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Roads to the Great Eucatastrophie: The Christian Mythology of C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien

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ROADS TO THE GREAT EUCATASTROPHE:
THE CHRISTIAN MYTHOLOGY OF C.S. LEWIS AND J.R.R. TOLKIEN

A Capstone Experience/Thesis Project
Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree Bachelor of Arts with
Honors Program Graduate Distinction at Western Kentucky University

By
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2010

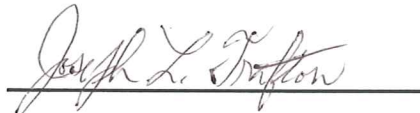
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis is to analyze how C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien created mythology that is fundamentally Christian but in vastly different ways. This task will be accomplished by examining the childhood and early adult life of both Lewis and Tolkien, as well as the effect their close friendship had on their writing, and by performing a detailed literary analysis of some of their mythological works. After an introduction, the second and third chapters will scrutinize the elements of their childhood and adolescence that shaped their later mythology. The next chapter will look at the importance of their Christian faith in their writing process, with special attention to Tolkien's writing philosophy as explained in "On Fairy-Stories." The fifth chapter analyzes the effect that Lewis and Tolkien's friendship had on their writing, in conjunction with the effect of their literary club, the Inklings. The next two chapters will provide a literary analysis of Lewis's and Tolkien's writing, with a special concentration on how they transformed their fairy-stories into Christian myths. The thesis will finish with a summary of the conclusions found through the examination of Lewis and Tolkien's lives and the literary analysis of their mythology.

Keywords: J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, *Narnia*, *The Lord of the Rings*, Christian, Mythology

Dedicated to anyone who is excited to read a book.

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I would also like to extend my sincere appreciation to my primary advisor: Dr. Joseph Trafton. Without your help, this thesis would still be a flat and basic literary analysis of the works of Lewis and Tolkien, two authors who deserve far better treatment than the project I had initially conceived. Thank you so much for the many hours you have contributed. I am deeply grateful for all of your patience, support, and expertise.

Additionally, I would like to thank the Honors College for its generous financial support through the Honors Development Grant. Without this financial aid, I would not have been able to study abroad at Harlaxton College in England, where I was able to visit the Eagle and Child pub in Oxford—the meeting place for the Inklings—which became the inspiration for this thesis. I also would not have been able to travel perform the research necessary to complete my CE/T project.

Finally, I want to thank the kind and welcoming staff of the Marion E. Wade Center at Wheaton College, especially Laura Schmidt, who was ever so patient with my

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien are two of the most celebrated fantasy authors of the modern era. Since initial publication in the mid-1900's, their novels have sold millions, filling the minds of readers with the adventures of Elves and Eldils. As a result of their popularity, their works have generated a large volume of scholarship. The Marion E. Wade Center in Wheaton, IL, is a specialized research collection that centers on the writings and scholarship of Lewis and Tolkien, along with three of their contemporaries, Charles Williams, Owen Barfield, and Dorothy Sayers, and two other writers who influenced them, G.K. Chesterton and George MacDonald. The overwhelming majority of the works gathered at the Wade Center focus on the Christian faith of these writers and the manner in which it influenced their works.

The purpose of this thesis is to continue this scholarship, to show how Lewis and Tolkien—in spite of their close friendship and common origin of the mythopoeic belief based upon Tolkien's writing philosophy as expressed in "On Fairy-Stories"—created Christian myths in vastly different forms.

By examining the childhood and early adult life of both authors, it is possible to understand how Lewis and Tolkien created their mythology, to grasp the influences from a

foundation of faith and a love of Faerie that permeates their writings. It is here that this thesis will begin.

Delving into diaries, letters, and personal accounts, scholars can piece together the early lives of Lewis and Tolkien. Following the introduction, the second and third chapters of this thesis will scrutinize the elements of their childhood and adolescence that shaped their later mythology. The next chapter will look at the importance of their Christian faith. Though Tolkien was a devout Catholic from the time that he was a small boy, Lewis did not convert to Christianity until he was an adult. During a nighttime stroll down Addison's Walk,¹ Tolkien explained to Lewis his understanding of the partnership between myth and Christianity; shortly afterwards, Lewis professed a faith in Christ. The full explication of Tolkien's philosophy is found in his essay "On Fairy-Stories." This essay is also examined in this chapter because it is the foundation for each of their mythology, as well as for Lewis's faith. The fifth chapter analyzes the effect that Lewis and Tolkien's friendship had on their writing, in conjunction with the effect of their literary club, the Inklings. The sixth and seventh chapters provide a literary analysis Lewis and Tolkien's writing, with a special concentration on how they transformed their fairy-stories into Christian myths. The thesis finished with a summarizing chapter about the conclusions found through the examination of Lewis's and Tolkien's lives and writings.

In his biography of Lewis as the writer of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, Alan Jacobs wrote, in a sense, the Narnia books and *The Lord of the Rings*—in their different ways, and for their different audiences—did inaugurate a new age. Not that the edifice of a modernism has been toppled like Minas Morgul: the Eliots and Joyces, the

¹ A picturesque footpath on the grounds of Magdalen College at Oxford University.

Pounds and Woolfs still dominate at least the academic arena (as, in my judgment, which in this respect is quite different than Lewis's, they should). But between them Tolkien and Lewis generated a forceful countertradition, one that finds its strength less in the academy—though American universities feature plenty of courses in Tolkien or Lewis of the Inklings—than among ordinary readers.²

This thesis stems from both the academic world and that of an ordinary reader. The Faerie realms of Narnia and Middle-Earth have captured my imagination for many years. It is my deepest wish that through this academic thesis I have been able to shed light on the Christian aspects of the mythology of C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien and to inaugurate a new reader into the world of the Inklings.

² Alan Jacobs, *The Narnian: The Life and Imagination of C.S. Lewis* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005) 305.

CHAPTER 2

The Early Life of C.S. Lewis

Clive Staples Lewis was born the second son of Albert and Flora Lewis on November 29, 1898, in Belfast, Ireland. Both of his parents were educated people—his father worked as an attorney¹ and his mother received a degree from Queen’s University, Belfast.² In *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis stated that his parents were from “two very different strains.” His father came from “true Welshmen, sentimental, passionate, and rhetorical, easily moved both to anger and to tenderness; men who laughed and cried a great deal and who had not much of the talent for happiness.” On the other hand, he claimed that his mother’s family was “a cooler race” that had a “talent for happiness in a high degree,”³ though many biographers have claimed that this statement is not true of either Lewis’s mother or of any of her family members.⁴ Considered bookish and clever people, Lewis’s parents encouraged him and his older brother, Warren, to read, draw, and create. Perhaps it was their encouragement for their children to be intelligent and independent that gave Lewis the self-confidence to, at the age of four, declare to his family that

¹ George Sayer, *Jack: A Life of C.S. Lewis* (2nd ed.; Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994) 25.

² *Ibid.* 29

³ C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (New York: Harcourt Books, 1955) 3.

⁴ Sayer 27

he would no longer be called Clive, but Jacksie. He refused to answer to any other name and, as a result, was known as Jack until the day he died.⁵

Lewis was raised in a happy, Victorian home. In 1905, his family moved from the inner suburbs of Belfast to Little Lea, a house in Strandtown.⁶ Throughout his childhood, Lewis's older brother was his chief companion. Warren (or Warnie) and Jack were always very close, though Lewis remembers that they were also very different. This is best illustrated by their childhood drawings. Warnie's were of machinery, like ships and trains, while Lewis, inspired by Beatrix Potter's stories, drew anthropomorphic animals. But instead of allowing their different interests to create a division between them, the Lewis brothers combined their ideas to create Boxen, or Animal Land, an imaginary world that was fused with India, an obsession of Warnie's.⁷

Many readers wish to view the tales of Boxen as a predecessor to Narnia; Lewis vehemently refutes this, claiming in *Surprised by Joy* that the only similarity is the talking animals.⁸ Strangely, the Boxen stories were filled with politics. This might have been an attempt on Lewis's part to make his stories more "grown-up." Lewis and his brother were forced to listen to the adult conversations whenever their family had visitors; thus, he began equating politics with grown-up thought.⁹ By the time the brothers outgrew their imaginary world, the drama of Boxen comprised a small novel, which included many illustrations and maps. It played a significant role in their childhood and became a way for the brothers to meet on common ground

⁵ Jacobs 1

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Surprised by Joy* 14

⁸ *Ibid.* 15

⁹ *Memoir of C.S. Lewis* by W.H. Lewis (In *Letters*) 27.

and bond. Warnie later longed for the relationship that he shared with his brother as children so much that he suggested reviving Boxen when they were both in their thirties.¹⁰

But their childhood happiness was sadly short-lived. In 1908, Flora Lewis was diagnosed with abdominal cancer and was forced to undergo surgery. But the operation failed to stop the cancer from spreading, and after a period of being confined to her room, away from her family, she died on August 23, 1908, her husband's birthday.¹¹ Her death had a profound impact on her family. Lewis stated that "with my mother's death all settled happiness, all that was tranquil and reliable, disappeared from my life."¹²

Many biographers cite his mother's death as Lewis's first religious experience. Lewis was raised in a Christian home, but his family was not very devout. Yet when his mother was ill, Lewis prayed for her recovery, fully believing that it would happen. When she did not recover, he prayed for a miracle, for his mother to be a modern Lazarus.¹³ Lewis refutes the claim that Flora's death was his first, real religious experience on the grounds that it had no effect, either for good or bad, on his view of God. He was not surprised when his prayers were not answered for he "was used to things not working,"¹⁴ and if she had been healed, it would not have furthered his faith in God. He would have seen it as merely restoring the status quo.

After his mother's death, Lewis was sent away to public boarding school with his older brother. Sending children away to boarding schools was a standard practice in Britain during those days. Yet Lewis hated his formal schooling. Wynyard School in Hertfordshire was a poor institution that did little to educate its students and the headmaster was later declared to be

¹⁰ Jacobs 151

¹¹ Sayer 53

¹² *Surprised by Joy* 21

¹³ Jacobs 5

¹⁴ *Surprised by Joy* 21

certifiably insane.¹⁵ After it closed in 1910, the Lewis boys were enrolled in Campbell College, though Jack only stayed part of one semester, having to withdraw for respiratory problems. After a two year stay at Cherbourg House, during which he had to work very hard to be brought up to the levels of his peers,¹⁶ Lewis, like Warnie, was accepted into the prestigious Malvern College. The best public education Lewis received was from Malvern College, due in large part to the school master, Harry Wakelyn Smith, also known as Smugy to pupils. He taught Lewis how to read poetry with so much attention to grammar, syntax, and rhythm that it almost became a song. Lewis's love of poetry and later literary style was deeply indebted to Smugy.¹⁷

Though Lewis's public education gave him the knowledge and skills he would need to succeed as a scholar, it also turned him into—in his own words—a prig.¹⁸ Lewis did not fit in socially; he much preferred music and literature to athletics and was not inclined to worship the older students, or “Bloods.” His prior knowledge of the literary classics made him feel superior to his fellow classmates. Thus, school was a very miserable place for Lewis. He constantly wrote to his father, begging to be taken home, though his father did not understand the full depth of Lewis's unhappiness until he threatened to commit suicide.¹⁹

It was also during his years spent in public schools that Lewis walked away from his Christian upbringing and his faith in God. Lewis describes in *Surprised by Joy* how he had made his religious practices an unbearable burden. In an effort always to mean what he prayed Lewis adopted the habit of forcing all his prayers to have a realization, or a “certain vividness of the

¹⁵ Colin Duriez, *Tolkien and C.S. Lewis: The Gift of Friendship* (Mahwah, NJ: HiddenSpring, 2003) 11.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 66

¹⁷ Sayer 88

¹⁸ *Surprised by Joy* 101

¹⁹ Sayer 90

imagination and the affections.”²⁰ If he was not sincere, or his prayers were not “realized,” Lewis would start all over. His exhaustion with religion, coupled with his opinion that the world was “a rather regrettable institution,”²¹ made it very easy for Lewis to abandon his faith when he was introduced to Miss Cowie, Cherbourg’s matron and an occultist. Lewis said, “little by little, unconsciously, unintentionally, she loosened the whole framework, blunted all the sharp edges, of my belief.”²²

Lewis’s conversion away from Christianity was solidified during the year he studied with William T. Kirkpatrick, also known by the Lewis family as the Great Knock, at Great Bookham in Surrey. Lewis said of Kirk in *Surprised by Joy*,

If ever a man came near to being purely logical entity, than man was Kirk. Born a little later, he would have been a Logical Positivist. The idea that human beings should exercise the vocal organs for any purpose except that of communicating or discovering truth was to him preposterous. The most casual remark was taken as a summons to disputation.²³

He was a Presbyterian turned Atheist, who used reason to support his decision. Lewis did not gain a new perspective on religion from Kirkpatrick, but rather “fresh ammunition for a position already chosen.”²⁴

While the Knock might have swayed Lewis’s religious views away from Christianity with his reason, at the same time Lewis learned his rhetoric and teaching style from him. For the

²⁰ *Surprised by Joy* 61

²¹ *Ibid.* 63

²² *Ibid.* 60

²³ *Ibid.* 135-36

²⁴ *Ibid.* 140

rest of his life, Lewis would delight in a logical debate.²⁵ Kirk provided a learning structure that allowed Lewis to flourish and prepare for Oxford. He would be left alone for hours to teach himself from the Classics and to study Greek and Italian with minimal guidance from his teacher.²⁶

Lewis was awarded a scholarship to University College, Oxford, but he only studied there from September to November of 1917, when he enlisted in the British army to be sent to the frontlines of WWI. His military career was relatively short-lived. Lewis was wounded during the Battle of Arras—pieces of shrapnel remained in his chest for most of his life—and was discharged in December 1918.²⁷ Lewis wrote little of the brutality of war, both in *Surprised by Joy* and in his fiction. He alludes to it, but rarely describes it; during the final battle in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, he has the character, Lucy, say that “horrible things were happening everywhere,”²⁸ but he never describes the horrors.

Lewis returned to Oxford to finish his degree in January 1919 and was elected as a Fellow of Magdalen College in 1925,²⁹ a post he would hold for twenty-nine years until he moved to Magdalen College, Cambridge, in 1954. While at Oxford, Lewis returned to Christianity, became close friends with J.R.R. Tolkien, Owen Barfield, and Charles Williams, and published over thirty books and essays in the form of apologetics and fairy stories. Lewis died of various illnesses, including a heart attack and kidney failure, on November 22, 1963.³⁰

²⁵ Sayer 93

²⁶ *Ibid.* 94

²⁷ Duriez 18

²⁸ C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (New York: Collier Books, 1950) 173-74.

²⁹ Jacobs 116

³⁰ *Ibid.* 302

C.S. Lewis is one of the most celebrated fantasy writers of the 20th century; but why? What events occurred in Lewis's early life that allowed him, an esteemed apologist and Oxford don, to imagine the worlds of *The Chronicles of Narnia* and *The Space Trilogy*? Biographers and critics can find two themes in his life that led to the creation of his fiction: the pursuit of joy and a deep love of myths.

Searching for Joy

C.S. Lewis wrote his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, to explain how he returned to Christianity from Atheism through the pursuit of "joy," or *Sehnsucht*. The term means a type of yearning or longing. Lewis first uses it in, what is for 21st century readers, an obscure allusion to Friedrich von Hardenberg's novel *Hienrich Von Ofterdingen*. The story's protagonist is obsessed with a blue flower, but possessing the flower is not nearly as pleasurable as longing for it.³¹ Lewis uses the term "joy" to describe the "ever-present, central quality in all forms of religious experience."³²

His first experience with joy occurred as a small child when Warnie brought him "the lid of a biscuit tin which he had covered with moss and garnished with twigs and flowers so as to make it a toy garden or a toy forest."³³ This little token from his brother taught Lewis longing and was an experience that he tried to recreate his entire life. During a period of four years in his youth, Lewis recorded every single time he encountered "joy" in his diary, attempting to find a pattern so he could experience it more often.³⁴ But his attentiveness often failed, bringing him

³¹ *Ibid.* 41

³² Sayer 52

³³ *Surprised by Joy* 7

³⁴ Jacobs 42

“just in sight of it but [joy] didn’t arrive.”³⁵ It is easy for outsiders to see that Lewis was failing to find joy because he was over-analyzing his life. He reflects in *Surprised by Joy* that “joy is distinct not only from pleasure in general but even from aesthetic pleasure. It must have the stab, the pang, the inconsolable longing.”³⁶ This kind of delight is not a thing that can be replicated on demand.

Joy slipped into Lewis’s life quietly and often in surprising packages—one being the music of Wagner. While in Cherbourg House, Lewis discovered an illustrated volume of *Siegfried and the Twilight of the Gods*. It enchanted him so much that he began writing a heroic poem of the Niblung story.³⁷ It was many months before Lewis even heard a recording of Wagner’s music, but by then he was already obsessed with the mythological context of the composer. So when he did hear a record of *Ride of the Valkyries*, he thought “not of concert music but of heroic drama.” Wagner became “a new kind of pleasure, if indeed ‘pleasure’ is the right word, rather than trouble, ecstasy, astonishment, ‘a conflict of sensations without name.’”³⁸

Another example of surprising joy is Lewis’s friendship with childhood acquaintance Arthur Greeves. Lewis did not associate much with Greeves growing up—he was three years Lewis’s senior and a sickly, coddled child—but in an act of charity, Lewis visited him on his sickbed in April 1914.³⁹ What he found shocked Lewis. He recalls in *Surprised by Joy*,

I found Arthur sitting up in bed. On the table beside him lay a copy of *Myths of the Norsemen*.

³⁵ C.S. Lewis, *All My Road Before Me: The Diary of C.S. Lewis 1922-1947*, Edited by. Walter Hooper (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jananovich, 1991) 338.

³⁶ *Surprised by Joy* 72

³⁷ *Ibid.* 74

³⁸ *Ibid.* 75

³⁹ Jacobs 55

“Do *you* like that?” said I.

“Do *you* like that?” said he.

Next moment the book was in our hand, our heads were bent close together, we were pointing, quoting, talking—soon almost shouting—discovering in a torrent of questions that we like not only the same thing, but the same parts of it and in the same way... Many thousands of people have had the experience of finding the first friend and it is none the less a wonder; as great a wonder (pace the novelists) as first love, or even greater... Nothing, I suspect, is more astonishing in any man’s life than the discovery that there do exist people very, very like himself.⁴⁰

Lewis’s friendship with Greeves lasted their entire lives; only Warnie knew him for a longer period of time.⁴¹

While Wagner and Arthur Greeves brought Lewis great joy in and of themselves, his experiences with them are intertwined with another factor: mythology. For his entire life, Lewis was a great lover of myths—especially northern mythology and a trait he referred to as “Northernness.” It was a love that would shape his entire life, leading him to discovering joy, to his conversion to Christianity, and to writing his most popular novels.

Enchanted by Myths

Lewis’s love of mythology can be traced to the manner in which he was raised. As a child, he described his home as a world “of endless books.” He claimed,

My father bought all the books he read and never got rid of any of them. There were books in the study, books in the drawing room, books in the cloakroom, books (two deep)

⁴⁰ *Surprised by Joy* 130-31

⁴¹ Jacobs 56

in the great bookcase on the landing, books in a bedroom, books piled as high as my shoulder in the cistern attic, books of all kinds reflecting every transient stage of my parents' interest, books readable and unreadable, books suitable for a child and books most emphatically not. Nothing was forbidden me.⁴²

Because no book was off limits, Lewis read everything he possibly could. By age nine, he was reading an array of books that ranged from the children's tales of E. Nesbit to Milton's *Paradise Lost*. While in public school, Lewis devoured ancient texts like *Quo Vadis* and *Ben Hur*.⁴³ So when he went to study with Kirkpatrick at age seventeen, his tutor quickly realized that Lewis "has read more classics than any boy I ever had—or indeed I might add than any I ever heard of, unless it be an Addison on Landor or Macaulay. These are people we read of, but I have never met any."⁴⁴ Though Lewis may have devoured the Classics with rapture, it was mythology that gave him "joy"—specifically the myths of the Norse.

Lewis's obsession with mythology began with Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's "Norse Ballads," specifically the *Saga of King Olaf* and *Tegner's Drapa*. When Lewis read about the death of Balder the Beautiful, he said, "Instantly I was uplifted into huge regions of northern sky, I desired with almost sickening intensity something never to be described."⁴⁵ This attraction to everything Northern was a trait that Lewis shared with both Arthur Greeves and J.R.R. Tolkien; he described that it was as if an "arrow was shot from the North."⁴⁶ Strangely, Lewis's fascination with mythology, especially those found in epic poems, was propelled forward by the headmaster of Campbell College, who taught Arnold's *Sohrab and Rustum* not only because it

⁴² *Surprised by Joy* 10

⁴³ *Ibid.* 35

⁴⁴ Jacobs 59

⁴⁵ *Surprised by Joy* 17

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 130

was an exemplary piece of literature, but because it was fun as well.⁴⁷ Though Lewis was only enrolled at Campbell College for a few months, this teaching had a profound effect on him. As a result of it, Lewis spent a great deal of his time in school reading *Morte d' Arthur*, *Loki Bound*, and the *Faerie Queen*.

Yet the story that was most influential on Lewis's love of mythology was not a Classic or a Norse tale, but a book called *Phantastes* by George MacDonald. While in school Lewis picked up an Everyman's copy of the book in a train station. He was overwhelmed by the story and wrote to Arthur Greeves, "I have had a great literary experience this week... The book, to get to the point, is George MacDonald's "Faerie Romance," *Phantastes*... Have you read it? I suppose no, as if you had, you could not have helped telling me about it."⁴⁸ Lewis claimed in *Surprised by Joy* that after reading the book, "my imagination was, in a certain sense, baptized,"⁴⁹ though at the time he did not fully understand why. It was many years before Lewis realized that reading *Phantastes* was a spiritual experience.⁵⁰ The writings of George MacDonald affected Lewis so profoundly that he wrote him in as a major character in *The Great Divorce*; like Beatrice in Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, MacDonald is the protagonist's guide through Heaven.⁵¹ Lewis said that he knew "hardly any other writer who seems to be closer, or more continually close, to the Spirit of Christ Himself,"⁵² and he would later go on to write two introductions—one for *Phantastes* and one for *George MacDonald: an Anthology*—praising the life and works of

⁴⁷ Jacobs 29

⁴⁸ Jacobs 63

⁴⁹ *Surprised by Joy* 181

⁵⁰ Sayer 106

⁵¹ *Ibid.* 65

⁵² Jacobs 64

MacDonald. Lewis said MacDonald wrote “fantasy that hovers between the allegorical and the mythopoeic. And this, in my opinion, he does better than any man.”⁵³

C.S. Lewis’s entire life was shaped by his pursuit of “joy,” or *Sehnsucht*, which in turn led to his life-long passion for mythology. Both of these interests dictated his leisurely pursuits and molded his academic career and writing style. Eventually, Lewis would follow his passions—the pursuit of joy and a love of myths—back to a faith in Christ.

⁵³ C.S. Lewis, “Introduction to George MacDonald,” *Phantastes*, By George MacDonald (Grand Rapids, MI: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Group, 2000) ix.

CHAPTER 3

The Early Life of J.R.R. Tolkien

John Ronald Reuel Tolkien was born on January 3, 1892 to Arthur and Mabel Tolkien in Bloemfontein, South Africa. Originally from Birmingham, England, Tolkien's parents moved to South Africa separately; first, Arthur moved for a job at the Bank of Africa in 1890, and then Mabel followed a year later after her father finally blessed the couple's three year long engagement.¹ Arthur and Mabel were from very different families. The Tolkiens were German immigrants who had lived in England only for a few generations. They once owned a family firm that manufactured pianos, but the company was bankrupt by the time Arthur went into business.² By comparison, Mabel Suffield Tolkien was descended from a proud family from the West Midlands, specifically Worcestershire. Tolkien would later identify more with his mother's family than he would with his city-dwelling father's, as would his younger brother, who would make his permanent home in Worcestershire.³

Tolkien was named "John" after his grandfather, and "Reuel" was his father's middle name. The name "Ronald" was not a family tradition; yet it would be the name by which he was

¹ Humphrey Carpenter, *J.R.R. Tolkien: a biography* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company. 1977.) 17-18.

² *Ibid.* 17

³ Duriez 4

known by family members.⁴ When he was born, Tolkien's mother wrote to her in-laws, claiming that he looked like "such a fairy" when dressed in white frills and even "more of an elf still" when naked—perhaps foreshadowing his later interests.⁵ The Tolkien family was complete with the birth of a second boy, Hilary Arthur Reuel Tolkien, on February 17, 1894.⁶

For a short while the Tolkiens lived happily in South Africa. But the heat was causing Tolkien to be feverish, so Mabel and her two sons sailed for England and cooler weather in the spring of 1895. Because of work, his father did not accompany them, but promised to follow soon.⁷ This promise was to be unfulfilled; Arthur Tolkien caught rheumatic fever and died of severe hemorrhaging on February 15, 1896.

This one event drastically changed the Tolkiens' entire outlook for their future. Forced into poverty by her husband's death, Mabel moved from her parents' home to a rental cottage in Sarehole, just outside of Birmingham. After experiencing the heat of South Africa and the busy industry of Birmingham, Tolkien was placed in a rural English setting at an age when his imagination was truly beginning to flourish. It was during his years living in quiet Sarehole that he began to conceive of his legendary Shire. Tolkien's deep love of trees was also fostered during this time period. For his entire life, Tolkien loved big trees with deep, gnarly roots and he loathed people who cut them down for no reason. He recalled one particular event that solidified this feeling: "There was a willow hanging over the mill-pool and I learned to climb it. It

⁴ Carpenter, *J.R.R. Tolkien* 20-21

⁵ Duriez 4

⁶ Carpenter, *J.R.R. Tolkien* 22

⁷ Duriez 5

belonged to a butcher on the Stratford Road, I think. One day they cut it down. They didn't do anything with it; the log just lay there. I never forgot that.”⁸

Tolkien's education began early. He could read and write proficiently by the time he was four years old.⁹ His mother began to teach him the rudiments of handwriting—his elegant and elaborate penmanship would forever mimic Mabel's—as well as the basics of Latin and French. Under Mabel's tutelage, Tolkien was admitted to King Edward's School in Birmingham when he was seven.¹⁰ To be closer to the school, the family moved from Sarehole, eventually settling in a house beside King Heath Station.

Other significant changes were occurring in the Tolkien household during this time period, specifically his mother's conversion to Catholicism. In the spring of 1900, Mabel and her sister, May, were accepted into the Catholic Church. As a result, their family—conservative Protestants—were outraged. May's husband was an active member of the Anglican Church and forbade her from entering a Catholic church again. He was also providing financial support for Mabel and her sons, which immediately stopped when she refused to denounce her new faith.¹¹ Despite facing hostility from both sides of her family and the additional financial strain, both of which took a severe toll on her health, Mabel remained a devout Catholic and began schooling her children in the faith.

Mabel's faith led her to remove Tolkien from King Edward's School and place him in St. Phillip's School, which was under the direction of the clergy of the Birmingham Oratory. This decision put the Tolkien family in contact with Father Francis Morgan, who was to become an

⁸Quoted in Joseph Pearce, *Tolkien: Man and Myth*. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press. 1998) 14.

⁹ Carpenter, *J.R.R. Tolkien* 29

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 32

¹¹ *Ibid.*

invaluable friend. A kind and generous man, he made it possible for the family to move into the Oratory cottage and provided much financial aid.¹²

It was while living in the Oratory cottage that Mabel succumbed to diabetes and died at the age of thirty-four. Tolkien claimed, “My own dear mother was a martyr indeed, and it is not to everybody that God grants so easy a way to his great gifts as he did to Hilary and myself, giving us a mother who killed herself with labour and trouble to ensure us keeping the faith.”¹³ Tolkien placed blame of his mother’s death on the neglect and persecution she suffered from her family because of her Catholic faith. It was her influence that made Tolkien a devout Catholic for his entire life.

Upon their mother’s death, the boys’ guardianship passed to Father Morgan. He was very selective about where Tolkien and his brother lived; Morgan did not want their relatives to take them away from the Catholic Church. After a few years of stay with their Aunt Beatrice Suffeld, who offered Tolkien and Hilary room and board, but little more,¹⁴ they eventually settled with a Mrs. Faulkner, who let rooms from her house near the Oratory. Living in the house with them was Mrs. Faulkner’s drunken husband, their daughter, Helen, and another boarder, Edith Bratt.¹⁵

Edith was nineteen, three years his senior, when she and Tolkien met, but they became instant friends and conspirators against Mrs. Faulkner. Edith was also an orphan; her mother had died five years before and she had no father listed on her birth certificate.¹⁶ So the two shared much in common. By the summer of 1909, Tolkien and Edith declared they were in love.¹⁷

¹² Duriez 7

¹³ Quoted in Carpenter, *J.R.R. Tolkien* 39

¹⁴ Carpenter, *J.R. R. Tolkien* 41

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 46

¹⁶ Pearce 27

¹⁷ Carpenter, *J.R.R. Tolkien* 48

Father Morgan was horrified by this development. Tolkien was supposed to be studying for an Oxford scholarship and Father Morgan felt that his relationship with Edith was distracting Tolkien. He demanded that the relationship end and began searching for new lodgings for Tolkien and Hilary.¹⁸ Because Tolkien had great respect and affection for his guardian, as well as a deep debt, he obeyed Father Morgan's command and agreed not to see or write to Edith until he turned twenty-one, at which time he would no longer be Father Morgan's responsibility.¹⁹

Under Father Morgan's watchful eye Tolkien continued to study for an Oxford scholarship. While in school, Tolkien formed a club for discussion and literary interests. The key members were Tolkien, Geoffrey Smith, Robert Gilson, and Christopher Wiseman. The group was originally named the "Tea Club," which was later changed to the "Barrovian Society," and eventually combined into the T.C.B.S.²⁰ These four remained loyal friends until the horrors of World War I separated them forever. Echoes of the group can be seen in the band of four hobbits that set off in *The Lord of the Rings*. Tolkien continued the habit of forming clubs throughout his academic years and well into his teaching career, such as the Inklings, which revolved around Tolkien and C.S. Lewis.

In 1911, Tolkien earned a scholarship to Exeter College, Oxford, to read Classics. But Tolkien was not diligent in his study of Latin and Greek authors. Tolkien later said, "My love for the Classics took ten years to recover from lectures on Cicero and Demosthenes."²¹ His lack of studying may be attributed to the fact that Exeter College did not have a tutor to keep Tolkien on

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 49

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 50

²⁰ Duriez 11-12

²¹ Quoted in Pearce 33

track for his first two terms,²² but it is more likely the result of too many hours studying Old Norse, festivity, and classical philology. Encouraged by Joe Wright, the Professor of Comparative Philology, Tolkien switched from studying classics to linguistics.²³ Fascinated by language since childhood, Tolkien already had a good command of the Germanic languages and was particularly intrigued by Celtic languages. Now on a course of study that interested him more than the Classics had, Tolkien spent more time studying and soon became an exemplary philologist.²⁴

On the stroke of midnight on his twenty-first birthday, Tolkien celebrated by writing his first letter to Edith in three years. He renewed his love for her and begged to know, “How long will it be before we can be joined together before God and the world?”²⁵ But during their long separation, Edith had moved on; she was engaged to marry George Field, the brother of a school friend.²⁶ Tolkien, emblazoned by the romantic notions that he had read about in literature and bound by promises made three years prior, boarded a train to visit Edith and convince her to leave her fiancée. His job was not difficult, for Edith claimed that she only said “yes” to Field because he had been kind to her and she felt neglected, believing that Tolkien had forgotten about her during their separation.²⁷ After an impromptu visit, Edith returned Field’s ring and became engaged to Tolkien.

Tolkien was nervous about revealing his engagement to Father Morgan; though he was no longer his guardian, Morgan was still a close friend and supported Tolkien financially. But

²² Carpenter, *J.R.R. Tolkien* 62

²³ *Ibid.* 70

²⁴ *Ibid.* 70-71

²⁵ Pearce 33

²⁶ Carpenter, *J.R.R. Tolkien* 68

²⁷ *Ibid.* 69

Tolkien need not have worried, for although Father Morgan's initial response was far from enthusiastic, he did not oppose the union.²⁸ He later gave the couple his full blessing and volunteered to marry Tolkien and Edith in the Oratory.²⁹

Only one obstacle stood in the way of their marriage—Edith was not Catholic. Though Edith was not opposed to converting to Catholicism, during the years that she and Tolkien were apart she had become very active in the Church of England. She had gained status in her local parish and the majority of her friendships centered on it.³⁰ To break ties with the Anglican Church would be to remove a substantial part of her life. Edith was also worried that if she converted to Catholicism, she would no longer have a roof over her head; the house in which she lived was owned by a man who was very anti-Catholic. She pleaded with Tolkien to postpone her conversion until their wedding day neared, but Tolkien would not hear of it. He loathed the Church of England, considering it “a pathetic and shadowy medley of half-remembered traditions and mutilated beliefs.”³¹ He wanted Edith to act straight away. Tolkien's insistence on his fiancée's immediate conversion created feelings of bitterness and resentment in Edith that would last for years, possibly contributing to her lack of faith later in life.³² Yet at the time, Edith adhered to Tolkien's wishes and converted to Catholicism. They were married on March 22, 1916.³³

Tolkien and Edith's joyful reunion was marred by the start of World War I. As Tolkien studied to complete his degree, Oxford's campus was rapidly emptying because young men were

²⁸ *Ibid.* 70

²⁹ *Ibid.* 86

³⁰ Pearce 35

³¹ Quoted in Carpenter, *J.R.R. Tolkien* 73

³² Pearce 35

³³ Carpenter, *J.R.R. Tolkien* 86

enlisting by the thousands. Yet Tolkien was not in a hurry to rush off to the front; he was hopeful of achieving a First Class, so he stayed at Oxford to finish his studies. His melancholy at being left behind by his classmates was brightened when he learned of a plan that would allow him to train for the army while at Oxford, his call-up deferred until after graduation.³⁴

Tolkien achieved First Class Honors in his final examinations in English Language and Literature, successfully completing his degree in 1915. He then immediately accepted his commission as a second lieutenant in the 13th Battalion of the Lancashire Fusiliers, forsaking the opportunity to command his platoon for a job as a signaler.³⁵ Tolkien's experiences in the trenches of WWI drastically changed him, as they did all soldiers. But they also led to the creation of one of the principle characters in his epic trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings*. Several years after the end of WWI, Tolkien divulged that "My 'Sam Gamgee' is indeed a reflexion of the English soldier, of the privates and batmen I know in the 1914 war, and recognized as so far superior to myself."³⁶

Tolkien left the horrors of the front in November of 1916 after he contracted trench fever. He was sent to England by ship and recuperated in a Birmingham hospital. A series of illnesses throughout the next year made it impossible for Tolkien to return to the front.³⁷ By the time he was well, the war was ending. Sadly, Tolkien's friends were not as lucky as he was. By the end of the war, the T.C.B.S. had lost half its members; Robert Gilson and Geoffrey Smith both died of wounds sustained on the front lines.³⁸

³⁴ *Ibid.* 80

³⁵ *Ibid.* 85-86

³⁶ Quoted in Carpenter, *J.R.R. Tolkien* 89

³⁷ *Ibid.* 103

³⁸ *Ibid.* 92-94

Tolkien had always planned to return to Oxford for a professional academic career, but the university was in shambles after the war and a position was not to be found. Thus, Tolkien accepted employment from an old school friend, William Cragie, to work on the “W” section of the new Oxford English Dictionary.³⁹ Explicating the etymology of words was work that catered to Tolkien’s principal interests and allowed him to continue exploring Germanic languages. He later remarked, “I learned more in those two years than in any other equal period of my life.”⁴⁰ However, the income he earned by working on the dictionary was not enough to support his household, which now included a son. So he began tutoring students from the university to supplement his wages. Students, mostly from the women’s colleges, would walk the short distance to his house to be schooled in Anglo-Saxon.⁴¹

The Tolkien family left Oxford for a brief interlude when Tolkien was hired as a Reader in English Language at the University of Leeds in 1921. He quickly took over the section of the English department that specialized in Anglo-Saxon and Middle English, creating a syllabus that would provide students with a solid philological training.⁴² While in Leeds, Tolkien struck up an acquaintance with E.V. Gordon. The two men decided to collaborate on a new edition of the Middle English poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* with the purpose of creating a text worthy of university students. Tolkien was responsible for editing the entire text and creating a glossary, while Gordon contributed the majority of the annotations to the project.⁴³ Tolkien and Gordon made an industrious pair and became close friends. Nancy Martsch speculated that,

³⁹ Duriez 19

⁴⁰ Quoted in Carpenter, *J.R.R. Tolkien* 108

⁴¹ *Ibid.* 108

⁴² *Ibid.* 111

⁴³ *Ibid.* 111-12

“Perhaps, had he remained at Leeds, with Gordon, Tolkien would have written more philology; as it was he became friends with Lewis and wrote the Mythology instead.”⁴⁴

Tolkien’s time at the University of Leeds was brief. In October 1925 he was appointed Rawlinson and Bosworth Professor of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford with an accompanying fellowship at Pembroke College.⁴⁵ Humphrey Carpenter speculated that it would be possible to say that after Tolkien returned to Oxford with his wife and three sons—John, Michael, and Christopher—no other major events happened in his life. He was awarded the Merton Chair of English Language and Literature in 1945 and lived a quiet, simple life of an Oxford don in a conventional suburb.⁴⁶ The only thing that sets Tolkien apart from the hundreds of other men who have lived similar, ordinary lives is the creation of a complex mythology that occupied his imagination for the majority of his life.

Language: Inspiration to Write

Tolkien made his career as a philologist and linguist, but the study of language was not something he discovered at Oxford University. Language saturated his life from the time he was a small child. He delved into Welsh, Old Norse, and Finnish on his own time and began creating “private” languages, which later became the inspiration for his mythology. Language excited Tolkien and it easily shaped his entire life.

Tolkien’s first encounter with the joy of language came from his mother. Mabel Tolkien began educating her sons when they were still small children and a large part of her teachings revolved around reading, writing, and language. Tolkien was fascinated by the rudiments of

⁴⁴ Quoted in Duriez 20

⁴⁵ Duriez 21

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 118

Latin and enjoyed the shapes and sounds of the words just as much as their meanings.⁴⁷ Mabel quickly realized that her eldest child had a special gift for language and began teaching him French as well. But Tolkien did not take to French as he did Latin. He had no special reason for disliking the language—he just did not enjoy the sound of the words as he did Latin and English.⁴⁸

Tolkien's attraction to language deepened after a failed attempt at writing. After reading the *Red Fairy Book* by Andrew Lang, specifically the story of Sigurd, slayer of the dragon Fafnir, Tolkien became enamored with dragons and tried to write his own tale. He claimed, "I remember nothing about it except a philological fact. My mother said nothing about the dragon but pointed out that one could not say 'a green great dragon' but had to say 'a great green dragon.' I wondered why, and still do. The fact that I remember this is possibly significant, as I do not think I ever tried to write a story again for many years, and was taken up with language."⁴⁹

From that moment on, Tolkien began studying language whenever he could and found great pleasure in it. He was "stirred by the numinous beauty of place names he could not pronounce"⁵⁰ as he watched Welsh coal cars rumbled past his home in Birmingham, was captivated by the "surface glitter" of Greek,⁵¹ and inspired to learn more about Middle English after hearing *The Canterbury Tales* recited in its original language by the form-master, Brewerton, at King Edward's School.⁵² It was under Brewerton's influence that Tolkien began to

⁴⁷ Carpenter, *J.R.R. Tolkien* 29

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 30

⁴⁹ Quoted in Pearce 15

⁵⁰ Duriez 1

⁵¹ Carpenter, *J.R.R. Tolkien* 35

⁵² *Ibid.* 36

look past the meanings and phonetics of Latin, Greek, and German to search for the reason why they words were in the form that they were.⁵³

Studying language for no other reason than that he enjoyed it would be a practice Tolkien would carry all the way through to Oxford—sometimes to his detriment. In his later years at King Edward’s, Tolkien became active in the Debating Society. It was a tradition for a debate to be held entirely in Latin, but this was too easy for Tolkien. Posing as the Greek Ambassador to the Senate, he delivered an entire speech in fluent Greek. On another occasion, Tolkien stunned classmates by speaking in Gothic and then, in flawless Anglo-Saxon.⁵⁴ Tolkien was supposed to be studying for a scholarship to Oxford during this time period but the lure of language pulled him away from his lessons. This distraction was the also one of the reasons that Tolkien earned a Second Class on his examinations after four terms at Oxford.⁵⁵ By the time Tolkien switched from studying Classics to philology, he was so well versed in languages that he feared the Oxford syllabus would not be challenging enough to occupy him for the next two years.⁵⁶

Because of Tolkien’s extreme captivation with languages, it is not surprising that he began creating his own private languages. As a child, Tolkien and his cousin, Mary, created a language based upon English, Latin, and French called “Nevbosh.” They were soon fluent enough in their make-believe language that they would chant limericks in it.⁵⁷ Inspired by this practice, Tolkien continued the practice of creating words, filling notebooks with invented alphabets.⁵⁸ Most of his invented languages were useless, serving no other purpose but to amuse

⁵³ *Ibid.* 42

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* 56

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* 70

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* 71

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* 44

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* 45

Tolkien—like the “Alphabet of Rumi,” a collaboration of Hebrew, Greek, and Pitman’s shorthand that Tolkien used to write his diary entries in after he returned to Oxford.⁵⁹

Yet some of Tolkien’s imagined languages proved to be very significant for they formed the foundation of his Middle-Earth mythology, the most important languages being Quenya and Sindarin. Based upon Finnish and Welsh, these two languages are the High-Elven languages that provide the basis for *The Silmarillion*.⁶⁰ Tolkien considered his languages to be a “mad hobby,”⁶¹ never expecting them to find an audience. But after creating these languages, Tolkien had to find a people to speak them. Thus, the saga of Middle-Earth began.

Tolkien’s mythology was not only created for his languages, but inspired by it. For Tolkien writing does not begin with a setting, a plot, or even a character, but a name. He said, “Give me a name and it produces a story, not the other way about normally.”⁶² Tolkien’s mythology was conceived by a name, stumbled upon by accident, whose importance lay not in the meaning of the name, or the character it labeled, but simply in the sound.

Shortly after Tolkien began studying philology at Oxford, he was required to read an Anglo-Saxon religious poem: *Crist of Cynewulf*. Two lines from this poem permanently changed Tolkien:

Eala Earendel engla beorhtast

Ofer middangeard monnum sended [sic].

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* 107

⁶⁰ Duriez 12-13

⁶¹ Carpenter, *J.R.R. Tolkien* 83

⁶² Duriez 2

In translation, it means, “Hail Earendel, brightest of angels/ above the middle-earth sent unto men.”⁶³ The name “Earendel” means a shining light or ray, though in these lines it typically refers to John the Baptist. The name had a profound effect on Tolkien; he said, “I felt a curious thrill as if something had stirred in me, half wakened from sleep. There was something very remote and strange and beautiful behind those words, if I could grasp it, far beyond ancient English.”⁶⁴ Tolkien was inspired to write by this name, and Earendel became a chief character in *The Silmarillion*, and is briefly mentioned in *The Lord of the Rings*.

Mythology: Food for Language

Language was not only the foundation for Tolkien’s mythology, but often what drew him to myths in general. Tolkien was enamored of certain myths because of the language in which they were written. For example, he was enthralled by *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* because of Middle-English; the language held special significance for Tolkien because it was the language of his mother’s West Midland ancestors.⁶⁵ He also read *Pearl*, a poem about a dead child, for the same reasons.

But in other situations myth led Tolkien to language. Around 1911, Tolkien discovered W.H. Kirby’s Everyman translation of the *Kalevala*. This collection of poems, also known as “Land” or “Heroes,” is the main compilation of Finland’s mythology. Tolkien wrote to a friend, “The more I read of it, the more I felt at home and enjoyed myself.”⁶⁶ Tolkien began studying Finnish soon afterwards, so he could read the *Kalevala* in the original translation.

⁶³ Carpenter, *J.R.R. Tolkien* 72

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* 72

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* 43

⁶⁶ *Ibid.* 57

Some scholars find it odd that Tolkien, a devout Catholic who claimed that he “fell in love with the Blessed Sacrament from the beginning,”⁶⁷ would have such a passion for pagan mythology. But Tolkien did not believe that pagan myths were fictitious lies created to mislead; rather, he believed that they were an attempt to know God. He wrote in “Mythopoeia,” a poem for C.S. Lewis,

The heart of man is not compound of lies,
but draws some wisdom from the only Wise,
and still recalls him. Though now long estranged,
man is not wholly lost nor wholly changed.
Dis-graced he may be, yet is not dethroned,
and keeps the rags of lordship once he owned,
his world- dominion by creative act;
not his to worship the great Artefact,
man, sub-creator, the refracted light
through whom is splintered from a single White
to many hues, and endlessly combined
in living shapes that move from mind to mind.
Though all the crannies of the world we filled
with elves and goblins, though we dared to build
gods and their houses out of dark and light,
and sow the seed of dragons, ‘twas our right

⁶⁷ Quoted in Duriez 8

(used or misused). The right had not decayed.

We make still by the law in which we're made.⁶⁸

Tolkien believed that humans were imitating God by creating myth, which he explained in his essay "On Fairy-Stories." These beliefs will be further explored in later chapters.

Tolkien's love of myth not only consumed his private life and led to the creation of his mythology, but was a major part of his professional life as well. The study of Germanic linguistics revolved around the myths and poems written in the languages. One epic poem in particular brought Tolkien great acclaim for his academic study of it; that poem was *Beowulf*.

Tolkien first read *Beowulf* in an Old English primer at King Edward's School and thought that it was one of the most extraordinary poems of all time.⁶⁹ While teaching at Oxford, he delivered a series of lectures on *Beowulf* that delighted students. He would enter a silent classroom and begin to recite the opening lines in Anglo-Saxon, commencing with a cry of "Hwaet!" Many students understood this word to mean "Quiet!"⁷⁰ The writer J.I.M. Stewart, a former student, declared "He could turn a lecture room into a mead hall in which he was the bard and we were the feasting, listening guests."⁷¹

Tolkien's many lectures on *Beowulf* expressed an extreme dissatisfaction with the scholarship on the poem. He did not like the way that scholars were analyzing it for its historical data about the period, instead of attempting to critique it as a poem.⁷² Tolkien created the following metaphor to describe the bad scholarship that had surrounded *Beowulf*:

⁶⁸ J.R.R. Tolkien, "Mythopoeia," *Tree and Leaf* (London: Harper, 1964) 87.

⁶⁹ Carpenter, *J.R.R. Tolkien* 42-3

⁷⁰ *Ibid.* 137-38

⁷¹ *Ibid.* 138

⁷² Duriez 69

A man inherited a field in which was an accumulation of old stone, part of an older hall. Of the old stone some had already been used in building the house in which he actually lived, not far from the old house of his fathers. Of the rest he took some and built a tower. But his friends coming perceived at once (without troubling to climb the steps) that these stones had formerly belonged to a more ancient building. So they pushed the tower over, with no little labour, in order to look for hidden carvings and inscriptions, or to discover whence the man's distant forefathers had obtained the building material. Some suspecting a deposit of coal under the soil began to dig for it, and forgot even the stones. They all said: "This tower is most interesting." But they also said (after pushing it over): "What a muddle it is in!" And even the man's descendants, who might have been expected to consider what he had been about, were heard to murmur: "He is such an odd fellow! Imagine his using these old stones just to build a nonsensical tower! Why did not he restore the old house? He had no sense of proportion!" But from the top of that tower the man had been able to look out upon the sea.⁷³

Tolkien delivered a lecture to the British Academy on November 25, 1936, titled "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics." In this lecture Tolkien pleaded for *Beowulf* to be studied, not for the poet's sources, but for what he did with them.⁷⁴ He claimed that its power lay in the "mythical mode of imagination;"⁷⁵ the themes of ancient North and of dragons are what make *Beowulf* worthy studying. Tolkien's lecture was received with great praise and he later revised and

⁷³ J.R.R. Tolkien, "Beowulf: The Monster and The Critic," *Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984) 7-8.

⁷⁴ Duriez 70

⁷⁵ *Ibid.* 70

published it under the title *Beowulf and the Critics*. The use of this essay is still prevalent in modern scholarship of *Beowulf*.

J.R.R. Tolkien was a man who lived for language and myths. They constantly occupied his imagination, influenced his relationships with his wife and children, determined his course of study and scholarship at Oxford, and later brought him great—though often unwanted—fame. Language and mythology would also lead to another important factor in Tolkien’s life—his friendship with C.S. Lewis.

CHAPTER 4

C.S. Lewis's Conversion and the Importance of "On Fairy-Stories"

In his preface to *God in the dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, Walter Hooper states, "Lewis struck me as the most thoroughly converted man I ever met. Christianity was not for him a separate department of life; not what he did with his solitude; 'not even' as he says in one essay, 'what God does with His solitude.' His whole vision of life was such that the natural and the supernatural seemed inseparably combined."¹ Lewis's conversion from a self-proclaimed Atheist to the devout, Christian writer Hooper knew did not happen instantaneously; there was no "Aha!" moment, no blinding light and instant conversion like Saul on the way to Damascus. Lewis's conversion to Christianity—like his original drifting away from it—was gradual. It was also very rational; Lewis claimed that he just accepted what he knew to be true. He said, "'Emotional' is perhaps the last word we can apply some of the most important events. It was more like when a man, after a long sleep, still lying motionless in bed, becomes aware that he is now awake."² Lewis's conversion was a series of small steps and revelations that was greatly influenced by his friends and, surprisingly, his love of myth.

¹ Walter Hooper, "Preface." In C.S. Lewis's *God in the dock; Essays on Theology and Ethics*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1970) 12.

² *Surprised by Joy* 237

Steps to Salvation

Many biographers of Lewis's life date his conversion to a period in 1929, when he "admitted that God was God"³ and began attending regular church services.⁴ However, Lewis does not consider these events to be when he became a Christian, rather when he became a Theist. In *Surprised by Joy*, he said, "It must be understood that the conversion recorded in the last chapter was only to Theism, pure and simple, not to Christianity. I knew nothing yet about the Incarnation. The God to whom I surrendered was sheerly nonhuman."⁵ How did Lewis, a man of reason, who had rejected God as a child, ever reach a point where he could acknowledge the sovereignty of God? Commenting about what one might assume to be a seemingly random events and influences, Lewis stated, "The great Angler played His fish and I never dreamed that the hook was in my tongue."⁶

Lewis's conversion, which his brother described as "a slow steady convalescence from a deep-seated spiritual illness of long standing,"⁷ began when his close friend, Owen Barfield, became an Anthroposophist.⁸ Though Barfield was never able to convert Lewis to Anthroposophy's manner of combining science and spirituality, their conversation did have the effect of destroying Lewis's "chronological snobbery."⁹ Lewis adhered to the popular opinion that past intellectual climates are automatically wrong. Barfield challenged him to discover why a previous method of thought and scholarship died away and to examine it based upon its own

³ *Ibid.* 228

⁴ Sayer 223

⁵ *Surprised by Joy* 230

⁶ *Ibid.* 211

⁷ Quoted in Sayer 217

⁸ Anthroposophy is a philosophy developed by Rudolf Steiner that is based upon the existence of an objective, spiritual world which is only accessible through cultivating conscientiously a form of thinking independent of sensory experience.

⁹ *Surprised by Joy* 207

merits. Their conversations forced Lewis to scrutinize more closely his assumptions about reality.¹⁰

Lewis's mind was further prepared to accept God when he rediscovered the "joy" that came from mythology. When he returned to Oxford after WWI, Lewis swore off stories full of "Fantasy" and "wishful thinking," declaring that "he was never going to be taken in again" by undisguised erotic reverie or the squalid nightmare of Magic.¹¹ But Lewis's resolve was destroyed when he reread the *Hippolytus* of Euripides. The reemergence of joy in his life overwhelmed him; he later said of the experience: "the inhibition was over, the dry desert lay behind, I was off once more into the land of longing, my heart at once broken and exalted as it had never been since the old days a Bookham."¹²

The final blow that brought Lewis to his knees—literally—was an off-hand comment made by a fellow tutor at Oxford. T.D. Weldon was a very cynical man who openly criticized all religions and believed "that he has seen through everything." Yet, during a discussion with Lewis, Weldon admitted that there was evidence to support the historicity of the Gospels. He said, "Rum thing, that stuff of Frazer's about the Dying God. It almost looks as if it really happened once."¹³ When questioned about his statement, Weldon quickly changed the subject. This admission from "the cynics of the cynics"¹⁴ shocked and outraged Lewis.

It was shortly after this conversation with Weldon that Lewis found himself kneeling on the floor of his room in Magdalen College, admitting that "God was God."¹⁵ At that time, his

¹⁰ *Surprised by Joy* 207-08

¹¹ *Ibid.* 204

¹² *Ibid.* 217

¹³ Sayer 222

¹⁴ *Surprised by Joy* 224

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 228

conversion was not a moment of joy or relief; Lewis claimed that he was the “most reluctant convert in all England.”¹⁶ When he converted to Theism, he was just acknowledging a truth he could no longer deny. Years later, Lewis marveled at the grace of a God who would accept a man on the conditions he offered. He wrote,

I did not then see what is now the most shining and obvious thing; the Divine humility which will accept a convert even on such terms. The Prodigal Son at least walked home on his own feet. But who can duly adore that Love which will open the high gates to a prodigal who is brought in kicking, struggling, resentful, and darting his eyes in every direction for a chance of escape? The words *compelle intrare*, compel them to come in, have been so abused by wicked men that we shudder at them; but, properly understood, they plumb the depth of the Divine mercy. The hardness of God is kinder than the softness of men, and His compulsion is our liberation.¹⁷

Lewis’s conversion to Christianity, to the man who would write such eloquent words about the love of God, would not occur for another two years. During this time period he was not overly concerned about the Cross or the implications that it carried. He said,

My conversion involved as yet no belief in a future life. I now number it among my greatest mercies that I was permitted for several months, perhaps for a year, to know God and to attempt obedience without even raising that question. My training was like that of the Jews, to whom He revealed Himself centuries before

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 229

there was a whisper of anything better (or worse) beyond the grave than shadowy and featureless *Sheol*. And I did not dream even of that.¹⁸

But eventually the question of Jesus Christ began to wear on Lewis, possibly as a result of the regular church attendance that he began after his initial confession. Lewis accepted God and the historical value of the Gospels, and most likely acknowledged Jesus as the Son of God, but he could not understand the importance of the Sacrament, or the significance of concepts that are the foundation of pagan myths—such as sacrifice, propitiation, the shedding of blood, and redemption.¹⁹ He questioned “how the life and death of Someone Else (whoever he was) two thousand years ago could help us here and now—except in so far as his *example* could help us.”²⁰

Reconciling God and Myths

Lewis’s answer came from his close friend, J.R.R. Tolkien. Both professors at Oxford University, Lewis and Tolkien became friends through their love of myths. They would often be found lounging in the sitting room of Magdalen College, animatedly discussing literature and smoking their pipes. On September 17, 1931, Lewis invited Tolkien and Hugo Dyson, one of Tolkien’s friends from Exeter College, who was now a Lecturer in English Literature at Reading University, to dine with him in his rooms at Magdalen.²¹ Lewis later wrote to Arthur Greeves,

It was really a memorable talk. We began (in Addison’s Walk just after dinner) on metaphor and myth—interrupted by a rush of wind which came so suddenly on the still warm evening and sent so many leaves pattering down that we thought it

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 231

¹⁹ Sayer 225

²⁰ Carpenter, *J.R.R. Tolkien* 150

²¹ *Ibid.*

was raining. We all held our breath, the other two appreciating the ecstasy of such a thing almost as you would. We continued (in my room) on Christianity: a good long satisfying talk in which I learned a lot.²²

Throughout this long discussion, Tolkien and Dyson attempted to convince Lewis that he was requiring too much of Christianity; he refused to embrace the religion until he could understand the idea of Atonement, of how Christ's sacrificial death could put us right with God.²³ Tolkien pointed out that whenever Lewis encountered sacrifice in myths, he admired it. Why could he not transfer this unquestioning appreciation from myth to the true story of Christ? Lewis countered with, "But myths are lies, even though lies breathed through silver."²⁴

Thus, Tolkien began to explain his entire philosophy as a writer. He believed in the inherent truth in all mythology; because we are created by God, in his image, when we create stories they will contain a "splintered fragment of the true light, the eternal truth that is with God."²⁵ He said, "Only by myth-making, only by becoming a 'sub-creator' and inventing stories can Man aspire to the state of perfection he knew before the Fall. Our myths may be misguided, but they steer however shakily towards the true harbour."²⁶ Tolkien continued talking with Lewis and Dyson until he retired at three a.m.; Lewis and Dyson continued on for another hour.

This night completely changed Lewis's perspective. The next week, he wrote to Arthur Greeves, "I have just passed on from believing in God to definitely believing in Christ—in Christianity."²⁷ Just like every other part of his conversion, Lewis did not make this decision in

²² Quoted in Jacobs 148

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Carpenter, *J.R.R. Tolkien* 150-51

²⁵ *Ibid.* 151

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.* 151-152

one night, but mulled over the discussion for a few days. His actual conversion, his declaration of faith in Jesus Christ, occurred on September 22. Lewis was driven in the side-car of his brother's motorcycle to the safari zoo in Whipsnade. He later recalled that he did not exactly spend the ride in deep thought, but, "when we set out I did not believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and when we reached the zoo I did."²⁸ Lewis explained the process by which he came to this decision in a letter to Arthur a month later. He wrote,

Now what Dyson and Tolkien showed me was this: that if I met the idea of sacrifice in a Pagan story I didn't mind it at all: and again, that if I met the idea of god sacrificing himself to himself... I liked it very much and was mysteriously moved by it: again, that the idea of the dying and reviving God (Balder, Adonis, Bacchus) similarly moved me provided I met it anywhere except in the Gospels. The reason was that in Pagan stories I was prepared to feel the myth as profound and suggestive of meanings beyond my grasp even tho' I could not say in cold prose "what it meant."

Now the story of Christ simply a true myth: a myth working on us in the same way as the others, but with tremendous difference that it really happened: and one must be content to accept it in the same way, remembering that it is God's myth where the others are men's myths: i.e. the Pagan stories are God expressing himself through the minds of poets, using such images as He found there, while Christianity is God expressing himself through "real things."²⁹

²⁸ Surprised by Joy 237

²⁹ *The Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis, Vol. I, Family Letters 1905-1931* Walter Hooper, ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2004) 967.

After his conversion, Lewis showed an immediate change in personality. Biographer Alan Jacobs comments, “It is as though the key to his own hidden and locked-away personality was given to him. What appears almost immediately is a kind of gusto (sheer, bold enthusiasm for what he loves) that is characteristic of him ever after.”³⁰

Tolkien wrote the poem “Mythopoeia,” or the making of myths, to encourage his friend in his new faith. The poem begins, “Philmythus to Misomythus,”³¹ meaning “myth-lover to “myth-hater.”³² The poem reiterates the argument that Tolkien presented to Lewis during their evening stroll in Addison’s Walk—that myths are an expression of God. Lewis fully embraced Tolkien’s philosophy and it forever shaped his theology and writing; in fact, he claimed that it was essential to being a Christian. In his essay “Myth became fact,” he writes,

The heart of Christianity is a myth which is also a fact. The old myth of the Dying God, without ceasing to be myth, comes down from the heaven of legend and imagination to the earth of history. It happens—at a particular date, in a particular place, followed by definable historical consequences. We pass from a Balder or an Osiris, dying nobody knows when or where, to a historical Person crucified (it is all in order) under Pontius Pilate. By becoming fact, it does not cease to be myth: that is the miracle. To be truly Christian we must both assent to the historical fact and also receive the myth (fact though it has become) with the same imaginative embrace which we accord to all myths.³³

³⁰ Jacobs 131

³¹ “Mythopoeia” 85

³² Jacobs 143

³³ *God in the dock* 43-44

“On Fairy-Stories:” Tolkien’s Method for Writing

The theology that Tolkien explained to Lewis during their stroll down Addison’s Walk—that the story of Christ is the myth that came true and that by writing myths of our own, we point towards the glory of God—became the foundation for their writing. In the belief that myth is a form of glorifying God, they went on to write *The Space Trilogy*, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, and *The Lord of the Rings* with a distinctly Christian influence. Tolkien’s philosophy about Christianity and writing myths is fully explained in his essay “On Fairy-Stories.” Thus, to better understand Lewis’s conversion, it is imperative to study this essay.

Over the years, many critics have attacked Tolkien’s work, claiming it to be escapism and child’s play. For some people this view is perpetuated because they truly do not enjoy myths and thus, cannot enjoy Tolkien’s writing. But most such critics do not appreciate Tolkien’s work because they do not understand the nature and meaning of myths in the same manner that he did; modern society views myths as stories that are lies or falsehoods. For Tolkien myths had the exact opposite meaning because they stem from his Catholic faith. Thus, Tolkien is often “a misunderstood man because he is a myth-understood man.”³⁴

The full explication of Tolkien’s philosophy regarding Christianity and the creation of myths is found in his essay “On Fairy-Stories.” Tolkien begins by defining what he means by “Faerie,” though his explanation does come with a warning to readers that “it is dangerous to ask too many questions, lest the gates should be shut and the keys lost.”³⁵ He states that he does not mean diminutive creatures with wings when he says “fairy,” but rather beings like the knights

³⁴ Joseph Pearce. “True Myth,” *The Catholic World Report*. (Dec. 2001) 34-38.

³⁵ “On Fairy-Stories” 3

called Elfe from Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queen*.³⁶ "Faerie, itself, is the realm or state where fairies exist, though the best stories are not about fairies, or dwarfs, or giants, but about humans in the realm of Faerie. Tolkien excludes from his definition of fairy-story traveler's tales, beast fables, and dream adventures—the exclusion of beast fables mostly likely contributed to Tolkien's negative criticisms of Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia*.³⁷ Created faerie realms, or "sub-creations," must be a completely secondary world, where the reader's mind can enter and relate to what is true according to the laws of that world;³⁸ it is not enough to create a world with a green sun. The author must go through the tedious and difficult task of creating a world where the green is credible because of the nature of that secondary world.³⁹

Tolkien's view of fairy-stories has three parts: recovery, escape, and consolation. Recovery is the "regaining of a clear view." Fairy-stories must make readers "look at green again, a be startled anew (but not blinded) by blue and yellow and red. We should meet the centaur and the dragon, and then perhaps suddenly behold, like the ancient shepherds, sheep, and dogs, and horses—and wolves."⁴⁰ Tolkien's meaning of "escape" is not in the negative tone used by critics of mythology. He asks, "Why should a man be scorned, if, finding himself in prison, he tries to get out and go home? Or if, when cannot do so, he thinks and talks about other topics than jailers and prison walls?"⁴¹ By writing of worlds without modern technology, myth-makers are not looking for things that are less "real" or "alive," but more so—such as lightning, clouds,

³⁶ *Ibid.* 7-9

³⁷ *Ibid.* 13-17

³⁸ *Ibid.* 37

³⁹ *Ibid.* 49

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* 57

⁴¹ *Ibid.* 60

castles, and horses.⁴² With these arguments Tolkien also refutes the notion that fairy-stories are for children alone. He says, “Fairy-stories have in the modern lettered world been relegated to the ‘nursery,’ as shabby or old-fashioned furniture is relegated to the playroom, primarily because the adults do not want it, and do not mind if it is misused.”⁴³ By connecting only the minds of children to fairy-stories, people make the mistake of viewing “children as a special kind of creature, almost a different race, rather than as normal, if immature, members of a particular family.”⁴⁴

The greatest part of fairy-stories in Tolkien’s mind is the consolation, which is also the part that connects mythology to his Christian faith. Consolation in fairy-stories is not just a happy-ending, but the “turn” in the story that denies universal defeat. In this moment readers are able to catch a quick glimpse of “Joy beyond the walls of the world.”⁴⁵ Tolkien calls this moment the Eucatastrophe.

Tolkien observes that because of the consolation of fairy-stories, every writer of mythology, every “sub-creator,” hopes to be a real creator, hopes that this quality of consolation is coming from reality. Approaching Christianity from this perspective led Tolkien to the conclusions that he shared with Lewis; the Gospels tell a fairy-story that has entered the world and fulfilled the purpose of Creation. He says, “The Birth of Christ is the eucatastrophe of Man’s history. The Resurrection is the eucatastrophe of the story of the Incarnation.”⁴⁶ History and myths resemble each other because they both point to the Great Eucatastrophe. By creating myths and secondary worlds, men are imitating the Creator from which they came. By including

⁴² *Ibid.* 60-65

⁴³ *Ibid.* 34

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 69

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 71

consolation in their fairy-stories, they are—consciously or not—pointing readers to this Creator, from whom joy comes.

The philosophy laid out in “On Faerie-Stories” is Tolkien’s roadmap for reading and writing myths. After the evening spent talking on Addison’s Walk, it also became the foundation for Lewis’s tales. Tolkien and Lewis both start at the same place when they begin to “sub-create”—with the belief that all myths glorify God. From this point, they begin to create their own mythology and realms of Faerie, walking together at first, but somewhere along the way diverging in different directions.

CHAPTER 5

The Effect of the Inklings

It is not a stretch to say that without the friendship between C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien none of their most celebrated works would have been published. Tolkien would have continued to create the mythology of Middle-Earth, but without Lewis's support it would have remained a private hobby. Lewis might have continued to write and publish poetry, such as *Dymer*, if he had never become friends with Tolkien, but it is questionable whether he would have ever evolved from a Theist to a Christian without the help of his friend. Tolkien laid the groundwork for Lewis's science fiction fantasies and children's stories through his philosophy about myths while Lewis unceasingly—though sometimes in harsh, critical tones—encouraged Tolkien to continue writing and to publish his mythology.

The Founding Friendship

Lewis and Tolkien met while teaching at Oxford. At the time, Tolkien was in the middle of a long-running debate in the Honour School of English Language and Literature. One part of the School believed that every student should study all English literature up to the present day; the other side argued that study should be restricted to medieval texts and their language, with only a minimal amount of reading from modern literature—by which they meant anything

published after Chaucer.¹ Tolkien was attempting to establish a revised syllabus within the school that would require all students to study early English literature because it was the base for modern writing, but students who wished to specialize in medieval writing and language would not have to waste time reading the works of modern writers.² The day that Lewis formally met Tolkien, he was pushing his syllabus reform at a tea at Merton College, and Lewis's impression was not exactly positive. He commented, "No harm in him; only needs a smack or two."³

Lewis and Tolkien became friends through the "Coalbiters." In order to promote his syllabus reform, Tolkien established a literary club called Kolbitar—meaning "old cronies who sit round the fire so close that they look as if they were biting the coals"—that would read the Icelandic myths in their original language.⁴ Lewis was automatically drawn to the Coalbiters because of his love for Norse myths and all things Northern. After a few weeks of studying Icelandic with him, Lewis discovered that Tolkien was not only interested in the language, but shared his delight in the mythology aspect as well. Lewis invited Tolkien back to Magdalen after a meeting for further discussion and whisky. Tolkien ended up staying for three hours "discoursing of the gods and giants of Asgard."⁵

After this initial visit, Tolkien began regularly stopping by Magdalen College to visit Lewis on Monday mornings. He and Lewis would often walk to a local pub for a drink; discussion topics ranged from Oxford politics to theology to their writing.⁶ These Monday meetings became a regular tradition that lasted for over ten years. In a letter to Warnie, Lewis

¹ Humphrey Carpenter, *The Inklings*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company. 1979) 24.

² *Ibid.* 26

³ *Ibid.* 23

⁴ Glycer, Diana, *The Company They Keep* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press. 2007) 3.

⁵ Sayer 250

⁶ Walter Hooper, ed. *Collected Letters* (San Francisco: HaperSanFrancisco, 2007), 2:16.

commented that “meeting his friend was one of the most pleasant spots in the week.”⁷ Shortly after their late-night discussion of Norse gods, Tolkien gave Lewis a draft of his unfinished poem “The Gest of Beren and Luthien”—which later became the “The Lay of Leithian” in *The Silmarillion*—to read and critique. Lewis loved it. He wrote to Tolkien, “I can quite honestly say that it is ages since I have had an evening of such delight: and the personal interest of reading a friend’s work had very little to do with it—I should have enjoyed it just as well if I’d picked it up in a bookshop.”⁸ Lewis included a detail critique of the poem in his letter, jokingly turning it into a renowned piece of literature that had previously been studied by scholars such as “Peabody,” “Pumpernickel,” and “Schick.”⁹

Throughout their entire friendship Lewis was an adamant supporter of Tolkien’s fiction. Tolkien said of his friend, “He was for long my only audience. Only from him did I ever get the idea that my ‘stuff’ could be more than a private hobby. But for his interest and unceasing eagerness for more I should never have brought [*The Lord of the Rings*] to a conclusion.”¹⁰ Over the years he regularly read excerpts and offered his opinion, pushing Tolkien to continue. It may appear that Tolkien was an ungrateful friend because he did not return Lewis’s unwavering support in regard to the *Chronicles of Narnia*; he contemptuously told Roger Lancelyn Green, “It really won’t do! I mean to say: “Nymphs and their Ways, The Love-Life of a Faun!””¹¹ But readers must remember that as much as Lewis praised his friend’s work, he tore it apart just as thoroughly; in his critique of “The Gest of Beren and Luthien,” Lewis nitpicked over small

⁷ *Ibid.* 47

⁸ Quoted in Carpenter, *The Inklings* 30

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, Humphrey Carpenter, ed. September 12, 1965 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1981) 362.

¹¹ Carpenter, *J.R.R. Tolkien* 204

details, such as word choice and order, even going as far as to completely rewrite entire stanzas.¹² Regardless of the multiple criticisms of his work, Tolkien continued to read excerpts to Lewis for years; Lewis also returned the favor by trading with Tolkien poems that he had written for review.¹³ This custom of exchanging their writing became a regular part of their Monday meetings and paved the way for the establishment of the Inklings.

Meetings at the Bird and Baby

The group of men from Oxford known as the Inklings has become legendary, mostly due to the works of C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, and Charles Williams. Much has been written on the Inklings over the past decades, analyzing its importance in the lives and writings of the prominent authors that emerged from the group. The illusion has arisen that the Inklings was a formal, literary society with rules and regulations. Nothing could be further from the truth.

The group of friends revolving around Lewis and Tolkien was the second group to use the name “the Inklings;” the first was an essay club founded by Edward Tangye Lean. In an attempt to prevent his club from being short-lived—like most student-founded clubs were at that time in Oxford—Lean invited several faculty members to participate in the discussions.¹⁴ Tolkien recollected of the meetings: “Its procedure was that at each meeting members should read aloud, unpublished compositions. These were supposed to be open to immediate criticism.”¹⁵ Despite his best efforts, Lean’s club dissolved in 1933 and the name was adopted by Lewis to describe “the undetermined and unelected circle of friends”¹⁶ who gathered to read their own compositions. No one knew for certain why Lewis adopted the name, but Tolkien

¹² Glycer 5

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Glycer 9

¹⁵ Carpenter, *Letters*, September 11, 1967, 388

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

commented, “I called the name a ‘jest’, because it was a pleasantly ingenious pun in its way, suggesting people with vague or half-formed imitation and ideas plus those who dabble in ink.”¹⁷

The Inklings was a “thoroughly casual business;”¹⁸ an amorphous group of male, Christian friends who were interested in literature. There was no system of membership, or of recording attendance—if you could show up, you did. The only requirement was that you had to be a friend of Lewis or invited by another member.¹⁹ Over the years regular members included: C.S. Lewis: his brother, Warnie: J.R.R. Tolkien: his youngest son, Christopher: Owen Barfield, a long-term friend of Lewis: R.E. Harvard: and Hugo Dyson.²⁰

The group would meet at a local pub in Oxford, the Eagle and Child, also known to locals as the Bird and Baby, on Tuesday mornings to discuss writing over a pint. Later in the week, they would reconvene on Thursday nights in Lewis’s sitting-room at Magdalen College.²¹ Beginning around nine o’ clock, Warnie would brew a strong pot of tea, pipes would be lit, and Lewis would ask, “Well, has nobody got anything to read us?”²² If no one produced a manuscript, Lewis would often read some of his own writing. On the rare nights when no one had anything to read, the discussion would turn to riotous jest and whimsical word-play.

The Inklings was a sounding board for the writings of its members; they were able to read aloud whatever piece they were working on at the moment and get uncensored feedback—both positive and negative. Over the years Tolkien read practically the entire drafts of what was to become *The Lord of the Rings*, and *The Silmarillion*. Lewis also brought his work—both

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Carpenter, *J.R.R. Tolkien* 153

¹⁹ Duriez 82

²⁰ Carpenter, *J.R.R. Tolkien* 153

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Sayer 252

fictional and theological—before the group for criticism. For the seventeen years that the Inklings lasted, it played a significant role in the lives and writing of both authors. By the time the group dwindled away—mostly due to members dying or moving away—Lewis and Tolkien had written their most celebrated works.

The myths of Lewis and Tolkien were not written to serve any academic or theological purpose, but merely to bring joy and pleasure to the authors. Towards the end of 1937, Lewis said to Tolkien, “Tollers, there is too little of what we really like in stories. I am afraid we shall have to write some ourselves.”²³ From the statement, Lewis and Tolkien made a wager: both would write a mythopoeic story in the form of a popular thriller. Tolkien began on a time-travel story named “The Lost Road.” which was a story about a father and son as they journey back to the land of Númenor.²⁴ The story was never finished, but it gave Tolkien ideas for what would later become “The Fall of Númenor.” On the other hand, Lewis held up his end of the bargain by writing a space-travel story about a man named Ransom who is kidnapped and taken to Mars. This story was later published as *Out of the Silent Planet*, the first of three novels in Lewis’s *Space Trilogy*. This friendly wager began the mythic writing careers of Lewis and Tolkien. As historian Diana Glyer notes,

Out of the Silent Planet, Perelandra, That Hideous Strength, The Lost Road, “The Fall of Númenor”, The Lord of the Rings: each of these works has a long and intricate history. But each one has its genesis in the same place. They were born

²³ Quoted in Carpenter, *The Inklings* 65-66

²⁴ Carpenter, *J.R.R. Tolkien* 173

out of a specific conversation, a friendly competition, and a deliberate decision to write fiction along similar lines.”²⁵

Lewis and Tolkien are both well-respected for their scholarly writing. Tolkien’s “Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics” is still prominently used in the study of Beowulf today. *Mere Christianity* is often considered a theological staple by Christian churches when trying to attract new believers. Yet it was their mythology, not their scholarly works, that made Lewis and Tolkien famous.

Christian Myth—Not Allegory

As previously discussed, Tolkien’s philosophy for writing as seen in “On Fairy-Tales”—that by creating myths man is pointing towards the Creator from which he came—became the foundation for the Christian mythology of both Lewis and Tolkien. Neither of these authors wrote allegorically; Tolkien said, “There is no ‘symbolism’ or conscious allegory in my story. Allegory of the sort ‘five wizards=five senses’ is wholly foreign to my way of thinking. There were five wizards and that is just a unique part of history. To ask if the Orcs ‘are’ Communists is to me as sensible as asking if Communists are Orcs.”²⁶ In most cases, allegory is comprised of very flat, one-dimensional characters that directly represent a very real person, place, or thing—“A” will always directly equal “B.” This is never the case in Lewis’s and Tolkien’s stories. Their characters may have “applicability” to real world people and events, so that “A” may parallel “B,” but they will never directly represent it.

C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien come from similar backgrounds; raised in motherless homes from an early age, they both developed a deep love for myths and the realm of Faerie.

²⁵ Glycer 59

²⁶ Carpenter, *Letters*, November 17, 1957, 262

Both men attended Oxford for a degree in English, fought in WWI, and then, returned to the University to teach. Lewis and Tolkien both professed a commitment to the Christian faith—albeit at different points in their lives—and through the course of their friendship, together created a mutual foundation for their mythopoeic stories. From this history, most readers would expect the writings of Lewis and Tolkien to be very similar in terms of their Christian influence. Yet they are not; Lewis and Tolkien diverge into vastly different directions during the creation process. Lewis creates a realm filled with allusions to Christianity and that revolves around the figure of Christ, while Tolkien's Secondary World is made Christian through the act of creation. But in spite of all their differences, the works of both Lewis and Tolkien can be classified as Christian myths.

CHAPTER 6

Based on Christ:

The Christian Myths of C.S. Lewis

C.S. Lewis wrote a variety of fiction over the course of his lifetime, ranging from epic poems to children's fairy stories to illustrative fantasy; all were heavily influenced by Christianity after his conversion in 1931. Due to the differences in style of his writings, Lewis consequentially represents his faith differently in each piece. Several of his fantasies, such as *The Screwtape Letters* and *The Great Divorce*, though they are fiction, are written didactically. Their main purpose is to give instruction on Christian values through the act of story-telling. Thus, these novels cannot be analyzed as Christian myths in the terms of "sub-creation" that Tolkien describes in "On Fairy-Stories." Lewis's novels that can be examined as Christian myths are those that have the primary purpose of entertainment and can be read purely for pleasure without gaining any theological instruction, those that Lewis wrote because "there is too little of what we really like in stories"¹—his *Space Trilogy* and *The Chronicles of Narnia*. It is on these two series that this analysis of Lewis's work as Christian mythology will focus.

¹ Carpenter, *The Inklings* 65

As discussed in the previous chapter, Lewis did not write *Narnia* or the *Space Trilogy* as allegory. He defined allegory as “a composition (whether pictorial or literary) in which immaterial realities are represented by feigned physical objects e.g. a pictured Cupid allegorically represents erotic love (which in reality is an experience, not an object occupying a given area of space) or, in Bunyan, a giant represents Despair.”² Lewis’s characters are not flat, one-dimensional representations of real people and places, but complex inventions that can exist upon their own merit. At the very best, they will parallel aspects of Christianity, but they will never represent them. In response to allegations that he set out to write allegory, Lewis stated,

Some people seem to think that I began by asking myself how I could say something about Christianity to children; then fixed on the fairy tale as an instrument; then collected information about child-psychology and decided what age-group I’d write for; then drew up a list of basic Christian truths and hammered out ‘allegories’ to embody them. This is all pure moonshine. I couldn’t write in that way at all.³

For Lewis the writing of all of his fairy-stories began with an image. His conception of the planet Perelandra began with “simply the picture of floating islands themselves, no location, no story.”⁴ From this one image—of great islands that float like lily pads—emerged a plotline reminiscent of the Garden of Eden that became the sequel to *Out of the Silent Planet*. Likewise, the realm of Narnia did not begin with parallels to Christianity, but with “a picture of a Faun

²*Collected Letters Vol. III*, Walter Hooper, ed. December 29, 1958, 1004

³ C.S. Lewis, “Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What’s to Be Said,” *On Stories and Other Essays on Literature* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt Inc. 1982) 46

⁴*Collected Letters Vol. III*, Walter Hooper, ed. January 31, 1952, 162

carrying an umbrella and parcels in a snowy wood.⁵ He did not set out to create Christian mythology, but to write a story that he wanted to tell. Lewis stated, “This picture [of a faun] has been in my mind since I was about sixteen. Then one day, when I was about forty, I said to myself: ‘Let’s try to make a story about it.’”⁶

Lewis may not have meant to write Christian myths, but it is what he wrote— his faith is undeniably entwined in the plot and characters of his novels. For the most part, this occurred by accident. He said of his stories, “At first there wasn’t even anything Christian about them; that element pushed itself in of its own accord.”⁷ The most celebrated religious figure from his novels—the lion, Aslan—was never part of the original equation for the storyline. Speaking of *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, Lewis said,

At first I had very little idea how the story would go. But then suddenly Aslan came bounding into it. I think I had been having a good many dreams of lions about that time. Apart from that, I don’t know where the Lion came from or why He came. But once He was there He pulled the whole story together, and soon He pulled the six other Narnian stories in after Him.⁸

Some readers may be confused as to how a story can contain heavy Christian imagery and characters and not be allegory. Lewis wrote from the unique perspective of what he called a “supposition.” He said of his character, Aslan, “ He is an invention giving an imaginary answer to the question ‘What might Christ become like if there really were a world like Narnia and He

⁵ “It All Began with a Picture,” In *On Stories*, 53

⁶ *Ibid.* 53

⁷ “Sometimes Fairy Stories,” In *On Stories*, 46

⁸ “It All Began with a Picture,” In *On Stories*, 53

chose to be incarnate and die and rise again in that world as He actually has done in ours?”⁹ A “supposition,” as Lewis calls it, allows a writer to ponder “Suppose life on another planet actually exists—how does Christ exist on this planet?” Lewis’s supposals differ from allegory “because they mix the real and the unreal in different ways.”¹⁰ His stories do not step-by-step imitate history, but take elements from it and twist them into new stories—such as the story of Christ. He says, “The Incarnation of Christ in another world is a mere supposal: but *granted* the supposition. He would really have been a physical object in that world as He was in Palestine and His death on the Stone Table would have been a physical event no less than His death on Calvary.”¹¹

By writing from the perspective of suppositions, Lewis writes mythopoeically as Tolkien describes in “On Fairy-Stories.” He takes the Eucatastrophe of human history—the birth, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus—and places it in his own Secondary World. Lewis becomes a sub-creator by constructing his novels to be stages for the effects of the Great Eucatastrophe.

Lewis’s *Space Trilogy* and *The Chronicles of Narnia* are overflowing with Christian images and themes, from prophecies to moral codes. To analyze all of these elements would require a series of books—much more space than is allocated to this thesis. Thus, the remainder of this chapter will focus on the one characteristic of Lewis’s writing that turns his fairy-stories into Christian myths, which is the figure of Christ.

⁹ *Collected Letters Vol. III*, Walter Hooper, ed. December 29, 1958, 1004

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.* 1005

Christ—Not Christ-Figures

Art and literature are filled with Christ-figures, from prophets to healers to martyrs to anyone who dies with his arms out-stretched. Though Lewis may use Christ-figures in his novels, such as *Elwin Ransom*, he does not use them to represent Christ, rather to imitate Him, as it says in Ephesians 5:1. “Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children.”¹² Lewis said, “Ransom (to some extent) plays the role of Christ not because he allegorically represents him (as Cupid represents falling in love) but because in reality every real Christian is really called upon in some measure to *enact* Christ.”¹³ Lewis’s myths do not need Christ-figures to represent Jesus because they have the actual figure of Christ, renamed as Aslan and Maledil.

All of Lewis’s created worlds are tied to our own world, to reality. Thus, the character of Christ in his stories is not a standalone person, but one who has crossed over from reality. This is most easily seen in the *Space Trilogy*, where Christ is not given a new form, just a new name. Like all Christians who have lived since Jesus’ Ascension into Heaven,¹⁴ readers are not shown the actual, flesh and blood form of Maledil, only spiritual convergence and the reflection of Him in other believers. For example, in *Perelandra*, Ransom mentally argues with Maledil about whether he should eliminate the Un-man. When he accepts the task of preventing the Un-man from continuing to tempt the Lady Tinidril, he allows the Incarnation of Christ on Earth to save the planet of Perelandra. Ransom muses, “When Eve fell, God was not Man. He had not yet made men members of His body; since then He had, and through them henceforward He would save and suffer. One of the purposes for which He had done all this was to save Perelandra not

¹² *The Holy Bible, New International Version*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984).

¹³ *Collected Letters Vol. III*, Walter Hooper, ed. December 29, 1958, 1005

¹⁴ Acts 1:9, *The Holy Bible, New International Version*

through Himself but through Himself in Ransom.”¹⁵ The Lady and readers do not see the physical Maledil, but the indwelling of Him in Ransom.

Readers are first introduced to Maledil in *Out of the Silent Planet*. Questioning the Malacandran Hnohra about the order of sentient beings on his planet, Ransom stumbles into a discussion about religion and creation:

Ransom, following his own idea, asked if Oyarsa had made the world. The *hrossa* almost barked in the fevour of their denial. Did people in Thulcandra [Earth] not know that Maledil the Young had made and still ruled the world? Even a child knew that. Where does Maledil live, Ransom asked.

“With the Old One.”

And who was the Old One? Ransom did not understand the answer. He tried again.

“Where was the Old One?”

“He is not that sort,” said Hnohra, “that he has to live anywhere.”¹⁶

Ransom quickly realizes that Maledil was not a sentient being, but “a spirit without body, parts or passions.”¹⁷ Lewis’s description of Maledil the Young, who lives with the Old One and is the creator and sustainer of the universe, is an imitation of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity as expressed in John 1:1-4: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men.”¹⁸

¹⁵ C.S. Lewis, *Perelandra*. (New York: Scribner, 1944) 123.

¹⁶ C.S. Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet*, (New York: Scribner, 1938) 69.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *The Holy Bible, New International Version*

The Passion of Christ is never repeated within Lewis's *Space Trilogy*; Maledil does not become reincarnated and die again for the salvation of his creatures. The Crucifixion and Resurrection as they occurred on Thulcandra was enough to completely alter the universe. In Perelandra, the Lady tells Ransom, "Since our Beloved became a man, how should Reason in any world take on another form? Do you not understand? That is all over. Among times there is a time that turns a corner and everything this side of it is new. Times do not go backward."¹⁹ Because Maledil became a human, from that moment on all thinking creatures that are created in His image will be in the shape of a human; the shape of the furry *hross* that lives on Malacandra will never come again.

While Christ takes the form of a spiritual being who became human in Lewis's *Space Trilogy*, in *The Chronicles of Narnia* he becomes a lion. If readers read *Narnia* in its original order—not the chronological order distributed today that begins with *The Magician's Nephew*—they will first meet Aslan as a long-awaited, returning King. In *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, the Pevensie children learn from Mr. Beaver that

He's the King. He's the Lord of the whole wood, but not often here, you understand. Never in my time or my father's time. But the word has reached us the he has come back. He is in Narnia at the moment. He'll settle the White Queen all right. It is he, not you, that will save Mr. Tumnus.²⁰

Aslan is returning to Narnia to fulfill a prophecy and to free the realm from the rule of the evil White Witch. The prophecy stated,

¹⁹ *Perelandra* 54

²⁰ *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* 74

Wrong will be right, when Aslan comes in sight,
At the sound of his roar, sorrows will be no more,
When he bares his teeth, winter meets its death
And when he shakes his mane, we shall have spring again.²¹

Once Aslan returns to Narnia, his role transforms from King to Savior. Of the four Pevensie children who enter into Narnia through a wardrobe, the younger brother, Edmund, betrays his siblings to the Witch for promises of wealth and prestige. As a result, the Witch has a right to take Edmund's life according to the laws of the Deep Magic that created the world. She tells Aslan, "You at least know the magic which the Emperor put into Narnia at the very beginning. You know that every traitor belongs to me as my lawful prey and that for every treachery I have a right to a kill."²²

To save Edmund's life, Aslan offers his own. He consents to being bound, shaved, humiliated, and executed by the White Witch on the Stone Table. At his death, the Witch feels that she has claimed the victory; she tells Aslan,

And now, who has won? Fool, did you think that by all this you would save the human traitor? Now I will kill you instead of him as our pact was and so the Deep Magic will be appeased. But when you are dead what will prevent me from killing him as well? And who will take him out of my hand then? Understand that you have given me Narnia forever, you have lost your own life and you have not saved his. In that knowledge, despair and die.²³

²¹ *Ibid.* 74-75

²² *Ibid.* 138-39

²³ *Ibid.* 152

The death of Aslan strongly echoes the Crucifixion; the servants of the Witch deal abuse like the soldiers who flogged, spat on, and forced Jesus to carry his own cross. And like the tomb that could not hold Jesus two millennia ago, death does not contain Aslan. Susan and Lucy Pevensie return in the morning to find the Stone Table cracked and Aslan alive. Aslan explains his resurrection:

Though the Witch knew the Deep Magic, there is a magic deeper still which she did not know. Her knowledge goes back only to the dawn of Time. But if she could have looked a little further back, into the stillness and the darkness before Time dawned, she would have read there a different incantation. She would have known that when a willing victim who has committed no treachery was killed in a traitor's stead, the Table would crack and Death itself would start working backwards.²⁴

By having Aslan die to save Edmund from the consequences of his transgressions, Lewis recreates the Passion scene in his Secondary World. But why is Aslan not an allegorical figure, or a simple imitation of Christ? Why should readers consider Him the same entity that became human and died on a cross in Palestine? Lewis shows his readers that Aslan is Christ in several places—first, in the creation scene in *The Magician's Nephew*. Aslan is seen at the dawn of Narnia as the Creator: “Huge, shaggy, and bright it stood facing the risen sun. Its mouth was wide open in song and it was about three hundred yards away.”²⁵ Like the words, “Let there be light,”²⁶ which, according to the book of Genesis, began the existence of our own world, the song

²⁴ *Ibid.* 159-60

²⁵ C.S. Lewis, *The Magician's Nephew* (New York: Collier Books, 1970) 102.

²⁶ Genesis 1:3, *The Holy Bible, New International Version*

that Aslan sang created Narnia. From the lyrics of this song, the stars, land, vegetation, and animals of Narnia are formed.

Further evidence for the argument that the character of Aslan is Jesus is found at the end of *The Last Battle*. In this book the world of Narnia comes to an end; those who were still faithful to Aslan are welcomed into Aslan's Country—i.e. Heaven—instead of perishing. Once inside this eternal realm, the real Narnia of which the other had been a mere shadow or copy,²⁷ the characters from the previous six books, such as the Pevensies—minus Susan—and Digory Kirk, are able to commune with all other followers of Aslan from the beginning of time. In this land, the visage of Aslan began to change: “As He spoke He no longer looked to them like a lion.”²⁸ Aslan's image begins to shift from the physical lion readers had known into the true, eternal likeness of Christ.

If this evidence is not enough to convince readers that Aslan is Christ, then they can look to the writings where Aslan and Lewis both claim that he is the same person. In the *Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, Lucy Pevensie laments being forced to leave Narnia because she will not meet with Aslan at home, in England. Aslan tells her,

“But you shall meet me, dear one,” said Aslan.

“Are—are you there too, Sir?” said Edmund.

“I am,” said Aslan. “But there I have another name. You must learn to know me by that name. This was the very reason why you were brought to Narnia, that by knowing me here for a little, you may know me better there.”²⁹

²⁷ C.S. Lewis, *The Last Battle* (New York: Collier Books, 1970) 169.

²⁸ *Ibid.* 186

²⁹ C.S. Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (New York: Collier Books, 1970) 216.

Conclusive evidence for the “Aslan is Jesus” theory can be found in the words of Lewis, himself. In a letter to an eleven-year-old girl, Hila, Lewis wrote,

As to Aslan’s other name, well I want you to guess. Has there never been anyone in this world who (1.) Arrived at the same time as Father Christmas. (2.) Said he was the son of the Great Emperor. (3.) Gave himself up for someone else’s fault to be jeered at and killed by wicked people. (4.) Came to life again. (5.) Is sometime spoken of as a Lamb (see the end of the Dawn Treader). Don’t you really know His name in this world? Think it over and let me know your answer!³⁰

What is the purpose of Christ acting as Maledil or Aslan in fictional stories? For readers to be able to meet Him, so that by “knowing me here for a little, you may know me better there.”³¹ Lewis’s stories show readers that once you are acquainted with Christ, you are obliged to follow Him. In *The Silver Chair*, Jill meets Aslan by the bank of a stream, where the Lion “lay with its head raised and its two fore-paws out in front of it, like the lions in Trafalgar Square.”³² Once she has met Him, she is obligated to follow his orders and go search for the lost prince of Narnia.³³

This act of recognition and obligated obedience is also seen in Lewis’s *Space Trilogy*. In *That Hideous Strength* the character Jane Studdock is very skeptical of Christian faith of Ransom, also known at this point as the Director. When confronted by the reality of her relationship with God, she asks, “You mean I shall have to become a Christian?” Ransom simply

³⁰C.S. Lewis: *Letters to Children*, Lyle W. Dorsett and Marjorie Lamp Mead, ed. June 3, 1953, (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1985) 32.

³¹*The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* 216

³²C.S. Lewis, *The Silver Chair* (New York: Collier Books, 1970) 15-16.

³³*Ibid.* 19

replies, “It looks like it.”³⁴ Obedience in following Christ is rewarded with protection in Lewis’s books. As Dimble and Jane go off to find the reawakened Merlin, Ransom offers this advice: “And if he comes with you, all is well, if he does not—why then, Dimble, you must rely on your Christianity. Do not try any tricks. Say your prayers and keep your will fixed in the will of Maledil.”³⁵

The Christian myths created by Lewis are often subtle and ambiguous in their representation of Lewis’s faith; in many places, it is left up to the readers and their prior knowledge of Christianity to understand the allusions. But for all of the themes, symbols, and moral codes that are to be interpreted, the prevailing force behind the analysis of *The Space Trilogy* and *The Chronicles of Narnia* as Christian myths is not found in a minor insinuation. It lies solely in the perpetual figure of Jesus Christ, renamed as Maledil and Aslan.

³⁴ C.S. Lewis, *That Hideous Strength* (New York: Scribner, 1946) 313.

³⁵ *Ibid.* 226

CHAPTER 7

An Act of Worship:

The Christian Myths of J.R.R. Tolkien

The first seeds of the imaginary world of Middle-Earth can be traced back to the childhood of J.R.R. Tolkien when he was imbued with a deep love of languages. From his fascination with words emerged the two Elvish languages, Quenya and Sindarin, that form the foundation of Tolkien's mythology. The language-based realm of Elves, Dwarfs, and Wizards has enchanted readers since the initial publication of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*; as a result, the books have been critiqued many times over the years, mostly in search of Tolkien's hidden, evangelical message.

Tolkien said of his stories, "As for any inner meaning or 'message,' it has in the intention of the author none. It is neither allegorical nor topical."¹ In spite of this blatant dismissal of all allegorical allegations, scholars continue to debate the Christian influence on *The Lord of the Rings*—and with good reason. Scholar Matthew Dickerson argues, "His worldview was so thoroughly ingrained in him (as was his philosophy) that he could not help its becoming central to his writings,"² In the act of "sub-creating," of imitating his Creator, Tolkien integrated his

¹ J.R.R. Tolkien, "Forward," *The Fellowship of the Ring* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1954) x.

² Matthew Dickerson, *Following Gandalf: Epic Battles and Moral Victory in The Lord of the Rings* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2003) 14.

Christian faith into his mythology. He constantly refuted all suggestions that his characters were allegorical, but later admitted that “*The Lord of the Rings* is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision.”³

Yet, even after this admission by Tolkien, debates still continue about whether Tolkien’s stories are Christian myths, mainly because scholars tend to analyze *The Lord of the Rings* as standalone novels. If one were to analyze the trilogy separate from the rest of Tolkien’s mythology, there is very little evidence to support a Christian influence. Throughout all three novels there is an overwhelming sense of Providence; such as when Gandalf tells Frodo, “Behind that [Bilbo finding the Ring] there was something else at work, beyond any design of the Ring-maker. I can put it no plainer than by saying the Bilbo was *meant* to find the Ring, and *not* by its maker. In which case you also were *meant* to have it. And that may be an encouraging thought.”⁴ There is also an underlying moral and ethical code in the story, which all characters acknowledge. Aragorn states “Good and ill have not changed since yesteryear; nor are they one thing among Elves and Dwarves and another among Men. It is a man’s part to discern them, as much in the Golden Wood as in his own house.”⁵ But Providence and moral statures do not point to Christianity, merely Theism. The only reason these elements have been consistently used as evidence for the Christian influence on Tolkien’s mythology is because they came from a Christian man. To fully understand the Christian influence on Tolkien’s mythology, one must analyze *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* in conjunction with *The Silmarillion*.

³ Carpenter, *Letters*, December 2, 1953, 172

⁴ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1954) 61.

⁵ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Two Towers* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1954) 33.

At first it may seem foolish to critique thematic elements in one novel based upon the themes of another by the same author. Yet *The Lord of the Rings*, though it is a complete tale in and of itself, is also just one chapter in a larger story. To understand the Christian influence on Tolkien's mythology, it is imperative to analyze the entire history of Middle-Earth as a unit, not chapter by chapter.

Tolkien considered his works to be one story—*The Silmarillion* being the foundation for *The Lord of the Rings*, even though the latter was published first. He repeatedly petitioned his publishers to combine *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion* into one book. He wrote, "I had in my letter made a strong point that the *Silmarillion* etc. and *The Lord of the Rings* went together, as one long saga of the Jewels and the Rings, and that I was resolved to treat them as one thing."⁶ Though his attempts to have them published as one eventually failed, Tolkien never relinquished his belief that his stories were "inter-dependent."⁷

The inter-dependency of Tolkien's myths is evident throughout *The Lord of the Rings*. From the moment the reader first begins, he is bombarded with allusions to historical events, such as past journeys, adventures, battles, and victories, that he would have no knowledge of if not for *The Silmarillion*. The entire purpose of the trilogy—to tell the tale of the destruction of the Ring—is a consequence of events chronicled in *The Silmarillion*, specifically the creation of the Rings of Power and the temporary defeat of Sauron. Readers do not need to read *The Silmarillion* to know that there is missing information in Tolkien's trilogy; it can easily be surmised from the text, such as in a conversation between Frodo and Sam:

⁶ Carpenter, *Letters*, March 10, 1950, 139

⁷ *Ibid.* 143

“I wonder,” said Frodo, “But I don’t know. And that’s the way of a real tale. Take any one that you’re fond of. You may know, or guess, what kind of tale it is, happy-ending or sad-ending, but the people in it don’t know. And you don’t want them to.”

“No, sir, of course not. Beren now, he never thought he was going to get the Silmaril from the Iron Crown in Thangorodrim, and yet he did, and that was a worse place and a blacker danger than ours. But that’s a long tale, of course, and goes on past the happiness and into grief and beyond it—and the Silmaril went on and came to Earendil. And why, sir, I never thought of that before! We’ve got—you’ve got some of the light of it in that star-glass that the Lady gave you! Why, to think of it, we’re in the same tale still! It’s going on. Don’t the great tales never end?

“No, they never end as tales,” said Frodo. “But the people in them come, and go when their part’s ended. Our part will end later—or sooner.”⁸

The readers can follow the gist of the conversation, but to fully understand the examples used—who are Beren and Earendil? what is a Silmaril?—they have to read *The Silmarillion*. If they do not, readers will not understand Frodo and Sam’s part in the larger story.

Once critics begin to view Tolkien’s mythology as a single unit instead of individual stories, the evidentiary support for a Christian influence multiplies exponentially. Tolkien does not insert his faith into his works through the figure of Christ as Lewis does; rather, he uses the

⁸ *The Two Towers* 362-63

act of “sub-creation” to invent a universe that imitates reality—one where a spiritual victory is more important than a physical one.

A Christian Sub-Creation

Professor and critic Dorothy Barber wrote, “I think there is a coherent and consistent significance which is largely Christian in *The Lord of the Rings*. The story becomes anagogical not through allegory but through Tolkien’s profound understanding of the creative power of words.”⁹ Tolkien’s philosophy on writing as expressed in “On Fairy-Stories” is that by writing myths, man imitates God; he strives to be a creator, or “sub-creator” of his own Secondary World. Because of his view of sub-creating as a glorification of God, by writing *The Lord of the Rings* Tolkien is performing a Christian act—he is worshiping God. Tolkien’s mythology is evidence of his Christian faith. So it is little wonder that his stories parallel history.

R.J. Reilly wrote, “Mythology is the ghost of concrete meaning.”¹⁰ The history of Middle-Earth is not meant to represent our own history, but to mimic it, to be a fantasy world that operates in the same manner as our own. The characters and events of Tolkien’s Middle-Earth are not allegories, but neither are they suppositions like in Lewis’s myths. They are separate and whole persons that fully operate by the laws of the world Tolkien created; but due to Tolkien’s faith, they parallel the Deity and people of reality.

With echoes of the book of Genesis, Tolkien records the creation of Middle-Earth in the “Ainulindalë.” This short tale that begins *The Silmarillion* establishes a world with one omnipotent God who creates the earth with words. Eru, the One, also known as Ilúvatar, created

⁹ Dorothy K. Barber, “The Meaning of *The Lord of the Rings*,” *The Tolkien Papers* (Mankato State College, MN, 1970) 38.

¹⁰R.J. Reilly, In *Poetic Diction* by Owen Barfield (London: Wesleyan University Press 1952) 107.

the Ainur—lower gods who are similar to angels—“that were the offspring of his thought.”¹¹ He taught them how to sing a great theme and commanded the Ainur to “show forth your powers in adorning this theme, each with his own thought and devices, if he will” because Ilúvatar had imbued in them his creative powers, “the Flame Imperishable.”¹²

Tolkien’s Secondary World also has a Satan-figure who, in lusting for power and glory, brings discord into the world. Melkor, most powerful and knowledgeable of the Ainur, desired to create beings of his own and often went “alone into the void places seeking the Imperishable Flame.”¹³ Unable to create outside of the gifts that Ilúvatar had given him, Melkor began to weave his own themes into the music of the Ainur, causing discord. When the music ceased, Ilúvatar showed the Ainur that they had been singing the history of the world, each theme, including the disharmonious ones of Melkor, melding together to form a world that “has its uttermost source in me [Ilúvatar].”¹⁴ Throughout *The Silmarillion*, Melkor will be a continual adversary for the Ainur as they attempt to build the world their music had created.

After a creation story that is so similar to the first few chapters of Genesis, most readers would expect Tolkien’s faith to influence his mythology in other ways, specifically with a representation of the figure of Christ. But Tolkien’s work does not have the insertion of Jesus as Lewis’s myths do. Throughout the history of Middle-Earth, there are several Christ-figures—the most prominent being Gandalf, a wizard sent from the gods to lead the Fellowship and battle Sauron, who after battling with a demon is resurrected. Other Christ-figures include Frodo, who sacrifices himself to carry the burden of evil for the entire world, and Aragorn, the long foretold

¹¹ J.R.R. Tolkien, “Ainulindalë,” *The Silmarillion* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1977) 3.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.* 4

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 6

returning king, who has healing powers. But for all of the Christ-figures in Tolkien's stories, there is not an actual Messiah... yet.

The mythology of Tolkien is a "Christian understanding of a pre-Christian time."¹⁵ All of the writings that Tolkien finished before he died are the Old Testament of Middle-Earth; there is no Savior in them. But there is an obscure prophecy of a coming Messiah who will save Men. In the story "Athrabeth Finrod Ah Andreth" in *Morgoth's Ring*, the elves Finrod and Andreth are speaking about the future of Men. Andreth recounts, "They say that the One will himself enter into Arda, and heal Men and all the Marring from the beginning to the end. This they say also, or they feign, is a rumour that has come down through years uncounted, even from the days of our undoing."¹⁶ Had Tolkien been able to completely finish his mythology, he would have eventually come to a point where Christ would be represented in Middle-Earth. His published works are the glorious preface before the coming of Christ, of the Great Eucatastrophe.

Some scholars may question using a story published some many years after Tolkien's death as evidence for Christianity in Middle-Earth, but Christopher Tolkien claims that this story was complete when his father died and intended to be a part of *The Silmarillion*. He says in a commentary, "On one of these wrappers my father added: 'Should be last item in an appendix' (i.e. to *The Silmarillion*)."¹⁷ Thus, "Athrabeth Finrod Ah Andreth" should be included as evidence in the argument for Tolkien's Christian mythology.

Tolkien's faith influenced his works not only through the imitation of history, but in the incorporation of morality as well. In Tolkien's mythology the well-being of a character's soul is

¹⁵ Dickerson 225

¹⁶ J.R.R. Tolkien, "Athrabeth Finrod Ah Andreth," In *Morgoth's Ring*, Christopher Tolkien, ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1993) 321.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 329

just as important, if not more so, that the well-being of his body. In many cases, the moral battle that is to be fought is more difficult and more important than the physical battle—such as in *The Hobbit* when Bilbo went into the dragon’s lair to face Smaug. The dwarves send in Bilbo, who had earned a reputation of being sneaky throughout the journey, to scope out Smaug’s abode. Yet Bilbo falters in fear when he begins to near the entrance of the lair: “It was at this point that Bilbo stopped. Going on from there was the bravest thing he ever did. The tremendous things that happened afterwards were as nothing compared to it. He fought the real battle in the tunnel alone, before he ever saw the cast danger that lay in wait.”¹⁸ Bilbo continues down the tunnel because his companions are counting on him, not because he has anything to gain. The battle is not in stealing a golden cup or fighting a dragon; it is simply in doing what he said he would.

In Tolkien’s world sacrificing the moral victory is never acceptable; even if it means that by doing the right thing one is going to die. In *The Return of the King*, Faramir must face the consequences of his decision not to take the Ring from Frodo in order to help Gondor. He made this decision because he knew that it would be wrong to take the Ring and understood that the Ring must be destroyed. But Faramir’s father, Denethor, does not agree and threatens execution for allowing the hobbits to continue on their journey. He says,

“I know you well, Ever your desire is to appear lordly and generous as a king of old, gracious, gentle. That may well befit one of high race, if he sits in power and peace. But in desperate hours gentleness may be repaid with death.”

“So be it,” said Faramir.¹⁹

¹⁸ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit* (Boston, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1937) 193.

¹⁹ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1954) 80.

Faramir is unafraid in the face of death for his actions because to him, making the moral choice is far more important than living.

But even if you initially fail the moral battle, and are consequentially killed for it, you can still be redeemed. This can best be seen through the character of Boromir. Lacking the moral fiber of his younger brother, Boromir tries to forcefully take the Ring from Frodo, whom he had sworn to protect on the journey to Mount Doom, in order to help his people in Gondor. When Frodo slips on the Ring and disappears, Boromir is instantly remorseful for his actions: “He rose and passed his hand over his eyes, dashing away the tears, ‘What have I said?’ he cried. ‘What have I done? Frodo, Frodo!’ he called. ‘Come back! A madness took me, but it has passed! Come back!’”²⁰ He tries to make up for his actions by protecting Pippin and Merry during an attack, but his efforts are futile—the hobbits are captured by Orcs and Boromir is slain. As he is dying, Boromir confesses what he did to Aragorn:

Aragorn knelt beside him. Boromir opened his eyes and strove to speak. At last slow words came, “I tried to take the Ring from Frodo,” he said. “I am sorry, I have paid.” His glance strayed to his fallen enemies; twenty at least lay there. “They have gone: the Halflings: the Orcs have taken them. I think they are not dead. Orcs bound them.” He paused and his eyes closed wearily. After a moment he spoke again.

“Farewell, Aragorn! Go to Minas Tirith and save my people! I have failed.”

²⁰ *The Fellowship of the Ring* 449

“No!” said Aragorn, taking his hand and kissing his brow. “You have conquered.

Few have gained such a victory. Be at peace! Minas Tirith shall not fall!”²¹

Aragorn’s words are not just empty consolations for a dying man. Boromir may have morally failed and even lost the military battle, but he earned redemption through repentance; Boromir acknowledged what he had done wrong and tried to make amends, choosing morality in the end.

Tolkien’s mythology is difficult to classify as Christian because its religious influence is not shown in the characters or events but in the way Tolkien wrote. *The Lord of the Rings* is a “Christian” myth because Tolkien imitates God in the creation of it. Through this act of worship in imitation Tolkien creates a world that parallels our own, in both history and morality—a world where “Legend and History have met and fused.”²²

²¹ *The Two Towers* 4

²² “On Fairy-Stories” 73

CHAPTER 8

Conclusion

At face value the novels of C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien are very similar—and with good reason. Emerging from childhoods saturated in myths and built upon a mythopoeic foundation, their stories “remind us of the origin and literal meaning of the word “image-ination”—the creation of images in our minds and the projection of them onto the world around us and on our internal world.”¹ Using the form of fantasy fiction to present their Christian faith, Lewis and Tolkien offer an interpretation of reality that is central to their way of thinking and of living. As Lewis wrote, “The story does what no theorem can quite do. It may not be ‘like real life’ in the superficial sense; but it sets before us an image of what reality may well be like at some more central region.”²

Yet for all of the ways the fiction of Lewis and Tolkien is similar, the manner in which they create Christian myths is fundamentally different. Lewis uses the format of a “supposition” to create a world that is Christian through its dependence on Christ; the purpose of *The Space Trilogy* and *The Chronicles of Narnia* is to introduce readers to Christ through fiction. By comparison, Tolkien’s Middle-Earth is not a Christian myth by

¹ Mary Aileen Schniel. “In the Forge of Las: Tolkien and the Art of Creative Fantasy,” *Mythlore* 10, (1983): 17.

² “On Stories,” In *On Stories* 15

the insertion of Christ into the plot, but by the creation of the myth. The friendship between Lewis and Tolkien allowed them to originate their mythology from the same place—the belief that myths glorify God—but in the execution of presenting “an image of what reality may well be like” they diverge, creating Christian myths that represent their faith in two different ways.

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