

April 2017

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### Recommended Citation

Friedman, Sophia (2017) "Religion and Morality in Tolkien's The Hobbit," *Scholarly Undergraduate Research Journal at Clark*: Vol. 3 , Article 2.  
Available at: <https://commons.clarku.edu/surj/vol3/iss1/2>

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# Religion and Morality in Tolkien's *The Hobbit*

Sophia Friedman '16 | Comparative Literature



## ABSTRACT

Much research has been done on J. R. R. Tolkien's works, but *The Hobbit* has been overlooked. Because of the time in his life that it was written, this particular novel can offer unique insight into the questions of religion in Middle Earth that have been continuously raised. The first half of this essay will seek to answer these questions. Though most scholars look for an allegorical representation of the author's Catholic faith in the novel, it is not there. Instead, Tolkien found spirituality in the process of writing and in creating a believable Secondary World. Rather than trying to convert his readers to Christianity like some of his contemporaries, Tolkien asked his readers something more foundational: to practice spiritual growth by choosing good over evil. Through this plea and because of historical contexts, he used his didactic novel to promote moral absolutism simultaneously with multiculturalism. The second part of this paper delves into the contentious battle between Tolkien and his narrator, a character who agrees with Tolkien's views on moral absolutism, but proves to discourage multiculturalism. The narrator flatly and irresponsibly organizes the spectrum of characters into a Good/Evil binary, to Tolkien's displeasure. Though this article lays the groundwork, more scholarship is warranted on this novel.

## INTRODUCTION

John Ronald Reuel Tolkien's Middle Earth started as a few poems, and grew to encompass an entire universe, becoming a cultural fixture in his native England and throughout the world as he had intended. Because of the books' popularity, many critics have dismissed them as having no real literary value. For a time, the fantasy genre also precluded many scholars from taking them seriously. Yet, as academia warmed to Tolkien's work, *The Hobbit* remains understudied, and a dearth of academic discourse continues to surround it. Dismissed as children's fiction, the story's importance is often overshadowed by Tolkien's more "adult" works. Of course, the novel is important to understanding Tolkien and the creation of Middle Earth. Because *The Hobbit* was written before Tolkien's narrative style was fully developed, it can offer important insight into the ongoing debates

of religious content in his longer works. The supposedly young target audience for this novel is both a boon and a curse to scholars. In one sense, it clarifies many of Tolkien's motives, yet in another it obfuscates his morals. This essay, in trying to clarify the questions of religion and morality in Tolkien's work, has two sections. The first explores the motivation behind the writing of the novel and the inherent Catholicism that suffuses it. The work is inextricable from the author's religion, though the relationship between the novel and Christianity is complex. The second section will explore morality in the work through the lens of the unreliable and absolutist narrator. *The Hobbit* is an intrinsically Catholic book in which Tolkien's narrator imposes his morally absolutist views on this world in opposition to some of Tolkien's own views. Together, these parts will create an overall understanding of the role of the author's religion in his Middle

Earth novels.

## PART ONE

Scholars have scoured Tolkien's work for religious symbolism. Many have ascribed metaphorical meaning to morsels from the trilogy, often overlooking the act of writing itself as a spiritual undertaking. The author spent his life as a devout Catholic, never wavering from his faith. His motivation was not to convert his readers. He instead intended to create a "mirror of the national soul,"<sup>1</sup> a national epic that would reflect and crystalize the morals of the British Empire. However, this motivation was not a fully realized idea when he wrote *The Hobbit*. Because of the time in his life that he wrote it and its intended readership, the novel does not so much "mirror" contemporary morals, as try to mold them. His novel is written with a Catholic world view, and thus defines the notions of good and evil through that lens.

Rather than trying to convert his Protestant-majority country, Tolkien presents his readers with a choice between good and evil, hoping that their choice will prompt spiritual growth in an increasingly secular and difficult world. The novel is innately Christian, even if its purpose was more fundamental than conversion.

### Why *The Hobbit*?

Being one of the most popular authors in the second half of the twentieth-century, Tolkien has garnered much critical attention, mostly in the past few decades. The *legendarium*, his term for writings about Middle Earth,<sup>2</sup> has been labeled both Christian and secular, with much ink being spilled on each side of the debate. His shorter works of fiction, *Leaf by Niggle* for example, accumulate less controversy because of the all but explicit Christian symbolism. *The Hobbit* is unique from these shorter works. It was the first installment of his *legendarium* and is, by virtue of being first, quite different from the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. A small, critical vacuum exists around this novel, even in relating it to his later work.

The novel was written at a time in the author's life when his motives had not yet concretized. J. R. R. Tolkien moved to Birmingham from South Africa when he was a child.<sup>3</sup> His love for England blossomed over decades as he fought for her in World War One and then became a professor of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford.<sup>4</sup> In his studies and his personal reading, he admired the longstanding mythology of the Greeks, the Norse, and the Germans. He very much regretted that England had no great

mythology of its own that could preserve her "cultural identity."<sup>5</sup> He dismissed the Arthurian legends as tied to "the soil of Britain but not with [the] English" and strove to create his own that he could dedicate "to England; to my country."<sup>6</sup> When he penned *The Hobbit* in the late 1930's, this idea had not yet crystalized in his mind. Though the workings of the concept were still present, he was instead preoccupied with the idea of fairy stories, on which he gave a seminal lecture in 1939. *The Hobbit* is a mixture of both: a fairy story that creates a moral for its readers, and a mythology that works to "reflect basic behavioral structures related to values, morals or attitudes."<sup>7</sup> Because it was more didactic and came so long before Middle Earth was expanded, the work reflects England's secular morality and actively hones it into a more explicitly Catholic one. The novel guides its readers to moral truths with a heavier hand than Tolkien's other works.

Tolkien's four children were all under the age of thirteen when he wrote *The Hobbit*. This was not new for them: their father often made up both oral and written stories.<sup>8</sup> His children were his "immediate audience"<sup>9</sup> and the work contains effective attempts at humor and silliness to amuse them. In the opening chapter, a tangential story illustrates the creation of the game of golf, which supposedly started when King Golfimbul's head was knocked off in a battle, "sailed a hundred yards through the air and went down a rabbit hole."<sup>10</sup> This comical aspect, called "Hobbitry"<sup>11</sup> by Tolkien's friend C. S. Lewis, was another deterrent for the critical examination of the novel. The reluctance

to take the novel seriously was further compounded by the fact that the narrative is explicitly moralizing in a way that many adults and even children find patronizing. The employment of the narrator as a character, which will be much more fully discussed in Section Two, is one notable example. The novel's overtly didactic qualities, while extremely important for this essay, were another reason that it was overlooked so often.

### Writing as a Christian Act

The moral paradigm that Tolkien propagates to his young audience is one that is based in Christian values. The actual writing of the novel was, for Tolkien, inherently spiritual as every act in his life was. His practice of religion with a conviction akin to his mother's was paramount to him. Tolkien's mother Mabel was a convert to Roman Catholicism. This left her alone, shunned by her presumably Protestant family. Poverty contributed to her early death in 1904, after which Tolkien and his brother were then left in the care of a Catholic priest, Father Francis Xavier Morgan for nine years. They each considered F. Morgan tantamount to their actual father, who had died in South Africa.<sup>12</sup> Tolkien believed his mother to have been a martyr for Catholicism, and his continued devotion to the faith was his way of honoring the sacrifice that she had made for him and his brother. It was omnipresent in his life, and his writing was no exception. The content of the book and the ethos of the characters are not the only elements that make it so. He never wavered from it and was passionate about converting his

wife Edith and raising Catholic children.<sup>13</sup>

One way that this notion was manifested was in the language he used to discuss the creation and inspiration for Middle Earth. Tolkien's often repeated story about the first line of *The Hobbit* is an epitomizing example. One summer, as he sat in his office grading exams, he happened upon a blank page. On it, he wrote the first sentence: "In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit."<sup>14</sup> He noted that he had "never heard or used the word before."<sup>15</sup> Many other writers would take credit for their own creativity. Tolkien habitually sidestepped it, instead attributing it to a higher power. This theme of "divine source" is apparent in the various ways that he talks about inspiration: "The Other Power then took over: the Writer of the Story (by which I do not mean myself)."<sup>16</sup> He believed the legendarium was "*revealed* to him over time"<sup>17</sup> [emphasis added]. The motif of a divine muse has a notable precursor that he would certainly have been familiar with: St. John and the *Book of Revelations*. This is not to say that Tolkien thought of himself as a saint, but only to highlight a possible predisposition to his understanding of shared authorship with God. His religious background facilitated the idea that he was not Middle Earth's singular father: "Tolkien believed that he serves as a poet-recipient of God's secondary myths, that he was a *recorder* rather than an *inventor*" [emphasis added].<sup>18</sup> Because he is not the 'inventor,' transcribing God's, or 'The Other Power's,' word is a devotional act. To write down the stories from Middle Earth is an interaction

between Tolkien and his God.

Tolkien not only believed the act of writing and inspiration to be attributed to God, but he also related his creation of a universe, an act of "sub-creation," to God's creation of the real universe, the "Primary Creation."<sup>19</sup> He wished to employ sub-creation to form a Secondary World that the reader's mind could enter and that would feel real "while you are, as it were, inside."<sup>20</sup> His writing was not simply the creation of an independent three hundred-page novel, but instead an entire universe, along with twelve accompanying volumes of history and mythology. This extensive fictional history, though it had not been put to paper when *The Hobbit* was written, is palpably felt by his reader. In having his novel enchant the reader, Tolkien "as Secondary Creator imitates God as the Primary Creator."<sup>21</sup> Though Middle Earth's genesis took much more than six days, there is a relationship between the origin stories of Middle Earth and the Primary World. Again, Tolkien never attempted to deify himself, but he saw a relationship between his creation of a world and his God's. He understood the immense responsibility, and took his emulation of God's actions seriously. To achieve this "imitation," he needed constant reinforcement of verisimilitude.

For him, the test of whether or not sub-creation had been achieved was "involuntary [rather than willing] suspension of disbelief."<sup>22</sup> The constant striving towards this verisimilitude is palpable in *The Hobbit*: the story often implies a rich cultural background that the reader might assume has been left out for the

sake of brevity. In one instance, Bilbo cries "escaping goblins to be caught by wolves!"<sup>23</sup> According to the narrator, this phrase "became a proverb, though now we say 'out of the frying pan into the fire.'" Quotes like these give a sense of shared time and heritage between the Primary World and Tolkien's sub-creation. Persistent insinuations of verisimilitude in his fantasy novel are the foundations of successful sub-creation. Nicholas Boyle, quoted by Thomas W. Smith, qualified the incessant emphasis on past ages, or, "[the] portrayal of the experience of coming after a period in which a unified system of life and belief held sway, of stumbling across survivals of memories or past meanings" as tangible and vital to the story itself.<sup>24</sup> While adding to a sense of realism, this 'portrayal' of Bilbo's contemporary age as coming after a more glorious or harmonious one also evokes a sense of "longing for the security of imperial Christendom"<sup>25</sup> that plagued many of Tolkien's contemporary Roman Catholics, though not his Anglican peers. Emphasis on past times is a persistent theme for the author. As part of the lost generation that fought in the First World War, his disdain for modernism was well documented, and it is no surprise that he employs it here. This theme serves another purpose in his novels as evidence for the verisimilitude of his fictional universe. Few fantasy worlds are as thoroughly equipped with historical backgrounds as Middle Earth.

The final means by which Tolkien understood his writing, or sub-creation, as an act in God's service was through the process of his reader's "Recovery." Bradley

J. Birzer summarized the idea: “a new sense of wonder about things we have taken for granted or which have become commonplace.”<sup>26</sup> The ‘Recovery’ of sight might restore an adult’s view of reality to one as awe-struck as a child’s. R. J. Reilly claims that fantasy and ‘Recovery’ can be an antidote for the egotistical to recover their sense of humility.<sup>27</sup> Yet, parts of Tolkien’s motivations are even less contrived than changing his readers’ psyches. He hopes that the beauty of life in Middle Earth will inspire his readers to find the beauty in God’s Primary creation. His desire is that his works will become a prayer that highlights the work of the original Creator, prompting a casual reader to revel in nature. Not only does a successful sub-creation mirror Primary creation, but it also prompts readers to find a new joy in the Primary World.

### Is there religion in the novel? Does it matter?

As evidenced above, the act of writing the legendarium was in itself a Christian act. For a man so devout, there was no way to separate writing from the sense of duty to God that pervaded his life. He not only used writing to honor God, but he felt that the process of writing brought him closer to Him. However, multitudes of scholars have still attempted to find representations of religion in his works. Patricia Meyer Spacks asserts that Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* trilogy takes place in a “pre-religious age,” and she grasps at details hoping to prove that there is fodder in Middle Earth for an organized religion to come to fruition later.<sup>28</sup> This sort of investigation seems

inconsequential. Rather than looking for “a one to one relationship between his characters, events, or plot devices, on the one hand, and his beliefs on the other,” critics should seek to understand how a Catholic author might perceive the world.<sup>29</sup> Smith asserts that religious people, specifically Christians, “see reality through a specific lens.”<sup>30</sup> It is this “lens” that should be scrutinized to understand *The Hobbit*’s relationship to religion. Tolkien himself disliked religious symbolism that was too overt; he gave the Arthurian legends as one such example. In a 1951 letter to Milton Waldman, Tolkien wrote: “I dislike Allegory – the conscious and intentional allegory.”<sup>31</sup> He made it clear that delicacy was important in such works, that “myth and fairy story must, as all art, reflect and contain in solution, elements of moral and religious truth (or error), but not explicit[ly].”<sup>32</sup> A lack of explicit allegory also distinguished him from his contemporaries.

Tolkien’s success as a writer hinged on this point and is most visible when juxtaposed against one of his colleagues: C. S. Lewis, who was also a professor at Oxford where he and Tolkien shared a long and complicated friendship. He was known for his *Chronicles of Narnia* series, which rely heavily on Christian imagery. Though they were both Christian, Lewis was Protestant, a point that caused great contention between them. Spacks imputes Tolkien’s “cultish” following and greater relative success to the subtlety of his “apparent moral purpose.”<sup>33</sup> On the other side, Lewis always wrote with “the clear and specific purpose of a Christian apologist,” “the intent of demonstrating the

engulfing power of Christianity,” and finally the goal of the “conversion of [his] readers.”<sup>34</sup> She notes that though he would have liked to convert non-Christians, most of his “primary referents are Christian,”<sup>35</sup> which gives the sense that only the Elect can grasp his true message. Catholicism, as Tolkien interprets it, puts less emphasis on exclusivity, which may be one reason that Tolkien’s works found a greater fan base.

As a Catholic, Tolkien took an entirely different and more demotic approach. F. Morgan, Tolkien’s guardian, was a priest at the Birmingham Oratory and studied under its founder, John Henry Newman. Tolkien was consequently well versed in his ideas. One of Newman’s cardinal lessons was to acknowledge that “holiness and a supernatural destiny is [sic] God’s intention for everyone, Christians and non-Christians alike.”<sup>36</sup> Thus, the characters of Tolkien’s literature need not be Christian themselves to be holy. They can be used in God’s service regardless of a lack of baptism in the novel. Under this principle, there is also no requirement for references to worship or sacraments in the work. There need be no sacred rituals in *The Hobbit* for the preeminence of Tolkien’s God to shine through. Tolkien and Newman both recognized “the potential for holiness of the ordinary person doing ordinary things.”<sup>37</sup> Tolkien’s readers also do not need to be Christian to absorb his opinion on morality from the novel.

### Tolkien’s Motivations

Despite the dearth of explicit Catholicism, Tolkien believed that the novel can still

do his God's work, just as Newman would have expected. Tolkien sets up a universe much like the one that he experiences in Primary Creation. The characters each act according to their free will, not even the narrator has a say in the outcome. Spacks notes that this freedom is another instance of verisimilitude for Tolkien: "freedom of the will implies a structured universe, a universe like the Christian one in that only through the submission to the Good can true freedom be attained."<sup>38</sup> In the closing pages of the novel, Gandalf makes that explicitly clear to the hobbit: "Surely you don't disbelieve the prophecies, because you had a hand in bringing them about yourself?"<sup>39</sup> That freedom to act is more important than Bilbo recognizes; he has not spent time contemplating it. In *The Hobbit*, unlike *The Lord of the Rings*, the presence of this choice between good and evil is not expressed explicitly, mostly by fault of the narrator. Though it still exists for them, *The Hobbit's* characters are less aware of this choice for themselves than those in his "adult" fiction. The narration makes clear distinctions between the "good" side and the "bad" side, with characters appearing firmly committed to one or the other. However, the apparent lack of this choice for *The Hobbit's* characters, the lack of dynamism, is an illusion. As Part Two will discuss, by hiding the choice, the narrator seeks to strengthen his moralization of the characters. Tolkien implicitly asks his readers to make this choice for themselves.

The characters in *The Hobbit*, just like those living in the Primary world, can choose between good and evil. The

discussion of good and evil's definitions will be reserved for Part Two, but it is the existence of the choice itself that is pertinent here. The struggle to make this choice is essential to the understanding of the message that the author wishes to impart on his readers. In his later fiction, this choice is evident to the characters themselves. Sam, a hobbit in the trilogy, comes to understand "that heroism, in legend and in fact, consists of making repeatedly the choice of good."<sup>40</sup> That choice is Tolkien's ultimate lesson for his readers because "in this world as in the Christian one, the result of repeated choices of good is the spiritual growth of the chooser."<sup>41</sup> Tolkien does not share C. S. Lewis' motivation to convert his readers to Christianity and instead asks something more foundational. By writing novels that illuminate the "perennial Christian struggle between good and evil ... [Tolkien hopes to enroll] his readers on the side of good."<sup>42</sup> Again, *The Hobbit* is neglected by academics. It is obviously pedagogic: the reader is invited to experience spiritual growth in tandem with Tolkien's characters. However, most scholars fail to see this particular choice between good and evil in the work. The capacity for growth is present in *The Hobbit*, but its availability is limited to only those characters on the 'good' side. Tolkien's aspiration to catalyze spiritual growth in his readers is consistent throughout his career as an author.

At the end of the novel, all is well for those characters on the 'good' side. However, Middle Earth has not become an Eden: the potential for evil still exists in the universe. No

side has won irrevocably, and the implication is that evil and good will struggle forever, like yin and yang. Christopher Garbowski asserts that this view is decidedly anti-utopian: "in the context of a twentieth century that wrought great evil in the name of various utopias, that is saying not a little."<sup>43</sup> This lack of final judgment and reckoning is also notable for both a Christian novel and a fairy story. The twofold purpose is thus extremely important. First, it adds to a sense of verisimilitude, which has previously been established as having great importance. It allows the readers to identify with the characters, and induces 'Recovery' in the service of Tolkien's God. The second reason is spiritual growth. In Middle Earth, this choice is repetitive; generations on from Bilbo, the same opportunities for choice will arise. For the characters specifically, it is a reminder that one is never done. In other words, there is endless potential for spiritual growth in each person.

Though each reader is expected to seriously undertake the prospect of spiritual growth, that journey is not exactly open-ended. Tolkien had specific intentions for the moral progress of his readers, emphasizing qualities he found appealing and demonizing others. He was a moral absolutist, believing that his moral "truth is universal"<sup>44</sup> and should be applicable to everyone in both the Primary Creation and sub-creations. Tolkien, quoted by Leslie A. Donovan, noted that "frightful evil can and does arise from an apparently good root, the desire to benefit the world and others."<sup>45</sup> This quote exemplifies his disap-

proval of relativism and denial that conflicting views can have relative merit. Given his unshakable belief in the reality to benefit the world and others.<sup>45</sup> This quote exemplifies his disapproval of relativism and denial that conflicting views can have relative merit. Given his unshakable belief in the reality of his God, Tolkien's view is not surprising. However, his subtle pursuit of moral absolutism does not negate his desire for either the real world or Middle Earth to remain Catholic.

Like many Roman Catholics of his time, the early decades of the twentieth century were difficult for him. Historically, the erosion of the British Empire's power coincided with "rising nationalism uncomfortably close in Ireland, Scotland, and Wales."<sup>46</sup> T. S. Eliot, another British Roman Catholic, published his poem, *The Waste Land*, in 1922 as an overt display of his similar fears. He "saw the disintegration of [the British] empire as decay, rather than the growth of nationalism as progress."<sup>47</sup> Eliot grieves "the end of a projected Roman paradigm of imperial universality: the ideal of limitless linguistic cultural heterogeneity without national frontiers."<sup>48</sup> He makes it clear that the antidote, or rather the panacea, to rising nationalism is a political system that closely mimics the tolerance of the Holy Roman Empire. Undoubtedly, Tolkien agreed. In a 1967 letter, he wrote that the ending of his trilogy is "like [the] reestablishment of an effective Holy Roman Empire,"<sup>49</sup> a time known for its diversity of ethnic groups uniting under Roman Catholicism. In an essay titled *Nationalism*, he mentions, "Christianity rejoices at the mixture of races."<sup>50</sup> The

harmony of species in his works reflects this coveted paradigm. Bilbo lives among the dwarves for some time, but they never attempt to change him, instead accepting him for who he is.<sup>51</sup>

Birzer quotes one of Tolkien's contemporaries who stated that the detrimental effects of nationalism could be genocide or enslavement of those "deemed inferior."<sup>52</sup> Although his views were morally absolute, Tolkien and other Roman Catholics extolled multiculturalism, probably because of their favorable view of the Holy Roman Empire. Thomas W. Smith eloquently explained Tolkien's emphasis in his prose: "If Tolkien's characters discover anything on their quests, it is that their own customs and ways of thought come from long gone and often foreign cultures that existed for the most part beyond their awareness. All this is to say that for Tolkien tradition can be a gift that opens us to the plurality of the world."<sup>53</sup> This lionization is one reason that so many coexisting species within Middle Earth have their own unique and sumptuous cultures, many of which are only hinted at in *The Hobbit*.

The dwarves are again a good example of applauding pluralism. Tolkien affectionately based their "warlike passions," language, diaspora, and "love of artefact [sic]" on medieval Jews.<sup>54</sup> He repeatedly denounced anti-Semitism and condemned a German publisher for inquiring into his heritage. He wrote in a 1938 letter: "if I am to understand that you are enquiring whether I am of Jewish origin, I can only reply that I regret that I appear to have no ancestors of that gifted people."<sup>55</sup> Despite the flaws of the

dwarves in *The Hobbit*, Tolkien celebrated their individuality from the other Middle Earth species, just as he did in the Primary World.

## Conclusion

Tolkien's enduring popularity as an author can be mostly attributed to the subtlety and simplicity of his motives. He used his fiction to create the world that he wanted to see: "For Tolkien, mythology was a profound tool for shaping the goals, world-views, and actions of men."<sup>56</sup> As a Catholic, he hoped that his novels would inspire his readers to follow a distilled version of Christianity: choosing good over evil, a process of spiritual growth. Given the historical context for his views, a time when tradition and empire seemed to be threatened, it is not surprising that Tolkien's promotion of moral absolutism via Catholicism and eulogizing multiculturalism are present in his novels. *The Hobbit*, though understudied, is an exemplary model. However, Part Two will detail how Tolkien's motivations are at odds with his commitment to successful sub-creation.

## PART TWO

As previously discussed, a sense of verisimilitude in the novel is essential and serves many functions, both for the author and the reader. In the expansion of Middle Earth, Tolkien attempted to create a realistic fantasy universe in which any reader could be fully immersed. Along the journey, the hobbit Bilbo meets characters of a variety of different species. The narrator, in his own right, seems less enthusiastic about Tolkien's love of plurality. Regardless, he assigns

them to either side of a static binary, good or evil, based on views of Catholicism. The narrator shares Tolkien's view of moral absolutism and neatly organizes the Middle Earth species into his paradigm; he moralizes all the characters with his prose, despite the fact that few characters can objectively fit wholly onto one side or the other. He treats those on opposite sides of his arbitrary binary very differently. Tolkien's world was so realistically created that the moralizing of the narrator does not fit the author's story. In Middle Earth, as in the Primary World, superimposing moral absolutism over a variety of unique species is not successful.

### The Narrator

Tolkien took great pride in his ability to create a successful Secondary World, as evidenced by his continued expansion upon it until his death. In *The Hobbit*, the reader experiences everything in Middle Earth through the bizarre and limited lens of the narrator. The novel follows Bilbo Baggins and could easily have been from his first-person perspective. However, Tolkien includes a narrator whose perceptions and opinions are inextricable from the story; the reader is dependent on his information, regardless of reliability. His existence has been the cause of much of Tolkien's regret about the novel. In an unsent 1959 letter, he noted that when he wrote the novel, he had still been operating under the misguided notion that children and fairy stories were linked, an idea that precipitated the presence of the narrator. He states: "It had some unfortunate effects on the mode of expression and narrative method, which if I had

not been rushed, I should have corrected."<sup>57</sup> The presence of the narrator is simply another reason that the work had not been taken seriously by critics.

Jane Chance Nitzsche is one of the only scholars who has examined the inclusion of the narrator. She draws parallels between *The Hobbit* and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, in which "Chaucer the poet creat[es] the character of Chaucer the pilgrim."<sup>58</sup> Just as in that novel, *The Hobbit's* narrator becomes an independent character, telling the story to a presumably younger audience. He, as any character in the book, must be examined for his biases. Once they are understood, the reader can understand his filtering effect on the story. Nitzsche describes him as "arrogant, unimaginative, and very 'adult.'"<sup>59</sup> There is ample evidence throughout the story of his belittling of both the reader and Bilbo. When recounting Bilbo's taunting of the giant spiders, the narrator sneers that Bilbo's rhyme is "not very good."<sup>60</sup> He also has a habit of patronizingly trying to reassure his audience that the outcome will not be too upsetting. He clearly feels a sense of stewardship over his readers, trying to mitigate their emotional responses. When suspense in the story builds, he is quick to diffuse it: "luckily for him that was not true, as you shall see."<sup>61</sup> He takes this job seriously, "prid[ing] himself on his superior wisdom and status as an adult."<sup>62</sup> He hopes to be a guide for the readers, earning their trust by protecting them from uncomfortable emotions while also sculpting their opinions into those that mirror his own.

So what are his opinions?

As Nitzsche discerns, he is a social conformist.<sup>63</sup> He does not like disturbances, as evidenced by his dwelling on the poor treatment of Bilbo's door by Gandalf.<sup>64</sup> He "dislikes signs of immaturity,"<sup>65</sup> and denounces the Tooks as "not entirely hobbitlike," nor "respectable."<sup>66</sup> He addresses his readers as though they are the same as him, "folk like you and me,"<sup>67</sup> and condemns anything out of the ordinary or "abnormal."<sup>68</sup> Tolkien reveled in the plurality and distinctiveness of Middle Earth's creatures; the narrator scorns them. His preference is obviously for the Baggins family, rather than the adventurous Tooks, presumably because they, like him, more closely resemble the late Victorian English of Tolkien's childhood.<sup>69</sup> Just like the Baggins side, he is slightly xenophobic, relishing the sameness of the Shire people. Although Bilbo learns to appreciate the differences in his multicultural world, the narrator never acquiesces. He laments Bilbo's sustained friendship with elves, wizards, and dwarves because it came at the price of his respectability.<sup>70</sup>

This difference of opinion with the author creates tension between the two men. The narrator's constant disapproval is often at odds with Tolkien's thoughts. Nitzsche eloquently summarizes the relationship in which the narrator acts "as a critic who denies the artist's intention by misunderstanding the story and its characters[;] the narrator also personifies the critic ... against whom Tolkien, as heroic defender of the poem of a work of art, must battle."<sup>71</sup> Tolkien's later comments about wishing that he could eliminate the narrator



are part of this “battle.” She is writing here about their differing views on plurality. Tolkien of course celebrated it, while the narrator denigrates it. The two do share similar absolute views on morality, yet they differ again in how they like to present them. Tolkien’s Secondary World creates multiple species that successfully interact, despite moral differences. His organic universe mimics the Primary World so realistically because many unique characters do not abide by the same standards of good and evil. Tolkien did not intend for his work to be explicitly Catholic; he only hoped for the spiritual growth of his readers. The narrator would prefer every character to comply with the Catholic principals of good and evil. His intention is to distill the complex morality of the work down into a strict binary. He takes the authority to make those moralizing simplifications.

### Evil

The narrator takes liberties with the pedagogy of the novel, but he ultimately agrees with Tolkien about the nature of good and evil, the roots of which come from Christian ideas of virtue and sin. That there is an elemental distinction between the good and evil characters is highlighted in the beginning of Bilbo’s journey. The narrator tells his readers that,

*“Dwarves had not passed that was for many years, but Gandalf had, and he knew how evil and danger had grown and thriven in the Wild, since the dragons had driven men from the lands, and the goblins had spread in secret after the battle of the Mines of Moria. Even good plans of wise wizards like Gandalf and of good*

*friends like Elrond go astray sometimes.”<sup>72</sup>*

This quotation is the first of many that sorts species into opposing sides. The same lines are drawn during the Battle of Five Armies: elves, hobbit, wizard, dwarves, eagles, men, and Beorn all unite against an army of goblins and Wargs. However, the ‘evil’ side of this battle does not include various other creatures that Bilbo comes into contact with. Trolls, giant spiders, Gollum, and the dragon Smaug are also, according to the narrator, classified under this heading.

When dividing these thirteen species, the one of most tangible qualifying factors for ‘evil’ is the threat to eat Bilbo and his allies. The narrator wishes to make this characteristic a litmus test for categorization. However, this Secondary World echoes the Primary, where nothing is ever as black or white as one might hope. Though the eagles later fight on his side of the Battle, Bilbo initially fears that they will eat him and the dwarves. In the face of this ambiguity, the narrator looks to minimize Bilbo’s concerns. Bilbo compares himself to a “piece of bacon” about to be cooked, then wonders “what other nonsense he had been saying, and if the eagle would think it rude.” The narrator pejoratively tells his readers: “you ought not to be rude to an eagle,”<sup>73</sup> implying that Bilbo should stop being nonsensical and start thinking rationally.

Bilbo’s fear is not unfounded. The narrator and other characters often compare Bilbo to a rabbit. Bilbo himself makes the comparison only a page before the eagles bring his troupe of rabbits and hares to cook for dinner.<sup>74</sup>

The implication here is that Bilbo and his friends would indeed have been in danger of being eaten if Gandalf had not known the Lord of the Eagles, though the narrator would not like to dwell on that fact. This is the first of many instances that the narrator attempts to neatly fit an ambiguous and morally dynamic species into a condensed idea of ‘good.’ It is the narrator’s folly to try to moralize the eating habits of non-anthropomorphized beings. As in the Primary World, no animal could be deemed selfish or evil for eating their prey. To call Wargs “evil wolves,”<sup>75</sup> or spiders “brutes”<sup>76</sup> is markedly unfair. Feeding on their natural quarry should not be moralizing. The narrator’s overlay of these ideas obfuscated the author’s nuanced world.

Another species unnecessarily vilified is the goblins. They threaten to eat the dwarves, and are thus classified as ‘evil.’ They are flatly labeled as “cruel, wicked and bad-hearted.”<sup>77</sup> All of these qualifiers come from the narrator. By labeling them this way, he has negated all chance for them to change. In his view, they are fixed creatures and their evil is biological and therefore unchangeable. From the narrator’s lens, there is no choice in the matter and therefore they show no capability for spiritual growth.

The goblins do not deserve such harsh treatment from an overly zealous narrator. The dwarves were discovered by the goblins in their cave, their “Front Porch,”<sup>78</sup> with a sword that had a history of being used against them. They dislike Thorin’s people specifically because of a war, not because they hate all dwarves. The Great Goblin calls them “thieves” and “murderers,”<sup>79</sup>

neither of which are untrue; the dwarves even kill him later. It is no wonder that they were aggressive towards Thorin's group. When the dwarves had intruded onto Bilbo's home, the narrator made sure to comment on what a rude imposition they were. Yet here, when Thorin simply states his name, the narrator notices it and cheers him: "it was merely a polite nothing."<sup>80</sup> Though goblins who systematically enslave men are not saints, the narrator here takes liberties with his choices. In this situation their aggression is more than justified. However, the casual reader would perceive them as lacking gradation. Tolkien crafted this species with intelligence and a remarkable culture that the narrator wholly dismisses in the name of flat moralization for his audience.

The narrator's intimation that the evilness of the goblins is immutable is also applicable to the other species that he reviles. He notes that Smaug has a "wicked and wily heart"<sup>81</sup> as well. Smaug's preeminent crime is greed. In almost all circumstances, the spectrum of good and evil is, at its core, a measure of selfishness. However, more than just the goblins and Wargs descend on the mountain when they discover that Smaug is dead: the elves and men also intend to share in the bounty. However, the narrator, again making gross oversimplifications, offers redemption for greed only to those that he deems to be 'good,' and thus deserving. This action is in direct opposition with the Catholic tenet of loving thy enemies and offering compassion. The narrator's selectivity is not in keeping with Tolkien's religion. This can be most clearly illustrated in the case

of Thorin.

### Good

The rightful King under the Mountain, Thorin Oakenshield, lives with a tendency towards greed. One of the Thorin's oddest complaints about Smaug is that he has the treasure, but refuses stubbornly to use it: "[dragons] never enjoy a brass ring of it."<sup>82</sup> The narrator knows that the dwarves also have a predisposition toward avarice, and resents them for it. He sees it as a moral system that conflicts with his own absolute views. Two personified moral systems confront each other when Bard threatens Thorin for gold. The narrator, hoping to avoid any discussion of a world where morals might be relative, sidesteps explication of the two sides. He later echoes Thorin's words about Smaug, trying to highlight the hypocrisy: "when the heart of a dwarf, even the most respectable, is wakened by gold and by jewels ... he may become fierce."<sup>83</sup> He resents their differences and flaws, two characteristics that he feels should have no part in creatures on the 'good' side. Having been sorted by the narrator onto the 'good' side, Thorin is presented with an opportunity for absolution from this sin. In his verisimilar world, Tolkien believes that every person should have an opportunity for spiritual growth. Though the narrator dislikes the dwarf, he cannot deny this fact. He begrudgingly recounts his final realization that "if more of us valued food and cheer and song above hoarded gold, it would be a merrier world."<sup>84</sup> Because of his dislike of dwarves and their dissimilarity from the familiar hobbits, the narrator is "not

prepared for Thorin's charitable retraction at the moment of his death."<sup>85</sup>

It is in Thorin's last words that the narrator and Tolkien find common ground and can together praise him for simply choosing 'good' over 'bad.' Thorin's ultimate recognition does nothing to save his life from battle wounds, even if it does rejuvenate him spiritually. This instance is one of the only true examples the reader sees of growth, Tolkien's ultimate goal. Yet it is simple a small precursor to the most important exhibition.

The most telling episode of spiritual growth is Bilbo's, which the author applauds. The narrator is ambivalent because his growth causes him to sacrifice his reputation. On the first page of the novel, the narrator lovingly details Bilbo's hobbit-hole under The Hill: "bedrooms, bathrooms, cellars, pantries (lots of these), wardrobes (he had whole rooms devoted to clothes), kitchens, dining-rooms."<sup>86</sup> He is adamant that it is the envy of all those around him and a status symbol in the respectable hobbit community. This extensive dwelling is a microcosm of Thorin's under the Lonely Mountain. Just as Thorin is King under the Mountain, Bilbo is the king of "Bag-End, Under-Hill."<sup>87</sup> He "hoards his wealth – food in the hobbit world – against depletion by strange intruding dwarves."<sup>88</sup> Gloin even comments that he looks "more like a grocer than a burglar,"<sup>89</sup> cementing Bilbo's preference for food as a form of wealth. Bilbo joins the dwarves because of their promise for adventure, not treasure, and his relationship with gold stays almost stagnant. The narrator suggests that he is not totally immune from monetary greed,

but it always is fleeting: “the enchanted desire of the hoard had fallen from Bilbo.”<sup>90</sup> Unlike Thorin who would rather starve than give up gold, Bilbo would prefer a hot meal to the wealth. Gluttony is the hobbit's personal version of greed.

The manifestation of Bilbo's personal growth comes at a moment that parallels Thorin's experience. As he returns home from his adventure, he finds an estate sale underway; the hobbits of the Shire had presumed him dead and were all vying to possess his treasures: “many of his silver spoons mysteriously disappeared and were never accounted for.”<sup>91</sup> Though he stops the auction, Bilbo does not panic with the same intensity he had at the thought of running out of cakes during the dwarves' first intrusion. Instead, he exhibits a new propensity for sharing. His parting words to the dwarves are a standing invitation to tea and hospitality. He spends most of his gold on presents, and is pleased to host Gandalf and Balin when they arrive unannounced. This final instance of growth is in sharp contrast to the deathbed proclamation of Thorin. Bilbo is living out his newfound values. The author has created in the hobbit a surrogate for the reader to see benefits of a life lived with less greed; Bilbo is an exemplar of

a character that has experienced real spiritual growth by choosing not to cherish wealth, but to share. The narrator is of another opinion: “I am sorry to say he did not mind.”<sup>92</sup> For him, the loss of Bilbo's ordinariness and reputation is more important than his growth.

### Conclusion

Tolkien as an author wanted his sub-creation to be believable because he felt that it would serve God's more effectively. In order to accomplish that task, he set out to create an intensely detailed world that would mimic the complexity of Primary Creation. He revels in the multiculturalism that permeates Middle Earth; each species is an opportunity for him to develop a history and a culture. The narrator serves as the enemy of Tolkien as an artist. Instead of celebrating the variations, he scorns and deprecates them for being different. Though he and Tolkien diverge here, they share a common goal of applying absolute morality to Middle Earth's creatures. The narrator is brusque with complex moral interactions that deserve delicacy. Though his methods for the moralizing of the story might be too harsh for Tolkien, they ultimately have the same ambition. The binary, restrictive language that the narrator employs denies the authentic nuance of Tolkien's Secondary

World. Instead of being an advantage, the narrator's unsuccessful flattening of the characters is an obstacle the novel's intentions.

Tolkien's universe outgrew his vision of it as a ‘mythology for England,’ instead becoming a mythology unto itself. *The Hobbit* was Tolkien's first published piece of writing about Middle Earth, done before he realized that fairy stories and children did not necessarily need to be linked. His stylistic approach was one of his later regrets, not only because the novel was relegated to children, but also because he found the narrator himself to be patronizing. The content is no less ‘adult’ than his later trilogy, but the narrator inhibited serious consideration of the work. However, once the reader learns to see the narrator's biases, Tolkien's underlying goal of writing a work that would ameliorate the reader was mostly effective. Because Middle Earth was essentially but not explicitly Catholic, it reached a wider audience. Perhaps because of the conversion of the novel into a film trilogy, *The Hobbit* seems to have piqued new interest in recent years. More critical work is certainly needed about this novel, encompassing the unfortunate narrative choices that Tolkien made.

FACULTY SPONSOR: Louis Bastien, Ph.D.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to Professor Bastien and Matt Rice for helping me organize my thoughts, and everyone who helped me with edits.

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