

Winter 1-15-1995

## J.R.R. Tolkien's "Leaf by Niggle": Word Pairs and Paradoxes

Anita G. Gorman

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



Part of the [Children's and Young Adult Literature Commons](#)

### Recommended Citation

Gorman, Anita G. (1995) "J.R.R. Tolkien's "Leaf by Niggle": Word Pairs and Paradoxes," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 20: No. 4, Article 10. Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol20/iss4/10>

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

To join the Mythopoeic Society go to:  
<http://www.mythsoc.org/join.htm>



---

## Online Summer Seminar 2023

August 5-6, 2023: Fantasy Goes to Hell: Depictions of Hell in Modern Fantasy Texts

<https://mythsoc.org/oms/oms-2023.htm>



### J.R.R. Tolkien's "Leaf by Niggle": Word Pairs and Paradoxes

#### Abstract

Examines Tolkien's use of language in *Tree and Leaf* to "demonstrate the paradoxes inherent in Christianity [...] artistic creation [...] [and] ordinary life." Asserts that Tolkien also "[suggests] the ultimate resolution of those paradoxes."

#### Additional Keywords

Paradoxes; Tolkien, J.R.R. "Leaf by Niggle"; Tolkien, J.R.R. "On Fairy-stories"

# J.R.R. TOLKIEN'S "Leaf by Niggle"

## WORD PAIRS AND PARADOXES

ANITA G. GORMAN



Although in recent years there has been criticism of what is termed dichotomous thinking and of the related privileging of one part of a dichotomy over another, whether male/female, white/black, western/eastern, it remains true that much that we perceive about the world we continue to perceive in dualities: heaven and earth, sun and moon, individual and society. These pairings are built into human consciousness, which sorts them out in various ways: sometimes one member is, in fact, privileged over the other; at other times, the two concepts, or tangible things, complement each other. At times the pairs wage conflict; at times they peacefully co-exist. Finally, there are pairs which function as paradoxes, seemingly contradicting each other, yet somehow existing in relationship.

I believe that J.R.R. Tolkien, in his essay "On Fairy-Stories" and the accompanying short story "Leaf by Niggle" (collectively published under the title *Tree and Leaf*), presents us with a number of highly suggestive word pairings which dramatize relationships and highlight the paradoxes of ordinary life as it has existed for centuries and as it persists today, in spite of technology, urbanization, and postmodernism. Further, informed as both of these works are by Tolkien's belief in Christianity, "On Fairy-Stories" and "Leaf by Niggle" not only demonstrate the paradoxes inherent in Christianity, the paradoxes of artistic creation, and the paradoxes of ordinary life, but also suggest the ultimate resolution of those paradoxes, even as they at the same time convey the ambiguity that persists in human existence.

Flannery O'Connor believed that "a story is a way to say something that can't be said any other way, and it takes every word in the story to say what the meaning is" (96). Readers and critics may talk about a story, but the meaning remains the story itself; that is as true of "Leaf by Niggle" as of any other tale. A good story remains larger than the sum of its parts; it speaks to us on many levels and in many ways, ways we can talk about and ways we cannot easily articulate.

C.S. Lewis, in an essay titled "Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What's To Be Said," writes about the genesis of his own stories: "Everything began with images.... Then came the Form" (46). Lewis liked the lack of romance in the traditional fairy tale, as well as "its brevity, its severe restraints on description, its flexible traditionalism, its inflexible hostility to all analysis, digression, reflections and 'gas'" (46). Even its "very limitations of vocabulary

became an attraction; as the hardness of the stone pleases the sculptor or the difficulty of the sonnet delights the sonneteer" (47). Those same limitations of vocabulary are what this paper discusses, those common words, which, when paired both with and against each other, may produce, in Lewis's hyperbole, "an inflexible hostility to all analysis," but may yield chains of connotations and suggestions in the mind of the reader.

In the essay "On Fairy-Stories," Tolkien asserts that the fairy story concerns, not cute little creatures, but rather the "adventures of men in the Perilous Realm or upon its shadowy marches" (9). In these highly serious stories, the storyteller fashions a "Secondary World" inside of which events happen according to the laws of that created, Secondary World (37). The primary world, the world created by the Creator God, is mirrored in the secondary world, the universe created by the human artist. The reader enters that secondary world via a process more powerful than Coleridge's theory of the willing suspension of disbelief. Art leads not to a rather tepid mere suspension of disbelief, but, in Tolkien's view, to the more positive secondary belief, not a belief that is second-rate, but a credo which parallels that secondary world created by humanity.

So far, Tolkien has introduced word pairs which are not contradictory but which are related in a quasi-Platonic way, one the mirror of the other. Next he defends Fantasy from the charge of irrationality. For Tolkien, Fantasy, rather than acting as the polar opposite of reason, obeys reason's logic; "the keener and the clearer is the reason," he asserts, "the better fantasy will it make" (54). Human beings are motivated to create fantasy, he adds, because they themselves are made in the image and likeness of a Maker" (55); therefore it is our nature to participate in the divine activity of creation, though on a much smaller scale.

The essay "On Fairy-Stories" also plays with the images of tree and leaf, the very title Tolkien has used to link the essay with the tale "Leaf by Niggle." The student of fairy tales thinks he gathers "only a few leaves, many of them now torn or decayed, from the countless foliage of the Tree of Tales, with which the Forest of Days is carpeted" (56). Though we may feel daunted by the introduction of still another story into this great forest of literature, nevertheless, Nature itself is constantly being renewed; the Creator continues to create, even though the Creation greatly resembles that of the past: "Spring is, of course, not really less beautiful," Tolkien writes, "because we have seen or heard of other like events.... Each leaf, of oak and ash and thorn, is a unique embodiment of the pattern..."

(56). With one exception (to be discussed later), Tolkien's word pairs are words that are not only among the most basic and ordinary of words but are words which have had long lives of connotation and symbol. It is this quality — the long history of these words — which enables the reader to enter into the essay as a co-creator of the text, as postulated by Wolfgang Iser and others; think of how simple is that word "tree" and what it conveys: the Garden of Eden, the Tree of Life, the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, the Cross, Nature, beauty, shade, the balance of oxygen and carbon dioxide, the happiness of climbing a tree in childhood. The leaf, multiplied, forms the tree; without the leaf, there is no tree and without the tree there is no leaf; the two are different, opposites, yet part of the same oneness. These two concepts — the tree and the leaf — as well as the clash and the blending of other opposites, Tolkien and the reader will meditate on further in Niggle's tale.

"On Fairy-Stories" also contains a neologism, the "eucatastrophic tale," Tolkien's term for the happy ending, in which he adds the Greek prefix "eu" meaning "good" to the Greek word "catastrophe." Unlike the sitcom writer or the romance novelist, who must provide happy endings because the public demands them, Tolkien joins company with the writer of the *Divine Comedy*; for Dante, for Tolkien, as well as for other Christian writers (one thinks of the Shakespeare of the comedies, or of Jane Austen), the happy ending is guaranteed by the Gospel, the good news; the happy ending remains the ultimate goal of God's creation. Tolkien's coinage, the eucatastrophe, is a fitting term, for it contains within itself its opposite, the catastrophe, the tragedy, the sorrow. In ordinary life, joy and sorrow are inextricably wedded; in Christianity, there is no resurrection without death, no empty tomb without the cross. For Tolkien the Christian myth is a eucatastrophe, and "it is true. Art has been verified. God is the Lord, of angels, and of men — and of elves" (72). Using still another pair of opposites, he writes, "Legend and History have met and fused" (72), or to put it another way, the secondary creation and the primary creation have merged. Returning to the image of the leaf, Tolkien asserts that through Fantasy the artist "may actually assist in the effoliation and multiple enrichment of creation" (73). As trees effoliate, so do artists make stories.

In the essay "On Fairy-Stories," then, we are given word pairs — primary creation and secondary creation; tree and leaf; fantasy and reason; eucatastrophe and catastrophe — which convey some of Tolkien's key ideas about the function of art in general and fairy tales in particular, ideas which are embodied in the accompanying story, "Leaf by Niggle," a work which Tolkien affirms is connected to the essay by "the symbols of Tree and Leaf, and by both touching in different ways on what is called in the essay 'sub-creation'" ("Introductory Note" to *Tree and Leaf*).

The story itself is embedded with numerous pairings, of people, of places, of concepts. We begin with Niggle, "a very ordinary and rather silly little man" (90) who com-

bines ordinariness with the desire to be an extraordinary artist. Niggle's name implies a pedestrian attention to detail. I think we are meant to identify with him, this person who plods along, who aspires to do something significant (in this case a painting). Like the names of characters in Restoration drama, Niggle's name identifies his personality. Parish, on the other hand, the man who lives next door to Niggle, bears a name which defines not individual characteristics, but a relationship: Parish is the Neighbor of the Bible (as in "love thy neighbor"); the word *parish*, further, signifies the most important group, next to the family, in the life of the Christian; within the parish, the individual finds both primary obligations and benefits. This obligation to neighbor often becomes a burdensome duty; instead of concentrating on his art, Niggle has to tend to household repairs, serve on a jury, help an ill friend, see to Mr. Parish, endure teatime visits of friends; Niggle stands for Everyman, and for every woman who has found the ties of neighbor and community (supposed) hindrances to self-fulfillment. Within this pair of opposites lurk other contrasts: Parish likes gardens, not pictures; Parish has a wife, Niggle does not; Niggle has a bicycle, Parish doesn't and can't ride anyway. Niggle doesn't even care "very much" for his neighbor, "partly because he was so often in trouble and in need of help," (91) but also because Parish displays no interest in Niggle's painting. The values of the two neighbors conflict, and it is with Niggle that most readers will identify; the narrator relates these details from Niggle's point of view, and most of us gladly position ourselves with the put-upon rather than with the oppressors.

The onerous obligation to neighbor is itself intertwined with Niggle's desire to create art. Often busy with other concerns, when Niggle does paint he paints leaves better than trees. "Yet he wanted to paint a whole tree, with all of its leaves in the same style, and all of them different." (88) Niggle, a human being made in God's image, wants to do what God does so well: create large units, whole trees, not just leaves.

Niggle's painting and Niggle's story create a canvas on which the reader can paint his or her own life. Those of us who have succeeded in, tried, or just thought about creating something — a poem, a short story, a painting, or even a paper for a conference — know the obstacles, both external and internal, which prevent us from concretizing what the imagination has envisioned or what the eye has seen in God's creation: similarly, there is Niggle, "up on the ladder, trying to catch the gleam of the westerling sun on the peak of a snow-mountain, which he had glimpsed just to the left of the leafy tip of one of the Tree's branches" (90-91).

A further contrast between art and life occurs when Parish asks for wood and canvas (another word pair) to patch up his battered home. Parish's wife's illness and Parish's bad leg (a further duality) force Niggle to go off on his bicycle to fetch the doctor.

Now he was out of the shed, he saw exactly the way

in which to treat that shining spray which framed the distant vision of the mountain. But he had a sinking feeling in his heart, a sort of fear that he would never now get a chance to try it out. (93)

"The lyf so short," as Chaucer wrote so very long ago, "the craft so long to lerne" (*The Parliament of Fowls*, l. 1).

Throughout this first part of the story, it is clear that paired words, people, and concepts exist in ambiguous and conflicting relationships. Parish lacks the altruism of the Good Neighbor, yet Niggle's altruism is only grudgingly performed. Parish is the practical man and Niggle the artist, yet Niggle's art cannot capture the reality of the Primary Creation. When Niggle is told by the Inspector that houses come first and that he should have used the materials of his art, namely the canvas, to repair his neighbor's roof, Tolkien has captured a moral dilemma: do we take care of all human needs before creating art, all of which, as Oscar Wilde quipped, is "quite useless"? Tolkien's answer becomes clear only at the end of the story.

Niggle's journey, which he must reluctantly begin, even though his painting is not finished (as our life's work is never completed), constitutes a journey into Purgatory, the "place or condition in which the souls of the just are purified after death and before they can enter heaven" (Hardon 452). This purification, according to Church teaching, may emerge through "an act of contrition deriving from charity and performed with the help of grace" as well as by the "willing acceptance of suffering imposed by God" (Hardon 452). Though no longer a popular or much discussed belief, Catholic theologian John Shea has recently remarked that purgatory is experiencing something of a revival, partly because of our current awareness of change, growth, and process. Samuel Johnson, though not a Catholic, thought purgatory believable:

"Why, Sir, it is a very harmless doctrine. They are of opinion that the generality of mankind are neither so obstinately wicked as to deserve everlasting punishment, nor so good as to merit being admitted into the society of blessed spirits; and therefore that God is graciously pleased to allow of a middle state, where they may be purified by certain degrees of suffering. You see, Sir, there is nothing unreasonable in this." (Boswell 425)

In this new place, this purgatory, Niggle works and for the first hundred years he worries, wishes he had called on Parish earlier, regrets that he did not have "a week longer"; in other words, he engages in an examination of conscience and makes acts of contrition. Later, as he is purged, rehabilitated, and freed from his debt, he forgets "what it was that he had wanted a week longer for" (97).

In Purgatory, the First Voice and the Second Voice form still another contrast. The two, usually identified as God the Father and God the Son, debate Niggle's worth. Niggle wasted time, the First Voice concludes, "not even amusing himself"; he "never got ready for his journey" (99).

The Second Voice tells some of his good traits:

"He was a painter by nature. In a minor way, of course; still, a Leaf by Niggle has a charm of its own. He took a great deal of pains with leaves, just for their own sake. But he never thought that that made him important. There is no note in the Records of his pretending, even to himself, that it excused his neglect of things ordered by the law." (100)

If this is the voice of Christ, surely the most likely interpretation, then the defense of Niggle suggests that humility, diligence, and, yes, art itself are all important; nonetheless, art is subordinate to the rule of law, and by inference to the physical needs of the people of the world.

When the Voices ask Niggle (who has been eavesdropping), to comment, Niggle first inquires about his neighbor, Parish: "And please don't worry about him and me. He was a very good neighbour, and let me have excellent potatoes very cheap, which saved me a lot of time" (101). Niggle has learned, in these years of purgatory, to think of others rather than himself; his altruism sends him on the next part of the journey. Niggle now approaches heaven; in that classic Christian paradox, he has found his life by losing it. By being more concerned about his neighbor than about himself, he has in a sense found himself, he has become his true self.

Now, in place of darkness, Niggle sees the contrasting light. His journey leads him farther away, but also back again: "By the gate stood his bicycle; at least, it looked like his, and there was a yellow label tied to the bars with NIGGLE written on it in large black letters" (103). When he sees the Tree of his painting, the tree is "finished" in a way his painting never was. In this living tree, which Niggle recognizes as a "gift," the imagined meets the Platonic Ideal in its ultimate reality: "All the leaves he had ever laboured at were there, as he had imagined them rather than as he had made them; and there were others that had only budded in his mind, and many that might have budded, if only he had had time" (104). Some of the leaves even seem to have been created with Mr. Parish, "there was no other way of putting it" (104). Art and reality coalesce.

Niggle's question about his neighbor, that is, his movement out of self-preoccupation and into concern for others, is now followed by still another sign of selflessness: he acknowledges his need for Parish, who knows things about the earth, a reminder of St. Paul's statement that there are many gifts but the same spirit, many members but one body. Niggle finds Parish, and they work together to build a house and garden, each one developing a different side of his own nature, with Parish contemplating trees and the Tree more often than Niggle, and Niggle showing an aptitude for gardening. Although his friend does not remember doing it, Parish thanks Niggle for putting in a word for him, affirming that Niggle's word got him out of purgatory sooner. An overt theological note, the discussion refers to the belief that as members of the Mystical

Body we can pray for each other. The Anglican Samuel Johnson, who prayed for the soul of his dead wife Tetty (Boswell 171), once said to Boswell, "Why, Sir, if it be once established that there are souls in purgatory, it is as proper to pray for them, as for our brethren of mankind who are yet in this life" (425). Concerning this belief, the *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (1967) reiterates the doctrine of the communion of saints, "the community of all those who are joined in Christ, whether in heaven, purgatory, or on earth. This means that the action of any member of this community affects all others in it, although the manner in which this is accomplished is hidden in the mystery of the divine wisdom" (1039).

The Second Voice, Parish says, gave Niggle credit for Parish's release; Niggle, in another act of selflessness as well as in a moment of insight, responds that they both owe their fate to the Second Voice, to Christ, as we infer. With the help of a man who "looked like a shepherd," Niggle is ready to move on; in a touching moment, Parish says that he must wait for his wife. When Parish asks whose country they are in, the shepherd replies: "It is Niggle's Country. It is Niggle's Picture, or most of it: a little of it is now Parish's Garden" (108). The shepherd tells Parish that he only had to look in the old days and he would have seen Niggle's picture, even if it was "only a glimpse" at the time. The mountains now visible to them had been in the borders of his picture, "but what they are really like, and what lies beyond them, only those can say who have climbed them" (110). Tolkien seems to imply here that art makes suggestions and points the way, but only direct experience presents us with the full reality; we have not yet experienced heaven, so how can we know it fully? The mountains in the border of the picture are like objects seen through St. Paul's "glass, darkly."

The end of the story spells the resolution, although a poignant one, of the conflict between art and practicality: back on earth, Councillor Tompkins says that although Niggle was "useless" to society, he would have made Niggle useful and, barring that, recommends death for the "useless." Atkins, the schoolmaster, finds a corner of the picture, the canvas which had been used for repairing the house. Atkins keeps this corner of the painting, which deteriorates except for one leaf, and that framed one leaf, the "Leaf by Niggle," Atkins donates to the local museum; "it hung there in a recess, and was noticed by a few eyes. But eventually the Museum was burnt down, and the leaf, and Niggle, were entirely forgotten in his old country" (112). Art survives for a time, with the help of its friends, but not nearly as long as Horace's *monumentum aere perennius*, the monument more lasting than bronze.

Richard Purtill has written eloquently that "the message of the second part of the story is the joyous one that nothing is wasted. What seems to be our failure at our lifework will blossom into success; what seem to be our failures in personal relations will also be redeemed" (22). Tolkien delineates this redemption as the story moves

abruptly from this world back to the afterlife, where the two Voices extol the virtues and pleasures of the region known as Niggle's Parish. The First Voice and Second Voice, God the Father and God the Son, are different and yet one; Niggle and Parish, formerly different, become unified, and the land they worked in Purgatory becomes Niggle's Parish, a symbol of their unity. The two have created, in the afterlife, a Secondary Creation worthy of the Creator God.

Tolkien wrote this story and its accompanying essay in the period of 1938-39 when World War II was imminent and *The Lord of the Rings* was taking shape. Some have read Niggle's story as its author's pessimism about his own art and life; Brian Rosebury, for example, equates the Tree with "*The Lord of the Rings* (or perhaps the whole history of Middle-earth)... [and] the dilatory and unsystematic working habits are Tolkien's..." (116). No doubt the story connects with Tolkien's own experiences; nevertheless, I think it has a much larger meaning. "Leaf by Niggle" speaks to all of us who have tried to create something artistic, to all of us who have empathized with the authors of forgotten books on dusty shelves in old libraries. Tolkien's story proposes that human endeavors, though they fail or decay, are still worth doing; that all those contradictions and oppositions with which we live, are ultimately resolved. Just as the meek shall inherit the earth and the last shall be first, so, in St. Paul's words and in Tolkien's world, shall "all things work for good for those who love God" (Romans 8:28).



### Works Cited

- Haddon, John A. *Modern Catholic Dictionary*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980.
- Boswell, James. *Boswell's Life of Johnson*. Ed. R.W. Chapman. London: Oxford UP, 1953.
- Lewis, C.S. "Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say what's to Be Said." *On Stories and Other Essays on Literature*. Ed. Walter Hooper. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982. 45-48.
- New Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol. 11. Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 1967.
- O'Connor, Flannery. *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*. Ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1969.
- Purtill, Richard L. J.R.R. Tolkien: *Myth, Morality, and Religion*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984.
- Rosebury, Brian. *Tolkien: A Critical Assessment*. New York: St. Martin's, 1992.
- Shea, John. *The Four Last Things*. Summer Scripture Seminar 1988. Mundelein, IL: Center for Development in Ministry, St. Mary of the Lake Seminary, 1988.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. "Leaf by Niggle." *The Tolkien Reader: Stories, Poems and Commentary by the Author of 'The Hobbit' and 'The Lord of the Rings'*. New York: Ballantine, 1966. 85-112.
- . "On Fairy-Stories." *The Tolkien Reader: Stories, Poems and Commentary by the Author of 'The Hobbit' and 'The Lord of the Rings'*. New York: Ballantine, 1966.