

ESSAY # 2

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Classical Mythology

Second Year

Tutorial paper No. 2

Week beginning May 29, 2006

J.R.R. Tolkien

Lecturer: Dr Ron Newbold

Tutorial: Tuesday 4 pm

Student: Nina Gregurev

CLASSICAL MYTHOLOGY

With particular reference to *The Fellowship of the Ring*,
Consider the view that Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* is too
Simplistic to be regarded as mythic, that it lacks true mythic
Profundity and complexity.

This Tutorial Paper is dedicated to

'The One'

"... the Lord, of angels, and of men – and of elves."

Tolkien, J.R.R. Tree and Leaf,
Unwin Books,
London,
Ninth Impression, 1974, p 63

Considering the view that Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* is too simplistic I conclude that structured within the pages of *The Fellowship of the Ring* lies a panoply of mythic profundity and complexity. Its themes of a golden age, the hero, his quest, along with the journey to maturity all coincide with Celtic, Norse, and Greek mythology. The Ragnarok spirit of the (then) age is foretold, observable in Sauron's character, and a concealed Christ and his salvific wonders are bestowed. An exact Christian analogy it is not; yet it remains regenerative throughout as a story of grace, courage and brotherly love.

It is a book of infinite losses, of cosmic diminution, of paradise lost,
and yet not without its eucatastrophe and evangelium.¹

Amid this vastness of academic possibility, I must limit my scope to discuss predominantly the hero quest and will attempt to show its mythic profundity and complexity with regard to the role of accompanying grace.

A critic like Edward Wilson, who, as Meyer-Spacks reveals, once suggested in a similar vein to the essay question, that Tolkien's work not be taken seriously, has drawn out many critics to come to Tolkien's defence. I hope to imitate these in my own small way.

Meyer-Spacks refutes Wilson and writes in Tolkien's defence:

On this level the difference between good and evil seems rather simple. The good possess the boy scout virtues; the evil are treacherous and cowardly. The good love nature, the evil destroy it. The good eat good

¹ Kilby, Clyde S. "Mythic and Christian Elements in Tolkien". In Montgomery, John Warwick (Ed.) Myth Allegory and Gospel. Bethany Fellowship Inc. Minneapolis, 1974, p.128

food, the evil eat bad food. If this were all one might agree with Wilson in his condemnation of Tolkien's trilogy, for impotence of imagination, superficiality of conception. But the simplicity of this ethical system is redeemed by the philosophic complexity of its content: simplicity does not equal shallowness.

The ethical system Meyer Spacks refers to is one of absolute values, which is actually not so simple. Relative values would be far simpler – one could simply move with one's whims. Holding absolute values requires self-discipline, coming from both within and without. Absolute values are inherent in Aragorn's words. Dowie points out:

...Aragorn tells Eomer, "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." (II, 41)³

It can therefore be assumed each character knows ethics/morality. Philosophic complexity is seen in the "fleshing out" of the characters (especially Frodo's), observed when juxtaposed with the problem of evil. Chance says:

Because the Fellowship is burdened with the responsibility of bearing the Ring and because its presence attracts evil, the greatest threat to the Fellowship and its mission comes not from without but from within. The hero must realize that he can become a monster. The two books of the Fellowship trace the process of this realization: the first book centers on the presentation of evil as external and physical, requiring physical heroism to combat it; and the second book centers on the presentation of evil as internal and spiritual, requiring a spiritual heroism to combat. The hero matures by coming to understand the character of good and evil – specifically, by descending into an underworld and then ascending into an

² Meyer Spacks, Patricia. "Power and Meaning in *The Lord of the Rings*". In Isaacs, Neil D. And Zimbardo, Rose A. (Eds.) *Tolkien and the Critics, Essays on J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings**. University of Notre Dame Press, Indiana, 1968, p 85.

³ Dowie, William. "The Gospel of Middle-Earth according to J.R.R. Tolkien". In Salu, Mary and Farrell, Robert, T. (Eds.) *J.R.R. Tolkien, Scholar and Storyteller, Essays In Memoriam*. Cornell University Press, N.Y. 1979. pp 276/7.

overworld, a natural one in the first book and a supernatural one in the second. The second book, then, functions as a mirror image of the first. These two levels correspond to the two levels – Germanic and Christian – of *Beowulf* and *The Hobbit*. For Frodo, as for Beowulf and Bilbo, the ultimate enemy is himself.⁴

“The presentation of evil as internal” becomes clearer when in the second book Galadriel counsels Frodo not to use the ring’s power.

Did not Gandalf tell you that the rings give power according to the measure of each possessor? Before you could use that power you would need to become far stronger, and to train your will to the domination of others.⁵

Frodo’s learning curve takes him on a long, difficult, inner/outer journey:

Frodo’s physical heroism evolves in the combat with physical dangers in book 1: his cry for help when Merry is caught by Old Man Willow; his stabbing of the barrow-wight’s hand as it nears the bound Sam; his dancing and singing to protect Pippin and their mission from discovery; his stabbing of the foot of one Rider during the night-attack; and his valor (brandishing his sword) and courage (refusing to put on the Ring, telling the Riders to return to Mordor) at the edge of the Ford. But this last incident reveals Frodo’s spiritual naivete: he believes physical gestures of heroism will ward off the Black Riders.⁶

Later, in the last chapter of book two, “The Breaking of the Fellowship,”:

He faces a threat from the proud and avaricious Boromir *within* the macrocosm of the Fellowship. Fleeing from him, Frodo puts on the Ring to render himself invisible and safe. But this unwise move allows him to see clearly (too clearly) as he sits, symbolically, upon the Seat of Seeing

⁴ Chance, Jane. Tolkien’s Art, A Mythology for England. The University Press of Kentucky, Rev. Ed. 2001, p. 147

⁵ Tolkien, J.R.R. The Lord of the Rings. George Allen and Unwin Ltd. London, 1969. (The Fellowship of the Ring) p. 385

⁶ Chance, Jane. Tolkien’s Art (Op Cit) 2001 p 160

atop Amon Hen (“Hill of the Eye”), built by the kings of Gondor, the searching of Sauron’s own Eye. What results is a second internal danger – the threat from *within* Frodo, the microcosm. A battle is staged within his psyche, and he is pulled first one way, then another, until, as a fully developed moral hero, he exercises the faculty of free will with complete self-control: “He heard himself crying out: *Never, never!* Or was it: *Verily I come, I come to you?* He could not tell. Then as a flash from some other point of power there came to his mind another thought: *Take it off! Take it off! Fool, take it off! Take off the Ring!*” He feels the struggle of the “two powers” within him: “For a moment, perfectly balanced between their piercing points, he writhed, tormented. Suddenly he was aware of himself again. Frodo, neither the Voice nor the Eye: free to choose, and with one remaining instant in which to do so. He took the Ring off his finger” (*LR*, 1:519).⁷ In this incident, parallel to the encounter of the Riders at the Ford in the last chapter of the first book, Frodo rescues himself instead of being rescued by Glorfindel or Gandalf.⁸

At this point Frodo has acquired a degree of equivalence of Catholic discernment of spirits.

Further, in providing his moral education by the realization that he must wage his own quest alone to protect both their mission and the other members of the Fellowship, he displays *fortitudo et sapientia* (fortitude and wisdom) and *caritas* (charity) – hence, he acts as that saviour of the Fellowship earlier witnessed in the figures of Tom Bombadil and Strider in the first book and Gandalf and Galadriel in the second. His education complete, Frodo can now function as a hero for he understands he may, at any time, become a “monster”.⁹

Will power is not sufficient to save this ultimate quest hero. Near the end of the *Lord of the Rings*, when Frodo says: “I have come”...”But I do not choose now to do what I came to do. I will not do this deed. The Ring is mine!”¹⁰, Gollum bites off Frodo’s ring finger and falls to his death in the Crack of Doom, thereby unintentionally saving free people from Sauron’s power.

⁷ Tolkien, J.R.R. *Op.Cit*, 1969, p 421

⁸ Chance, Jane. *Tolkien’s Art* (op cit) 2001 p 161

⁹ Chance, Jane. *Tolkien’s Art* (op cit) 2001 p 161

¹⁰ Tolkien, J.R.R. *Op.Cit*, 1969, p 981

In a profoundly Catholic sense one sees it is not Frodo's nature within him, his will power, but unmerited Grace without, that actually saves the hero and the quest – although not without cost. The loss of Frodo's finger is symbolic of the greater internal wound of the heart that can never be reversed.

All along it seems the unseen hand of Chance has manoeuvred the free-willed peoples and events to this penultimate conclusion. But is it really chance?

That there is some superordinating power over Frodo and his friends is often suggested. There is a force "beyond any design" of Sauron, says Gandalf, as he explains the history of the Ring to Frodo. Bilbo, he says, "was **meant** to find the Ring" and therefore Frodo was also "**meant** to have it" (I, 65). Elrond tells those present at the Council that though they are seemingly there by chance, it is not actually so. "It is so ordered that we, who sit here, and none other, must now find counsel for the peril of the world" (I, 255). A little later Aragorn tells Frodo pointedly that "it has been ordained" that he should hold the Ring (I, 260). ... a sovereign Good is constantly and consistently operative.¹¹

It is Grace, rather than chance or strength of will, which ultimately saves the fellowship.

In a letter to his friend Robert Murray, S.J., who had read the unpublished manuscript and commented how "without a word about religion, the book is all about grace," Tolkien answered,

I think I know exactly what you mean by the order of grace;...*The Lord of the Rings* is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision. That is why I have not put in, or have cut out, practically all references to anything

¹¹ Kilby, Clyde S. "Mythic and Christian Elements in Tolkien". In Montgomery, John Warwick (Ed.) Myth Allegory and Gospel. Bethany Fellowship Inc. Minneapolis, 1974, p. 132

like 'religion', to cults or practices, in the imaginary world. For the religious element is absorbed into the story and the symbolism.¹²

In the wider scope of *The Lord of the Rings* and referring to the religious "universal actuality"¹³ of Frodo's hero journey as seen in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, I think it has become apparent that Meyer Spacks' refutation of Wilson's "simple" morality or ethical system, (as seen in the character of Frodo), has in fact become complex. For the description of Frodo, in spite of himself, cannot in the end follow through with the disposal of the ring, paraphrases St. Paul:

For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do.¹⁴

He was, by this, exemplifying a profoundly sad and complex meta-truth of human nature – the sin nature within upon which grace must be multiplied for redemption.

It is perhaps interesting that this profound kindness of fortune which was bestowed on Frodo at the end of the book, is delivered through the very same gracious pen of that exemplary 'sub-creator'¹⁵ Tolkien, whose testimonial is:

We make still by the law in which we're made.¹⁶

¹² Dowie, William. "The Gospel of Middle-Earth according to J.R.R. Tolkien". In Salu, Mary and Farrell, Robert, T. (Eds.) *J.R.R. Tolkien, Scholar and Storyteller, Essays In Memoriam*. Cornell University Press, N.Y. 1979. P 284

¹³ Reader, Classical Mythology (HUM 4 (92111), University of Adelaide, 2006, p 18

¹⁴ Romans 7:19 King James Version

¹⁵ Petty, Anne C. *One Ring to Bind Them All: Tolkien's Mythology*. The University of Alabama Press, 1979. p 105

¹⁶ Tolkien, J.R.R. *Tree and Leaf*, Unwin Books, London, 1964, p 49

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