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„The Christian Tradition in J. R. R. Tolkien's Fiction"

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There is a place called 'Heaven' where the good here unfinished is completed; and where the stories unwritten, and the hopes unfulfilled, are continued.

– J. R. R. Tolkien

Table of Contents

Foreword

A Personal Comment

I doubt I will ever forget the first time I read *The Lord of the Rings*. I was thirteen, and I was reading the book in its German translation by Wolfgang Krege, which has been widely discredited for its modern turn of phrase and disregard of the finer nuances of the original. I cannot deny that upon first starting the book, I nonetheless found it laborious to read, difficult to follow, and altogether a little too high and mighty a story. But I forced myself to continue on in spite of my misgivings, and as the story began to draw me in, I allowed myself to get lost in the imaginary world – and as the existence of the present thesis suggests, I fell in love with the story, the characters, and the world.

I do not doubt that Tolkien has had a similarly striking effect on generations of readers, as is exemplified by an early review of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, written by C. S. Lewis for *Time and Tide*, which starts with the words "This book is like lightning from a clear sky" (Carpenter 250). At the time of its publication, it had no equal, was (almost) one of a kind; a fantastic epic told in the archaic style of heroic romances, containing multiple peoples, places and languages never heard of before, it was the starting point of a literary tradition that is one of the most popular today – Fantasy literature. I maintain that, despite the multitude of new publications' dust jackets sporting the laudatory statement "the new Tolkien", the true Tolkien is still without equal today. The reason why he continually manages to capture the imagination of readers more than 40 years after his death is, in my opinion, the feeling his narratives stir up in their audience, and this is also what sets him apart from the variety of pseudo-Tolkienian High Fantasy novels that crowd modern bookstores and bookshelves.

Tolkien conveys that all's well that ends well. He puts his characters through an awful lot in all his stories, and his readers suffer with them and doubt with them

that things can still come to a good end, but this is what Tolkien promises: In the end, no matter how dark things might seem before, everything will be alright. His outlook is always a hopeful one. This is what kept my attention when I first read his books; and this is what draws me to them still, what makes me read and re-read all that he has written over and over, what makes me page through his novels to my favourite – the consoling – parts when I doubt the world. Through his positive attitude, Tolkien gives his readers something to hold on to. I – we – will always be grateful to him for that.

Definition and Justification of Research Area

Since their publication, a lot of research has been conducted into the origins of and influences on Tolkien's stories. This is not surprising due to the extreme success of the two novels published in his lifetime, and the ongoing interest in his other writings, published bit by bit after his death. Although Tolkien himself has commented more than once on the literary influences and theoretical foundations of his texts, mostly in letters to curious readers, no definitive canon could be identified.

The present thesis builds on the popular hypothesis that Tolkien drew on his devoutly Catholic faith as the basis for his mythology. However,

> *The Lord of the Rings* transcends any strictly monotheistic reading. Instead, it manifests an extraordinary ethico-religious richness and complexity which derives from the *blending* of Christian, pagan, and humanist ingredients. It is all of these, and no single one of them (Curry 117).

Because of the multitude of possible interpretations of his texts, there is still much left to discover about Tolkien and his writings. No approach, neither linguistic nor (anti-)religious nor societal / environmental nor any other, has won out over the others so far. As Curry points out, this is due to the rich variety of sources Tolkien used, so that his stories encompass all these theories, although to various degrees, and none can be excluded from a complete analysis. Despite this, the Christian perspective "is not a universally accepted way of approaching his work" (Bernthal 18). In this thesis, the fallacy of disregard for it shall be shown by pointing out specific motives and themes that the Christian or

Catholic belief and Tolkien's legendarium share. Once it has become clear that the theistic approach is in fact a relevant one for reading and understanding Tolkien, "there is a wealth of spiritual meaning to be found in [his] pages" (Pearce 1998: 111).

However, this meaning is not immediately apparent to the cursory reader, since it is not expressed in the direct takeover and reproduction of Christian elements in the story world. "Critics who dismiss the Christian influence in Tolkien's work seem to believe it can only occur as crude allegory" (Bernthal 34), but this is not what the author himself aspired; in fact, he "cordially dislike[d] allegory" (LOTR xxvi). Instead, he wrote stories that would carry across the message of his faith, the promise of the ultimate happy ending that has already been commented on above. Furthermore, he made sure that while his mythology was not distinctly Christian, it was not distinctly anti-Christian either; it should not contradict the Catholic mythology but allow for it to unfold in the continuation of the storylines. Tolkien conceptualised his imaginary world in a way that "there is room for Middle-earth to be both substantively pre-Christian and yet thoroughly Catholic" (Boffetti 196).

it is this desire to 'mask' the Christian origins of his narratives that continue to provide opportunities for researchers to try and trace these origins within the texts themselves. This project will be undertaken in this thesis, with the additional aspect of collecting, evaluating and, if possible, extending, existing studies on the topic of religion in Tolkien's writings. It strives to answer the research question, "Can a Christian influence be deduced from Tolkien's works, and if yes, how does it manifest in the texts?".

The first part of the question can straightforwardly be answered with *yes*, as becomes clear from this introductory chapter, while the second part will be detailed in the pages of this diploma thesis.

Methodology
In order to determine whether his Catholic faith played a role in the writing of his

stories, its role in Tolkien's everyday life is examined in the first place. Sources of information on this topical aspect are his letters, the critically acclaimed biography of the writer by Humphrey Carpenter, and a selection of works of secondary literature on Tolkien that deal with the subject. The analysis of the faith's relevance in his life is undertaken chronologically in order to simultaneously give an overview of the course of his life and highlight key events that shaped his world view and belief. Moreover, those of his writings that are noteworthy in connection with his biography as a devout Catholic are presented and linked to the discussion.

Secondly, the main part of the present thesis draws on the primary texts and the secondary literature to discover and provide an overview of the distinct Christian elements in Tolkien's literary material. In order to give some structure to the information found, it is divided into several sub-sections that each deal with a specific manifestation of the Catholic faith in the literary universe, going from broad to narrow by starting with the order and creation of the fictional world and ending with certain characters personifying Christian traits. Within these chapters, individual aspects of the texts' religious background are examined one after the other using both primary and secondary texts. An evaluation of their relevance and correct interpretation by the author of this thesis is also included for each facet.

Once the features of a Christian-coloured story world have been determined, the final part of the thesis looks at the effect of their inclusion on the audience of Tolkien's works. A short conclusion then tries to determine the success of his enterprise to create a fictional universe consistent with Catholic theology. These chapters do not rely primarily on textual support either by the primary or the secondary sources, but are built on the personal assessment of the writer of the present thesis.

A Note on Citation

While all secondary literature in this thesis is quoted in the usual style of giving the author's name and the respective page number(s) in brackets after the

quotation itself, a different techniques has been deemed more appropriate for quotations from the primary literature. In order to make it more easy for the reader to differentiate between the individual texts by Tolkien, they are cited using abbreviations instead of the writer's name and, for distinction, the year of publication. The style of citation remains the same, with the abbreviations and page numbers appearing in brackets behind the quoted phrases. The list below gives the abbreviations for the primary texts that are directly quoted from in this thesis.

- *The Lord of the Rings = LOTR*
- *The Silmarillion = SIL*
- *On Fairy-Stories = OFS*
- *Mythopoeia = MYTH*
- *Letters by J. R. R. Tolkien = LET*

As is customary, quotations from the Bible are identified by giving the name of the book, the number of the chapter, and the number of the verse the quoted phrase is taken from in brackets. The Bible edition used as a source text here is the English Standard Version from 2001.

Full citations for each of these as well as the rest of the primary texts can be found in the bibliography.

1. Biographical Background

To give a fundamental basis to the investigations undertaken in this thesis, the first chapter gives a short overview of Tolkien's life, focusing on the people and events that inspired the writer's profoundly Christian view of life, and his work, and the Catholic faith that permeated both.

His belief in the deep interrelationship between art and religion is most clearly visible in one of Tolkien's short stories, Leaf by Niggle, an autobiographically influenced tale of a painter unable to complete his great work before his death and then finding it finished and made real in the afterlife. Similarly to Niggle, Tolkien himself worked on his mythology all his life, with large parts remaining uncompleted by the time he died – a fact that greatly worried him. However, we can expect his belief in the nature of Heaven, as illustrated by the quote that introduces this thesis, to have given him comfort, as the same belief deeply influenced the entire writing of the very same mythology.

The creation of Middle-Earth was based upon three pillars, for the most part profoundly connected to Tolkien's fundamentally Christian, Catholic beliefs: His schoolboy club of male comrades was united in the purpose of writing 'a mythology for England'; after the first World War, the duty fell to the survivor, Tolkien, to fulfill this dream for his friends who had perished with their stories untold; and in imitation of the work of God the Creator of the universe he set about creating, 'sub-creating' his own world. Moreover, Tolkien's mother, who brought him and his brother up in the Catholic faith after her conversion from Anglicism, died, in her sons' eyes, as a martyr for this choice, as it left her shunned by her family. The example of firmness of faith she set her sons thereby influenced Tolkien deeply and lay the seed both for his own firm belief in Catholicism and, combined with her love for and teaching of languages, the creation of his mythology.

These three factors – the desire to fulfill his youth friends' dreams of writing, the desire to sub-create, praising God through imitating the divine act of Creation,

and the desire to live up to his mother's example of firm Catholic belief – form the biographical basis for this thesis' analyses.

On January 3rd, 1892, in Bloemfontein, South Africa, a son was born to an English couple who had emigrated there a few years previously for occupational reasons. Arthur Tolkien and Mabel, born Suffield, welcomed into the world that day a baby boy who would end up becoming one of the most celebrated and influential authors of the 20th century, who would create worlds, languages and characters so beloved by so many that the modern (Western) world is hardly imaginable without them, but would, without John Ronald Reuel Tolkien and his Middle-Earth, be an infinitely poorer place. While it is unlikely that Mabel, holding her newborn son in her arms, could in any way even begin to imagine how pivotal his birth would turn out to be for the development of our culture, it seems she was not entirely devoid of foresight, as she wrote to her family, back in Birmingham, a description of John Ronald Reuel in which she likened him to a fairy (Carpenter 24) – a creature that would, if in a different incarnation, as the more refined Elves of Middle-Earth, feature most prominently in the stories the boy would grow up to write. It is among this family that Tolkien truly grew up, for although he was born in South Africa, he, his mother, and his younger brother Hilary relocated to England in 1896 to live with Mabel's West Midlands family, the Suffields. Arthur Tolkien, having remained in Bloemfontein to continue his work at a local bank, died of a sudden illness shortly after, leaving Ronald (as he was commonly called by family and friends) and Hilary half-orphaned and, together with their mother, stranded in a country that was essentially foreign to them, and almost entirely without financial means. However, this situation, as horrid as it must have seemed, resulted in the rather fortunate move of the family to Sarehole, a small village surrounded by typically English countryside, where they could live quite comfortably and where, most importantly, the spirit at the core of his mythology entered the young Ronald's lively mind: a profound appreciation of and joy in the simplicity and down-to-earthness of this English countryside and the way of life it favoured.

1.1. An example of Catholic faith: Mabel Tolkien

Despite what his known way of life and his literary output suggest, Tolkien was not actually born a Roman Catholic, but entered that faith rather when his mother Mabel converted to Catholicism shortly after having permanently returned to England after Arthur's death. This step of Mabel's had far-reaching consequences, not only for herself, but for her sons as well, the worst of which were the accompanying alienation of Mabel from her family and the end of the financial support she had received from its members following her husband's death. For Ronald, this meant another move, from the countryside suburb into the city of Birmingham proper, but it also meant that he was now raised in this new faith. At that point, no-one would have realised how pivotal this choice made by Mabel would prove not only for herself, but also and especially for Ronald, who from the very beginning connected the Catholic belief with the figure of his mother. This link only intensified when, in 1904, she died of diabetes, which was still incurable in those days, leaving Ronald and Hilary orphaned and effectively destitute.

There were two functions in which Mabel Tolkien acted as a fundamental influence in her son's life – an influence that can be traced not only throughout his personal life, but which is also traceable in his works. The first one is that of Mabel as a teacher, instructing her sons at home when they were young, imparting her deep knowledge of languages, music, even biology and botany. The second is that of Mabel as a martyr, dying (in J. R. R. Tolkien's view) of the neglect she was subjected to by her family after her conversion to Catholicism (Birzer 47). He took her loss extremely hard, the pain of it staying with him for the remainder of his life. Tolkien was conscious of owing much of his devout Roman-Catholic belief to the example of his convert mother, "who clung to her conversion and died young, largely through the hardships of poverty resulting from it" (*LET* 172). The fact that she stuck to her chosen faith despite the social and, along with those, financial problems that she faced because of it proved to

her son her profound devotion and set her up in his mind as a martyr – she had died, in the end, for Tolkien, for what she believed in. As Flieger stresses, "in his view, it was her adherence to that religion which led to the circumstances that caused her death and thus his bereavement. […] The very thing that gave him his faith robbed him of his mother and thus mixed with that faith a sense of irretrievable loss" (3).

Mabel Tolkien was the first one to instruct her sons in a school-like manner, teaching them at home long before they both went on to institutionalised learning in various Birmingham grammar schools. Her teachings guided Ronald's personal development and shaped his interests from very early on, directing them towards botany – trees remained particularly close to his heart for all his life after his mother had encouraged him to study them – and especially languages. It is save to say, from today's point of view, that without this early linguistic input, Middle-earth in its present form would not exist; it might not even exist at all. Therefore, a great dept is owed to Mabel for, in her homeschooling, planting the seeds in her son's heart and mind that would come to grow into a mythology enjoyed by millions.

An episode that is exemplary for the way Mabel influenced Tolkien's perception of and interaction with the world, as shown in his writings, occurred when, after a reading of a book of fairy-tales, the boy began writing his first original story. It is enchantingly retold in Carpenter's biography (34): Influenced by what he had read, Ronald wrote a little story about a dragon and gave it to his mother for commentary, of which he could only recall at a later point that she had criticised a linguistic detail – according to Mabel, instead of "a green great dragon", the description of the beast had to read "a *great green* dragon". Not only did Ronald, of course, correct his mistake, if it can be called that, but he also started to think about the *why* of it, making this one of his early linguistic explorations of the English language, of which many more were to come.

After their mother's death, guardianship of the Tolkien boys passed to Father Francis Morgan, a priest at the Birmingham Oratory where they had used to attend mass with Mabel. Ronald was, by then, a student at King Edward's School, one of the prime grammar schools in the city, his education focusing on the classics, Latin and Greek. This played right into his talent with and interest in languages, something Mabel had already discovered early on and which led to Ronald learning not only Latin and Greek, but German, Gothic, Welsh, Finnish, and several other languages throughout his life – and, of course, to creating his own, first as private amusement, then as the basis for his mythology. During this time, the Oratory, in itself a center of Catholic teaching, also became one of the centers of Ronald Tolkien's life, Father Francis' morning service the start of his days, while the rest of them was spent in its other center, his school. There, he particularly bonded with three boys about his age, Christopher Wiseman, Robert Gilson, and Geoffrey Bache Smith, and the four of them founded the TCBS, the "Tea Club of the Barrovian Society", named after their meeting place at Birmingham's Barrow Stores. These friendships, which continued on after the boys' graduation from King Edward's School to their time at different British universities, were hugely influential for Tolkien's writing career, based as they were on the club members' common goal: to create a mythology for England.

1.2. Continuing Stories Yet Unwritten: After the War

J. R. R. Tolkien left Birmingham for Oxford's Exeter College in 1911, leaving behind not only his school and the Oratory, the two places where he'd been happiest since the death of his mother, but also the woman who would later become his wife: Edith Bratt, three years older than Ronald and heading for a career as a professional pianist. The couple had met living in the same boarding house, but Father Francis had forbidden their involvement until Ronald's coming of age. So, for the next years, he focused on his studies, first of the classics and then of English Language and Literature – until World War I began.

In his studies, he came across an Old English poem, the "Christ" by Cynewulf,

in which are included the following lines:

Eala Earendel Engla Beorhtast
Ofer Middangeard Monnum Sended

Tolkien commented on these lines later in his life, calling them "rapturous words from which ultimately sprang the whole of my mythology" (Carpenter 46 and *LET* 7-8). Bernthal added to this assessment that "it is significant that the beginning of Tolkien's mythology finds its origin in a poem about Christ" (17), stressing how important his religion was already in these earliest stages of Tolkien's writing – and Earendel ended up in the Middle-Earth universe as the steerer of a ship sailing the heavens as the evening star. Together with the invented languages he had already worked out to a great degree of detail at this point (they would end up in his texts as the Elven languages Quenya and Sindarin, among others), these few lines of poetry were one of the triggers that set in motion the creation of Middle-Earth, which had slumbered in Tolkien's mind up until he was called upon to release his imagination.

In 1914, the first World War started, and a year later, Tolkien graduated with highest honors in English Language and Literature from Oxford University and joined the Lancashire Fusiliers to fight in the Battle of the Somme. Before leaving for France, he married Edith, with whom he had resumed his relationship after his 21st birthday.

While he himself was delivered from the horror of the French trenches by a common soldiers' illness called "trench fever" and allowed to return to England for treatment, two of Ronald's four closest friends and members of the TCBS, Robert Gilson and Geoffrey Smith, fell in the War. Ronald believed that it was now up to him to fulfill their shared vision of writing for their country, deeply moved as he was by a line in a letter Smith had sent him on the day of his death, "may you say the things I have tried to say long after I am not there to say them" (Carpenter 104-5 and Birzer 46). "He saw his legendarium as a monument to his friends who had died in the Great War: his mythology, he

hoped, would help restore knowledge of the old truths in the ravaged post-war world" (Birzer 46), and he began by writing "The Fall of Gondolin", the first story ever written for the cycle that was published as *The Silmarillion*.

There is no denying the influence the war experience had on Ronald's stories. Not only were they written in the belief that he was doing God's and his late friends' ultimate will, but they also reveal how deeply he felt about issues brought on by his days in the trenches. His way of dealing with what he suffered through as well as with the loss of his companions was testimony to his deep faith, guiding him through these trying times; and in his tales he tried to revive the kind of war that is worth fighting – the opposite of the kind of fighting he had participated in.

World War I was the first big war fought not only man against man, but also man against machinery. This, in Tolkien's mind, diminished the sacrifice of those men, faced with an enemy that was implacable and faceless – just as Sauron, one of the major villains in his mythology. Heroism, as it is portrayed in his works, is exactly that of these men, standing their ground against overwhelming adversaries, therein sacrificing themselves for the sake of others who have never encountered the evil themselves. In this, they resemble Mabel Tolkien, who in the eyes of her son also gave her life for a worthy cause and the sake of others, namely for him and Hilary and the cause of raising them in what she believed to be the true, worthy faith, Catholicism. The wars in Middle-Earth are fought not for the sake of fighting but to achieve a similarly worthy goal: to protect and preserve what is good in the world, to keep safe the things worth fighting for. Those are the wars Tolkien assumed were 'just', fought for a good reason, while his own war experience was one of pointless fighting. Therefore, although he was disgusted by the horrors of the first World War, he considered the second World War against Nazi Germany a war worth fighting; and the same qualities also allowed Tolkien to reconcile the quite frequent and sometimes even glorifying portrayals of warfare in his texts with his profound Catholic faith.

A question all must face after a traumatising experience such as war is, can you go back to life as it was before? The narrator answers this, for one of his characters from *The Lord of the Rings*, Frodo, with the assertion that "there is no going back"; however much one might hope for it, the reality is that one is so transformed by the events one underwent that it is impossible to simply return to one's earlier state of existence. However, "a Quest [such as these events] gives meaning to our own existence" (Caldecott 1999: 20), in the same way that religion gives meaning to the lives of its followers, the way the Catholic belief gave meaning to the suffering and death of Tolkien and his friends, helping him cope by raising them up above the mere horror of experience and infusing them with significance, so that even if there is no going back, there is a chance for going on.

Eucatastrophe

From his stories it becomes apparent that Tolkien achieved a lot of their narrative power by a course of narration that set his heroes up against overwhelming odds so that their chance of success seems almost non-existent, but still, in the end, victory is usually theirs. This victory is commonly brought about by the type of event Tolkien referred to as 'eucatastrope' and defined as "a sudden joyous turn" (*OFS* 68) of events at the desperate moment when forfeiture and death seem imminent. Eucatastrophe happens through divine intervention; a well-known example being the eagles of Manwë, the Valar governing the winds, who are sent to aid in the great battles of the Third Age of Middle-Earth, the Battle of the Five Armies retold in *The Hobbit* and the battle in front of the gates of Mordor that marks the end of the War of the Ring in *The Lord of the Rings*. When in each of these battles, the heroes are on the verge of succumbing to the onslaught of their foes, they are rescued from that evil by the eagles who remove them from the battlefield or another area of danger (comp. Frodo's and Sam's rescue from Mount Doom) and end the fighting by launching

their own fierce attack against the opposing armies. They are *deus ex machina*, the forces of eucatastrophe.

As a Catholic, Tolkien considered the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ to be the ultimate eucatastrophe (Birzer 39), and its effect of providing powerful, lasting joy for those that witnessed or heard of it was the effect he strove to imitate in his own versions of the narrative turn. He discusses this concept extensively in his lecture-turned-essay "On Fairy Stories", linking it to his Christian belief by saying that "in the 'eucatastrophe' we see a brief vision […] a far-off gleam or echo of *evangelium* in the real world" (*OFS* 71), with 'evangelium' referring not only to the biblical Gospels as such, but to any tale relating to the reader the grace of deliverance that is the highest function of the fairy-tale (comp. *OFS* 68) and by extension of any good story, in Tolkien's view. Such a story "does not deny sorrow and failure […] but it denies *universal* or *final* defeat, by giving a taste or echo of victory" (Caldecott 2005: 143-144). In this narrative strategy, it echoes the Christian tale, and it conveys the same state of reality as well: "that evil and death will not in the end triumph, that they have in fact already been defeated" (Holloway 187). Readers of 'fairy-stories', that is, fiction in its 'Tolkienian' understanding, will grow to be familiar with this "Consolation of the Happy Ending" (Tolkien in Flieger 27), the moment in the fairy tale when evil is overthrown and good triumphs. Tolkien desired to recreate and relate this motivational morale through his own mythology.

Escapism

A claim in criticism of fantasy literature that is often made in relation to this is that of *escapism*, i. e. readers leaving behind a non-ideal version of reality by reading a story that denies this reality and replaces it with an ideal version of itself that negates the original and its wrongs. Tolkien's works have been called escapist, the word used as an insult or at least derogatory, many times, but he himself did not believe that to provide a different reality to immerse oneself in was necessarily a negative function of literature, as has been observed several times in the abundant secondary literature on the subject:

> Tolkien perceives that 'realist' critics use the word escapism in a negative, patronizing or derisive sense because they object to what they see as the willful *desertion* by 'escapist' writers from the 'realities' of life […] Yet Tolkien did not accept this dogma, believing it fundamentally flawed and therefore not 'realist' at all. For Tolkien, true reality, the fullness of reality, was to be found beyond the physical in the metaphysical, beyond the natural in the supernatural (Pearce 1998: 145).

It becomes clear from the above quote that escapism in no way has to mean a rejection of real life, but rather the understanding that real life is intrinsically imperfect and escapism can provide a way to smooth out the flaws in everyday events in order to make them even more real, or perhaps a chance to see them in a new light, such as the depiction of war in Tolkien's writings in comparison with the actual horrible experience. A concept this desire to depict a kind of 'super-reality' can be likened to is that of *mimesis*, which roughly translates to *imitation*. There have been several versions of mimetic theories throughout history, starting with Plato and Aristotle; and somewhere in the process of shaping and reshaping these theories, a Catholic concept of mimesis has emerged as well, which partly traces back to the French philosopher and theologist René Girard. Catholic mimesis can be understood as the purposefully euphemistic depiction of reality instead of its exact replication. The reasoning behind this strategy of representation, which lines up with Tolkien's views on escapism, is that it is not despicable but laudable to seek and (re-)create a more refined version of reality rather than focusing on rendering it in all its imperfections. Contemplating this in religious terms, the sinful here and now is in this way transformed into the heightened reality envisioned by God at the moment of Creation, a perfect world free from blemish or sin. This is the world that all escapist art should be directed towards.

Tolkien was of the opinion that "the desire to escape is understandable and can be morally commendable, depending on what you want to escape from" (Bernthal 69), and that fiction offered a reality that might have been more easy to cope with reading, but was in no way devoid of its own terrors – "a world more beautiful (if in its own way no less terrible)", as Flieger (26) describes it – comparable to those in the real world. Yet it was those terrors that he tried to present in a different light, to infuse them with a meaning beyond the dread they

aroused, so that to experience them would not be in vain, but serve a higher purpose – terrors that made sense.

In the end, escapism in the form it takes in Tolkien's mythology must be seen not as "a flight from reality, but an escape to a heightened reality" (Lawhead 167, Pearce 1998: 152, Garner, Alan. "A bit more practice". In: Meek, Margaret; Warlow, Aiden; Barton, Griselda [Eds.]. *The Cool Web: The Pattern of Children's Reading*. London: The Bodley Head 1977. 199 in Curry 133). It incorporates values that our present-day society has already lost, but that we might wish for in times of trouble, as well as presents solutions to our problems that come to pass simply by reading the appropriate lines, so that no problem is insurmountable – everything can be fixed if we only believe it can. Again, the Christian desire to represent the world in its ideal, God-given state is apparent here, and will certainly have influenced Tolkien in his portrayal of the "heightened", more refined reality of Middle-Earth. By involving ourselves in the stories and the realities they tell, what we experience reading them is transferred back into our own reality; "the nostalgia Tolkien engenders, therefore, is finally redirected back into our own lives, here and now" (Curry 58). So escapism is really an escape through another reality back to our own.

1.3. Imitating Divine Actions: Sub-Creation

Aside from his being called upon to write by his friends' desires to see their visions realised, there is another impulse that must be examined with regard to Tolkien's motivation for storytelling: The wish of the creation to imitate the Creator, to follow His example in bringing to life a world of one's own design – to "make still by the laws in which we're made", as Tolkien writes in his narrative poem *Mythopoeia* (87). He created, in his writings, Middle-Earth in devout imitation of the Lord creating Earth, an act for which he coined the term "sub-creation". "[Tolkien believed that] his sub-created secondary world was a reflection, or a glimpse, of the truth inherent in the Created Primary World" (Pearce 1998: 110). In that way, his writings can again be likened to the Bible, especially the Gospel, as both, as explained above, work along the lines of the

Catholic mimetic principle, showing reality in a different light so as to present a more perfect, more understandable version of it and comment on it at the same time. Tolkien's sub-creation is, in itself, also a comment on the actual Creation; he "saw his own myth as a reflection of the True Myth, which was the fullness of Reality flowing from God" (Pearce 1998: 96).

With the established terminology of *sub*-creation, it becomes apparent that, contrary to what some critics believe (see Pearce 1999: 102), the Christian faith was linked to Tolkien's myth-making at a fundamental level, as he was certain he was in no way creating *ex nihilo,* but building on the already existing first Creation. "Tolkien thought that he merely served as a scrivener of God's myth […] that he served as a poet-recipient of God's secondary myths, that he was a recorder rather than an inventor" (Birzer 25-26). "Sub-creative collaboration with Creation, which for Tolkien was the poet's collaboration with God, was the acknowledged principle behind his creative effort. […] He was the sub-creator, the word-combiner, the mythical grammarian. Beyond him, working in and through him, he felt the Primary Creator, the Prime Mover, the Initiator of Change" (Flieger 172-173). Viewing his work in this way protected Tolkien from falling prey to hubris, one of the seven cardinal sins of Catholic teaching, which signifies the belief that one exists in a higher state than others, or even on one level with God. But since he believed in receiving his creative talents from God rather than having developed them on his own, Tolkien would not take credit for creating Middle-Earth in the sense of 'inventing' it but said of the writing process that often it felt as though he were discovering something that had already been there, that he was merely recording what was told to him, so that his myth is ultimately not his own, but that of God as the force behind the writer. This distinction, as Gunton explains, is founded in the belief that "there is only one to whom we can ascribe the act of creation [while] the human artist can only operate on a secondary, lower, level, by divine gift" (129-130). Middle-Earth, although its landscape, peoples, and history are distinct from that of the real world, is nonetheless a part of it – more than that, it *is* our world as seen through the lens of the sub-creator, and so is, from this viewpoint, *all* art,

building upon the art of the Lord, His act of Creation that allowed for humankind's art to evolve. Therefore, the term 'fiction' always seemed inappropriate to Tolkien as a description of his work, because it is not fictional so much as "a figment of truth" (Pearce 1998: 99), a mimetic image of the True Myth, which, in his opinion, "had reconciled all lesser myths in itself" (Pearce 1998: 195). There is no story that does not originate in this True Myth, because everything has its ultimate origin in God. This assertion lends itself to explaining why Tolkien's admiration and appreciation of Pagan texts and his inclusion of Pagan elements in his mythology are not tangents to his Christian mode of writing or contrary to it, as has been claimed by those in secondary literature that seek to diminish the importance of Christianity in the evolution of Middle-Earth: If everything originates from the Lord, Paganism does as well, and if all stories are variations of the True Myth, so are Pagan tales, and if the True Myth has "reconciled all lesser myths in itself" (Pearce 1998: 195), the Pagan myths are part of it as well. Paganism, such as Christianity, is just a different expression of the one Myth that has raised up the Earth, and the Pagan writers Tolkien was inspired by worked with this Myth in the same way he did, as sub-creators giving it their own 'spin'.

J. R. R. Tolkien, in his creation of Middle-Earth, shaped fiction the way God shaped reality – the definition of sub-creation. Following this 'rule', fiction would always be a variation of but not an alienation from that reality, because adherence to its principles is paramount in order to make one's own myth consistent with the original Myth. "The fundamental act of writing the fantasy novel requires a strict acknowledgement of the basic beauty and immanent goodness of God's creation by the author" (Lawhead 169), so that the writer can achieve the coherence with reality that allows the reader to recognise the reflection of the breathing world in its written counterpart, its purified representation shaped by Catholic mimesis, as in a distorting mirror. While the reader is provided with a chance for recognition of the Primary World, the writer takes the chance to explore it by sub-creating his secondary world after its model and to discover the Creator at its core. "For Tolkien, the creation and

exploration of fantasy worlds were a way of examining the image of the Maker as revealed in his creation and in his creatures" (Lawhead 170), and he "desired to recreate the truth, laws, and beauty of God's created order" (Birzer 45).

These 'guidelines', the beliefs that guided his writing process and, by extension, that of every writer and other artist, signify a definite negation of the claim that to create one's own world is to assume God's place as the designer and creator of the universe; that writing about fantastic worlds is to 'play God', in the sense of writers trying to usurp and improve upon God's Creation in their works. Contrary to that, *sub*-creation understands itself not as a method of improving, but of exploring the given world, always in awareness of the dept owed to God for providing the basis for and allowing its expansion in the process of sub-creation. "The fundamental relationship between 'Creation' and 'sub-creation', reality and imagination, is one of gift and, in response, gratitude" (Boffetti 199). The power to sub-create is a direct gift from God to mankind, to enable them to interpret His creation in their own understanding of the given reality. "Sub-creation, then, is not idle play or random imitation of God; it is part of His intent" (Flieger 47). Continuing this thought, it becomes apparent that artists do not operate within their own creation in denial of the Primary World, but "all 'true artists' (comp. Pope Benedict XIV) [find] their freedom within the boundaries of the all-encompassing divine scheme of creation" (Bernthal 95) – "in every act of artistic creation [they] echo the divine creation of the world" (Caldecott 2005: 184).

Furthermore, it is stated in the first pages of Genesis, the biblical story of the Primary Creation, that God made Man after his own likeness, imbuing this His creature with life in His own fashion. Therefore, logic dictates that the desire to create that is innate in humanity is an imitation of God's nature and His wish to make His visions of the world real, and that artists follow His example in their acts of sub-creation (comp. Boffetti 199, Holloway 179-179, Hooper 187, Birzer 39). The Gospel of John tells us that "in the beginning was the Word" (1:1), and the world is brought into being through the Word being spoken, meaning that the origin of all Creation lies with language. This is paralleled in Tolkien's sub-

created universe by the term "Eä", which translates to "Let the things be", spoken by the Tolkienist God-figure Eru Ilúvatar at the start of the creation process of the fictional universe. Since the Christian myth of Creation claims that all the world in existence originated from within words, the fact that Tolkien as a devout Christian chose to follow in his God's footsteps and sub-create through the medium of the written word is not surprising: "The writer's tools of sub-creation are words – a subdivision of the *logos* of John, and thus also are in imitation of God" (Flieger 41).

In addition to his own work as a sub-creator, Tokien also included the concept in the myth he invented to explain the emergence of Middle-Earth: The Ainur, angelic beings, are created by Ilúvatar, and the realisation of the world He had envisioned is given over to them to design and shape it after their will, within the framework provided by Eru. Similarly, mankind was given the earth to work with as they would, within the Primary designs of God. Another parallel in these processes of sub-creation is that both employ a transition medium to make real their visions of the world, mankind using language, as Flieger (41) states, and the Ainur using music (a more detailed explanation of this process is to follow in a later chapter). In this way, Tolkien set up his secondary world to function along the same principles as he believed the Primary World did, and lay the technique of sub-creation that is so central to his understanding of the world and his work at its center to give it a fundamental link to his own reality.

The question of free will is another aspect that must be taken under consideration with relation to sub-creation: Writers will, of course, aim for maximum perfection in their sub-created worlds, to be able to present the reader with the best possible version of their imagination, but at the same time it is important to allow the (fictional) world to run its course as well, and that course may not always be perfect or reflect the exact way the author wished events to develop – proof that the writer is not the ultimate authority on his own work but receives insights into it from his own Creator. This idea stands in the

long tradition of the *poeta vates*, i.e. 'the seeing poet' or the 'poet visionary', the writer whose stories do not originate within himself or draw on previous storytellers' ideas (those are *poeta doctus*) but are the manifestations of inspiration ordained by God.

The fact that it is possible for humans to sub-create their own versions of God's universe proves that free will is a paramount feature of the nature of mankind. "Without free will, participatory joy in creation would be impossible" (Bernthal 93). Again, striking similarities become obvious when examining the origin of free will in Tolkien's mythology. "Ilúvatar kindles within his creatures 'the Flame Imperishable', which confers life and free will" (Bernthal 93), waking especially in the Ainur the desire to partake in the creation of Middle-Earth and to shape it according to their personal wishes for the world. Through this Flame Imperishable, Ilúvatar is present in everything they create in His name, as everything is imbued with His spirit. There is a biographical significance for Tolkien and his work in this 'indwelling' of the creator's spirit in the creation: the Christian J. R. R. Tolkien 'indwells' his work, which is therefore infused with his Christian spirit, already making it a Christian work through its act of creation alone.

1.4. A Life of Myth-Making

After World War I, Tolkien's life took on a pattern of extraordinary ordinariness, quite devoid of extravagant experiences and events (Carpenter 133-134): He became professor of Anglo-Saxon, first in Leeds and then in Oxford, was a married man committed to his first love, Edith, and father of four children (John, Michael, Christopher and Priscilla), and lived a tranquil life in suburban areas, finally retiring to his wife's favourite holiday place, Bournemouth, where he died on 3rd January 1973, aged 81, three years after Edith had passed. The couple is buried in Wolvercote Cemetery near Oxford, their graves marked not only with their names but also with those of the Middle-Earth couple Tolkien used to liken his marriage to: the mortal Beren and the elf-maiden Luthien, whose love transcended the boundaries of race and even of death. His life was defined by

the love for his family, the devotion to his Roman Catholic faith – and the continuing development of his mythology, which negates the apparent ordinariness of his existence with the success of the two books published in his lifetime, *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings.*

Mythopoeia

While these two works of fiction are the most well-known of Tolkien's writings, as well as the only ones he lived to see published and publicly celebrated, his written work comprises many thousand pages more: Not only did he constantly continue to shape and reshape his fictional universe, but he also wrote widely on his academic subject, Old English, as well as several texts that do not fit into any of those two categories, several of which have been made accessible to the public in the years after the author's death through the tireless efforts of his third son, Christopher, to see more and more of his father's writings published. A text among these which is of particular relevance to an evaluation of his life as a believing Roman Catholic is the poem *Mythopoeia*. It is constructed as a monologue from "Philomythus to Misomythus" (*MYTH* 85) explaining the necessity of accepting the Christian myth as a basis for all further myth-making. Therein, it outlines Tolkien's views of his creative work in the context of a God-given and God-governed world and the way he as a Christian writer utilises the gifts the myths of his religion grant him to experiment with. The poem was written and gives a fictionalised account of a discussion between Tolkien and the then atheist C. S. Lewis, who later gained fame as the author of the *Chronicles of Narnia*, texts which stand alongside Tolkien's in their incorporation and transmission of the Christian belief. However, when Tolkien and Lewis met through a common friend at Oxford University in 1926 (Carpenter 166), Lewis was still a determined atheist and although the two went on to become fast friends as well as frequent reviewers of each others' written works in progress, mostly in company of the group of writers known as the 'Inklings' (Carpenter 172), they each took pains to argue and try to convince the other of the righteousness of their respective world views. After said pivotal talk in 1931

(Carpenter 169), Lewis apparently began to see the truth in Tolkien's words, because he gradually became a theist, accepting the existence of a God, and finally, a member of the Anglican Church. This last step Tolkien saw as an affront, since he himself had advocated the Roman Catholic religion and was not tolerant of other branches of Christianity. Still, the discussions of the nature and necessity of religion with Lewis were a driving force behind putting to paper his own musings on the subject, whether in or outside of the world of Middle-Earth.

Leaf by Niggle

Another text that deserves to be mentioned in this context is a short story, written in Tolkien's most productive period, and perhaps his most personal and autobiographic work, *Leaf by Niggle*. It tells the story of a painter who dreads to go on a certain journey and instead spends all his time painting a single tree, trying to achieve true perfection in his painting. His work is frequently disturbed, mostly by a neighbor in need of Niggle's help, which Niggle resents, but he still pauses in his painting and assists the man. Finally, the time comes for him to start his journey, and he winds up in a dark place while two voices argue over his fate, until he is released and completes his travels to a beautiful garden where the tree he devoted so much time to painting stands and has become real. The religious metaphor here is quite clear, as is the connection to Tolkien himself: Both he and Niggle have devoted their lives to a great work of art, and both are worried that they might not finish it in their lifetime, as they also have to deal with other matters and cannot spend their whole time painting or writing, but when they can't put their final journey (dying) off no longer, they are found worthy and released into their own personal heaven where their fictional universe has been made reality. This view of life after death is summarised in the following quote, taken from a letter from Tolkien to his son Michael: "There is a place called 'heaven' where the good here unfinished is completed; and where the stories unwritten, and the hopes unfulfilled, are continued" (*LET* 64). It is this firm belief that all will be alright in the end that, fuelled by his Christian

faith, characterises Tolkien's positive attitude to life that is reflected in all his stories – no matter how dark things may seem, in the end, some version of a glorious Heaven awaits.

Never-ending Stories

We cannot know if, after his death over 40 years ago, Tolkien found his mythological world realised in Heaven, but he certainly focused a great deal of his energy and time on its written realisation until the day he died. There is no period of his literary productivity in which he did not concentrate both on expanding and on revising what he had already written. For this reason, he did not always make as much progress as he or his publishers would have liked, but rather tended to go off on tangents and spend long periods of time refining various minor aspects of his imaginary world – at least, they would probably seem minor to anyone but him. But, just as Niggle carefully painted each leaf of his great tree individually and with as much detail as possible to render the tree itself as realistically as possible, Tolkien too paid almost excessive attention to detail, with the effect that readers of his books often find themselves in a written environment fashioned so perfectly that the fictional world appears to them as a real place, and that sense of reality was exactly what the author desired to achieve. Keeping in mind that this was his goal, it comes as no surprise that many of his texts remain fragments – their sheer amount was too much to finish in his lifetime in this perfectionist manner of writing. Moreover, Tolkien was not above second-guessing himself, often changing or even reinventing entire storylines, either because his very vision of the story had changed or because he had completed another story and was trying to make all others consistent with the finished version. A prime example of this technique of rewriting (comp. Carpenter 259) is the central chapter of *The Hobbit*, "Riddles in the Dark", in which the character Gollum first appears and challenges Bilbo to a game of riddles. In the first version of the book, Gollum promises Bilbo a ring as a reward for winning the game, but refuses to give it, which is how Bilbo justifies his keeping of the ring he had actually found earlier. After *The Lord of the Rings*

had been finished, Tolkien went back to *The Hobbit* and rewrote the entire chapter to make it more consistent with the events of the later book (Bilbo now finds the ring and uses it to escape from Gollum after the creature goes back on his word to show him the way out of the goblin caves, which would have been Bilbo's prize, and tries to kill him); the revisions were published in the next edition.

In this way, none of his stories were ever truly finished, and just like his character Niggle, he was haunted by the thought that he would die without having accomplished what he set out to do. And while it is true that he did not 'finish' all his stories in the sense of putting them into book form and publishing them as novels, Tolkien did not only leave behind an extraordinary amount of literary material on his sub-created world, but he left the world itself, which readers can keep evolving. Middle-Earth, on this earth, is never finished; but maybe Tolkien found it finished in Heaven, perfected and realised by the grace of God, as he had hoped and believed.

2. Previous Theoretical Considerations: Tracing Christian Elements in Tolkien's Writings

There have been many discussions of the potential Catholic background to J. R. R. Tolkien's writings, comprising both views on its non-existence and on its overwhelming significance in Middle-Earth, and tracing prominent features of the belief system in Tolkien's stories. This chapter serves as a summary of these theories, giving an overview of the Christian faith's influence on some of the most defining elements of Middle-Earth, its geography, topography and the events taking place within that framework.

Not every reader of a book necessarily subscribes to the same world views or holds the same beliefs as its author, and certainly this is not necessary for a successful reading experience – but when an author's views and beliefs have entered the story world, consciously or unconsciously, in the process of its creation, they form a crucial element of the text, whether or not they are detected by the reader. The more likely reader to detect this element is the one who shares in the underlying system of faith; however, anyone knowing what to look for can discover and examine it. This is why, although by far not all Tolkien critics and writers of secondary literature on Tolkien and the world he created are Roman Catholics or possibly not even Christians, much less *believing* Roman Catholics or Christians, many still have managed to trace the influence and manifestations of this belief system in his writings. The resulting treatises can approximately be split into two groups according to the purpose behind them – to one side stand those who write to prove the relevance of his faith for the texts, on the other those seeking to disprove or at least diminish this relevance.

It should be clearly deducible that the present thesis sides with the first group of writers and shares the viewpoint of the texts they have produced. This evaluation is, frequently and importantly, based on a quote by Tolkien himself: "*The Lord of the Rings* is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic

work", he writes to Father Robert Murray (*LET* 191). However unambiguous this statement may seem, those that nonetheless work to dismiss the religious basis of Tolkien's writings claim that an author is never the final authority on his texts and ask *If religion is so important in* The Lord of the Rings*, where is it? Where are the rituals, the prayers, the saints; where is God?* And they are not wrong to wonder, as explicit references to the Catholic faith are not (or, hardly) to be found anywhere on the thousands of pages Tolkien produced – they are absent not only from *The Lord of the Rings*, but from *The Hobbit*, *The Silmarillion*, *The Book of Lost Tales*; indeed, they do not seem to be present in the mythology at all. While this appears to make a compelling argument for the contra-side, it only takes a further reading of the letter cited above to explain it or rather, to have Tolkien explain it himself: "That is why I have not put in, or have cut out, practically all references to anything like 'religion', to cults or practices, in the imaginary world. For the religious element is absorbed into the story and the symbolism" (*LET* 191); in another letter, he writes of his desire to make his secondary world "consonant with Christian thought and belief" (*LET* 378). Despite the lack of obvious direct references to Christianity, it is nonetheless the foundation upon which Middle-Earth is built; the entire universe is "imbued with a profound wisdom […] drawn very largely from the Catholic faith in which he was raised" (Caldecott 2005: 5).

Internal Consistency

As stated above, in creating Middle-Earth Tolkien was careful to align it with his own world view and to eliminate any discrepancies that might have arisen from the clash between his mythology and the ultimate mythology, Christianity. He "felt the difficulty of creating an internally consistent and believable secondary world that was still theologically in line with orthodox Christianity" (Birzer 47). This is why, although he "tried to make his own mythology as Christian as possible" (Birzer 53), no overtly Christian elements are directly incorporated in it, so as to not to disturb the believability of the illusion he was presenting the reader with. However, "the cosmological setting of Tolkien's imagined world,

along with the creatures and events with which he filled it and the moral laws governing this imagined cosmos, were all intended to be compatible with his beliefs about reality, and in fact provide "pointers" to a Christian world-view" (Caldecott 2005: 6). This compatibility Caldecott detects as Tolkien's goal is not forced upon the reader in order to establish the secondary world as consistent in and with itself. It is the aim of the author to write so well that the process of reading transports the reader into a secondary universe that is so well presented that the reader exchanges it for his actual reality and accepts deviations from that reality without question as being true in the sub-created world. If the alternate reality included too blatant references to the Primary World, it would not be internally coherent enough to show the reader a convincing secondary reality. Because of that, although "as a sub-creator, Tolkien desired to recreate the truth, laws, and beauty of God's created order" (Birzer 45), he did not directly copy elements of the Catholic faith into his mythology – due to their origin in the Primary World, they would have broken up the consistency of the sub-created world.

Any attempt at searching for direct embodiments of features of Christianity in distinct elements of Tolkien's world such as characters or plotlines will therefore prove futile, unless one is prepared to look beyond the obviously nonexistant copying of content from religious teachings and texts to the driving forces behind Middle-Earth's narratives and the motivations and traits of their acting characters. As Bernthal explains, Tolkien "does very little to foreground or 'flag' characters, scenes, objects, events, plot lines, or places as having a Christian valence. But he clearly believes that Christian categories of all kinds are tools that he is using in the construction of Middle-earth" (Bernthal 44). The same argument is brought forth by Birzer, who states that "while no single character or place within *The Lord of the Rings* directly parallels the places, events, and people of the Christian story, throughout the story, one finds strong Christian symbolism" (Birzer 61). Employing these 'tools' to anchor this 'symbolism' in his mythology was a necessity for Tolkien, as he could not have tolerated it in himself to make art that did not reflect his life; therefore, as Christianity was

central to one, it also had to be central to the other. For his readers, realising and understanding the presence and meaning of the theological grounding of Middle-Earth is not necessarily relevant to ensure appreciation of the stories, which is why they are not directly confronted with it in the form of unmissable signposts, but it adds to the allure of the narratives to know how thoroughly they are linked with the writer's everyday world. For the writer himself, anything less than that would have been unacceptable, a negation of his role as sub-creator in praise of God (see ch. 1.3.). Despite this, in using the Catholic spirit rather than actual Catholic features, he still protects the integrity and ensures the internal consistency of his sub-creation.

Historical and Theological Anchoring

"Middle-Earth is not an imaginary world", writes J. R. R. Tolkien to his friend and reviewer W. H. Auden, continuing with "The theatre of my tale is this earth, the one in which we now live, but the historical period is imaginary" (both *LET* 257). In another letter, this time to the publishing company Houghton Mifflin Co., he states that "imaginatively this 'history' is supposed to take place in a period of the actual Old World of this planet" (*LET* 233). There can be no discussion, then, of his writings being 'just fantasy', as they are actually meant to be complementing our own history, geography and, yes, theology. In *The Lord of the Rings*, for example, Tolkien is dealing with a period of (admittedly imaginary) history set in about 6000 B.C. (Bernthal 7), with tales from *The Silmarillion* predating those in *The Lord of the Rings* by another few thousand years – no more precise datings have yet been agreed upon in terms of our world's calendar. However, although the events he describes may time-wise be far removed from today's world, they follow the same theological parameters. The tales of Middle-Earth take place between the Fall and the Redemption of Man (Bernthal 7, Pearce 1998: 110), in the same theological stage of existence as our world does, but there is no conscious awareness of this state in the fictional universe; it is "uninformed by Christian revelation" (Bernthal 7), Jesus Christ has not yet come into and enlightened the world. Nonetheless, especially *The*

Silmarillion reveals to the reader the presence of the Christian 'holy' in its setting: "We are in a time when the One God, Eru, is known to exist by the wise, but is not approachable save by or through the Valar[1], though He is still remembered in (unspoken) prayer by those of Numenorean descent. In the eternal sense with which Tolkien is principally concerned it is a Christian world created by a Christian God who has not, as yet, revealed Himself in the fullness of the truth made explicit in the Incarnation and Resurrection." (Pearce 1998: 110). Due to this lack of an actual religion to be practiced in the story world, the absence of specific rituals and practices belonging to this religion is justified once more.

Moral Foundation

In the process of basing his mythology on his Catholic faith, Tolkien instilled the moral principles underlying this faith in his mythological realm as the basis on which actions, persons, and situations are judged. "The themes of his writing are the keys to Tolkien's own deepest concerns, including death and immortality, nostalgia for paradise, creation and creativity, the reality of virtue and sin, the right stewardship of nature, and the moral dangers posed by the possession of technological power" (Caldecott 2005: 5). These concerns stem from the Catholic belief, which through their treatment in Tolkien's texts is incorporated into the world which those illustrate. Again, the practice he follows as a writer is their wordless acceptance rather than their open acknowledgement. Catholicism is not paraded in front of the reader as an infallible net in which the characters are caught and forced to interact, but rather it forms the ground in which all the stories are rooted and thereby infuses them all with its spirit. "While Tolkien's Middle-earth does not instruct in Catholic moral theology, the moral tectonics of Middle-earth are distinctly Catholic" (Boffetti 203). There is a firmly established code of conduct that governs life in the secondary world – it does not differ profoundly from the Primary World's standards of morality – and through examining this code of conduct, it can be

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[1]   Angelic beings that are conventionally called upon in times of need, see ch. 2.1.

seen that it derives from the rules of behavior and interaction lain down in the Christian orthodoxy, "paralleling the teachings of traditional Christianity to a remarkable degree" (Pearce 1998: 94). By furthering this, Tolkien ensures the continuing link between the Primary and the secondary world without encroaching upon the standalone functionality of the latter.

2.1. The Order of the World

Middle-Earth is the place usually referred to when talking about Tolkien's writings; it is, as he himself said, our world (see quotations from certain letters above) – and, just as this world, it is contained within a universe far greater than itself. This universe is known as *Arda*, and embedded in it are all realms, and most distinctly, those that in the Christian world view are the heavens (if not Heaven itself) and Earth, the *Void* and *Eä*, "the World that is" (*SIL* 9).

It has already been established that the Western world in its Christian markedness has served as a model for the characteristics of Tolkien's Middle-Earth, especially in regard to the way the spiritual plane of both worlds is structured. Therefore, the rule of Eä belongs to a God-figure, a single God-figure, mind, who brought the world into being *ex nihilo* (copm. Caldecott 2005: 97) and ultimately governs it, even if most of his actual interaction with the physical world is managed by his underlings, groups of powerful spirits that have aided in creating the actual physical manifestation of Arda and are commonly likened to the Angels of Christian mythology.

The One God

The ruling power governing the physical and spiritual world of Arda, the representative of the Christian God in Middle-Earth, is called Eru Ilúvatar, the Father of All. It has been suggested in the secondary literature that this God and the other beings he gives over the direct rule of Arda to, the Ainur, are more alike to creatures from such heathen belief systems as the polytheistic pantheons of the ancient Greeks and Romans or the Norse world of gods and goddesses. And while it is true that in the earliest writing processes that led to

what we know today, in the most finalised, published version, as *The Silmarillion*, the various deities of Valinor and Middle-Earth exhibited more human-like characteristics, quarreling and loving amongst themselves much like the deities of Rome, Greece and Scandinavia are claimed wont to do, Tolkien was careful to iron out such inconsistencies with his personal faith in the many revision processes he applied to this and all other works of his mythology, leaving the lordly spirits of Eä to resemble the Christian One God and his angels rather than a plurality of major and minor gods and goddesses.

In an interview given to the *London Daily Telegraph Magazine* on 22 March 1968, J. R. R. Tolkien spoke about this topic with Charlotte and Denis Plimmer and explained to them that "of course God is in *The Lord of the Rings*. The period was pre-Christian, but it was a monotheistic world. [Its God is] *the* one, of course! The book is about the world that God created – the actual world of this planet." (Plimmer, Charlotte; Plimmer, Denis. "The Man Who Understands Hobbits." In: *London Daily Telegraph Magazine*. 22 March 1968. 35. Quoted in Birzer 45). So, once again, we may take the author's word as confirmation of the claims brought forth here: It is indeed a God modeled on "the One", "although the characters in Middle Earth have a knowledge of God that is less complete than that which has been revealed to the Christian world" (Pearce 1998: 110), that we are presented with in *The Silmarillion* as the ultimate authority over and creator of the universe. Aside from the first chapters of this book, the Ainulindale, which can be compared to the Book Genesis in the Bible insofar as it contains accounts of the creation of the world, the God Eru is not usually present in the stories of Tolkien's legendarium. However, as he is "the only omniscient being in Tolkien's secondary world, and history is the providential story he writes, known only to him" (Bernthal 96), he still intervenes directly at turning-points in the history of his world (comp. Birzer 55). He does not remain remote, but works towards keeping history on the course he has planned by tipping the scales in those vital moments that could decide the fate of Arda and develop it away from his ideas. One such direct intervention is called the only one by Curry (110): the moment when, in response to their

worshipping the dark lord Morgoth and his emissary Sauron instead of keeping faith in Ilúvatar and his Ainur, the Men of the kingdom of Númenor are punished – their island is sunk, they drown, and the direct way to Valinor, land of the Ainur and comparable to Heaven, is blocked for them (a more detailed account of the Númenorean rebellion and the reshaping of the world follows in a later chapter). Despite the pivotal role this incident plays in the history of the fictional universe, it is not the only time Eru influences it. There are several instances of what can be called *deus ex machina*, the sudden appearance of a benevolent influence working towards the positive outcome of a difficult situation. "The Eagles are coming" is a well-known and much-quoted line in that context, primarily made popular by Peter Jackson's films, that sums up a common shape *deus ex machina* takes at later points in time: The eagles, sent by Manwë, Eru's highest-ranking Valar, at Eru's bidding, 'deliver from evil' (personifying God's answer to the plea in the corresponding line of the Lord's Prayer) the good people of Middle-Earth, for example in the Battle of the Five Armies told in *The Hobbit* or in the rescue of Frodo and Sam from Mount Doom and the simultaneously ongoing battle in front of the gates of Mordor in *The Lord of the Rings*. These instances of direct godly intervention are few and far between, however, so that "unlike the biblical God, Tolkien's Eru is a strikingly remote and disengaged figure" (Flieger 53). Although he is not always altogether present in the consciousness of the peoples of Middle-Earth, his word is still "the law in which [they] are made" (*MYTH* 87), and he remains the "Prime Mover – Eru, the One" (Flieger 55).

The Ainur

Eru Ilúvatar is a remote figure in the universe he created; the peoples of his world have more interaction, especially in the First and Second Age, with the angelic beings he "commanded […] to act only as governors […] but never to appear as gods themselves" (Birzer 55), spirits referred to as the *Ainur*. In the process of Creation, they split into two groups, the *Valar*, who are similar to the Archangels of Christian mythology (Birzer 53) and the *Maiar*, lesser angelic

beings who appear in different forms, the five wizards (called *Istari*, such as Gandalf) being one of them. "Essentially, they are the guardian angels and sub-creators" (Bernthal 81) of the secondary world. They, and especially the Valar, shape and govern the lands of Arda, making their home in the heavenly Valinor and overseeing life in Middle-Earth. The name *Valar* translates to *Powers* (Burns 2004: 175), but they are commonly seen as 'gods' by those they rule over, those populating Middle-Earth (Pearce 1998: 91). By this fact, again, the interpretation of the Ainur as a pagan pantheon of gods is shown to be wrong: They were not conceived as god-like figures by Tolkien, but are only sometimes perceived as gods within Middle-Earth. Another feature distinguishing them from heathen deities is that their nature is incorporeal; they can take such form as they please, when they desire to clothe themselves [*SIL* 11], being predisposed, individually, to a female or male appearance" (Hutton 95), but they are closer to the spiritual than to the physical plane, more spirits than persons.

The Ainur play a vital role already in the creation process: they are shown by Eru a vision of the world that is to be, as he has envisioned it in the creation music (see a following chapter), and some of them descend into this world after he has brought it into existence and shape it according to their own will within his primary design. They are essentially sub-creators, their "participatory joy in creation" and "the additional gift of free will" (Bernthal 93) bestowed upon them by Eru Ilúvatar as the Christian God bestows creativity and the freedom to express it upon his creatures. "They participate in the physical making of the world but could not have done so had not Eru first given them the theme [i.e. the outline of his plans for Arda]" (Flieger 55), so that Creation itself remains a divine act, but allows for interpretation by the sentient creations within the divine framework. Free will is a distinctive characteristic of God's, and Eru's, creatures, but they still live by divine guidance and grace.

Unlike the Creator himself, the Valar retain a very involved stance and presence in Arda, interacting quite naturally with all children of Ilúvatar but especially with the Elves in the early days of the world. In fact, even in the Third Age, the stage

of history that is recounted in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, they are still being remembered almost like in prayer by the last of the Elves that have remained that long in Middle-Earth, as this song, sung in the Hall of Fire in the house of Elrond at Rivendell, shows (*LOTR* 309):

A Elbereth Gilthoniel	*O Elbereth Starkindler,*
silivren penna míriel	*white-glittering, slanting down sparkling like a jewel,*
o menel aglar elenath!	*the glory of the starry host!*
Na-chaered palan-díriel	*Having gazed far away*
o galadhremmin ennorath,	*from the tree-woven lands of Middle-earth,*
Fanuilos, le linnathon	*to thee, Everwhite, I will sing,*
nef aear, sí nef aearon!	*on this side of the Sea, here on this side of the Ocean!*

Elbereth is the Elves' name for the Valar Varda, who fashioned sun, moon and stars and thereby brought light to Middle-Earth. She is often likened to the Virgin Mary and comparably called the Lady of Light, Queen of the Seas and White Lady. This connection is emphasised in another song recorded in *The Fellowship of the Rings* (*LOTR* 104, first and last stanza), sung by the High Elves Frodo and his companions encounter in the woodlands of the Shire:

Snow-white! Snow-white! O Lady clear!	*O Elbereth! Gilthoniel!*
O Queen beyond the Western Seas!	*We still remember, we who dwell*
O Light to us that wander here	*In this far land beneath the trees,*
Amid the world of woven trees!	*Thy starlight on the Western Seas.*

Both of these hymns to Elbereth have a prayer-like component, but mostly focus on praising the Valar. "Elvish chants are strung on melodic lines redolent of Benediction" (Caldecott 1999: 17). Particularly through the first element, they can indeed be compared to hymns directed at the Holy Virgin Mary, for example to *Hail, Queen of Heaven*[2] (see Burns 2011: 251) and by extension its Latin predecessor, the medieval plainchant *Ave, Maris Stella*, i.e. 'Hail, Star of the Sea', which Tolkien, raised on the mass held in Latin, would probably have favoured. The English version begins as follows:

Hail, Queen of heaven, the Ocean Star.
Guide the wanderer here below!
Thrown on life's surge we claim thy care.
Save us from peril and from woe.
Mother of Christ, Star of the Sea,
Pray for the wanderer. Pray for me.

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[2] a Marian hymn written by Father John Lingard (1771–1851)

In comparison of the Christian and the Tolkienian hymn, a striking similarity of certain motives used can be observed: both figures are closely linked to the stars and the sea, and both are appealed to to provide guidance for wanderers in the wild. Still, several figures in Tolkien's mythology have been attempted to be seen as the Middle-Earth version of Mary, such as the Elf-women Luthien, Galadriel and Arwen, but neither they nor Varda / Elbereth are clear-cut copies of the Mother of Christ. Most troublesome in these comparisons is the aspect of virginity, which has no parallel in the legendarium. In keeping with his desire to create an internally consistent secondary world, it seems that Tolkien chose not to include this element so as to not to make the link back to the Primary World too obvious and thereby disturb coherence of his sub-creation he sought to establish. Also, because his stories of Middle-Earth take place at a time when the Redemption of Mankind through the coming of Christ is still in the far-off future, there is no need for a role such as Mary's plays in the Christian mythology.

Another Valar that takes an active part in the goings-on of Middle-Earth, also in the later ages, is Manwë, the lord of winds and weather and all that lives in the air. His Christian counterpart is the Archangel Michael (Pearce 1998: 92), the protector of Mankind, intermediary between God and his creatures and the leader of the Lord's forces against evil. Manwë occupies a similar role in Arda, being Eru's first emissary among the children of Ilúvatar and leading the hosts of the Valar in the battles against the rogue Ainur Morgoth (for more details on Morgoth's rebellion against Ilúvatar see a later chapter). Again, however, Manwë is not simply the embodiment of Michael in Middle-Earth, but has his own distinctive characteristics that separate him from the Archangel; one of these, as already mentioned, is his lordship over the winds and birds of the world. Among those, the Eagles of Manwë take on a pivotal role, acting as the personifications of *deus ex machina* at the moments when Ilúvatar, through his messenger Manwë, directly intervenes in the events in Middle-Earth, as

illustrated by the examples given earlier.

The fact that Manwë has a specific domain at his command is an indicator for why many researchers insist on equalling the Valar with the pantheons of gods and goddesses prevalent in polytheistic religions. In the Roman and Greek as well as in the Nordic mythology, each of the godly figures controls a certain aspect of life and earth, and in a way, so do Tolkien's Valar. Aside from Manwë and Varda, the most well-known and most closely linked with the peoples of Middle-Earth are Ulmo, lord of the waters, and Aulë, the smith, who even goes so far as to create his own race, the Dwarves (which is why they are not among the peoples known as the Children of Ilúvatar, a more detailed account is to follow). Tolkien appears to have become aware of this diversion from the depiction of the Valar as angelic spirits in a monotheistic universe towards gods in their own right and with their distinct personalities and tried to iron out these discrepancies to the Christian mythology in his revisions of the text of *The Silmarillion*. Therefore, an identification of the Valar as a polytheistic pantheon is no longer plausible, while their view as representations of Archangels has gained more support in the primary and secondary literature.

The Children of Ilúvatar

Elves are, as Galadriel claims in the introductory sequence of Peter Jackson's 2001 film version of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, "immortal, wisest and fairest of all beings". They are the first of the 'Children of Ilúvatar', the creatures Eru conceived himself, in whose contrivance the Valar played no part (comp. Birzer 54, Flieger 76-77). Along with the Elves, the Men also number among the children of Ilúvatar, but the two races are clearly distinguished from one another. "In a feat of ingenious invention, or sub-creation, Tolkien […] distinguishes Men and Elves as being made directly 'in the image of God', essentially different from the rest of Creation" (Pearce 1998: 90-91), positioning them at the same level of creation that the humans occupy in the Christian concept of the Primary World. Examining the groups more closely from a Christian perspective, a possible interpretation of their distinctions is the perception of the Elves as

Mankind before the fall from grace, while the Men represent the state of Mankind today. The fall from grace is alluded to in the third chapter of Genesis (3:5-3:6) and stands for Adam and Eve's disobedience of God's word by letting themselves be tempted to eat fruit from a forbidden tree, which causes them to develop feelings of shame and for which they are banned from the garden of Eden before they can eat fruit from the Tree of Life and gain immortality. Through this 'original sin', Man has allegedly developed a predisposition towards evil and loses the close connection to God and concomitant traits.

In the divine schematic of Middle-Earth, the Elves are much more closely linked to Eru's representatives, the Valar, than the Men, and are even allowed to share the Undying Lands, where the Valar dwell, at one point. They are not the Valar's equals, but they sometimes seem to exist closer to the spiritual than to the material plain, and at the beginning of history, they cultivate quite personal relationships with their angelic overlords, culminating in marriages between Elves and lesser spirits, such as between the Elf-king Thingol and the Maiar Melian, the parents of Lúthien, who Tolkien identified his wife Edith with. In later ages of the fictional universe, it is the Elves who remember the Valar in songs and invocations, as discussed above, and who know to trust in their – and, through them, Eru's – divine guidance to manage the affairs of Middle-Earth.

Because they retain their closeness to the divine, the Elves possess many traits that crown them the height of Creation – they are closer to 'perfection' than Mankind will ever manage to be. First of all, Elves are immortal in the way that they do not die of natural causes, although they can be slain, for example in battle, or waste away from despair, but their life forces are bound to the world, and they endure as long as it endures and will only truly 'die' when the world itself comes to an end. In contrast, the life span of Man is shorter and ultimately reaches its natural end with old age, causing them to truly die and leave the world behind. A more detailed examination of the fates of Men and Elves from a Christian perspective will be undertaken in a later chapter.

Secondly, the Elves are the living embodiments of common standards of beauty and always appear in bodily perfection. These descriptions of Elrond and Cleborn and Galadriel, prominent Elven characters, taken from *The Lord of the Rings* (295, 461), show how Tolkien conveyed their bodily superiority by giving the readers recognisable vantage points to illustrate it:

> *The face of Elrond was ageless, neither old nor young, though in it was written the memory of many things both glad and sorrowful. His hair was dark as the shadows of twilight, and upon it was set a circlet of silver; his eyes were grey as a clear evening, and in them was a light like the light of stars. Venerable he was as a king crowned with many winters, and yet hale as a tried warrior in the fulness of his strength. He was the Lord of Rivendell and mighty among both Elves and Men.*

> *They [Celeborn and Galadriel] stood up to greet their guests, after the manner of Elves, even those who were accounted mighty kings. Very tall they were, and the Lady no less tall than the Lord; and they were grave and beautiful. They were glad wholly in white; and the hair of the Lady was of deep gold, and the hair of the Lord Celeborn was of silver long and bright; but no sign of age was upon them, unless it were in the depths of their eyes; for these were keen as lances in the starlight, and yet profound, the wells of deep memory.*

These characters also represent all that is good in the world of Middle-Earth, serving as focal characters exemplifying the kind of behavior Tolkien considered 'perfect' and worthy of being striven for in the context of his stories. Presenting these exemplary characters in such a favorable light is one of the ways in which the author tried to transmit his Christian values and instill them in his audience.

The third aspect of the Elves' superiority lies in their many talents and the way they always seem to successfully employ them to lead their lives in the best possible way. Whatever the Elves do, they do it well; and every skill they set their mind to they manage to become accomplished in. In the interrelationship between the two peoples, the Elves mostly occupy the positions of teachers and advisers of the Men, due to their longer life spans and correspondingly greater wealth of knowledge and experience. Ultimately, their desire for as complete knowledge and mastery as possible, driven by the wish to be able to ensure that all the world is safe and ordered, led to them succumbing to the temptations of evil themselves. "Tolkien saw an element of pride in the Elves, an unwillingness to be just Elves, not Valar or 'gods'. […] The problem is the same as Adam's" (Aldrich 95). In both cases, it is the people's pride that leads to their

downfall and estrangement from their Creator (see chapter 2.3).

Death and Afterlife

While the Elves were provided with seemingly obvious advantages by Eru Ilúvatar, he gave the gift He Himself prized most to His other, His favourite children, the Men, who contrary to the Elves were conceived as mortal. Tolkien did not regard his conception of death as a gift as contradictory to the Catholic understanding of death (Aldrich 98). On the contrary, he was of the opinion that the immortality of the Elves, although it might appear as the more desirable alternative, is in fact a curse rather than the blessing Mankind's ability to die is in his view. From the Catholic perspective, this is comprehensible, since believing Catholics have faith in the notion that after death, if they have lived a 'good' life by their religion's standards, they will be received in Heaven, which is their most profound wish. Therefore, the fate of Men directly parallels the Christian appreciation of death as the portal to a new and better life in the presence of God that Tolkien himself believed in and aspired.

Tolkien conceptualises death and afterlife in his mythology so that after death, the spirits of both Men and Elves are received in the Halls of Mandos, the Valar who rules over the deceased and passes judgement on them. There, each race awaits its fate: The Elves, who refer to Mandos' realm as the 'Halls of Awaiting' (*SIL* 68), spend an extended but not more closely defined period of time there before they are released back into the world to continue living their lives, meaning that they believe in an afterlife of reincarnation (Curry 112). This is the gravest distinction between the two peoples: "Mankind dies and leaves the world when its comparatively short span is over, whereas Elves do not die and are bound to the world for as long as it lasts" (Flieger 52). While the Men do also come to the Halls of Mandos after their death, they do not remain there but move on – to where, no-one knows except for Ilúvatar himself, who designed their fate. "The fact that the One has not revealed what he purposes […] illustrates Tolkien's concern that his myth should remain true to Christian

orthodoxy" (Pearce 1998: 120). Because Christ has not yet come to Middle-Earth and redeemed the world through his suffering, death and resurrection, it is not possible yet for Mankind to rise from the dead and join their God in his heavenly home, and since this Christian take on afterlife is not applicable for the Men of Tolkien's sub-created universe, their fate is left untold at that point. Even so, it is made clear that contrary to the Elves, the Men do not return to the world, but move beyond it (Aldrich 100). They are free from the endless wheel of death and rebirth the Elves are subjected to. "In Tolkien's view, the real escape from death is through death to eternal life […] the final Consolation, the Escape promised in the Gospels" (Flieger 28). Wherever the dead Men of Middle-Earth go, they can be glad to be allowed to leave their physical existence behind and await the arrival of their Savior Jesus Christ, as do the deceased Catholics in the Primary World.

The Question of Good and Evil

As has already been said, the distinction between the fictional races of Elves and Men can be traced back to the distinction between Mankind before and after the fall from grace in paradise. However, for the Men in Tolkien's mythology, "their lives come after the fall but do not cause it and are not part of it. This is a notable and important departure of Tolkien's mythos from the Christian one with which it is so often compared and associated" (Flieger 128). Instead, the Biblical situation is paralleled not in their behavior, but in the way the two races are presented. As a matter of fact, the underlying Catholic concept of the original sin is absent from the sub-created universe.

In further consequence of their claimed greater distance from the divine, the Men are more free than the Elves to "shape their life beyond the creational design" (Flieger 52), as they "are not bound for ever to the circles of the world" (*LOTR* 1394), while the fates of the Elves are inextricably linked with the fate of the whole world and cannot be separated from it. Therefore, Men are more prone to divert from the right path laid down by Ilúvatar, since they possess more freedom and free will than the Elves, and as a result are more likely to

turn towards evil. The race of Men as a whole is presented as less trustworthy and steadfast throughout Tolkien's narratives, but due to the godly accordance of free will, both Elves and Men carry the potential for both good and evil within them, and both choose the latter over the former at several pivotal moments in the history of the fictional world.

In spite of these indicative storylines, when his novels first became popular, many critics claimed that their primary weakness lies in the writer's strict adherence to black-and-white character design, meaning that all the heroes are wholly and truly good while the bad guys are wholly and truly evil and there is no arc of character development to add a certain credibility to this division. However, this allegation is easily refuted by the argumentation above: As it holds true for the Christian Primary World, it also holds true for the secondary world that it is every person's own choice in which direction they want to orientate themselves, and this choice is not made once, but again and again at every crossroads situation that comes up on the road of life of each individual. This proves that no-one is born either good or evil, although some may be more predisposed towards one or the other due to certain defining character or racial traits, but it is their choices that ultimately determine which faction characters belong to, and this affiliation can shift and change throughout their lives. Examples from the primary literature are the wizard Saruman, who is sent to Middle-Earth as a governor of Eru's good will and ends up a supporter and rival of the Dark Lord Sauron in the War of the Ring, and Gollum / Smeagol, a Hobbit-like creature whose mind is perverted by the One Ring he chances to find but who in the end manages to recover parts of his inherently good nature. Even the Elf-lady Galadriel, a figurehead for all that is righteous in Middle-Earth, experiences several moments of dark temptation throughout her life, such as when Frodo offers her the One Ring and she sees herself as a queen displacing Sauron, "not dark, but beautiful and terrible as the Morning and the Night! […] All shall love me and despair!" (*LOTR* 476). Her choice to refuse the power the Ring would grant her and, on a more general level, to refuse to succumb to the temptations of Evil, cements the moral constancy of her character within the

narrative as well as from an outside, Catholic perspective.

Other races

Along with the Children of Ilúvatar, several other peoples dwell in the lands of Middle-Earth. The most familiar to Tolkien readers are probably the Hobbits, "an unobtrusive but very ancient people, more numerous formerly than they are today; for they love peace and quiet and good tilled earth" (*LOTR* 1). This quotation makes it clear that one of the purposes the race of Hobbits had in the agenda of his writings was to convey Tolkien's criticism of the industrialisation process and the resulting disregard for and exploitation of nature (Carpenter 146-147). Accordingly, "they do not and did not understand or like machines more complicated than a forge-bellows, a water-mill, or a hand-loom" (*LOTR* 1) and inhabit rural areas, organised in village communities. They can be classified as "a branch of the specifically human race" (*LET* 158) and come into play in the Third Age of the history of Middle-Earth; before that time that is described in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, there is no mention of the 'little folk', as they are often referred to. Gunton (134) describes them as "an idealised – and sometimes rather sentimentalised? – version of the meek who shall inherit the earth", and it is true that the Hobbits unite many qualities that their inventor valued, starting with their appreciation of nature. Their way of living in harmony with their surroundings is also a feature of the Elves, but those have a different motivation, as their very existence is tied to that of the natural world. The Hobbits, by contrast, do not believe themselves to be vital to the turnings of the world and therefore hold to the premise that they are not to mess with it either. This lack of self-importance is a distinguishing feature of the Hobbit race that ties in with its Christian origins.

With the recent release of the three-part film version of *The Hobbit* (2012 – 2014), the fans' attention has been drawn to another race of Middle-Earth: the Dwarves[3]. They are "great miners and craftsmen in the mountain halls", again

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[3]   This way of spelling the plural form of *dwarf* has been used by Tolkien as a modern version of the historically correct plural word *dwarrows* (*LET* 17).

characterised by Galadriel's speech from the *Fellowship*-film, and, at least in the book, are not presented in an altogether favourable light. *The Hobbit* (247) describes them as

> not heroes, but calculating folk with a great idea of the value of money; some are tricky and treacherous and very bad lots; some are not, but are decent enough people like Thorin and Company, if you don't expect too much.

Again, Tolkien's own values speak to his readers through this passage and inform the characterisation of this race.

Another reason for the Dwarves' standing apart from the other races of Middle-Earth is that they were not created by Ilúvatar Himself, but by one of the Valar, Aulë (*SIL* 37): After Ilúvatar has created his Children, they are put into an enchanted sleep, only to wake up when the world of Middle-Earth has been perfectly readied for their arrival. Aulë, however, grows impatient with the lack of life on earth and forms his own creatures out of stone, thereby extending the creative freedom the Valar were given to help shape the world too far. He is reprimanded by Eru and has to take on the task of destroying his Dwarves. Before Aulë can go through with this, though, Eru intervenes and grants the Dwarves the right to inhabit His universe alongside His own races, but decrees that their awakening must be delayed until after the Children of Ilúvatar have come into the world. "Aulë's unquestioning acceptance of Eru's chastisement and his willingness to destroy his creatures recalls the unquestioning obedience of biblical Abraham and his willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac at God's command [Genesis 22, 1-19]" (Flieger 100). Both Aulë and Abraham exemplify the Christian virtues of piety and reverence as channels for enabling them to own up to their disobedience and face the consequences through their trust in God's wisdom and justice. The readers of *The Silmarillion* are shown the benefits of such behavior, which promotes Tolkien's Christian world view.

In a mocking imitation of Ilúvatar's creations, the evil lords of Middle-Earth, first Morgoth and then Sauron, fashion their own races through enslaving and perverting existing creatures until they morph into something new and bad

through and through, these characters serving as the exception to the rule that no-one is born evil. *The Silmarillion* recounts the intrusion of Evil into the universe as follows (4ff): Through the diversion of one of the most powerful Ainur, Melkor, from Eru's visions of the world, many other spirits were corrupted and Melkor, then called Morgoth, became the first Dark Lord, to rule those he had turned from Ilúvatar.

Theologically speaking, evil is "a force which enslaves the good creation. Evil is an essentially alien power which corrupts and destroys the work of God" (Gunton 128). Accordingly, the Evil in Arda cannot create, only distort what has been created by the forces of good, either by warping its character through temptation and fear, or by torturing it into a foul, twisted mirror of itself. "Just as the devils of Christian mythology are fallen angels, so all the creatures of the Dark Lord are hideous parodies of creatures from the true creation: goblins of elves, trolls of those splendid creatures the ents, and so on (Gunton 132-133). Imitating the Istari as guardians of the good, Morgoth created the Balrogs; imitating the Elves, he created the Orcs; ages later, Saruman followed in his footsteps and perfected the evil fighting race in the Uruk-Hai. Each of the 'good' races has an evil counterpart that has its origins in them.

2.2. The Creation of Arda

It has already been explained at several points in this thesis that Tolkien's writing process was characterised by a pattern of constant revising and editing. One of the author's particular concerns that guided these processes of rewriting is his desire to make his sub-created world as consistent with the Primary world, or more precisely his Catholic view of it, as possible, while still preserving the internal logical consistency of the narrative. Therefore, "it is scarcely surprising that Tolkien's own version of the Creation in *The Silmarillion* bears a remarkable similarity to the Creation story in the book of Genesis [...] Tolkien was careful to

ensure that his own Creation myth did not contradict the account in Genesis" (Pearce 1998: 84-85). Although it is non-contradictory, there are some striking differences between the Christian and the Tolkienian tale of Creation. These, the writer decreed, "were supposed to be due to the fact that it was written not from the human point of view, but from that of the Noldorian Elves" (Caldecott 2005: 97). The basic structure of the two Creation myths is nonetheless similar. Both the Primary World and Tolkien's fictional universe are created by a One God who outlines the shape of the world as well as the rough course of its history, with its distinct starting and end point. In the legendarium, "Eru created the universe from nothing, *ex nihilo*. He did not shape it from something preexisting, as in practically all pagan mythologies […] the created world is not eternal. History is linear, with a beginning and an end, not cyclical, as in many pagan systems" (Agoy 78). Here, the much-debated claim that Middle-Earth is rather modeled on Paganism than Catholicism is refuted once again.

The history of Middle-Earth is divided into 'ages' that are separated by events that work fundamental changes upon the way of life in the world, usually through a triumph over a threat of the dark powers, after which a new order arises. In this way, "every age of Middle-earth mirrors the Christian tale through the four components of creation, degeneration, sacrifice, and renewal" (Kerry 37).

In terms of the actual mechanisms of Creation, the main similarity between the two accounts lies in the use of words to bring the world into being. In Genesis 1:3, "God said, 'Let there be light', and there was light". In *The Silmarillion* (9), Eru says, "Eä! Let these things be!", and Eä, 'the World that Is', comes into existence. In both instances, the word and its physical manifestation are one and the same; "the word has the power to do what it says, to realize what it signifies" (Zimmer 53). The words of the God-figures contain both the meaning and the realisation of what they say, and through speaking the words, the physical world is created (Caldecott 2005: 98). This also ties in with the Gospel according to John, where the first verse states that "in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). "In

Tolkien's fictive world, the creative principles of Genesis and John are combined" (Flieger 59).

The Music of the Ainur

While it is the Word that ultimately creates the physical universe Arda, the world is first conceived as a mere vision by Eru, which he shows to his Ainur as a piece of music (*SIL* 3):

> And it came to pass that Ilúvatar called together all the Ainur and declared to them a mighty theme, unfolding to them things greater and more wonderful than he had yet revealed; and the glory of its beginning and the splendour of its end amazed the Ainur, so that they bowed before Ilúvatar and were silent.

Contained within this music are the entire history of the universe as well as its basic shapes, but it is not the "physical act of creation, but only its blueprint. It is the pattern for the world *in potentia*." (Flieger 58). Nor is it by any means complete – Eru only decided the outline of the world that is to come into being, leaving the details to his Ainur, who he imbued with his own creative wisdom and knowledge so that they could work freely within the confines of his primary design, and they weave new melodies to shape the world according to their will, embellishing Eru's theme with their own thoughts and visions. Their song is finally made real through the word "Eä!", Eru's command to "Let the things be!".

The version of the universe that is conceptualised in the Music of the Ainur follows in its historical development the course that Eru has laid out in his first musical representation, which "was to be the greatest of all music until the end of days, when God would create an even greater theme" (Birzer 53). This "end of days" can be equated with the Incarnation and Passion of Christ (Caldecott 2005: 189), who in the secondary world has not yet been revealed, his Coming situated in such an extremely remote future that it cannot yet be anticipated, which is why religion in the Catholic sense is barely practiced in Middle-Earth, if at all. However, when the projected history of the fictional world has run its course, it will be renewed in a new and final theme, as the Christian world will be renewed in the Second Coming of Christ, when God will intervene directly, deal out judgement and end all evil in the might of his powers that are then

revealed to his people.

Creation as sub-creation

The Creation myth of Genesis leaves no doubt that God is the only participant in the act, not delegating any part of the process. The Music of the Ainur sets the Creation of the fictional universe in direct contrast to the work of the sole almighty Creator of the Christian mythology. This is due to Tolkien's adherence to the concept underlying his entire work, sub-creation. As has already been discussed in an earlier chapter, he was of the opinion that the ideas for his mythology did not originate within himself, but were sent to him from God so that he as a writer could shape his own version of God's reality without diverting from its true source. In the Ainulindalë, "Tolkien projected his idea of sub-creation back to the beginning of all things, and conceived it in terms of music." (Pearce 1998: 88). Although the participatory efforts of the Ainur are the defining reason for why Arda is the way it is, they are not its creators, but only its "subordinate co-creators" (Holloway 183), whose sub-creativity takes over where Eru's primary creative concept of the world leaves off, the boundaries of which they recognise and respect as the boundaries of their creative freedom. The Ainur, too, steer clear of the temptation of hubris; they do not try to usurp Eru's place or consider their own ideas for the world better than the ones He has proposed. In this, "the Ainulindale illustrates the Catholic understanding that true freedom and full actualization of the self blossom out of obedience to God" (Bernthal 95). Judging from the Catholic viewpoint, the best and most worthy lives are those lived in fear and respect of the Lord's rules while simultaneously making use of the personal freedom He grants each of his subjects, not least by seeking individual fulfillment through sub-creativity. The Ainur are the clearest reflections of this view of life in Tolkien's sub-created universe.

The Secret Fire

Free will as a basis for successful sub-creation plays an essential role in the mythological world, as it is the very nature of how that world was created and

how life in it is lived, and was instilled in all his creatures by the Creator-God Eru. A life of sub-creation is made possible by the 'Secret Fire' or 'Flame Imperishable', a force flowing from Eru to all his creatures and enabling them to become sentient, intelligent beings capable of independent thought and creativity. Without the Flame Imperishable, intelligent life is impossible; creatures that were not created by Ilúvatar do not possess it and must therefore be constantly governed and guided by their maker, since they cannot function on their own. For this reason, the Dark Lords of Middle-Earth could only pervert existing life but not create new life – they did not possess the Secret Fire, "for it is with Ilúvatar" (*SIL* 4). The Dwarves are an exceptional people: they were not created by Ilúvatar himself, but since Aulë had not acted out of malintent, they were granted access to the Secret Fire and allowed to evolve into self-sufficient creatures.

"The Book of Wisdom in the Old Testament describes something that appears very similar to Tolkien's "Secret Fire". Widsom, or *Sophia*, is said to precede the creation of the world and to be placed at its very heart (Wisd. 7:25-26)" (Caldecott 2005: 137). The Flame Imperishable is likewise placed at the heart of the physical universe Arda when it is brought into being, as Eru promises: "And I will send forth into the Void the Flame Imperishable, and it shall be at the heart of the World, and the World shall Be" (*SIL* 9).

Another interpretation of the Secret Fire is that is "was meant to suggest the Holy Ghost" (Kilby 35) as the spiritual power that guides believing Christians on their path to a religiously successful and fulfilled life. The Holy Ghost is the part of the Trinity that is least obviously present in Tolkien's mythology, which is why its alignment with the Flame Imperishable is an attractive hypothesis. Kilby (59) also states that Tolkien himself confirmed this correlation in one of their conversations. Both Christian elements serve as the life-giving essence that the Secret Fire serves as in Middle-Earth.

The Coming of Evil

In order to enable them to actively participate in the creation process, Eru gave each of the Ainur parts of his wisdom and knowledge. "To Melkor among the Ainur had been given the greatest gifts of power and knowledge, and he had a share in all the gifts of his brethren" (*SIL* 4), and therefore, Melkor perceives himself as superior to his kin and seeks to resemble Ilúvatar rather than them. He envies Ilúvatar's ability to create life and tries to give himself the same ability by searching for the Flame Imperishable, but because it originates and is always with Ilúvatar, he cannot find it. Melkor begins to resent having to stick to the theme Ilúvatar proposed and begins to come up with his own notes, which bring the music into disharmony and cause some of his fellow singers to follow Melkor's theme rather than Ilúvatar's. Twice, Ilúvatar weaves a new theme around Melkor's discordant song, until it is incorporated into the original music, for, as Ilúvatar explains (*SIL* 6):

> no theme may be played that hath not its uttermost source in me, nor can any alter the music in my despite. For he that attempteth this shall prove but mine instrument in the devising of things more wonderful, which he himself hath not imagined.

Eru nullifies Melkor's meddling "using even the designs of the Enemy to bring about good" (Caldecott 1999: 32). Thus, Melkor is shown that his efforts to disengage himself from Ilúvatar have failed, and he "was filled with shame, of which came secret anger" (*SIL* 6). Due to this anger, he descends into the world with the Valar and tries to wreck all that they have created, until the battle him "for the dominion of Arda" (*SIL* 12) and manage to restore the world to such a degree that the Children of Ilúvatar can awaken in it despite the blight of Melkor, who is imprisoned in the halls of Mandos, judge of the dead.

Melkor can be seen as a fallen angel, reminiscent of Lucifer, who is commonly treated as the equivalent of Satan (Pearce 1998: 91). Melkor does not only believe he should be ranked as Eru's equal, but tries to usurp his godly "capacity to create – and especially to bestow free will, the one creative power which is denied to him" (Bernthal 96). Thus, Melkor introduces the Evil to Middle-Earth, as he himself is its primary personification, the first diversion from Eru's divine plan. "Asserting oneself against God through sub-creation is the original sin that blights Middle-earth" (Bernthal 106) and from which all further

evil evolves; it goes against everything Eru and his Creation, and even the faithful Christian Tolkien, stand for.

2.3. Rebellions against the Heavens

Due to Melkor's rejection of his place in Ilúvatar's heavenly court, driven by his desire to become his Creator's equal and possess His powers, the concepts of evil, "the desire for being apart from God" (McGrath 180), and sin are established in the sub-created universe even before it actually exists as a physical world. Therefore, a "desire to possess is the cardinal temptation in Tolkien's cosmology" (Flieger 109), the deadly sin Melkor has anchored in it. This possessiveness goes hand in hand with the belief that possession of the coveted trait, object or ability will allow the possessor to raise himself up to the same level or even above his betters. Sinful behavior in Middle-Earth usually follows this or a similar pattern, as "Tolkien's insight about sin, observed throughout history, is its insane repetitiveness" (Bernthal 117). Hence, following the initial transgression of Melkor even before the birth of the world, the primary biblical temptation "you will be like God" (Genesis 3:5) has spawned several uprisings against the divine schematic of Arda. Two additional examples are described below.

The Downfall of the Elves

While the "Ainulindalë" in *The Silmarillion* gives an account of the Creation of Arda, the "Valaquenta" focuses on the history of the Elves in the earliest ages of the universe. Their fall from the grace of Valinor is central to this narrative.

One of the primary weaknesses of the Elves is their pride, as has already been mentioned. Especially at the onset of their history they are not always content with their status in Middle-Earth's society, considering themselves deserving of more knowledge and power than they inherently possess. Their original intentions, the protection and preservation of a status quo they tend to idealise, can be seen as good, but still lead them to seek for knowledge beyond their grasp. At one point, this desire is exploited by Melkor, who has falsely

convinced the Valar of his redemption and therefore has been set free, "and he offered them the service of his lore and labour in any great deed they would do" (*SIL* 67). The Noldor, the proudest and most accomplished of the Elven peoples, "took delight in the hidden knowledge that he could reveal to them; and some hearkened to words it would have been better for them never to have heard" (*SIL* 67). Melkor's words call to mind the temptation of the snake Adam and Eve give in to in the garden Eden: "when the woman saw […] that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate" (Genesis 3:6). Both in the biblical and in the mythological scenario, the promises by the covertly evil facilitator of the characters' prideful desires are "lies breathed through silver" (*MYTH* 85). "Like Satan, his mythological equivalent, Morgoth is "a liar and the father of lies" (Gospel of St. John 8:44)" (Birzer 89-90).

At that time in the First Age, the Elves dwelled with the Valar in their heavenly home Valinor, having been allowed to come there from Middle-Earth were they had awoken to live in closer kinship with the powers of the world. Melkor, detesting this kinship, continued spinning his web of lies among the Noldor, causing them to believe that they were being held captive in Valinor against their will to keep their powers from growing to rival those of the Valar. He achieved his goal when two groups of Noldorian Elves left Valinor to establish new strongholds in Middle-Earth. Although the Valar let them go, they committed many atrocities, for example slaughtering coast-dwelling Elves and stealing their ships to be able to escape via the Sea. For their actions, they are banned from ever returning to Valinor by Mandos, Master of Doom, who also held Melkor captive after his first uprising against the Valar. The Elves' exile from Valinor parallels the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Paradise; both are the result of wrongfully acquired knowledge and disobedience of the divine, motivated by essentially good people lending evil their ear.

Fëanor

The catalyst for the rift between the Elves and the Valar, aside from Melkor's

whisperings, was the Elven prince Fëanor, "of all the Noldor, then or after, the most subtle in mind and the most skilled in hand" (*SIL* 64). His crowning work are the Silmarils, three jewels containing within them the light of Valinor itself. "As Melkor is the first of the powers to fall, Fëanor is the first of the Elves, and both encounter their temptation within the process of sub-creation" (Bernthal 110). Fëanor is so captivated by the wonder he has created that he looses sight of his own position in the great scheme of things – he is not a creator in his own right, but a sub-creator, using the materials and gifts he was given by Eru. Tolkien writes that "perversion and the Fall occur when the sub-creator wishes to be the Lord and God of his private creation" (*LET* 145), which exactly the way Fëanor sees himself. He grows reluctant to share the Silmarils with anyone, locking them up in a vault, and becomes ever more proud of himself and his product.

When Melkor destroys the Trees that lit up Valinor, the light of the Blessed Realm remains only in the Silmarils which he lusted after for a long time but was unable to cheat from Fëanor. The Valar ask Fëanor to allow them to destroy the Silmarils and free the light within so that it might return to Valinor, but his response is negative: "This thing I will not do of my free will. But if the Valar will constrain me, then I shall know indeed that Melkor is of their kindred." (*SIL* 83). During their conversation, Melkor breaks into Fëanor's house and steals the Silmarils, causing their maker to succumb to an anger- and pride-fuelled madness in which he convinces the Noldor to leave Valinor: "Why should we longer serve the jealous Valar, who cannot keep us nor even their own realm secure from their Enemy?" (87-88). His people, already riled up by the dark infiltrations of Melkor, agree, and, fearing to lose more to the Valar and their land, depart on stolen ships and are banished from the heavenly realm. Again, their and especially Fëanor's fall from paradisaical grace are caused by hubris and rebellion against well-meaning the heavenly forces.

The Downfall of Númenor

As is recounted in the "Akallabêth" in *The Silmarillion* (309-338), the

Númenoreans are a people among Men who rejected Melkor / Morgoth when he first came to power in Middle-Earth and instead fought against him alongside the Elves and the Valar. For their loyalty, they were rewarded with a land of their own, an island raised from the sea about halfway between Middle-Earth and Valinor. However, as all Mankind, they remained banned from entering the Undying Lands, because it was not the fate of Man to live forever in the Blessed Realm. When they first settled on their Isle, the Númenoreans built a temple there and worshipped Ilúvatar; but once again, it was Melkor who turned them from the true God and convinced them to worship him instead. "Melkor precipitated the restlessness [of Men], lying that death was a punishment, not a gift. Men believed Melkor, and they grew to resent Ilúvatar" (Birzer 57). They were led to believe that Melkor was a God himself and knew and would share with them the secret of eternal life by his emissary, Sauron, who lived among them. "Just as the earliest men had been tempted with knowledge, so too were the Númenoreans" (Birzer 98), recreating Adam and Eve's mistakes.

Sauron allies himself with the Númenoreans and persuades them to launch an attack upon the shores of Valinor and the Valar "to wrest from them everlasting life within the Circles of the World" (*SIL* 333). "Their attack is really directed against God – Eru Iluvatar – who has made the boundaries" (Bernthal 115), allowing the Men to move through death to a higher existence outside of this world, his gift to their race, which Sauron and Melkor have made them forget to see as such. They only regard their mortality as a punishment, but do not understand that "a divine 'punishment' is also a divine 'gift'" (*LET* 286). However, for their revolt against their godly fate, true divine punishment ensues: When the fleet reaches Valinor, "the Valar laid down their government of Arda. But Ilúvatar showed forth his power, and he changed the fashion of the world", opening a chasm in the sea in which the Númenorean ships sink and rounding the surface of the world so that Valinor and the Undying Lands around it are no longer accessible from Middle-Earth. The Land of Gift, the island of Númenor, is destroyed and cast into the sea. The way this rich land meets its end is commemorative of the myth of Atlantis, which was similarly drowned by the

wrath of a God because its inhabitants had grown unfaithful.

The Christian story that is most prominent here is that of Noah and his Arc: Those among the Númenoreans who had remained faithful to Eru were spared the fate of their kin and allowed to sail to Middle-Earth abord ships they had built for the occasion, because "no matter how foul the vast majority of humanity might become, God still protects his faithful" (Birzer 55).

2.4. Christlike Figures

In the previous chapter, the focus lay on the fates of peoples and nations that are recounted in *The Silmarillion*, where little of the storytelling centers on individual characters. In *The Lord of the Rings*, however, the perspective on the narrative is a different one, picking out focal characters whose journeys the readers follow as they progress through the book's pages. Several of these characters go through a passion-like process, which is why they can be compared to Jesus Christ. It must be remembered, though, that none of them are direct representations of Christ in Tolkien's mythology, as none of them are direct descendents of God. Therefore, they do not experience Incarnation, Crucifixion and Resurrection and do not bring about the true salvation of Middle-Earth in the Christian sense.

The prime examples of figures resembling Christ are Frodo, Sam, Gandalf, Aragorn and Faramir, all of whom personify an aspect of his character: "Gandalf is the prophet, Aragorn is the "Christian" king, Frodo is the sacrificial priest, Sam is the common man, and Faramir is the man who knows and respects his place in God's creation" (Birzer 86). Furthermore, they all actively decided to align themselves with the forces of good, consciously positioning themselves against evil in disregard of the cost to themselves. Their lives follow "a Eucharistic pattern" (Bernthal 30). A succession of events of Catholic sacramental significance is most easily traceable in Aragorn's life. Comparisons between Jesus and Gandalf can be narrowed down to their sacrificial death and rebirth.

Frodo

As the main character in *The Lord of the Rings*, and with an arduous life's journey of his own to go through, Frodo deserves to be examined more closely as a substitute of Christ in Middle-Earth. The Hobbit exemplifies "the Christian dimension of humility and ultimate dependency" (Curry 29), unconscious of his own worth and trusting instead in the worth of his mission, which "increasingly resembles that of Christ as the journey approaches its end" (Caldecott 2005: 55). The carrying of the Ring can be interpreted as an analogy of Jesus carrying the cross, partway aided by Simeon as Frodo is aided by Sam. In Shelob's Lair, the Garden of Gethsemane is revisited, "not least because Frodo is betrayed to Shelob under the cover of darkness by a companion (Gollum)" (Caldecott 2005: 55), as Jesus was betrayed by Judas. Contrary to Jesus Christ, however, Frodo is overcome by his desire for power in the end, as it proves stronger than his selflessness and determination to save others if not himself. "As an act of free will, [this is] a recapitulation of the Fall of Adam" (Flieger 152). Having his hero fail at the ultimate end is Tolkien's way of stressing the inadequacy of the common man to resist temptation and overpower his tendencies towards sin. Still, through divine intervention, all is turned to good account and Frodo is relieved of his burden and rewarded for his suffering with a final journey to the Blessed Realm and eternal peace, as is granted to the faithful Christians at the end of a religiously well-lived life.

3. Final Commentary: The Christian Method

It has been determined that a primary aim of Tolkien's attempts at sub-creation was the desire to develop a pre-Christian universe that still complemented the Catholic theology. Traces of their Christian heritage have been found in his stories, and their forms and functions have been analysed. What remains now for the concluding chapter of this thesis is to examine what effect the inclusion of these Christian elements has on the readers of his texts, and whether or not these texts are successful constructions towards fulfilling their writer's goals.

3.1. The Reception of Tolkien's Stories

When *The Fellowship of the Ring* first appeared in 1954, followed by *The Two Towers* later the same year and *The Return of the King* in the following year, the literary world was confronted with a quest narrative in the archaic style of Medieval heroic epics, full of strange creatures and continuous internal references to earlier events of the mythological world – for it was an entire new world that the author had devised as the setting of his fantastic story. It is likely that no-one new quite what to make of the book, which had originally been conceived as a sequel to the children's book *The Hobbit*, published in 1937. Tolkien had exceeded the scope and spun away from the narrative of that well-received little story, to confront darker and more weighty themes and address issues that lay close to his heart, through a tale he considered the best medium of transportation for the message he wanted to invoke in his readership.

As to what this message is, he is often misunderstood, his work viewed as an allegorical treatment of the Second World War, an interpretation that, while possible, disregards the finer points and does not recognise the true essence of the story. Tolkien himself commented on this fallacy in the Foreword to the Second Edition of *The Lord of the Rings* (xxvi):

> I cordially dislike allegory in all its manifestations […] I much prefer history, true or feigned, with its varied applicability to the thought and experience of the readers. I think that many confuse 'applicability' with 'allegory'; but one resides in the freedom of the

reader, and the other in the purposed dominion of the author.

In the Foreword, a short treatise on his motivation and the writing process, he managed to keenly isolate the one aspect that has perhaps held the greatest appeal for readers, having fuelled the novel's ongoing popularity from its first publication until today: Its applicability, the chance for every reader to recognise their own life's situation and draw their own conclusions from the tale, always with the comforting certainty that no matter how dark things seem, all will be alright in the end.

How does Tolkien achieve his audience's conviction of his story's consoling subtext? It is informed by his writing's Christian basis, its message the same promise of an ultimate happy ending that the Gospel purports. In "On Fairy-Stories", he presents the eucatastrophic tale, the kind of story that ends happily after a surprise twist at a particularly desperate moment in its narrative (*OFS* 68). The primary example of this type of story is the Christian tale of evangelium, "the supreme Good News in human history" (Murray 48), the True Myth that Tolkien strove to emulate.

The Mythical Method

In order to better understand the way Tolkien's mythological storytelling works, the 1923 essay "Ulysses, Order and Myth" by T. S. Eliot can be taken into consideration. In this short review-like text, Eliot claims that by utilising a well-known myth such as the Odyssey as the backdrop for his novel, James Joyce found a revolutionary way of employing the shared knowledge that this kind of myth provides to structure, tell and present his tale. Founding it on myth also links the modernist story with the literary past, "manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity" (Eliot).

The parallel between Joyce's application of the ancient Greek myth of the Odyssey and Tolkien's application of the Christian myth of the Bible is obvious: Both draw on literary traditions that have long entered into common knowledge,

at least of the culture in which the two authors operate, and use the narratives of these traditions as bases for their own. The effect is an elementary recognisability of the stories' basic components on the part of the reader, which aids in relating their contents and messages, if any. Another gain of this method of storytelling is the level of depth the original myths provide their more contemporary versions with. They each carry the weight of the entire literary tradition built upon the respective mythological tale, which adds to the levels of meaning and the significance of the individual narratives.

Aside from the added ponderosity, using myth as the basis for one's story also has an auxiliary explanatory effect on it. "It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history" (Eliot). It has already been thematised that Tolkien found the reality of wars, industrialisation and environmental disaster he faced every day hard to bear and tried to invoke a more refined version of the world in his texts. What has often been derided as 'escapism' is, however, a method of storytelling for which Eliot coined the term 'mythical method'. The mythical method explains a story world by putting it in the context of a familiar myth in order to facilitate understanding and to raise the positive significance of supposedly ordinary or even terrible events. Earlier discussions have already revealed that Tolkien employed the hopeful message of the Christian myth to embolden his own tales of horror and suffering with the promise of a positive outcome that awaits at the very end. His way of making sense of the world by examining it through the lens provided by his Catholic faith and the philosophies it espouses could, in keeping with Eliot, be termed the 'Christian method'.

The Tolkienian Message

The effects of the Christian method of writing on the readers of the corresponding texts can only be guessed at at this point, since it is impossible to correctly anticipate what each reader is left with after finishing one of Tolkien's books without collecting additional data, which would have gone

beyond the scope of this thesis. However, judging from accounts given in the secondary literature as well as in reviews or letters on the texts, it can be deduced that whether or not a reader is aware of their Christian foundation, the overall effect is one of relief and hopefulness. Again, the revelation that all's well that ends well is the most important trigger of the audience's reaction.

If a reader approaches Tolkien's work with the knowledge of its religious origins or with the explicit intent of studying the effect these origins have on the stories, they might glean from them something similar to the researcher Stephen Lawhead, who describes his reading experience as follows:

> This is precisely what I saw in *The Lord of the Rings*: the visible trail of God's passing, the hallowed glow of his lingering presence. In his massive fantasy epic, Tolkien paints a convincing portrait of Goodness, Beauty, Truth (Lawhead 165).

Tolkien gives his readers the confidence to continue on even when times are hard, to retain the belief that there is some good in the world even when it cannot be seen, to cling to truth even when all seems false. He teaches them not to despair, because their paths will eventually lead them to their happy endings. His audience gets to know that there is always hope. In Christian terms, he reminds them to keep their faith, because God is there, guiding them towards salvation.

3.2. Evaluating Success

When it comes to judging whether or not J. R. R. Tolkien was successful as a storyteller, it is important to distinguish between the different levels of success he could have achieved. On the one hand, it is undoubtedly true that he was highly successful regarding the number of books he sold and the amount of money he made. His enduring popularity is another marker of success on that level. On the other hand, the success regarding his own writing goals is less easily evaluated, but certainly meant more to Tolkien himself.

First of all, he wanted to "try his hand at a really long story that would hold the attention of readers, amuse them, delight them, and at times maybe excite them or deeply move them" (*LOTR* xxiv). The fact that his stories are still widely read

and loved is proof that he accomplished this mission. If he had not held their attention, his readers would not be so eager to debate the various aspects of his books, would not focus on even the tiniest details to gain more information on the story world, would not meet and dress up and enact scenes that excited or moved them – Tolkien's stories live on in their reader's lives because they continue to amuse, delight, excite and move them today.

Second, he set out to sub-create a secondary world that mirrors the Christian theology of the Primary World without reducing the result to a mere allegorical representation rather than an independent but complementary universe. This is why, as has so often been stated already, he did not include explicitly Christian or Catholic elements, symbols, or rites, but focused on infusing his tales with the morals and philosophies of this belief system. As the analyses undertaken in the present thesis show, this goal was achieved as well – while there are myriads of Christian facets in the stories of Middle-Earth, they are not forced upon the audience but underlie and inform the narratives. "*lo sh'mo bo sh'mo*, 'Where the Name is not uttered, there the Name is present'. For some thousand pages Tolkien refrained from taking the Lord's name in vain; invisible, it illuminates the whole" (Madsen 47). Tolkien managed to convey the matters close to his heart without spelling them out for his readers to stumble over; he managed to instill in them the belief in the ultimate good end; and he managed to tell Christian stories without calling them that. His texts, the attempts to fulfill of his personal writing goals, can definitely be called successful.

Conclusion

This diploma thesis has set out to trace the Christian influence and identify and evaluate its manifestations in the works of John Ronald Reuel Tolkien. In the research that has been done on the writer since his first successful publications in the 1950s, it could not yet be determined which role, if any, his fervent Catholic faith plays in his texts. Therefore, the present thesis makes the case for a full acknowledgement of its relevance, basing this assessment on a close reading of the primary literature as well as of commentary by the author himself

and previously undertaken studies in the secondary literature.

In a first step towards determining the extent of his belief's influence on his writings, the importance of Catholicism in Tolkien's everyday life was discussed in a chronological examination of key moments that shaped his faith and world view. It is noteworthy that he frequently connected his faith with the people in his life; first with his convert mother and his guardian, a priest, then with his comrades in arms, and later with his colleagues and friends in his university environment. It was his goal to give voice to the concerns of himself and his surroundings, using the Christian belief system to make sense of a world he found was moving in the wrong direction. As a sub-creator, a poet granted his talents and ideas by God, he began to shape his own mythological world in which the Catholic ideals and the order of the world were still upheld.

In the second part of this thesis, key aspects of the Christian background of Tolkien's fictional universe are presented and valued with regard to the transference of content from the Primary to the secondary world. The focus, as the thesis' title suggests, lies on similarities between the Christian and the Tolkienian myth: The worlds share a structure, as both were created *ex nihilo* by one God-figure, who exists in a void surrounded by angelic beings and populates the world with creatures made in his likeness. Middle-Earth is brought into being through music and the godly command and then shaped by the Valar, the Archangels, who govern the secondary world in its God's, Ilúvatar's, stead. As does the Bible, Tolkien's narratives include several accounts of rebellions against the Heavens caused by initially good, obedient creatures falling prey to the temptations of Evil and disobeying their God. For all that, there are also characters who go through a Passion-like process, personifying aspects of Christ himself in the way they lead their lives.

Finally, the third big chapter of this thesis provides a comment on the analyses undertaken within its pages by examining the effects of Tolkien's usage of the Christian myth as the basis for his sub-creation. Building on a treatise by T. S. Eliot, the concept of the 'Christian method' of storytelling is introduced: It

transports the message of the ultimate Happy Ending of the Gospel to the readers and gives a more profound meaning to events in the story world by infusing them with the positive Christian spirit.

Evaluating his success in achieving the aims he set himself and his work, it becomes obvious that Tolkien was a highly successful writer not only in monetary terms, but also in the terms of his narrative goals. He wanted to write stories that would draw his readers in and awaken strong emotions, and he wanted to do this in a way that would not contradict but complement the Christian Primary World. He met both of these demands.

The present thesis has managed to effectively answer the research question under consideration, "Can a Christian influence be deduced from Tolkien's works, and if yes, how does it manifest in the texts?", by first stating that yes, Tolkien's writings exhibit definitive signs of their Christian heritage, and then detailing the various similarities between the Primary and the secondary world in terms of their organisation, creation and history.

While a decisive answer of these questions, as is presented in this thesis, could put an end to the discrediting discussions whether or not the Christian influence in Tolkien is noteworthy or even really present, there are still facets of this overall topic would lend themselves to further research. An aspect that could only be touched upon in this text, for example, is the effect the inclusion of Christian elements has on the readers of Tolkien's stories. Reviews of his texts or questionnaires given to readers could form possible starting points for an analysis in this direction. A qualitative study on the impact of the Christian method of storytelling could provide insights into the workings of the inclusion of myths as the basis for more modernised narratives and facilitate understanding of the writing process of authors employing the mythical method, and its results. A closer examination of these methodological approaches to storytelling would be beneficial for the whole field of literary theory.

Now, as this thesis has come to a close, the time has come to give thanks to the

man without whom it would not exist: John Ronald Reuel Tolkien himself. Although he would probably have found it amusing to be the subject of any kind of scientific text, I hope he would also have been flattered by the attention he continues to receive from literary researchers. The author did not live to see all his work published; he could not enjoy knowing that even his more obscure texts managed to fascinate and delight their readers; he remained unaware of the fact that he and his stories have gained cult status and that many aspects of modern society would be unthinkable without them as their basis. Therefore, it is only fitting that he now has the last word, in a poem that illustrates both his own approach to life and writing and the writing of this thesis:

> *The Road goes ever on and on*
> *Down from the door where it began.*
> *Now far ahead the Road has gone,*
> *And I must follow, if I can,*
> *Pursuing it with eager feet,*
> *Until it joins some larger way*
> *Where many paths and errands meet.*
> *And whither then? I cannot say!*

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<u>Abstract</u>

The goal of the present thesis is the detection of Christian or Catholic influences in the fantastic works of British author John Ronald Reuel Tolkien. Born in 1892, the writer had a formative influence on the development of the literary trend, fantasy literature, throughout his 81 years of life. His massively successful novels *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* are still recognised as key texts of the early days of the genre. Tolkien's fame and the popularity of his works still endure and have been rekindled at the beginning of the 21st century through the release of several films.

His books are characterised by a rich wealth of detail in the creation of their world; the author's highest aspiration was to secure the internal logical consistency of his fictional universe. The world itself, Middle-Earth, is our world, and Tolkien's stories retell events that might have happened here in a remote past. Their chronological placement in the history of the Earth can be related to benchmarks of Christianity: The fall from grace is long in the past, the Revelation of Christ far in the future. Therefore, God exists, but He is barely present in the daily life of the peoples of Middle-Earth, which justifies the almost total absence of religious rituals or prayers.

If one's focus is on the direct transference of Christian elements in Tolkien's works, one will find hardly anything. However, his faith is clearly traceable in every level of the texts, in the creation of the world, its symbolism and its narrative. Middle-Earth is a monotheistic world set in a universe and inhabited by creatures created by God in his likeness. The facets of the inclusion of religious themes in Tolkien's stories have been extensively thematised in the secondary literature and summarised in this thesis.

The reason for their relevance in his mythology is the relevance of the Catholic faith in Tolkien's own life. After his mother's conversion to Catholicism and her early death soon afterwards, the belief took on a growing significance, and when he finally began to develop his literary world, it formed the basis. It was paramount for Tolkien to ensure that his mythology, despite its internal

seclusiveness, did not contradict the Christian mythology, but complemented it. He saw himself not as an inventor or creator of something that was entirely his own, but rather as a 'sub-creator' allowed and enabled to put to paper his own version of the Primary World by divine grace.

Tolkien's literary work was characterised by a desire for perfection, which lead to him getting caught up in less relevant aspects of his texts and an ensuing loss of time due to which not all of his works could be published during his lifetime. This troubled him greatly, but his steadfast faith allowed him to rely on the realisation of his visions in Heaven. This hopeful outlook to an ultimately good end of all things, the Christian method of storytelling, is what he wants to leave his readers with when they have reached his stories' ends.

<u>Kurzzusammenfassung</u> (German Abstract)

Die vorliegende Diplomarbeit hat es sich zum Ziel gesetzt, die Einflüsse des christlichen bzw. des katholischen Glaubens in den fantastischen Werken des britischen Autors John Ronald Reuel Tolkien nachzuweisen. Der 1892 geborene Schriftsteller prägte in seinen 81 Lebensjahren die Entwicklung der literarischen Trend-Strömung der Fantasyliteratur mit den Massenerfolgen *Der Hobbit* und *Der Herr der Ringe* entscheidend mit. Seine Berühmtheit und die Beliebtheit seiner Werke sind bis heute ungebrochen und bekamen seit dem Anfang des 21. Jahrhunderts durch diverse Verfilmungen neuen Anstoß.

Tolkiens Bücher kennzeichnet unter anderem ein hohes Maß an Detailreichtum in der Weltschöpfung; der höchste Anspruch des Autors an sich selbst war die Sicherstellung der internen Widerspruchsfreiheit seines fiktionalen Universums. Die Welt selbst, Mittelerde, entspricht unserer Welt, und die Geschichten Tolkiens berichten von Ereignissen, die in einer fernen Vergangenheit hier stattgefunden haben könnten. Die zeitliche Einordnung seiner Texte in die Historie der Erde kann nach christlichen Maßstäben erfolgen: Der Sündenfall ist lange vergangen, die Offenbarung Christus' liegt noch weit in der Zukunft. Daher existiert Gott zwar, doch ist er kaum präsent im täglichen Leben der Völker in Mittelerde, was das fast vollständige Fehlen von Religionsausübung und Gebeten rechtfertigt.

Sucht man nach direkt übertragenen Elementen des Christentums in Tolkiens Werken, so wird man kaum fündig werden. Allerdings ist sein Glaube in jeder Ebene der Texte, in Weltschöpfung, Symbolik und Handlung, deutlich nachweisbar. Mittelerde ist eine monotheistische Welt, eingebettet in ein göttlich geschaffenes Universum und bewohnt von Kreaturen, die im Abbild Gottes von ihm erschaffen wurden. Die Facetten der Einbettung religiöser Motive in seinen Erzählungen wurden in der Sekundärliteratur ausführlich thematisiert und in dieser Arbeit zusammengefasst.

Der Grund für ihre Relevanz in seiner Mythologie ist die Relevanz des katholischen Glaubens in Tolkiens eigenem Leben. Nach dem Übertritt seiner

Mutter zum Katholizismus und ihrem frühen Tod bald darauf gewann der Glaube für ihn immer mehr an Bedeutung, und als er schließlich mit der Entwicklung seiner literarischen Welt begann, basierte er sie darauf. Es war ihm wichtig, dass seine Mythologie trotz ihrer innerlichen Abgeschlossenheit der christlichen Mythologie nicht widersprach, sondern sie komplementierte, denn er sah sich auch nicht als Erfinder bzw. Schöpfer von etwas ganz und gar Eigenem, sondern vielmehr als 'Nebenschöpfer', der nach dem Beispiel und durch die Gnade Gottes seine eigene Version der gottgeschaffenen Welt zu Papier bringen darf.

Tolkiens literarisches Schaffen war von einem Drang zur Perfektion geprägt, was dazu führte, dass er sich oftmals in weniger relevanten Aspekten seiner Texte verrannte und dadurch viel Zeit verlor, weshalb nicht alle seine Werke zu seinen Lebzeiten publiziert werden konnten. Dies bereitete ihm große Sorgen, doch in seinem festen Glauben konnte er sich darauf verlassen, dass seine Visionen im Reich Gottes doch noch Erfüllung finden würden. Mit diesem hoffnungsvollen Ausblick auf ein letztendlich glückliches Ende aller Dinge, der christlichen Erzählmethode, möchte er auch seine Leser am Ende der Geschichten zurücklassen.