short while. Men truly die (as Elves only seem to) and leave the world, and so the Elves call them the "Guests" or "Strangers" (Sil:42)

Death is their fate, the gift of Iluvatar, which as Time wears even the Powers shall envy. But Melkor has cast his shadow upon it, and confounded it with darkness, and brought evil out of good and fear out of hope. (Sil:42)

In Tolkien's mythology death is not seen as a punishment but a gift given by God. Of course many of the men in his world see it as a curse, as we saw with the Numenoreans. Is this view of death as a gift in contradiction to the Catholic one? Tolkien didn't think so. The idea

of death as a gift is "an Elvish perception of what death—not being tied to the 'circles of the world'—should now become for Men, however it arose" (Let:286). It

does not necessarily have anything to say for or against such beliefs as the Christian that 'death' is not part of human nature, but a punishment for sin (rebellion), a result of the 'Fall'. A divine 'punishment' is also a divine 'gift', if accepted, since its object is ultimate blessing, and the supreme inventiveness of the Creator will make 'punishments' (that is changes of design) produce a good not otherwise to be attained: a 'mortal' Man has probably (an Elf would say) a higher if unrevealed destiny than a long-lived one. To attempt by device or 'magic' to recover longevity is thus a supreme folly and wickedness of 'mortals'. Longevity or counterfeit 'immortality' (true immortality is beyond Ea) is the chief bait of Sauron—it leads the same to a Gollum, and the great to a Ringwraith. (Let:285-86)

For both Elves and Men, then, time is perceived as an enemy. The Rings of Power are all, at least in part, anti-time devices. The Three, which were untainted by Sauron, are "good" so far as the Elves' desire to "preserve all things untainted" is good. The Nine and the One offered an apparent immortality to mortals but that promise was a lie: Sauron designed these weapons simply to enslave his enemies.

The problem of death and change remains after the Ring is destroyed. Even when the great objective evil is removed, when man and hobbit are able to live the good life—in Minas Tirith or the Shire—time continues to wear away. As mentioned at the beginning of this essay, at the end of *The Lord of the Rings* we are left standing on the shores of mortal lands watching those we love sailing away into immortality, escaping, we think, from time. We couldn't know from the text of *The Lord of the Rings* that Frodo and Bilbo would eventually have to die (Let:328) and that even for the Elves time is growing short—even ten thousand centuries will have an end. And for those left behind, however great the bliss, life must end:

I say to you, King of the Numenoreans, not till now have I understood the tale of your people and their fall. As wicked fools I scorned them, but I pity them at last. For if this is indeed, as the Eldar say, the gift of the One to Men, it is bitter to receive. (III:344)

Those are the words of Arwen the half-Elven who chose mortality to marry Aragorn. As bitter as it is to receive, death is just what a mortal man, or woman, should willingly accept from the Creator. In the last episode of *The Lord of the Rings* which we can read, the cold and grey figure of Arwen returns to the now empty land of Lorien and amid the falling leaves lays down her life:

...and there is her green grave, until the world is changed, and all the days of her life are utterly forgotten by men that come after, and elanor and niphredil bloom no more east of the Sea. (III:344)

Spacks is partly correct: man will be overthrown in Time, but then so will everything else—evil, the Elves, the world itself. But man will arise, Aragorn hopes, as Tolkien hoped. Death will not win. There is more beyond the circles of the world than "memory," that is, the memory Arwen would possess of her life with Aragorn if she abandoned Middle-earth and mortality and went to the West (III:343-44). For, as the Valar declared to the Eldar, men will join in the Second Music of the Ainur (Sil:42) in which "the themes of Iluvatar shall be played aright" (Sil:15).

For both men and Elves, "good" means being the kind of creatures Eru wills that they be. At the end of the Third Age, the Elves had the potential for a great fall, but they chose rather to "fade." For mortal men, good means accepting their mortality. It seems to Gimli the dwarf that men "come to naught in the end but might-have-beens" (III:149), and the Numenoreans who envied the Valar complained that "of us is required a blind trust, and a hope without assurance" (Sil:265). *The Lord of the Rings* is about immortality and escape from death. But there is no escape from death except through death, if at all. The Gift of the One to men is bitter to receive, as Arwen, says, but there is hope "beyond the circles of the world." What *The Lord of the Rings* has to say ultimately is that if true happiness is to be found by mortals, it will be found not in time but in eternity. *The Lord of the Rings'* author has passed into that eternity. And so shall we all.

NOTES

¹ All citations from Tolkien's letters are from Humphrey Carpenter, ed., *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1981) and will be indicated by the abbreviation *Let* followed by the page number.

² All textual citations from *The Lord of the Rings* are from the Second Edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1965) and give the volume number in Roman numerals followed by the page numbers in Arabic numerals.

³ For readers not familiar with Tolkien's mythology, perhaps a recap of his creation myth "The Music of the Ainur" might be useful. Eru or Iluvatar or the One is the monotheistic god of Ea, the created material universe. The Ainur are his first beings, the angels. The Music of the Ainur is a sort of huge symphony made by Iluvatar and all the Ainur (both those who would remain good and those who will fall), which Iluvatar then showed to them in a vision. He then spoke the word "Ea" meaning "Let these things be!" (Sil:20) and the universe began. The Valar are the good angelic beings who are the co-creators and guardians of Arda, the earth. Some of them are Aule, Yavanna, and Elbereth. Valinor is the natural paradise where they dwell. Morgoth, like Sauron his underling, is a fallen angelic being who tried to conquer and ruin the world.

⁴ For Tolkien's discussion of the purposes of fairy tales see "On Fairy-Stories," published as part of "Tree and Leaf" in *The Tolkien Reader* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1966).

⁵ *An Anthology of Old English Poetry*, Translated by Charles W. Kennedy (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), p.61.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.7.

⁷ C. Stuart Hannabuss, "Deep Down," *Signal*, Sept. 1971, pp.87-88. Quoted from Dedria Bryfonske, ed., *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, vol. 12 (Detroit: Gale Research Co., 1981), p.575.

⁸ Patricia Meyer Spacks, "Power and Meaning in *The Lord of the Rings*," from Neil D. Isaacs and Rose A. Zimbardo, eds., *Tolkien and the Critics* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1968), pp.82-94.

⁹ J.R.R. Tolkien, "Beowulf: The Monster and the Critics," from Lewis E. Nicholson, ed., *An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1963), pp.51-103. Originally delivered as the Sir Israel Gallanec Memorial Lecture of 1936 and published in the *Proceedings of the British Academy*, XXII (1936), pp.245-95. My quotes are from Nicholson, pp.67 and 73.