ESSAY # 2

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The following essay was the major contributor to my winning

the James Gartrell Prize

for work in Classical Studies

at the University of Adelaide in 2006
CLASSICAL MYTHOLOGY

With particular reference to *The Fellowship of the Ring*, consider the view that Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* is too simplistic to be regarded as mythic, that it lacks true mythic profundity and complexity.
This Tutorial Paper is dedicated to

‘The One’

“... the Lord, of angels, and of men – and of elves.”

Tolkien, J.R.R.  *Tree and Leaf*,
Unwin Books,
London,
Ninth Impression, 1974, p 63
Considering the view that Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* is too simplistic I conclude that structured within the pages of *The Fellowship of the Ring* lies a panoply of mythic profundity and complexity. Its themes of a golden age, the hero, his quest, along with the journey to maturity all coincide with Celtic, Norse, and Greek mythology. The Ragnorok spirit of the (then) age is foretold, observable in Sauron’s character, and a concealed Christ and his salvific wonders are bestowed. An exact Christian analogy it is not; yet it remains regenerative throughout as a story of grace, courage and brotherly love.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

...Aragorn tells Eomer, “Good and ill have not changed since yesteryear; nor are they one thing among elves and dwarves and another among Men. It is a man’s part to discern them, as much in the Golden Wood as in his own house.” (II, 41)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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6 Chance, Jane. Tolkien’s Art (Op Cit) 2001 p 160
atop Amon Hen (“Hill of the Eye”), built by the kings of Gondor, the searching of Sauron’s own Eye. What results is a second internal danger – the threat from within Frodo, the microcosm. A battle is staged within his psyche, and he is pulled first one way, then another, until, as a fully developed moral hero, he exercises the faculty of free will with complete self-control: “He heard himself crying out: Never, never! Or was it: Verily I come, I come to you? He could not tell. Then as a flash from some other point of power there came to his mind another thought: Take it off! Take it off! Fool, take it off! Take off the Ring!” He feels the struggle of the “two powers” within him: “For a moment, perfectly balanced between their piercing points, he writhed, tormented. Suddenly he was aware of himself again. Frodo, neither the Voice nor the Eye: free to choose, and with one remaining instant in which to do so. He took the Ring off his finger” (LR, 1:519).\(^7\) In this incident, parallel to the encounter of the Riders at the Ford in the last chapter of the first book, Frodo rescues himself instead of being rescued by Glorfindel or Gandalf.\(^8\)

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

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

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

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\(^8\) Chance, Jane. Tolkien’s Art (op cit) 2001 p 161
\(^9\) Chance, Jane. Tolkien’s Art (op cit) 2001 p 161
In a profoundly Catholic sense one sees it is not Frodo’s nature within him, his will power, but unmerited Grace without, that actually saves the hero and the quest – although not without cost. The loss of Frodo’s finger is symbolic of the greater internal wound of the heart that can never be reversed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

> We make still by the law in which we’re made.

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13 Reader, Classical Mythology (HUM 4 (92111), University of Adelaide, 2006, p 18
14 Romans 7:19 King James Version
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THANKS

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Nina Gregurev
Tuesday has rolled round again so welcome to another Tutorial Tuesday. As always all questions are welcome, from new players to old. Please sort...Â As always all questions are welcome, from new players to old. Please sort by new so everybody's question gets a shot at being answered. Feudal Fridays. Tutorial Tuesdays. Tips for New Players: A Compendium. The 'On my God I'm New, Help!' Â Fourth edition DVD-ROM Fourth edition New Pre-Intermediate Student's Book John and Liz Soars OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS CONTENTS LANGUAGE INPUT UNIT GRAMMAR VOCABULARY EVERYDAY ENGLISH -- 1 Getting to T.. Ristrt word, wron& word Sodal UprnsHMts Present, past, future p6 Verbs of similar meaning Thank you 50 much. know you do/make speak/talk My pleasure. p6 Who.Â WonImdinp Job, philosopher, historian. *** with me! Questions tags Ils a Jewely day, We've been married since 2010. p54 economist isn't le Indeflnite pan Nouns and verbs You don'lile coffee. do She's written several books. competition/compete you? I've been to China. p56 Word rons Adding a (omment ever and never *dangerous invi'talation p57 Yes, it is. Beautiful! Business students at the university who had just made online presentations could hear the lecturers discuss their work and allocate marks as their feeds remained live. Footage shared on social media shows the two women rudely review the students' presentations, with one saying she wanted to 'start drilling' her teeth out. The pair even questioned whether one girl who had spoken slowly throughout her presentation was disabled, saying: â€œHas she got something wrong with her?â€ GMIT president Dr Orla Flynn said: 'I would like to wholeheartedly apologise to our students for the data breach that has caused such deep hurt and dismay. 'GMIT is known as a student-centred institute and some of the comments made by our staff do not reflect the values to which we aspire. 'Ron Ritchhart makes a powerful argument that building a 'thinking culture' within our schools is the key to better learning, greater student engagement, and more happiness all around. This book includes not only a thorough discussion of the elements of a successful school culture, but also activities to elicit contributions from students and teachers.Â Listening to understand students (and ourselves), leveraging language, self-reflection and evaluation, the energy of modeling, collaborative assessment, and strategically using Thinking Routines are just some of Ritchhart's compass points in creating a culture of thinking for and with students. This is a book of infinite integrity and a must read for every educator. Bravo and thank you, Dr. Ritchhart! Read more. 5 people found this helpful.