

SANCTITY VS. PROFANITY IN J.R.R.TOLKIEN'S *THE LORD OF THE RINGS*

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ABSTRACT

Tolkien's vast saga in the *Lord of the Rings* (1954) is one of the most complicated fictional and fantastic worlds that has a unique structure that merges various cultures of Norse mythology, Anglo Saxon literature and medieval philology. The *Lord of the Rings* trilogy does not impose certain norms or standards on the minds of the readers, but it presents a new interpretation of the constant and eternal struggle between the camp of freedom, sanctity, implied Christianity, and the forces of oppression, profanity and implied heresy. Tolkien's trilogy is a deeper test for humanity's endurance and struggle against various changeable morals, standards and values that challenged the intellectual and cultural fluctuations that inflected man as a consequence of disasters especially wars.

The Lord of the Rings is presented chronologically. A narrator initiates the history of the ring at the very beginning of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, which is the only background information the readers need to understand and know about it. From this point, the line of the events happen in order. Starting from Gandalf's arrival in the Shire at the beginning of the first part to Sam and Frodo's return at the end of the last. But there is only one scene in the trilogy appears out of chronological order, which is the opening scene of *The Return of the King*. In this scene, the hobbit Sméagol kills his friend to acquire the ring of power and eventually becomes the withered creature Gollum, whose singular obsession is the ring.

Keywords: Ring, profanity, middle earth and sanctity.

The Lord of the Rings (1954-1955) was written during World War II and the beginning of the cold war. Tolkien asserted that the novel was not an allegory, "The characters, places, and incidents do not have a signification, do not 'stand for' anything in the primary world."¹ The use of the atomic bomb by U.S. deepened his doubts about the emergence of modern technological life and the corruption of authority. The concept of the heroic he imagines had been already influenced by his bitter and painful experience in World War I, which took him further away from the traditional understanding of the world, and becomes now capable of destroying itself. The publication of *The Lord of the Rings* in 1954 and 1955 was faced with bitter attack and criticism from several affiliates of the literary institution, but the sales of the novel proved it to be the best sold novel.²

The Lord of the Rings is a trilogy, where the first part is *The Fellowship of the Ring*, *The Two Towers* and the last one is *The Return of the King*. The dwellers of the middle earth in *The Lord of the Rings*, unite to save themselves from enslavement by the wicked Sauron. The parts of the trilogy are complementary for each other; there is no gap in the sequence of the events or ideas. The story stands on what is common everywhere and every time, which is the eternal struggle between what is sacred or good, and what is profane or evil. Sauron, centuries before, designed and made a very tempting ring, where much of his power and wickedness was soaked, so as to dominate through a series of lesser rings, men, and various mythological creatures as dwarves, and elves. Some men could not resist the lust for the ring, and fell into his control. But other men united and allied with elves to defeat him, and the ring was redeemed and cut from his hand.³

Isildur is a member of a human royal family who instigated by greed, has taken the ring, but Isildur was eventually killed, and the ring settled in the river

bed. The Deagol, hobbit-like creature, finally captures it. The lure of the ring instigated his friend, Smeagol, to kill Deagol. Smeagol passes the ring to Bilbo Baggins, who does not know or aware of its influence and dangers. He brings the ring back to his home and eventually passes it to his cousin and heir, the major character, Frodo Baggins. The latter understands what the essence of the ring is and that Sauron is tracking it to get the ring back. At that moment, Frodo and his group realize that the ring should be destroyed. But the mission of destroying the ring is harder than what is believed in the sense that it should be destroyed in the same fire, which made it, that is in the heart of Orodruin volcano where Sauron's realm is situated. The plan of taking the ring back to Sauron's den seems fruitless endeavor, which requires from the last men of the middle earth to fight Sauron's troops as a distraction while moving back Sauron's lethal weapon into the heart of his kingdom. The plan confuses Sauron due to its impossibility. He does not expect there is any possibility that Frodo and his friend would be able to return the ring to the fires of Sauron.⁴

The Lord of the Rings most prevailing allegorical interpretations are based on biblical readings, mostly, on Tolkien's expressed Catholicism and historical interpretations in which the war of the rings is understood to be similar to World War I or World War II. These arguments, for example, associate Saruman with Judas, industrialism and technology; Sauron with Satan, Hitler or Stalin. Moreover, Gandalf is seen as God or Churchill, Aragorn as Christ or MacArthur, the ring is the atomic bomb, Mordor is Hell, Russia or Germany. If it is taken historically, it is very alluring to associate the wastes of Mordor with the World War I battlefield Tolkien personally observed in France during the Battle of the Somme (1916) in which one million were killed or wounded in the bloodiest battle in human history or to see the falling Nazgul beasts as raiding bombers in the World War II.⁵

Tolkien is reputed to be a stern catholic person, and he was the reason for his friend C.S.Lewis's (1898-1963) conversion of Christianity during their discussion of their works in the Inklings⁶. Tolkien wants his masterpiece to be another face and interpretation of his understanding of natural standards of life relying on his vision toward Christianity and the difference between what is sacred and what is profane. The novel does not depict mere struggle between good forces and evil ones. The scope and richness of Tolkien's encyclopedic knowledge of different fields as Norse mythology, Anglo-Saxon literature and medieval philology enabled him to give his invented world complete systems of language, history, anthropology and geography. These are some reasons that make *The Lord of the Rings* stands alone as the fundamental text of modern fantasy.⁷

But Christianity is not stated directly, and the absence of overt theology from *The Lord of the Rings* does not mean the absence of Christianity or a Christian viewpoint. This idea is clear not only does Tolkien shares the general Christian attitude, he also stresses some themes and ideas which are related to his religious views,

Great in the battle of the Valar when the world was young. His golden shield was uncovered, and lo! it shone like an image of the Sun, and the grass flamed into green about the white feet of his steed. For morning came, morning and a wind from the sea; and the darkness was removed, and the hosts of Mordor wailed, and terror took them, and they fled, and died, and the hoofs of wrath rode over them. And then all the host of Rohan burst into song, and they sang as they slew, for the joy of battle was on them, and the sound of their singing that was fair and terrible came even to the City.⁸

The reader of the novel is unable to find a direct Christian reference. Instead it is a world much closer to a pagan one. The word Valar is always repeated and written with capital V since The Valar is repeatedly called the God in reference to the real God. The Valars of Tolkien are undoubtedly angelic images for the real God, and they are burdened with unusual meanings not usually associated with angels as the control of universe and planets or the establishing and

guardianship of the newly born earth, and they are not related to definite names of angels from the bible or post-scriptural traditions.⁹

The idea of eternal struggle between the good and evil has preoccupied Tolkien's minds regardless of its manifestations or images or names. He has believed deeply in this dominating concept, and this is clearly manifested in Tolkien's letter to his son:

I sometimes feel appalled at the thought of the sum total of human misery all over the world at the present moment: the millions parted, fretting, wasting in unprofitable days – quite apart from torture, pain, death, bereavement, injustice. If anguish were visible, almost the whole of this benighted planet would be enveloped in a dense dark vapour, shrouded from the amazed vision of the heavens! And the products of it all will be mainly evil – historically considered. But the historical version is, of course, not the only one. All things and deeds have a value in themselves, apart from their 'causes' and 'effects'. No man can estimate what is really happening at the present sub specie aeternitatis. All we do know, and that to a large extent by direct experience, is that evil labours with vast power and perpetual success – in vain: preparing always only the soil for unexpected good to sprout in.¹⁰

Tolkien wants us to bear in minds that there is no absolute evil. He believes in the existence of both good and evil, and that there is no absolute prevalence of evil in real world. He believes in the goodness of every creature, and has a belief that there no rational being is entirely evil. In Tolkien's myth, Morgoth was banished before the creation of the physical world. Also, Sauron represents very close approach to the wholly evil will as is possible. He had gone astray throughout the way of all tyrants; starting well, almost on the level of desiring to arrange everything around him in accordance with his own mentality and wisdom. He still at first considered the well-being of other inhabitants of the earth. But he delved deeper than other human tyrants in their egotism and the thirst for dominance after being in origin an immortal angelic spirit.¹¹

The two dimensional world of Tolkien, the middle earth and upper world are in constant battles with archetypal powers of tyranny. Tolkien aspires to see God's providence every time and in every place but unnoticed because this is what man believes in. He draws on man's deep yearning for something believed in and lost. As man yearns for Eden, *The Fellowship of the Ring* longs for the world that existed before the evil lord Sauron had brought together the forces of evil to enslave all life in middle earth. Tolkien, through his imagination, tries to tell the story of the Gospels or at least to add the flavor of its sanctity on his tale because he does not write the trilogy as an allegory.¹²

In Tolkien's fantasy world, like in our real world, good seeks to protect and preserve while evil seeks to dominate and destroy. The characters know that behind the increasingly dark cloud of oppression lurks one who seeks vengeance for past humiliation. In several terrifying scenes, the evil Sauron is described as showing many diabolical characteristics that seem to reflect those

of the biblical Satan. On the other side, Frodo's fighting team believes that "it is useless to meet revenge with revenge: it will heal nothing." (*LoR: The Return of the Rings*, 188). They try their best to reach a compromise first and leave revenge as the last resort. This reflects the essence of Christian faith in which revenge is not an attribute of any divine religion. *The Lord of the Rings* is a tale of redemption in which the main characters overcome cowardly self-preservation to model heroic self-sacrifice. Their bravery mirrors the greatest heroic rescue of all time, when Christ humbled himself and became obedient to death on a cross.¹³

Tolkien refers to several purposes behind writing *The Lord of the Rings*: "To create a world for his languages, to please himself, to experiment with writing a long narrative, and to induce secondary belief."¹⁴ He also notes that, as literature, the story has a literary effect and purpose rather than being real history—despite his extreme efforts to portray it as real.

The Lord of the Rings embodies conventional or traditional evil, or at least as it concerns the nature of evil. Evil is in one scale, away of good, an opposite, and an absence of good, rather than a positive and original force in itself. This is what Elrond clarifies to his fellows: "nothing is evil in the beginning". (*LoR: The Fellowship of the Ring*, p.349). Because evil is the extreme point and the absence of man's humanity, evil can only underestimate living forms, as Treebeard tells Merry and Pippin; trolls and Orcs mock or parody Ents and Elves. Frodo affirms that view of the dark lord's limitation much later in Mordor, when he enslaved every creature walking within his kingdom. Whether crude imitation or mockery, the products of that unproductive word, such as Orcs, demonstrate the profoundly anti-creative nature of evil.¹⁵

Tolkien tries to give readers a deep and detailed theological view about the constant and perpetual struggle between good and evil. He also asserts that man feels in our world, a feeling of an increasing bleakness and gloom that can give rise to ennui and despondency. The sense of defeatism and despondency imposes on man's soul an impression and a recognition that evil is mightier and somehow more real than goodness. Of course, this is completely opposite the truth as many people, including Tolkien, see it. In all cases, evil cannot prevail over goodness because evil is just a repudiation of the essential truth and fundamental wisdom, that is God as mentioned in the Jewish, Christian and Islamic religions. In other words, light may be veiled or blocked or weakened to allow darkness to propagate, but it cannot be destroyed. The necessary action to do to redeem light is to take away whatever conceals it, that is Melkor's or Sauron's evil. The great and jovial thing is the moment of removing the clouds of evil that block light to flow again, illuminating the world as brightly as before.¹⁶

Tolkien never lets us forget that "no battle is finally won, no victory permanently achieved—not in this world at least—just as every triumph creates a host of new perplexities. The ending of *The Lord of the Rings* where the defeat of evil is muted by an enormous grief at the departure of Gandalf and Frodo and Bilbo and the elves—can be read without tears only by the flint-hearted."¹⁷

Tolkien, despite vicious criticism, attempts earnestly to opt on all those voices and draw a new map for Christian thinking and Christian acceptability. People, at that time, adhere to a new attitude towards their religion and faith. Tolkien senses that it is his fundamental task to guide them to the right path, which is quite clear in Gandalf's the Grey words, "Are the Men of Rohan still to be trusted, do you think? I said to Gwaihir, for the treason of Saruman had shaken my faith." (*LoR: The Fellowship of the Ring*, p.341). Gandalf, in other words, Tolkien, has misgivings about the people of Rohan's credibility and faith so that it is duplication to Tolkien's real world, where material culture is marked as the loss of faith, which is associated with demoralized minds like Saruman who degrades people and enslaves them,¹⁸ "Dotard! What is the House of Eorl but a thatched barn where brigands drink in the reek, and their brats roll on the floor among the dogs?" (*LoR: The Two Towers*, p. 122).

Modern people view the past as shadowy only because the present is inconsiderate, ignorant, and ungrateful. The import of the vision may seem remote from the material sunlit world, but it indicates a steep learning curve for the Hobbits toward a probable re-ennoblement of the modern life they represent.

Tolkien attempts to mythologize what is sacred to him through linking it with Norse, Greek and Celtic mythologies. The first reason is that, for Tolkien myth is not something totally groundless, there are certain archetypes common for all humanity. The second reason is that myths are more digestible for man in which history and religion march side by side:

The heart of Christianity is a myth which is also a fact . . . It happens—at a particular date, in a particular place, followed by definable historical consequences. . . . By becoming fact it does not cease to be myth: that is the miracle.¹⁹

The last resort for humanity becomes the middle earth. The place where most loyal creatures fortified and defended. The Battle of the Morannon or Battle of the Black Gate represents the final and crucial incident in which man existence depends on who is the winner, "The board is set, the pieces are moving. We come to it at last, the great battle of our time." (*LoR: The Return of the King*, 11). It will examine the depth of faith where there are only two paths;

victory for humanity or death for their case. Before the beginning of the battle Aragorn encourages his army:

Sons of Gondor, of Rohan, my brothers! I see in your eyes the same fear that would take the heart of me. A day may come when the courage of men fails, when we forsake our friends, and break all bonds of fellowship; but it is not this day! An hour of wolves, and shattered shields, when the Age of Men comes crashing down; but it is not this day! This day we fight! By all that you hold dear on this good earth, I bid you stand, Men of the West!.
(*LoR: The Return of the King*, 201).

The battle Tolkien refers to has its roots in Christianity and mythology as well, which, in fact, comes to represent that the western world faith is on the verge of collapse. Tolkien knows how to attract peoples' attention to the issue he wants to propagate and convince others of his attitudes. So he adheres to something that is acceptable to the majority of people, that is, religion and mythology. He relies on Norse mythology, specifically, Ragnarok battle, which is the last battle of good gods against evil ones, and a new world will be created out of the ashes of the old one. He links this incident to Christianity, and this is his goal, through another kind of fathomless conflict between the new trends, norms and ideologies that invaded his society, and the authentic principles of Christianity. Armageddon is the battle that is mentioned once in the Bible, and it is the final war to establish God's rule against his enemies all over the world.²⁰

Tolkien explains that "The *Lord of the Rings* is essentially about the relation of creation to sub-creation. Sub-creation is freed from the channels the Creator has already used."²¹ Tolkien's idea is not to introduce explicit theology to deliver his message. Sometimes, Fantasy is made out of simple, fundamental things from the primary world but primary matter is rearranged in secondary patterns. By defining fantasy as sub-creation with an inner consistency of reality, Tolkien makes it a reality apart from ours. Tolkien does not only expand on and rewrites the Genesis story but he also considers his myth a supplement to the Bible because writers of the Bible and of fairy stories become coworkers with God.

NOTES

¹ Richard Purtill, *Lord of the Elves and Eldis: Fantasy and Philosophy in C.S.Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien* (Michigan: Zondervan publishing house, 1974), p. 16.

² Sara Constantakis, *Epics for Students* (Detroit: Gale, 2011), p. 316.

³ Ibid, 318.

⁴ Michael N. Stanton, *Hobbits, Elves, and Wizards* (New York: Palgrave, 2011), p.50.

⁵ Michael D.C. Drout, ed., *J.R.R.Tolkien Encyclopedia: Scholarship and Critical Assessment* (New York: Routledge, 2007), p.7.

⁶ The Inklings were a group of Oxford University writers who met regularly in a pub in the city to discuss their interest in Fantasy. Most famous of their members were Tolkien, C.S. Lewis and Charles Williams. The group witnessed the discussion of the writers' masterpieces. Stephen E. Andrews and Nick Rennison, *100 Must- Read Fantasy Novels* (London: A& C Black, 2009), p.157.

⁷ Andrews and Rennison, p.152.

⁸ J.R.R.Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* (London: HarperCollinsPublishers, 2008), p. 57. (all subsequent quotations are taken from this edition and are referred parenthetically as (LoR) with page number.

⁹ Richard Sturch, *Four Christian Fantasists: A Study of the Fantastic Writings of George MacDonald, Charles Williams, C.S.Lewis and J.R.R.Tolkien* (Zurich: Walking Tree Publishers, 2001), p. 15.

¹⁰ Humphrey Carpenter, ed., *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien* (London: GEORGE ALLEN & UNWIN, 1978), p.87.

¹¹ Ibid, 259.

¹² Kurt Burner and Jim Ware, *Finding God in the Lord of the Rings* (Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, 2001), p. 47.

¹³ Ibid, 7.

¹⁴ Martha C. Sammons, *War of the Fantasy Worlds: C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien on Art and Imagination* (California: ABC- Clio, 2010), p.7.

¹⁵ Harold Bloom, *Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations: J.R.R.Tolkien's the Lord of the Rings* (New York: InfoBase Publishing, 2008), p. 30.

¹⁶ Drout, p.88.

¹⁷ Ralph C. Wood, *The Gospels According to Tolkien: Visions of the Kingdom in Middle-Earth* (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), p.17.

¹⁸ Wayne G. Hammond and Christina Scull, eds. *The Lord of the Rings 1954-2004: Scholarship in Honor of Richard E. Blackwelder* (Wisconsin: Marquette University Press, 2006), p. 217.

¹⁹ Bruner and Ware, p.117.

²⁰ Drout, p. 545.

²¹ . Sammons, p. 14.

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الخلاصة

إن ملحمة سيد الخواتم (١٩٥٤) للكاتب تولكين هي إحدى أكثر العوالم السردية والخيالية المعقدة التي تتطوي على بنية فريدة حيث مزجت مختلف الثقافات، مثل الأساطير الاسكندنافية، الأدب الانكلو ساكسوني و لغات العصور الوسطى. لا تحاول ثلاثية سيد الخواتم إن تفرض معايير معينة أو قواعد معينة على عقول القراء لكنها تقدم تفسيراً جديداً للصراع الأزلي بين معسكر الحرية، القداسة و المسيحية و بين قوى الظلم، و التدنيس و الهرطقة. أن ثلاثية تولكين هي اختبار متعمق لتحمل الإنسانية و صراعها ضد القيم و المعايير و الأخلاق المتغيرة التي تحدث التقلبات الفكرية و الثقافية التي أملت بالإنسان نتيجة الكوارث التي إصابته و خاصة الحروب.

تطورت قصة سيد الخواتم تاريخياً و يربط الراوي تاريخ الخاتم عند بداية الجزء الأول (رفقة الخاتم)، و هي ما يحتاجه القراء من معلومات أولية عن الرواية لفهم الحاجة الملحة لبدأ رحلة الخاتم. بدأت الأحداث من هذه النقطة بالتتابع، من وصول كندالف لمنطقة شاير في بداية الجزء الأول إلى عودة سام و فرودو في نهاية الجزء الأخير. و هناك مشهد وحيد في الثلاثية كان خارج الترتيب الزمني: و هو المشهد الافتتاحي لجزء (عودة الملك). شهد هذا المشهد قيام الهوبت سميكل بقتل صديقه للحصول على الخاتم و قوته، الا ان هذا المخلوق (كولوم) انحدر إلى حال يرثى لها ليكون هاجسه الوحيد هو الخاتم.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الخاتم، التدنيس، الأرض الوسطى و القداسة و تولكين.