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*The Lord of the Rings
and Philosophy*

One Book to Rule Them All

Edited by

GREGORY BASSHAM

and

ERIC BRONSON



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Chicago and La Salle, Illinois

Volume 5 in the series, Popular Culture and Philosophy™

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16

Happy Endings and Religious Hope: *The Lord of the Rings* as an Epic Fairy Tale

JOHN J. DAVENPORT

On the surface, it seems possible to read Tolkien's tale of hobbits, wizards, and warriors simply as an entertaining adventure. Others regard the work as a Christian allegory. I will argue instead that Tolkien conceived his masterpiece as an epic fairy tale with a kind of religious significance. In particular, Tolkien wanted his story to have a special form of "happy ending" that suggests or echoes the Western religious promise that our struggles to overcome evil are not meaningless, that there will be final justice and a healing of this world. To show this, I will look at Tolkien's theory of the fairy tale and his Arthurian romance model for the happy ending in *The Lord of the Rings*.

Religion and Myth

There has been a long debate among critics about whether *The Lord of the Rings* is fundamentally a religious work. Unlike C.S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia*, Tolkien's book is an epic that involves no obvious Christian allegory and few clear parallels to stories in the Jewish Torah or Christian New Testament. Thus Patricia Spacks writes that for the moral and theological scheme in the work "there are no explicit supernatural sanctions: *The Lord of the Rings* is by no means a Christian work."¹ Indeed

many of the symbols, characters, and plot lines in Tolkien's works are closer to sources in Northern European mythology, such as stories of the gods in the Norse *Eddas*, the Finnish *Kalevala*, the Icelandic sagas, and heroic epics such as the Germanic *Lay of the Nibelung* and the Old English *Beowulf*, on which Professor Tolkien was a leading expert in his time.² And as Spacks correctly points out, in his famous lecture on *Beowulf*, Tolkien highlights differences between the Christian vision of salvation in an afterlife and the Norse vision of honor won in the heroic struggle to endure against chaos, despite the inevitability of our death: "northern mythology takes a darker view. Its characteristic struggle between man and monster must end ultimately, within Time, in man's defeat."³

Moreover, as many critics have recognized, a poignant note of sadness pervades much of Tolkien's work: the motifs of decline, irreversible loss, and the withdrawal of past glory are present throughout *The Lord of the Rings*. We find this not only in the passing of the High Elves, the diminished greatness of Gondor, and the loss of the entwives, but also in reflections on the great struggle at issue in the book. Even after the astounding triumph at Helm's Deep, Théoden, the aged king of the horse-folk of Rohan, still recognizes a reason for sadness:

"For however the fortune of war shall go, may it not so end that much that was fair and wonderful shall pass for ever out of Middle-earth?"

"It may," said Gandalf. "The evil of Sauron cannot be wholly cured, nor made as if it had not been. But to such days we are doomed." (TT, pp. 168-69)

Yet as Spacks also notes, Tolkien's world shares many similarities with the Christian one, including "the possibility of

Isaacs and Rose Zimbaro, eds., *Tolkien and the Critics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), p. 82.

² See J.R.R. Tolkien, "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics," in Christopher Tolkien, ed., *The Monsters and Other Essays* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1983), pp. 5-48. I would argue that Tolkien's work is also deeply inspired by the Arthurian legends and the larger cycle of British national mythology. The very first story Tolkien wrote about his fictional world, "The Fall of Gondolin," has clear links to the Fall of King Arthur.

³ Patricia Meyer Spacks, "Power and Meaning in *The Lord of the Rings*," in Neil

grace."⁴ Tolkien's *Silmariillion*, his unfinished prequel to *The Lord of the Rings*, begins with a single supreme God, Ilúvatar, creating from nothing the Ainur, immortal beings similar to archangels and angels in the traditional Christian hierarchy. With their participation, Ilúvatar then creates the physical world, Eä, and all its creatures in a cosmic symphony of divine music. The strife between good and evil begins in this creation story with the fall of the highest of the Ainur, Melkor (who is renamed Morgoth, paralleling Lucifer-Satan), who discovers that the discord he sows into the primordial music in the end only flows into the higher harmony foreseen by Ilúvatar. In the finale of this symphony of creation, "in one chord, deeper than the Abyss, higher than the Firmament, piercing as the light of the eye of Ilúvatar, the Music ceased" (S, p. 17). Here, more clearly than anywhere else in his works, Tolkien gives his world the promise of an ultimate redemption, or what theologians call an *eschatological* end or final judgment and perfection of the world. This promise is echoed at places in *The Lord of the Rings*, for example in Gandalf's memorable response to Denethor after the Steward of Gondor tells the wizard that he has no right to control the affairs of Gondor:

"... the rule of no realm is mine, neither of Gondor nor any other, great or small. But all worthy things that are in peril as the world now stands, those are my care. And for my part, I shall not wholly fail of my task, though Gondor should perish, if anything passes through this night that can still grow fair or bear fruit and flower again in days to come. For I also am a steward. Did you not know?" (RK, p. 16)

The implication is clear enough: just as the Stewards of Gondor are supposed to hold their realm in trust for the lost Númenórean King, should he ever return, so the rightful Owner of the world has entrusted Middle-earth to the care of Gandalf and his fellow wizards (and less directly to the care of the Valar, Ilúvatar's archangelic regents), until He comes to this world Himself.

But this Owner, Ilúvatar, is barely referenced in *The Lord of the Rings*. Even in *The Silmariillion*, in which the Valar are initially active, Ilúvatar is remote. By the time we reach the Third Age, even the Valar are only vaguely suggested as a power in the Utermost West beyond the Sea, who sent the wizards to help in the resistance against Sauron. So God and the archangels play virtually no direct role in *The Lord of the Rings*, which focuses on the struggles of mortal beings. In this way, Tolkien's masterpiece is similar to classics of Old English poetry, which focus on our immanent world of time, with all its transitoriness, loss, and courage in the face of mortality. It is not surprising, therefore, that we do not find Tolkien's characters praying to God, or encountering divine figures, or having religious experiences like those recorded in the lives of many saints. As Tolkien explained to his American publisher, the book is set in "a monotheistic world of 'natural theology.' The odd fact that there are no churches, temples, or religious rites and ceremonies, is simply part of the historical climate depicted. . . . The 'Third Age' was not a Christian world" (L, p. 220). Thus if a work of literature counts as "religious" only if it examines the nature of God, defends belief in God, or focuses on practices of worship, then *The Lord of the Rings* is not a religious work.

Magic, Fairy Tale Endings, and Eschatology

Nevertheless, *The Lord of the Rings* remains a religious work in quite a different sense. If, as the Danish existentialist Søren Kierkegaard thought, the essence of religious faith lies in embracing the promise of a salvation that we cannot achieve by our own good work alone—a salvation possible only by divine miracle—then Tolkien's work comes closer to this essentially religious attitude than other superficially "religious" works. Tolkien reveals his purpose in an essay titled "On Fairy-stories,"⁵ which explains the deeper idea behind the familiar

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

⁵ Reprinted in J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Tolkien Reader* (New York: Ballantine, 1966), pp. 3-73. All references to the essay will be to this edition, but you can also find it in *Tree and Leaf* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1967). In his letters, Tolkien refers frequently to this essay, suggesting its importance to friends and

happy endings we find in classic fairy tales like *Beauty and the Beast*, *Cinderella*, and *Hansel and Gretel*. In this remarkable essay, Tolkien argues that in their highest form, fairy tales are not, as we have come to think of them, just simplified nursery or old wives stories full of diminutive sprites invented to entertain very young children, but rather a form of serious literary art in which nature appears as a "Perilous Realm," the world of "Faërie." Genuine fairy-stories in this high mode include, for example, the original Greek tale of *Perseus and the Gorgon*, *The Juniper Tree*, and the medieval tale of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.⁶ The central function of magic in such stories is not to perform tricks or spells, but to satisfy "certain primordial human desires," including the desire "to survey the depths of space and time," "to hold communion with other living things," and most importantly, "the realisation, independent of the conceiving mind, of imagined wonder."⁷

Thus, Tolkien argues, it is essential to the genuine fairy tale that its magic be presented as *true* in the secondary world of the story, not explained away as a mere dream, illusion, or product of advanced technology. However, this is not because the magic of Faërie directly represents the divine power of the God who creates the cosmos. As Tolkien explains, the supernatural may play a role in fairy-stories: "Something really 'higher' is occasionally glimpsed in mythology: Divinity, the right to power (as distinct from its possession), the due of worship . . ."⁸ But unlike cosmogonic myths of creation, tales of Faërie are not primarily concerned with the Divine or "supernatural." Rather, "fairy-stories as a whole have three faces: the Mystical towards the Supernatural; the Magical towards Nature; and the Mirror of scorn and pity towards Man." The "essential face of Faërie," says Tolkien, "is the middle one, the Magical."⁹

relatives, trying to draw critics' attention to it (with little success), and expressing great frustration that the collection in which it first appeared (C.S. Lewis, ed., *Essays Presented to Charles Williams* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1947]) had gone out of print.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 13–15.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

In other words, what primarily distinguishes tales of Faërie is a certain kind of magic, one that has nothing to do with the alchemist's transmutations, or sorcerer's apprentice tricks, or spells in a Dungeons and Dragons game. The sort of perilous magic native to the world of Faërie, represented in Tolkien's world by High Elves, wizards, dragons, and ents, reveals a face of Nature that is hidden in our ordinary reality. It expresses a living force or spirit in all things, which it is our heart's desire to encounter, and also to employ in creating new reality: "Uncorrupted, it does not seek delusion nor bewitchment and domination; it seeks shared enrichment, partners in making and delight, not slaves."¹⁰ This good will to creative power Tolkien calls "the central desire and aspiration of human Fantasy."¹¹ In *The Lord of the Rings*, we see this desire for good power personified in Gandalf, and to a lesser extent in Galadriel, who both nevertheless refuse the chance to use the Ring's power to dominate and rob others of their freedom.

But the magic essential to tales of Faërie is not only an expression of the hidden side of nature, its inner glory and living beauty, and of the natural and good human desire to share in this wonder through "sub-creation." For this magic also responds to the innate human desires for what Tolkien calls Recovery, Escape, and Consolation. For Tolkien, Recovery and Escape refer to renewed appreciation of life and the value of nature, and an escape from the alienating delusions of an artificial, mechanized, and increasingly ugly consumerist society. These goals help explain why *The Lord of the Rings* focuses on the comfort and beauty of the Shire and its inhabitants, in contrast not only to Mordor, but also to the ruined Isengard with its hellish underworld of grinding engines.

Finally, we come to Consolation. By this, Tolkien does not mean comforting words, but an answer to the question of whether our efforts, hardships, and suffering have any point, any final significance (the sort of answer Boethius sought in his classic, *The Consolation of Philosophy*). The kind of happy ending that marks genuine fairy stories, in which there is a miraculous reprieve in the midst of impending disaster, hints at an

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

answer to this ultimate question. Tolkien calls the consolation provided by this unique kind of happy ending a "eucatastrophe," or joyous salvation within apparent catastrophe.

Tolkien proposes the term "eucatastrophe" because, he says, we don't have a word expressing the opposite of "tragedy." He conceives tragedy as the true form and highest function of drama, and eucatastrophe as the true form and highest function of fairy-tale.

The consolation of fairy-stories, the joy of the happy ending: or more correctly, of the good catastrophe, the sudden joyous 'turn' (for there is no true end to any fairy-tale): this joy, which is one of the things which fairy-stories can produce supremely well, is not essentially 'escapist' or 'fugitive'. In its fairy-tale—or otherworld—setting, it is a sudden and miraculous grace, never to be counted on to recur. It does not deny the existence of *dyscatastrophe*, of sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance; it denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will), universal final defeat, and in so far as *euzangelium*, giving a fleeting glimpse of joy, joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief.¹²

Tolkien chooses the term "eucatastrophe" to emphasize that the sudden "turning" or unexpected deliverance at the end of a true tale of Faërie must be experienced not as an achievement of triumphant revenge, but rather as a divine gift. The joy produced by such a happy ending requires a surprise, a deliverance that no human effort could have made possible. In a letter to his son, Christopher, Tolkien uses the example of a boy dying of tubercular peritonitis who was taken to the Grotto at Lourdes, but not cured. However, on the train ride home, as he passed within sight of the Grotto again, he was healed. Tolkien writes that this story, "with its apparent sad ending and then its sudden un hoped-for happy ending," gave him that peculiar emotion which comes from eucatastrophe, because it is a "sudden glimpse of the truth . . . a ray of light through the very chinks of the universe about us" (L, pp. 100–01).

The poignant emotion Tolkien finds in this moment in a good fairy tale requires a tragic recognition of the evil and imperfection of our world, or even a Norse-like resignation to the fact that we cannot overcome it by our own power, yet the

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 68.

tale rises above this grief in a humanly impossible reprieve that is only made possible by divine grace ("by virtue of the absurd," as Kierkegaard would say). In this sense, Tolkien says, "The Gospels contain a fairy-story, or a story of a larger kind which embraces all the essence of fairy-stories."¹³ The resurrection appears as the eucatastrophe of the Gospel story because it is the ultimate reprieve when all appears to be lost. But the eucatastrophic joy of the resurrection involves an eschatological message which is more direct than the hope implied in fairy-tale eucatastrophes. For Christians, the resurrection is the beginning of a new reality that promises eternal life with God in a world to come. In fairy-tale eucatastrophes, such eschatological hope is only indirectly hinted at.

Thus, as Tolkien sees it, the special kind of happy ending we find only in true tales of Faërie gets its power precisely from its veiled eschatological significance: it hints that there is an eternal source of hope beyond all darkness and despair. More simply put, the eucatastrophic turn in the fairy story is a sign or echo of the eschaton, an indirect reference to divine judgment and the coming of a new Kingdom. And the magical appearance of Nature in such tales also intimates something unexpected, namely, that the natural world as we know it is destined for a divine transformation, destined to become part of a new heaven and a new earth.

A good example to explain the notion of eucatastrophe is the medieval tale of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, which Tolkien studied closely and used in creating Frodo. Its central figure, the gigantic Green Knight who challenges Arthur's court, exemplifies what Tolkien called the "essential face" of Faërie, the magical toward nature. As a descendant of the "green man" nature spirit in Celtic mythology, he is a manifestation of a power within living things that cannot be possessed, appropriated, or controlled by human beings, but which nevertheless can act in reciprocity with us. He cannot be killed by natural human power, but he can make perilous bargains.

In brief summary, the story goes as follows:¹⁴ At the New Year's feast in Camelot, the Green Knight comes to dare any of

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

¹⁴ See *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl, and Sir Orfeo*, translated by J.R.R. Tolkien (London: Allen and Unwin, 1979).

King Arthur's knights to strike him a blow on the neck with his axe, as long as that knight will agree to suffer a similar blow at the Green Chapel one year hence. But when Gawain takes up this challenge, and cuts off the Green Knight's head, the latter picks up his severed head and tells Gawain that he'll see him in a year to complete the bargain! Two days before the appointed tryst, Gawain comes in distress to the house of Sir Bertilak (who is the Green Knight in disguise), and there enters into another perilous bargain: while his host is off hunting, Gawain will stay with his lady in the house, and he and his host will exchange whatever prizes they won at the end of the day. Sir Bertilak's wife (a Green Lady in disguise) then tries to seduce Gawain, testing his honor. With great difficulty Gawain resists the lady's advances, but on the morning before his doom, he accepts her girdle offered as a token of affection—both out of courtesy and because she tells him that its magic power can save him from the axe. He does not pass the girdle to his host, as their bargain required. Later, when the Green Knight comes with terrifying fury to the chapel, Gawain accepts his doom (the resignation that must precede a eucatastrophe). But the Green Knight does not kill Gawain: his first two axe-strokes stop at Gawain's skin, and the third cuts him just enough to cause a permanent scar, as punishment for keeping the girdle. This mark of mortality, similar to Achilles's heel, is the flaw which signals his humanity, his difference from the divine. As Tolkien wrote, "His 'perfection' is made more human and credible, and therefore more appreciable as genuine nobility, by the small flaw."¹⁵

In the terror of the Green Chapel, Gawain's unexpected reprieve is experienced as astounding grace, utterly unexpected. It is precisely a eucatastrophe in Tolkien's sense. And Gawain is Tolkien's primary model for Frodo. Like Gawain, Frodo accepts the burden and quest that no other knight can undertake. Like Gawain, despite his resolve, Frodo also finally succumbs to temptation and puts on the Ring (just as Gawain put on the girdle). And like Gawain, Frodo ends up with a wound and scar that forever mark his human imperfection. But the Green Knight's test is not primarily a lesson in morality: rather it is an encounter with the divine, as refracted in the perilous Nature of

¹⁵ J.R.R. Tolkien, "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," in *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*, p. 97.

Faërie-magic. What Gawain experiences in the Green Chapel is a foreshadowing or glimpse of salvation at the end of time.

An Epic Fairy Tale

Tolkien's primary goal in *The Lord of the Rings* was to create a fantasy for our time with the same eucatastrophic power that Gawain's fantastic tale had for fifteenth-century Britons, and this is what gives his trilogy its encompassing religious mood. Thus the history of Tolkien's world up to *The Lord of the Rings* is a history with a providential design, unfolding from within towards its transforming end. As Gunnar Urang writes,

The Lord of the Rings, as history, is more than day-to-day ongoing history. It is the history of the end: it is eschatology. And despite Tolkien's many debts to "Northernness," the shape of this eschatology is not that of Norse mythology but that of the Christian tradition. Tolkien's myth of the end is no Ragnarök (in which all the gods of Valhalla die in the last battle against the forces of chaos); the twilight is not for any gods but for Sauron and his forces.¹⁶

This is right, as long as we qualify Urang's statement by noting that even within Tolkien's secondary world, the end of Sauron and his realm is not the ultimate end, but only another crucial turning point, another anticipatory echo of that final greatest and last chord in which the Music of the Ainur ended and was complete.

Understanding Tolkien's conception of fairy tales and their central function sheds much light on *The Lord of the Rings*. Robert Reilly, one of the few commentators to appreciate the importance of Tolkien's essay on Faërie, rightly argues that the "proper genre" of the trilogy is "the fairy story mode as Tolkien conceives it."¹⁷ In explaining his trilogy to W.H. Auden, Tolkien alludes to his essay, "On Fairy-stories," and explains that he sees the modern connection between children and fairy stories as

¹⁶ Gunnar Urang, "Tolkien's Fantasy: The Phenomenology of Hope," in Mark Robert Hillgas, ed., *Shadows of the Imagination: The Fantasies of C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, and Charles Williams* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1976), p. 104.

¹⁷ R.J. Reilly, "Tolkien and the Fairy Story," in *Tolkien and the Critics*, p. 129.

"false and accidental," spoiling those stories both in themselves and for children. Tolkien therefore wanted to write a fairy story that was not specifically addressed to children at all, and that utilized "a larger canvass" (L, p. 216).

As the remark indicates, it was part of Tolkien's purpose to write an epic: in scope and depth, *The Lord of the Rings* covers the sort of vast conflict and journey we find in works like Homer's *Odyssey* and Virgil's *Aeneid*. This may seem puzzling, since fairy tales and epics are different genres for Tolkien: epics concern the struggles of heroes against the forces that threaten all life, in the process of which they discover and develop their unique identities (thus epics often involve a descent into an underworld as a figural descent into self or journey of self-discovery).

But as his letters make clear, *The Lord of the Rings* grew directly out of the stories making up *The Simarillion*: it was a development of the last segments of his encompassing epic narrative. The earlier stories making up *The Simarillion* were conceived primarily as parts of an epic: its main episodes all concern developments of the self in a hero's quest against what appear to be impossible odds. For example, in the central narrative around which the whole *Simarillion* was conceived, Beren and Lúthien descend into Morgoth's fortress and succeed, "where all the armies and warriors" of the elves have failed, in retrieving one of the stolen Silmariis (the greatest jewels ever made). As Tolkien emphasizes, their story anticipates Frodo's and Sam's, since it shows that the fortunes of world history "are often turned not by the Lords and Governors, [or] even gods, but by the seemingly unknown and weak" (L, p. 149). So *The Lord of the Rings* acquired the epic form of *The Simarillion*.

However, although *The Simarillion* is a work of fantasy, it does not meet all of Tolkien's requirements for a fairy story, since its unfinished sagas contain no true eucatastrophe. Even though the Valar come to overthrow Morgoth, every elven realm is destroyed, and this sorrow is irredeemable. No divine intervention, we feel, could ever make up for the beauty lost in the fall of Gondolin, or give meaning to the destruction of Nargothrond, or explain the tragic deaths of the children of Húrin, or console the endless sorrow of the Fifth Battle (which is perhaps Tolkien's version of the Battle of the Somme, in which he participated). This ultimate battle begins with Fingon, High King of the Noldor, declaring "*Utúlie'n aurë!* The day has

come!" (S, p. 190). But it ends with Fingon's death, followed by his friend Húrin's last stand, and his desperate cry, "*Aurë entu-luwa!* Day shall come again!" (S, p. 195). Húrin's hope can only foreshadow a possible eucatastrophe to come.

By contrast, *The Lord of the Rings* is meant to combine the epic quest narrative with the eucatastrophic (or indirectly eschatological) significance of the true faerie tale. One can see why such a combination appealed to Tolkien: no story in the British and Germanic mythologies that he loved so much had perfectly melded these models into a eucatastrophic epic: so this would be a tremendous literary achievement. This synthesis of the epic mode, which tends towards tragedy and sorrow, with the eucatastrophic consolation of the fairy tale, helps explain what several commentators have recognized as the paradoxical "joy-in-sorrow" atmosphere [that] pervades the *Rings*" trilogy.¹⁸ For, as Gunnar Urang put it, "Inside" or "outside" the story, the main question is whether or not a happy ending is possible; allegorically, whether or not there are, in the battle against evil, any grounds for hope.¹⁹ Despite his poignant lament for all the life and beauty lost to evil in our world, Tolkien still means to say that there is hope after all.

Tolkien's Eucatastrophes

Does *The Lord of the Rings* achieve this distinctive goal of crowning an epic quest romance with a eucatastrophe worthy of the greatest fairy stories? I think it comes close, and this helps explain much of the power of this work, which has moved generations of readers. Although there has been some disagreement about it, Tolkien clearly intended the eucatastrophe to come at the end of the chapter "Mount Doom," when Frodo's iron will to achieve his Quest finally falls under the One Ring's power at the very Cracks of Doom, and he puts on the Ring, claiming it for his own. After enduring so much hardship and struggle, and the loss of everything that formerly defined their lives, it seems that Sam and Frodo are destined to fail at the end. The Dark Lord will regain the Ring and triumph, destroying all the beauty

¹⁸ Clyde S. Kilby, "Meaning in *The Lord of the Rings*," in *Shadows of the Imagination*, p. 73.

¹⁹ Urang, "Tolkien's Fantasy: The Phenomenology of Hope," p. 103.

that is left in Middle-earth, and Frodo will become another Gollum, Sauron's broken slave.

But then the great "turn" comes: Gollum returns unexpectedly, fights Frodo and bites the finger from Frodo's hand, and then falls into the Cracks of Doom, taking Sauron's Ring with him. Here is the crucial moment of grace, the reprieve unlocked for. Only because Bilbo, Frodo, and Sam have all shown Gollum mercy, has he survived to this moment to bring Sauron down to ruin with him. Yet their mercy and care could not by itself achieve the victory: Fate must answer them. We experience this moment of saving grace through Sam's eyes. He witnesses the tremendous collapse of Barad-dûr, but without any sense of triumph. And then comes perhaps the most poignant moment in the whole text. Sam sees Frodo,

pale and worn, and yet himself again; and in his eyes there was peace now, neither strain of will, nor madness, nor any fear. His burden was taken away. There was his dear master of the sweet days in the Shire.

"Master!" cried Sam, and fell upon his knees. In all that ruin of the world for the moment he felt only joy, great joy. The burden was gone. His master had been saved; he was himself again, he was free. (RK, p. 241)

In Sam's joy, which is pure because his unconditional love for Frodo is so selfless, there is more than just a glimpse of *evangelium*. If we have come to love Sam and Frodo while reading their epic story, then at this moment we too will feel the piercing "joy, poignant as grief," which is Tolkien's goal.

In this event, we also see Tolkien's point that a true eucatastrophe is humbling, and thus precisely the opposite of the vengeful spirit of triumph that Nietzsche saw in Christian eschatological hope. Frodo's deliverance is like Sir Gawain's: he is saved, but with a wound that marks the moral limits he showed when he put on the Ring. And in this respect, he is obviously to be compared to Beren in the *The Silmarillion*. For at the end of his quest to retrieve the Silmarils from Morgoth, Beren loses a hand, just as Frodo loses a finger. The miracle of the outcome astonishes and moves us, but without encouraging any of the spiteful self-righteousness that can mar more conventional "good beats evil" endings. Even if Frodo and Sam had not been rescued by the eagles, and instead had died a

more Beowulfian death on Mount Doom after the Ring was destroyed, this would still have counted as a "happy ending" in Tolkien's sense.

Yet while it is the most central to the overall plot, Gollum's final fulfillment of his destiny is not the only moment in *The Lord of the Rings* where we find something like a eucatastrophe, a miraculous restoration beyond any hope that mortal beings could provide by their own power. As Urang suggests, the denouement on Mount Doom is anticipated by a series of unexpected rescues, of "lesser 'happy endings' figuring forth the ultimate triumph," including Frodo's escape at the Ford of Bruinen, Gandalf's return from death, and the victory at Helm's Deep.²⁰ And the destruction of the Ring is also followed by other eucatastrophic moments as well.

One of these is the moving scene at the end of the seven days that Faramir and Éowyn spend together in the Houses of Healing. As Faramir is falling in love with her, Éowyn remains caught in her grief, for Aragorn, her first love, is away at the final battle before the gates of Mordor. When they see from afar the collapse of Sauron's realm, they do not know for sure what has happened, but Faramir feels it in an upwelling sense of joy and love: "Éowyn, Éowyn, White Lady of Rohan, in this hour I do not believe that any darkness will endure! And he stooped and kissed her brow" (RK, pp. 259–260). Still, Éowyn remains torn between Aragorn and Faramir, but finally he confronts her grief directly and asks for her love: "Then the heart of Éowyn changed, or at last she understood it. And suddenly her winter passed, and the sun shone on her. 'I stand in Minas Anor, Tower of the Sun,' she said; 'and behold! the Shadow has departed! I will be a shieldmaiden no longer . . .'" (RK, p. 262). Here the turning is an inner one, like Théoden's reawakening from Wormtongue's spell. But this inward turn towards Faramir is pregnant with that sense of transcendent response, or divine fulfillment of hope, that makes for eucatastrophe. Éowyn's healing, her restoration to her true self, is one with the land's return to health.

We find a similar symbolism after Aragorn is crowned king, and Gandalf takes him up to a "high hallow" on Mount

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

Mindolluin, where it is still snowy, to show Aragorn his realm, and to give him hope. In answer to Aragorn's worries, Gandalf says:

"Turn your face from the green world, and look where all seems barren and cold! . . .

Then Aragorn turned, and there was a stony slope behind him running down from the skirts of the snow; and as he looked he was aware that alone there in the waste a growing thing stood. And he climbed to it, and saw that out of the very edge of the snow there sprang a sapling tree no more than three foot high. (RK, p. 270; emphasis added)

Aragorn finds a sapling of Nimloth, the White Tree of Númenor, scion of the tree in Gondolin, which in turn came from a seed of Telperion, the White Tree of Valinor. Its appearance is like a sign from the gods. Here again we find the language of "turning," the unexpected miracle, and with it a profound joy, a sense of fulfillment and completion. However, this is not a separate eucatastrophe, but rather the final piece of the larger "turn" from winter to spring. When the new king replaces the Withered Tree with the new sapling, the glory, hope, and vitality of Gondor are renewed.

The themes we have reviewed are sufficient to explain why Tolkien thought of *The Lord of the Rings* as "a fundamentally religious and Catholic work," even though he intentionally omitted "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" (L, p. 172). If it were only an epic romance, Tolkien's story would not necessarily have been religious, but as a fairy story for adults, it concludes with an essentially religious message that evil cannot stand forever, that its misappropriation of divine power and right destroys itself in the end. But this does not come about without our participation, our willingness to sacrifice, and our faith (beyond all rational hope) that our mortal efforts will be met with the ultimate response, and day will finally come again.