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A Thing New and Strange

I've been a Lord of the Rings fan most of my life; I saw the movies before I could understand the plot, and read through the legendarium at my leisure from grade school through college. So, while this past semester did not really offer me any novel encounter with Tolkien's works, it did expose me much more directly to others' critical readings of the stories than I'd had before. One idea often discussed was a theme of an overall downward trend: a long, slow defeat that feels embedded in the legendarium. Ostensibly, this reading is difficult to counter as, in the legendarium, real gods dwell in a real heaven providing a constant meter against which Middle Earth can be clearly contrasted. Nevertheless, when I've set down Tolkien's books in the past, a dissonant theme lingers in my mind: one of hope and goodness, found in the unlikely, waxing in spite of overwhelming evil, prevailing to show beauty when such seems lost. This reading seems naïve compared to the better evidenced theme of a long slow defeat, but I do not know of anything worthwhile in a story besides that which lingers once it's finished. So, I am drawn to consider this dissonant theme seriously and demonstrate here why the unlikely hope, rather than the long, slow defeat, is the thematic thread embedded most deeply throughout the legendarium.

To do this, I first intend to give two examples of images that have lingered in my mind after both first and second readings, then analyze these by contrasting them with more

conventionally beautiful images found in the books. This contrast will refine the understanding of the dissonant theme, and I will use this refined understanding to find examples even in images fundamental to Tolkien's work. The last few examples I consider will be used to pinpoint this dissonant theme by describing both the most consistent source of evil as well as the greatest good the characters attain. In so doing, I hope to leave former conceptions of good and evil in the books deconstructed, and the reader convinced of my thesis.

Before I begin, I will disclaim that I will not be considering authorial intent in my analysis. Though such an evaluation certainly has its place, it is not what drives the impression that books or other works of art have on the general public. Rather, I will be looking at the *Hobbit*, the *Lord of the Rings*, and *The Silmarillion* as they would be read by a casual reader (if there is anyone who casually reads *The Silmarillion*) in their published, widely available forms. I will allow that evidence could be found that Tolkien would have disagreed with certain conclusions I draw from his works; however, it is not the privilege of the author to control how his works affect readers.

Two surprisingly favorite images of mine from the books may give a sense for this dissonant theme. The first is the River Withywindle, a tributary to the Brandywine, by which the four hobbits meet Old Man Willow. It is described as a lazy, "dark river of brown water, bordered by ancient willows," yet it is viewed under a "golden afternoon of late sunshine [which] lay warm and drowsy upon the hidden land between" (*The Lord of the Rings*, bk. 1, ch. 6). This river valley receives both a menacing and lovely description within the same sentence, which mix to make its imagery rich, though more ordinary.

The second is the Drúedain, also called the Woses, Wild Men of the Woods. On their march to aid Gondor, the Rohirrim encounter their leader, Ghân-buri-Ghân, in the Drúadan Forest; he is described as "a strange squat shape of a man, gnarled as an old stone, and the

hairs of his scanty beard straggled on his lumpy chin like dry moss” (The Lord of the Rings, bk. 5, ch. 5). He speaks the common tongue haltingly, with ‘uncouth’ words mixed in. This sharply contrasts the description of many of the good men encountered, who are often tall and fair of speech. Further, whereas Tolkien often heavily foreshadows encounters (many and frequent warnings are given to the reader about Fangorn before the Hobbits meet an Ent) this people are nearly a complete surprise, besides a carving Merry sees two chapters before of the Púkel-men, which resembles the Drúedain. Despite their foul appearance, the Drúedain are far more connected to their forest than any other previously encountered and leverage this to provide invaluable aid to the Rohirrim.

These images certainly stick out to me because of their wholesale (and wise) exclusion from Peter Jackson’s films. However, their imagery also feels unique from the places and people that tend to dominate; almost all of the high and mighty images of glory that often come to mind when one thinks of the Lord of the Rings have long history that traces them back to some contact, however, distant, with the divine of this world, the Valar, and their dwelling in Valinor. The two images I described, though, feel independent of the divine, almost without past, and low. Yet, both still unabashedly possess some beauty or goodness of a kind otherwise unseen, even in Valinor.

I hesitate to call these images eucatastrophic though. Coined by Tolkien, ‘eucatastrophe’ refers to a sudden and unexpected happy resolution to a plot. The paragons of eucatastrophe are the Eagles, which possess direct connection to Manwe, the head of the Valar. However, the salvation they deliver is unexpected only to the common man; the wise foresee it. In contrast, this dissonant theme describes commonplace things which have power surprising the learned. This theme can be found throughout Tolkien’s stories, and is the real hope of Arda against a long slow defeat. It exists, and must exist, because of a flaw in the divine, the Valar.

In a worldview which places the Valar as the originators of all goodness in Arda and possessing the purest form of beauty, a slow decline into evil and blandness is inevitable. With each passing age Arda resembles the initial vision of the Valar less, and it becomes harder to trace history back to them. However, this first creation of the Valar did not capture all beauty, and, though little is said about it (about 2 pages before Melkor enters the scene) two quotes are worth noting: “And the light of the Lamps of the Valar flowed out over the Earth, so that all was lit as it were in a changeless day,” also, “And the shape of Arda and the symmetry of its waters and its lands was marred in that time, so that the first designs of the Valar were never after restored” (Quenta Silmarillion, ch. 1).

The Valar’s purest vision of beauty was of a symmetric world lit with changeless light. While this may be ‘perfect’ and pure ‘good’, in a sense, people today can envision beauty greater than this. This concept can be understood more clearly in examples of art. The greatest work of the High Renaissance period may be the Mona Lisa; however, to many, *Starry Night* from the later Post-Impressionism period touches closer to the heart. Or, more succinctly, *Olympia* (1863) is beautiful in a way that *Venus of Urbino* (1534), its model, could never be. This reality is the slight flaw in the first designs of the Valar, and it is the reason that new beauty must spring forth unforeseen even by the wisest in Tolkien’s stories.

This strange goodness is seen throughout Tolkien’s works, beyond the obscure river and people mentioned above. It is the Hobbits. They are unmentioned throughout the *Ainulindalë*, *Valaquenta*, *Quenta Silmarillion*, and *Akallabêth*. Their coming and simple goodness is unanticipated and strange to all in Arda, yet their simplicity contains a vision of beauty richer than what is found elsewhere. Indeed, the image of Bilbo smoking a pipe at Bag End is one of the most endearing images found in the *Legendarium*, and almost no aspect of this can be traced back to the Valar.

At the least, the Hobbits were unexpected to the wizards of Middle Earth. Sauron, the wisest, takes little heed of the Halflings, and Gandalf is considered strange to befriend them. Gandalf of course profits from this, as through Halflings the Ring is rediscovered, and in them he finds the Ringbearer: Frodo had a similar mix of Took and Baggins as his uncle Bilbo and was of the Fallohide strain (of the 3 breeds of Hobbits, the Fallohides were the most friendly with elves). So, it is in spending time and learning about the Hobbits that Gandalf is able to make connections and foresee who a good ringbearer would be.

Yet even Gandalf's foresight fails regarding Samwise, whose lineage is entirely unimpressive. Gandalf clearly likes Sam, assenting that he should go on the journey. But he cannot quite predict Sam as well as Frodo. When Gandalf the White meets Aragorn and company in Fangorn, he is one of the most divine figures encountered in the Lord of the Rings: "his hair was white as snow in the sunshine; and gleaming white was his robe; the eyes under his deep brows were bright, piercing as the rays of the sun; power was in his hand" (The Lord of the Rings, bk. 3, ch. 5). He knows much already of movements of Eagles, the Ring, of Frodo's resolve to go alone, and the peril he faces, at which the company can only guess. Yet, when Legolas tells him Sam went too, there is a change, "'Did he!' said Gandalf, and there was a gleam in his eye and a smile on his face, 'Did he indeed? It is news to me, yet it does not surprise me. Good! Very good! You lighten my heart. You must tell me more.'"

Another important vision of this strange goodness is seen in Éowyn. Of course, her plight is paralleled with one of the Hobbits (Merry), but her fearlessness achieves something unique. Her choices are more than unexpected – they are actively advised against by Aragorn. In my reading, this section casts no negative light on Aragorn. He seems bound to a fate beyond his desire, and Éowyn seems to be struggling with that: "I have waited on faltering feet long enough. Since they falter no longer, it seems, may I not now spend my life as I will?" while

Aragorn's position is different: "Were I to go where my heart dwells, far in the North I would now be wandering in the fair valley of Rivendell" (The Lord of the Rings, bk. 5, ch. 2).

Rather, Aragorn's advice that Éowyn stay with her people may have been drawn from the wisdom of the lesser-known story of Haleth from antiquity. Haleth was of the race of Man, daughter of Haldad and twin sister to her brother Haldar. During an Orc raid, Haldad's people were cornered against two rivers where they had built a stockade. When Haldad goes out to fight the Orcs, he is slain, and Haldar rushes out to his father only to be slain also. Haleth remains with her people, and holds them together against hope, until Elves are able to break the siege. The Elves then offer lands, but the Lady Haleth, "proud, and unwilling to be guided or ruled" (Quenta Silmarillion, ch. 17), leads her people through yet greater danger to their own lands. In choosing to remain with her people, Haleth becomes the head of a great house of Man, who are ever after known as the people of Haleth, though she never weds.

Éowyn does not take the choice of Haleth. She rides out with Théoden, and for love of him does not forsake him, even against the terror of the Witch king of Angmar. The valor of their battle is certainly unforeseen, and the image is a striking one. Yet, a more unexpected good is the focus on the problems of the House of Eorl which her choices reveal.

The House of Eorl may be chauvinistic, both in its lust for battle and slight underlying sexist beliefs. To the first point, during the charge into the Battle of the Pelennor Fields, "Théoden could not be overtaken. Fey he seemed, or the battle-fury of his fathers ran like new fire in his veins, and he was borne up on Snowmane like a god of old," then shortly after "all the host of Rohan burst into song, and they sang as they slew, for the joy of battle was on them" (The Lord of the Rings, bk. 5, ch. 5). This imagery sharply contrasts martial ideals of Gondor espoused by Faramir in his conversation with Frodo much earlier.

Direct sexism is harder to pinpoint, but I think it is suggested. As mentioned, I do not find any negative light to be cast on Aragorn in his dealings with Éowyn, but I do for Éomer, her brother. Contrasting Éomer's reaction to seeing his fallen king,

“Éomer said to them:

*Mourn not overmuch! Mighty was the fallen,
meet was his ending. When his mound is raised,
women then shall weep. War now calls us!*

Yet he himself wept as he spoke.”

against his reaction to seeing Éowyn, whom he thinks dead, one can sense a serious change:

“His face went deathly white, and a cold fury rose in him, so that all speech failed him for a while. A fey mood took him.

‘Éowyn, Éowyn!’ he cried at last. ‘Éowyn, how come you here? What madness or devilry is this? Death, death, death! Death take us all!’

Then without taking counsel, or waiting for the approach of the men of the City, he spurred headlong back to the front of the great host, and blew a horn, and cried aloud for the onset. Over the field rang his clear voice calling: ‘Death! Ride, ride to ruin and the world’s ending!’”

(The Lord of the Rings, bk 5, ch. 6)

‘Fey’ is a word used somewhat seldomly in The Lord of the Rings, but much more often in The Silmarillion. There, it usually describes the reckless abandon with which Elves pursue the Silmarils, especially Fëanor. It is no complement. Yet, all of Éomer's actions could be seen as despair over the loss of his sister, if not for parallels with the steward of Gondor.

Just as the men of Rohan could not recognize Éowyn as being a woman until too late, so too do none of them realize that she is not dead. Only someone outside the drama, Imrahil, Prince of Dol Amroth, can point out what to him seems obvious: that Éowyn should not be buried but healed. At the same time, Faramir too is thought dead by his father, Denethor, and kin, and only a Hobbit and a Wizard seem to be able to realize on their own that it is not so. This is from their final conversation,

“‘What then would you have,’ said Gandalf, ‘if your will could have its way?’

“‘I would have things as they were in all the days of my life,’ answered Denethor, ‘and in the days of my long-fathers before me... But if doom denies this to me, then I will have *naught*’”
(The Lord of the Rings, bk 5, ch. 7).

He then tries to kill his son, and, failing this, burns himself alive. Éomer’s and Denethor’s suicidal reactions are not from love, but rather out of a fear of the changing of the world, and a desire not to see it: Denethor sees the end of the line of stewards, and Éomer may see the beginnings of feminism in Arda.

This fear of change may be one of the broadest concerns of the wise and powerful of Arda, as it seems ever to gnaw at them. Fear of change, and desire to preserve, drives the Valar to create Valinor, Fëanor to create the Silmarils, and the Elves to use their rings to maintain their dominions. These choices are not evil, but the tune they follow seems to be the source of the view of the long slow defeat, and clearly runs dissonant to a tune Eru Ilúvatar sang at the beginning of all things: “Yet some things there are that they cannot see, neither alone nor taking counsel together; for to none but himself has Ilúvatar revealed all that he has in store,

and in every age there come forth things that are new, for they do not proceed from the past.” (Ainulindalë).

One final example, though it is two-fold. Elwë was one of the first elves to visit Valinor and look upon the light of the Trees. He returned to his kin as a king, urging them to heed the summons of the Valar to the Blessed Realm. But on this road to return to Valinor, he often wandered in the woods in search of his friend Finwë, who also visited Valinor and led a host back. In wandering, Elwë heard the song of Melian the Maia, and “forgot then utterly all his people, and all the purposes of his mind... but being filled with love Elwë came to her,” (Quenta Silmarillion, ch. 3). Neither strength of friendship nor the Trees which preserved the first light of the Lamps did Elwë, who was after known as Elu Thingol or King Thingol, hold in higher regard, for he never returned to Valinor.

Though it did not take root nor grow in the Blessed Realm, the love of Melian and Thingol brought forth the most beautiful of all the children of Ilúvatar: Lúthien. In the same woods where her parents met, Lúthien’s dancing enchanted Beren, the mortal man. The tale of Beren and Lúthien may be the most beautiful told in all the legendarium. This beauty is difficult to capture in a summary; however, one quote by Beren does well to describe their love: “Neither rock, nor steel, nor the fires of Morgoth, nor all the powers of the Elf-kingdoms, shall keep me from the treasure that I desire,” (Quenta Silmarillion, ch. 19). Almost no will in Arda, save the fell oath of Fëanor and his sons, defies both good and evil in the same breath as does this. Truly, too, is this vision of beauty beyond both Morgoth and the Valar, for on Morgoth Lúthien once cast “upon him a dream, dark as the Outer Void where once he walked alone,” and to Mandos, Doomsman of the Valar, she sang a song of such surpassing beauty that he was moved to pity, “who never before was so moved, nor has been since.” Meeting Beren and Lúthien at their return to his realm, King Thingol bade them sit by him and tell their tale. Then to Elwë, who had seen the very light of the Trees; to Elu Thingol, who had perceived subtle beauty that surpassed

even these in his love of Melian; even to him the love of Lúthien seemed “a thing new and strange.”

For all my lifelong love of Tolkien’s stories, putting him and his works under a microscope this past semester has somewhat fractured my view of the author. It seems he was ever unsure of his choices and had difficulty making many sections ‘work’. The Lord of the Rings was not released as he would have liked and was published without the ending it seems he would have wanted. In the midst of this confusion, a long, slow fall to mundanity can seem to be the only theme found throughout all his works. Yet when I was a kid, I did not worry about all the struggles of the author, and my first impressions were more coherent and optimistic. I have done my best to preserve them here, but it is only a shadow from memory of my initial experience; my first impression can never be recaptured. This is not a loss though; I’ve found good things unexpected in many other stories since then.