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## **Navigating Tolkien's Spatial Allegory**

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### Navigating Tolkien's Spatial Allegory

Tolkien's vast and detailed legendarium has helped pave the way for the fantasy genre as we know it today. His wide variety of characters, detailed maps, and the rich history<sup>3</sup> of Middle Earth have all undoubtedly provided inspiration to many modern writers, and continue to hold the interest of both new and old fans of his works. Within his world of Middle Earth, Tolkien has written about thousands of years' worth of history, and has created for each of his imagined races its own culture and language. However, despite the unique differences of Middle Earth when compared to our own world, many of Tolkien's key beliefs, such as his close ties to Christianity, have clearly manifested within his legendarium. While the inhabitants of Middle Earth operate under a divine system more like the Greek or Norse pantheon, there are clear Christian elements to his world. Even the physical landscape of Middle Earth, both in the early years of the First Age, and later on in the Third Age, seem to reflect the duality of the Christian concepts of good and evil. Tolkien seems to have set up a world in which intrinsically good things are closer to Heaven, and therefore closer to the Christian concept of God, whereas bad things often dwell underground, closer to the Christian ideas of Satan and Hell. Within the expanse of this spatial allegory that Tolkien has created, the residents of Middle Earth are able to move about in unique ways, and there seems to be a direct relationship between one's physical elevation and their moral standing at that point in the story. This paper will seek to establish and analyze the allegory created within Tolkien's legendarium, including its relationship to several key Christian elements, as well as observe a few specific instances of how character morality is directly reflected in their movement. By looking at character movements, and even the physical

topography of Middle Earth, with Tolkien's Christian beliefs in mind, readers can gain a greater understanding of the different ways Tolkien illustrates good and evil within his legendarium, as well as detect similarities between the ultimate fates of morally good and bad characters in the legendarium and keep figures in the Bible.

Before looking at how characters move throughout the allegory Tolkien has created, the presence of the allegory itself must be established, which can be done through a close analysis of Middle Earth's physical layout and key landmarks during both the First and Third Ages. In the First Age, the gods, or Valar, still dwelled within Middle Earth, and while they involved themselves in the affairs of the world less and less as the age went on, they were still a present force within it until the ending of the First Age. During this time in Middle Earth's history, Elves, Men, and Dwarves all came into existence and began establishing their own kingdoms and domains, forming alliances and rivalries alike. Out of the efforts made specifically by Men and Elves, the kingdoms of Númenor and Gondolin were established. Númenor was an island kingdom gifted to a division of Men who fought alongside the Elves and Valar in war as a reward for their bravery and assistance. At the center of the kingdom was a mountain, which was named "Meneltarma, the Pillar of Heaven, and upon it was a high place that was hallowed to Eru Illúvatar," the most powerful god, who created the Valar and the universe itself (*The Silmarillion* 261). The holiest place within Númenor, the entirety of which was a gift from the gods, is also the highest place on the island. Several centuries later, after Númenor falls into tyranny and ceases to honor the gods, including Eru Illúvatar, the entire island is sucked under the water, buried by the ocean. Númenor provides an important example of a continuous pattern seen throughout Tolkien's works. The city itself is raised above the water, with its holiest place being closest to the sky, and the Christian idea of Heaven. Once it ceases to be a good and holy place,

Númenor physically descends, falling away from Heaven, and instead toward Hell, as a result of its internal corruption.

Gondolin also serves as a location with clear Biblical elements, and emphasizes the relationship between physical location and goodness. Like other good, uncorrupted places in Middle Earth, Gondolin is located above ground, where it can be reached by the light of heaven. Gondolin is also extremely well protected, and seems to be under the watchful eye of the god Manwë for the majority of its existence. Gondolin is a hidden city, completely surrounded by steep mountains, wherein the society of Eagles, the servants of Manwë, dwell. Only the citizens of Gondolin know how to access the plain where the city rests, and the Eagles kill all intruders who seek to enter through the mountains. While Gondolin itself is not raised high in the way the temple on Númenor originally is, the city is surrounded by incredibly tall mountains, physical barriers that prevent the invasion of evil. With its isolation, and clear divine favor, Gondolin in many ways seems to represent a sort of Edenic paradise, where its inhabitants can exist free from the threats of war and evil. However, Gondolin is ultimately betrayed by one of its own, a detail that is likely meant to remind the reader of the temptation of Eve within Genesis, and how the perfection of Eden was destroyed by one who lived within it.

Yet, while these two kingdoms were clearly endowed with divine favor and began as morally good places, there were still many locations within Middle Earth where evil dwelt. Of the Valar, one god in particular named Melkor decided that rather than helping to promote peace and the independence of the three races within Middle Earth, he wanted to rule over the land. Throughout the First Age he gathered power and armies to him and would intermittently lash out against the inhabitants of Middle Earth in hopes of conquering over them. His stronghold, Angband, was built deep in the earth where light could not reach it. The darkness and depth of

Melkor's fortress seems to imply a hellish sort of imagery, especially when paired with the other creatures that dwelt within it alongside Melkor. In Angband, "he gathered his demons about him, those spirits who had first adhered to him in the days of his splendour...their hearts were of fire, but they were cloaked in darkness...Balrogs they were named" (*The Silmarillion* 47). The use of words such as "demon," "fire," and "darkness" all seem to further the idea of Angband as an infernal stronghold.

In addition to Balrogs, who are seen primarily dwelling deep underground in and around Angband, Tolkien introduces the creature Ungoliant, a massive female spider that wishes to devour everything it sees in an attempt to sate her endless hunger. She works with Melkor briefly in his plans to disrupt the balance in Middle Earth and bring about darkness in the realm. While she originally lived deep within a ravine, following her brief alliance with Melkor she "dwelt beneath Ered Gorgoroth, in that dark valley that was after called...the Valley of Dreadful Death" (*The Silmarillion* 81). With the introduction of various evil creatures into Tolkien's story, it becomes clear that they all follow a similar pattern. That is, they all seem to prefer dark places, which leads them to dwell deep underground, where the light of the heavens cannot touch them. This draw to darkness helps solidify the other half of Tolkien's spatial allegory, and provides Middle Earth with clear sections that are either good or evil. Good things dwell above ground, with creatures or establishments that are either especially good or even holy physically higher up, while evil things reside beneath the earth, away from light.

Jumping ahead many millennia, we reach the latter years of the Third Age of Middle Earth, the time period in which Tolkien's *The Hobbit* book and *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy take place. At this point, the Valar no longer physically reside in Middle Earth, and have all but ceased helping the inhabitants of Middle Earth altogether. Melkor has been defeated, but his

second-in-command, Sauron, has amassed an army and is attempting to take over Middle Earth, just like his predecessor. As the current topography of Middle Earth is revealed throughout these stories, it becomes apparent that good and evil are no longer balanced in the way they were during the First Age. Good places, like the kingdoms of Men and Elves, are still found above ground, with certain spaces existing at high elevations. The city of Minas Tirith specifically, provides a great example of a relationship between good and height during the Third Age. Like Númenor, the city is built into a mountain, and as the reader finally comes to the city itself, Tolkien describes “Mount Mindolluin, the deep purple shadows of its high glens, and its tall face whitening in the rising day. And upon its out-thrust knee was [Minas Tirith], with its seven walls of stone” (*The Return of the King* 7-8). Simply by being perched on a mountain, Tolkien makes it evident that Minas Tirith is elevated. However, the city is built in a way so that it has seven layers, each one higher than the previous. The uppermost level is the Citadel, the place where the royal family and the Steward of Gondor are meant to reside, and because of the architecture, those on this seventh level are able to look all the way down to the very foundation of the city. Like with Númenor, not only is the entire city elevated, but the most important section of the city is the highest. While in Númenor a temple existed at its peak, here it is the Citadel and the White Tree, which is made in the image of Telperion, one of the ancient trees of Valinor, created by one of the Valar.

In addition to Minas Tirith, there are other examples of good in high up places, such as the Eagles, who are still a present force in Middle Earth, although they are less active than they were in the First Age. However, within the Third Age we find that evil has also come to exist in high places, while still additionally dwelling in low ones. To reside underground is the nature of evil, as Tolkien establishes in the First Age, however evil has come to mimic good during the

Third Age, created perverted mockeries of several good places and creatures in Middle Earth. In place of Angband, the land of Mordor now exists as the gathering place of Sauron and his armies, an above-ground wasteland surrounded by barren peaks on all sides. Mordor's layout recalls that of Gondolin, and seems to act as an inverted Eden. Whereas Gondolin was a safe paradise for its people, protected on all sides by mountains and Manwë's Eagles, Mordor is a dark realm deprived of light and nature, filled with Sauron's forces and protected by his own dark creations. In addition to his ground troops, Sauron has created the Fellbeasts, creatures of flight resembling wyverns or small dragons, who patrol Mordor's borders and prevent spies from entering. These "anti-Eagles" also fly throughout Middle Earth on tasks given by Sauron, and participate in battle. Sauron has also built the Tower of Barad-Dûr, a stronghold where his evil spirit resides. From its peak his Eye is able to see both within and beyond his dark realm. However, Barad-Dûr is not the center of Sauron's "anti-Gondolin" kingdom. The volcano Orodruin rests at its center. If Gondolin's kingdom is reminiscent of Eden, with the kingdom's center being the very heart of the city where its rulers dwelt, Orodruin is the evil counterpart, and serves as the most corrupt, hellish part of Mordor. Even beyond the creatures and notable landmarks present in Mordor, Tolkien describes the entirety of realm with very bleak, desolate language, emphasizing the fact that no living thing that has not been corrupted by evil could ever survive there. Within Mordor "smokes trailed on the ground and lurked in hollows, and fumes leaked from fissures in the earth...all seemed ruinous and dead, a desert burned and choked" (*The Return of the King* 212). Mordor stands as the epitome of perverted good, a place of death and ruin, filled with nightmarish creatures and the evil will of Sauron, and shows that evil is slowly overtaking good as the Third Age ends.

Yet despite evil's gradual accumulation of power, Tolkien's original relationships between goodness and height hold true. At the end of *The Return of the King*, the reader sees the collapse of Barad-Dûr, and the destruction of Sauron and the majority of his forces, including all of the Nazghûl and their fellbeasts. In spite of Sauron's attempts to reach power and perhaps even godhood itself, eventually the balance must be brought back, requiring the forces of evil to return to the depths of the world. This fact remains true of characters themselves as well. The Eye of Sauron physically falls when he is defeated, as do the fellbeasts from the sky.

Even characters that begin as morally good run the risk of becoming evil and suffering an eventual fall, an event that is on one hand symbolic and reminiscent of Lucifer's fall from Heaven, and on the other quite literal. One of the best examples of a good character who slowly becomes corrupted by evil is Denethor, the Steward of Gondor at the time of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Although he is praised for his wisdom and knowledge of things happening far beyond the borders of Gondor, when Tolkien introduces him to the reader, Denethor's leadership is failing, as he is beginning to despair, losing all hope of defeating Sauron and his forces. The very first words he speaks are "Dark indeed is the hour...But though all the signs forebode that the doom of Gondor is drawing nigh, less now to me is that darkness than my own darkness" (*The Return of the King* 12). In addition to the constant threat of Mordor overtaking the neighboring realm of Gondor, the recent death of Denethor's eldest son causes him to begin losing all hope of a victory over evil. Denethor's hopelessness continues to grow until, in a fit of madness and despair, he attempts to burn himself and his youngest son alive. He descends from the peak of Minas Tirith deep into the tombs where Minas Tirith's past Kings and Stewards reside. His son is successfully saved from being killed alongside him, but despite the efforts of others, Denethor refuses to see reason, and upon leaping onto a table within the tombs, "he took

up the staff of his stewardship that lay at his feet and broke it on his knee. Casting the pieces into the blaze he bowed and laid himself on the table” (*The Return of the King* 131). In the end, Denethor’s hopelessness about the rising evil in the world and his son’s death drags him from the summit of Minas Tirith deep underground into the tombs, where he succumbs to death by fire at his own hands.

While Denethor’s moral movement within the story begins high and ends low, there are characters within the story who fluctuate between the two. One of the Maiar, Gandalf, commonly referred to as Gandalf the Grey and later Gandalf the White, is an example of this, albeit a unique one. Gandalf is a servant of the Valar and aids in helping preserve the balance of good and evil within Middle Earth even after the Valar have left the realm. *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy follows him, alongside eight others, as they attempt to transport Sauron’s most powerful weapon, The One Ring, to Orodruin where it can be destroyed. As an agent of good sent by the gods themselves, Gandalf’s moral standing remains thoroughly good as well. As the fellowship’s journey progresses, Gandalf acts as a leader, guiding them through Middle Earth. However, while traveling through the Mines of Moria, an ancient and massive mine built by the Dwarves, they attract the attention of a Balrog that had been dwelling deep within the mines and are pursued by the creature. While passing the Bridge of Khazad-Dûm in order to escape Moria, Gandalf lingers behind, demanding the group to “Fly! This is a foe beyond any of you. I must hold the narrow way” (*The Fellowship of the Ring* 370). He then turns to face the Balrog alone as the others head for the mine’s exit. The two face off briefly before the bridge collapses under the Balrog’s feet and it falls into a deep chasm, “but even as it fell it swung its whip, and the thongs lashed and curled about the wizard’s knees, dragging him to the brink. He staggered and...slid into the abyss” (*The Fellowship of the Ring* 371). Like Denethor, the Balrog, and Sauron,

Gandalf has physically descended deep into the earth in order to traverse Moria, and then falls even further into the depths of the world due to the Balrog. Following the lines of logic established in this paper, this would imply that Gandalf has somehow experienced a moral descent as well, and must have been evil or insane. However, Gandalf does not die deep underground, but actually survives his fall and continues to fight with the Balrog. The creature flees from him, ascending a staircase that runs from the very pit of the mountain to its peak, where Gandalf finally kills the Balrog. Gandalf soon dies as well from exhaustion and his injuries, but is brought back to life by the Valar so he may continue to help in the battle against Sauron. So despite physically descending down, not only does Gandalf rise up to an even higher point than he was before, but he is also resurrected, something that very rarely happens throughout the entirety of Tolkien's legendarium. The selflessness of his staying behind to slow the Balrog down so his allies could escape is a moral choice that ultimately brings him up higher than he once was, and he's rewarded by the Valar for his actions. Gandalf's sacrifice and resurrection are also likely meant to bring the image of Jesus Christ to the mind of the reader, once again reemphasizing the presence of Christian symbolism and similarities within Middle Earth.

The third character who seems to fully utilize Tolkien's spatial allegory is Gollum. Gollum's movements, both physical and moral, are perhaps the most complex of any character in the legendarium. He is continuously shifting his desires, fighting between his incredible addiction to the Ring and its hold over him, and the desire to be free of this temptation. These conflicting desires cause Gollum to roam the vast majority of Middle Earth, ascending and descending many times over his centuries of living. When Gollum, originally named Sméagol, first encounters the Ring, it has been found by his cousin Déagol. The Ring's allure effects him

almost instantly, and he murders his cousin in order to keep it as his own. Following this obvious moral downfall, Sméagol retreats deep underground beneath the Misty Mountains, and spends centuries hiding in a deep cavern, fawning over the Ring and slowly being poisoned by its corruptive and evil nature. After several centuries, Gollum loses the Ring to a hobbit named Bilbo Baggins, who pockets it, not understanding its power. When Gollum realizes what has happened, he spends decades traversing Middle Earth, searching for the one who stole his precious Ring. Bilbo eventually passes it down to his nephew Frodo Baggins, who then joins the Fellowship of the Ring, alongside Gandalf, and journeys to destroy it. The Fellowship is ultimately sundered partway through its quest, but Frodo and his friend Samwise Gamgee continue on towards Mordor with the goal of destroying the Ring. As they near the realm of Mordor, they are intercepted by Gollum, but manage to convince him to show them the way to Mordor. Gollum agrees, although it's unclear why he does so. It's possible he simply wishes to be near the Ring, or perhaps he's biding his time, awaiting the opportunity to betray the two hobbits and steal it from them. This section of the story, where Gollum's ultimate goal could potentially be either good or bad, features the three traveling through the Dead Marshes, a flat expanse of foul swampland. There is no upward or downward movement, which seems to emphasize the mystery of Gollum's morality.

Following this section of the narrative, Gollum's end goal becomes clear; he intends to lead them along a secret pathway into Mordor that is guarded by a giant spider named Shelob, a descendant of the ancient Ungoliant. Gollum plans to have them killed by Shelob, at which point he can seize the Ring for himself. However, in order to reach Shelob's lair, the three must first journey up the Stairs of Cirith Ungol. Before ultimately deciding to betray them, Gollum ascends to a physically high place. This seems to be Tolkien highlighting the moral crossroads Gollum

now stands at. While he could, in this moment, admit his plans and lead them a safer way, he could also lead them down into Shelob's lair. He has the potential to join the side of good, and safely guide the hobbits into Mordor where the Ring can be destroyed. However, he ultimately succumbs to his desire for the Ring, and leads the two into the dark tunnels where Shelob dwells. The two manage to survive however, and Gollum briefly departs from the main narrative. When he reenters it, Sam and Frodo are ascending Orodruin, and have nearly reached the entrance into the heart of the volcano where the Ring can be cast into the lava and destroyed. However, at this point Gollum has completely succumbed to his lust for the Ring, and is bent on taking it from Frodo. The two hobbits manage to make it into the heart of Orodruin with Gollum pursuing them. Once again, Gollum has physically ascended, and is again confronted with the options of choosing to do evil or good. Despite the countless years he spent being corrupted by the Ring, following the Christian line of thinking that Tolkien possessed, Gollum still has the potential to choose good and be saved. Yet he again chooses the Ring, an object of pure evil. He attacks Frodo, biting off the hobbit's finger to get to the Ring, and "dancing like a mad thing, held aloft the ring, a finger still thrust within its circle... 'Precious, precious, precious!' Gollum cried. 'My Precious! O my Precious!' And with that, even as his eyes were lifted up to gloat on his prize, he stepped too far, toppled, wavered for a moment on the brink, and then with a shriek he fell" into the lava (*The Return of the King* 240). With this final, decisive act, Gollum chooses evil once again, and his physical fall, this time to his death, mimics the plummeting of his morality. In seizing the Ring, Gollum has returned once again to the version of himself that greedily hoards it, and is effectively denying the entire world of salvation by taking the Ring for his own. However, he is swiftly repaid for his evil deed as he trips and falls to his death, destroying both himself and the Ring.

As a whole, the relationship Tolkien has built between physical elevation and the aspects of good and evil begins as a fairly simple allegory, but grows increasingly more complex as Middle Earth ages. While the duality of goodness and height originally appear straightforward in the First Age, as evil begins to overtake good and pervert it to its own ends, the balance starts to break down. As the Third Age draws to a close, the fate of all good in Middle Earth hangs by a thread. However, all hope and order are not lost as evil grows in strength. Eventually, things are returned to their original and rightful states; good remains high, while all the bad creations that had sought high places are ultimately brought low once again. Amidst all this, the physical movements of characters also provides important indicators of good and evil. The balance of good and evil within individual characters can be seen through their ascents and descents throughout Middle Earth. While selflessness and bravery cause characters to ascend both morally and physically, actions such as despair and treachery bring characters low. Overall, this fascinating relationship between the abstract concepts of good and evil and the physical attributes of Middle Earth show the unique ways in which Tolkien infused his own beliefs into his work, and allows the reader to better notice and understand the natures of good and evil within Tolkien's legendarium.

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