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## *Utopian and Dystopian Themes in Tolkien's Legendarium*, by Mark Doyle

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## Mythcon 51: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien

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**UTOPIAN AND DYSTOPIAN THEMES IN TOLKIEN'S LEGENDARIUM.**  
Mark Doyle. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2020. 204 pp. ISBN 978-1-4985-9867-5. \$90 (hardcover).

TODD SHIPPEY IS UNDOUBTEDLY CORRECT IN OBSERVING that “[t]he dominant literary mode of the twentieth century has been the fantastic” (vii), and he might have added that the dominant subgenre within this mode has been dystopia. Shippey’s comments arose in part from a now famous reader’s poll conducted by British bookseller Waterstone’s and BBC Channel Four’s *Book Choice* program in 1996 that resulted in J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* being named the “greatest” book of the century. Equally noteworthy, perhaps, is that George Orwell’s *Nineteen-Eighty-Four* finished second, and his *Animal Farm* third; the former has become perhaps the classic dystopian novel, whereas the latter serves as a fable of a betrayed utopia. Although these genres have normally been studied in isolation from one another, owing in large part to the specious schism between fantasy and science fiction, the thematic resonances among Tolkienesque fantasy, utopian visions, and dystopian narratives in our time are especially salient, as popular culture as well as literature is dominated by works of the fantastic, from *Game of Thrones* or *Westworld* to such “literary” novels as Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Buried Giant*. Just as works of utopia or dystopia engage in varying degrees with the fantastic, so works of fantasy engender utopian and dystopian ideas. In his straightforwardly titled *Utopian and Dystopian Themes in Tolkien’s Legendarium*, Mark Doyle explores how this operates in Tolkien’s work.

Doyle is quick to note that Tolkien did not create utopias or dystopias, but rather he “uses utopian and dystopian themes to intensify his audience’s longings and fears,” and that these become “effective means of inspiring idealism for a better society or concern for where our current society is headed” (2). In Doyle’s view, this is the strength of Tolkien’s work, in that it presents “good” and “bad” societies that are not perfect or ideal, on the one hand, or totally and insuperably repressive on the other. As Doyle puts it, “[h]is positive societies contain many good things our societies lack, and his negative societies incorporate many evil practices that our societies condone”; this in turn

“reinvigorates the formulas for utopian and dystopian literature, so that they speak more clearly to his readers’ hopes and misgivings about their current culture” (3). In this manner, Doyle connects such themes with Tolkien’s widespread and continuing popularity.

*Utopian and Dystopian Themes in Tolkien’s Legendarium* is divided into five chapters, plus an Introduction and an Epilogue. In Chapter 1, Doyle defines his terms, and discusses the key differences between Tolkien’s exploration of utopian and dystopian themes and the literature featuring actual utopias or dystopias. Doyle argues that Tolkien’s presentation is more effective precisely because he is not writing in those specific genres; thus, he is not interested in either pedagogy or polemic, that is, in showing us an ideal or in castigating an evil enemy. For example, “Tolkien’s good societies seem real because they occupy a middle position between our quotidian reality and paradise” (39). Chapter 2 delves into the medieval, Victorian, and modernist sources of Tolkien’s attitudes toward utopia and dystopia; not surprisingly, Doyle finds Tolkien’s utopianism to lie mainly with his medieval sources and dystopianism to be associated with modernism, which leaves a somewhat Hobbitic middle ground for the Victorian elements to emerge. Interestingly, this is also Doyle’s most “literary critical” chapter, in the sense that he focuses attention on form and genre, rather than merely on ideas, when noting that Tolkien mobilizes forms of the epic, the romance, and the novel to create his own hybrid genre (here simply called *fantasy*).

In Chapter 3, Doyle takes up Tolkien’s environmental views in relation to both earlier and today’s environmentalist movements. Doyle argues that the connection between man and nature in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* discloses Tolkien’s Catholic worldview, which also distinguishes Tolkien’s environmentalism from that of many in the Green movement today, for instance. Rather than depicting man *versus* the natural world, Tolkien would have people serve as custodians of Creation, and they only become evil insofar as they exceed the bounds of acceptable exploitation of natural resources. Chapter 4 focuses on myth, drawing upon Tolkien’s discussion of “sub-creation” and a “secondary world” in his influential essay “On Fairy-stories,” to show how Tolkien uses myths to construct his utopian or dystopian societies. The mythic atmosphere with which Tolkien’s world is imbued gives his landscapes and social formations greater vividness, and ironically, perhaps, make them seem all the more real (127). In Chapter 5, Doyle addresses more directly Tolkien’s politics, looking at such political philosophies as anarchism, “distributionism,” and Toryism. Doyle finds that, as with Tolkien’s views with respect to nature, Tolkien’s primary concern is with desire for control and respect for proper limits. Doyle argues that Tolkien is an anarchist, but one who respects the wisdom of beneficent authority, which Doyle ties again to Tolkien’s

Catholicism; notwithstanding its vast hierarchical structures, the Church—especially in its medieval form—tended to be local in its administration and, ideally, non-coercive with respect to its followers (170). Tolkien’s “bad” governments, much like man’s “bad” relationship with the natural world, aim for control, order, and efficiency, whereas the “good” governments act as public servants, allowing maximal independence on the part of the people.

In the Epilogue, titled “The Struggle for Tolkien’s Utopian and Dystopian Legacy,” Doyle moves beyond the *Legendarium* to look at film and video game adaptations of Tolkien’s work. Doyle, in the main, objects to the ways that these adaptations or extrapolations of Tolkien’s work have altered the moral vision of the original materials. For example, in Peter Jackson’s film trilogy, Aragorn is filled with doubt, Faramir covets the Ring, and Sam is jealous of Gollum’s relationship with Frodo. Doyle concludes that these changes reflect “many moderns’ discomfort with heroes. [...] The need to make heroes more flawed, and therefore more vulnerable, is a predictable effect of many contemporary people’s desire to have heroes who don’t morally challenge them too much” (178). Worse, Doyle finds in Tolkien-inspired video games a reversal of Tolkien’s moral positions, as when they “often ‘humanize’ evil characters in such a way as to make them more appealing. [...] Approaches like this are part of the general contemporary tendency to glamorize evil” (181). With this, Doyle reveals the real antagonism animating his study as a whole: Tolkien’s mythic, medieval, Catholic worldview as gleaned from his own writings stands athwart “our increasingly spiritually desiccated postmodern world” (183). While it is consistent with Doyle’s reading throughout, this view is disconcertingly simplistic coming from one who had quite properly defended Tolkien from accusations of simplicity earlier.

Indeed, I find this to be one of the flaws in this otherwise interesting and well written study. Doyle cannot seem to imagine utopian or dystopian themes in Tolkien’s work outside of the most simple, good-versus-evil binary oppositions, something that comes through especially in his uncritical assumption of which societies in Middle-earth are good or evil. Tolkien’s utopias include The Shire, Lothlorien, and Gondolin, with Mordor and Thangorodrim as archetypical dystopian societies. No mention is made of Galadriel’s motivation for leaving Valinor in the first place: “she yearned to see the wild unguarded lands and to rule there a realm at her own will” (Tolkien, *Silmarillion*, 90). Yet her wisdom and aptitude for leadership is not questioned, so her Sauron-like motivations are readily forgiven. (To deny this is to deny the seriousness with she “passed the test” in refusing Frodo’s gift of the Ring; had she no desire for power, there would have been no temptation at all, as with Tom Bombadil earlier.) Such nuances are what makes Tolkien’s moral universe far more interesting and, indeed, realistic, so it is disappointing to see such

complexities oversimplified. Doyle does discuss key scenes in which Orcs are depicted as utterly human, complaining about their superiors and speculating about motives and outcomes, but Doyle sees these as examples of Mordor's dystopian political organization and of the Orcs' inherently evil character (156–159). Tolkien's depiction of Orcs is somewhat vexed, but his moral imagination is far more complicated than is typically granted or emphasized in *Utopian and Dystopian Themes in Tolkien's Legendarium*.

Still, *Utopian and Dystopian Themes in Tolkien's Legendarium* is an interesting study of Tolkien's world in relation to these political and cultural discourses. By bringing together studies of Tolkien's sources and genres, his environmental views, his uses of myth, and his political theory, combined with detailed readings of key scenes and passages from *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and *The Silmarillion*, Mark Doyle has made a significant contribution to Tolkien studies and to our understanding of the ways that fantasy literature connects us to social, political, and philosophical concerns that are very much part of our real world.

—Robert T. Tally Jr.

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**MUSIC IN TOLKIEN'S WORK AND BEYOND.** Julian Eilmann and Friedhelm Schneidewind, eds. Zürich and Jena: Walking Tree Publishers, 2019. 474 p. ISBN 9783905703399. \$32.00.

**M**USIC IS A FOUNDATIONAL ASPECT of J.R.R. Tolkien's *legendarium*. It was there from the beginning, when *The Hobbit* first launched itself to an unsuspecting world, and then again when *The Lord of the Rings* took the simple world of Bilbo Baggins and reimagined it as part of the epic culture of Middle-earth, full of life and terror and song. The posthumous publication of *The Silmarillion* only reaffirmed the centrality of music to Middle-earth, as readers sat breathless before the procreative songs of the Ainur as if under some spell. But even before this, Tolkien had been telling stories in song; indeed, many of the earliest tales from Arda are written as songs or poetry, and he continued writing and rewriting them his entire life.