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## Escape and Reality in Tolkien's Legendarium

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Katherine Hovland

### Escape and Reality in Tolkien's Legendarium

More so than other genres, fantasy offers the opportunity to escape to another world, but the value of that escapism is debated. This work will explore how Tolkien's writings on fantasy, escape, and consolation in his essay "On Fairy Stories" are realized in the Legendarium, particularly in *The Lord of the Rings*, and consider reader responses. The emergent view of escapism is a positive one, grounded in the idea that stories can still contain truth. In the Legendarium, escapism has value as long as it retains its sense of reality; for readers, the texts offer escape, hope, and ultimately consolation.

In "On Fairy Stories," Tolkien offers an explanation of the concepts of escape and consolation that can act as a framework for reading the Legendarium. Tolkien sees value in escape, drawing close parallels between literal, physical escape and escapism through literature, and he pushes back against the idea that escape is cowardly or shameful. He frames his discussion of escape in a criticism of the modern era, rejecting the idea that the industrial world is somehow more real than the natural or even imagined world (148-150). These ideas about reality will be considered further, but first, it is key to understand that for Tolkien, escapism is a positive force, one that can aid humans in overcoming adversity and navigating desires that are out of reach (151-152).

Of course, not every reader will approach the Legendarium through the lens of Tolkien's nonfiction, but *The Lord of the Rings* similarly affirms the value of escapism, as examples in the text demonstrate the positive ways that escape can aid characters in moments of crisis. In these moments, we see characters in the midst of danger and hardship turn their thoughts towards

happy memories or imaginings. After escaping (in the literal sense) from orcs in *The Two Towers*, Pippin and Merry sit for a moment to gather their strength, and while eating lembas, they both remember “fair faces, and laughter, and wholesome food in quiet days now far away” (447). This scene is a moment of escapism that takes them away from their situation. In a time of trouble, they set aside their peril for a moment to spend some time in a happier world, one that they can now access only in their imagination, and it brings them a moment of peace. A similar but fleeting moment of escape occurs in the final pages of Book Five of *The Return of the King*. In what might be Pippin’s last moments, he thinks longingly of “cool sunlight and green grass” (874), which he never expects to see again. Although this moment of escapism is not as complete as the scene in *The Two Towers* and is tinged with sorrow more than comfort, it nevertheless introduces a moment of light in an otherwise bleak situation. The reference to nature acts as a reminder that while this battle may be a thing of horror, devoid of redeeming qualities, the world itself is not. Before Pippin slips into unconsciousness, cries that the Eagles are approaching remind him of Bilbo’s stories. He thinks, “This is my tale, and it is ended now. Goodbye!” (874). Framing one’s own experiences as a story is another means of escape, a way to create distance, an idea that is also explored in *The Two Towers*.

Escapism acts as a coping strategy and a means to reframe reality through the power of storytelling. Under Cirith Ungol, Frodo and Sam find comfort by casting themselves as characters in stories that others will tell (696-697). They become just another chapter in a long adventure. Telling their own story this way helps create some distance between themselves and their pain—what is unbearably awful to live is just another interesting plot point in a story. As Sam puts it, “even Gollum might be good in a tale, better than he is to have by you,

anyway” (697). Stories can also reframe a situation and bring new ideas to light; Tolkien alludes to this idea in “On Fairy Stories” in the line “These lamps may be excluded from the tale simply because they are bad lamps; and it is possible that one of the lessons to be learnt from the story is the realization of this fact” (148). Perhaps the realization for Sam and Frodo is the reminder that what they are doing is bigger than themselves, a necessary step in a long fight against evil. Their imaginings offer a gentler escape as well. Sam reminds Frodo that at the end of the story—or rather, their part in it—there will be rest. He imagines the story being told by a father to his son by a fireplace, and the cozy image cheers up Frodo, burdened though he is by the ring and by his quest (*Two Towers* 697). In that moment, it does not matter that such a moment is far out of reach for them. Creating distance between themselves and their reality brings them comfort, comfort that lightens their load and makes it easier to go on.

Escapism is a useful tool for navigating strife, and without it, characters are prone to hopelessness. At the foot of the mountain, Sam turns once again to escapism in their despair. Upset at losing his cookware, he reminisces about a bright point in their travels, a better time. But Frodo cannot remember. In fact, he claims to be unable to remember anything good, “no taste of food, no feel of water, no sound of wind, no memory of tree or grass or flower” (*Return of the King* 916). The ring has robbed him of his ability to imagine anything positive and with it his ability to escape from his dark reality. Without escape, he is trapped and overwhelmed by his reality. Escapism, rather than being framed as an unhealthy coping mechanism, is a necessary way to build hope and remain optimistic in the face of adversity. Without it, Frodo has nothing to put his faith in.

Tolkien's writings have in turn brought that escape to readers, as testified to by the J.R.R. Tolkien Fandom Oral History Collection. At the time of analysis, the collection contained 480 interviews with Tolkien fans, 64 of which contain a direct reference to escapism. The interviewees talk about escaping to another world, in language that makes it clear just how immersive the experience truly is. They also speak to things that Tolkien helped them escape from, be it boredom, everyday stress, frustration, isolation, instability, trouble with family, illness, or the death of a loved one. One interviewee says, "Truly, he has allowed me to survive. Since very little, I have found the ugliness of this world to be nearly unbearable. Tolkien has allowed me to escape to his world and have a respite." As Tolkien does in "On Fairy Stories," they frame their experience of escape as a positive force in their lives, and some even mention the impact that the essay had on their outlook. Like the hobbits in the *Legendarium*, the real people who read and love these stories find escapism to be a valuable coping mechanism and a way to reframe their situation.

However, a critical difference between the *Legendarium* scenes examined above and the oral history collection is that the hobbits were primarily escaping to real memories or plausible futures, not fantasy lands. The idea that fantasy worlds are not real makes escapism easier to criticize and potentially less meaningful than a memory or a dream. It can be argued that memories are grounded in reality, but stories are only illusions and can never offer true satisfaction. They may also offer less of a total escape, because of the element of disbelief. However, as noted above, Tolkien push back against the idea that fantasy was not real. In "On Fairy Stories," he criticizes the suspension of disbelief and instead argues that fantasy must give "the inner consistency of reality" (139). Fantasy works because it is real, in some sense, and

because it feels real to the reader. Many interviewees in the oral history mention that they felt they could escape into the stories because they felt so fully realized. When they talk about escapism, they reference heroism and adventure but also detail and realism. Thus escapism and believability seem to be inherently linked; the escapism is most effective when the escape is something real.

The narrative itself encourages investment in the idea of the story as real, though not without first introducing doubt. In the *Legendarium*, reality and story are not always clearly defined. *The Silmarillion* is a work of fiction, but even within the world of Middle Earth, it's difficult to know whether it can be read as fact. It claims to tell "the lore of the Valdar" (25)—maybe a history, maybe just a legend—and sometimes uses hedges that suggest the story is only a best guess at what might have transpired. For example, the account "Of The Rings of Power and the Third Age" tells that "it is said" that Frodo carried the one ring to Mordor (303-304). While the uncertainty adds realism to the idea that the *Silmarillion* is a collection of legends, it casts doubt on the entire *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. The idea of doubt is further explored in the *Quenta Silmarillion*, when a figure resembling the man Amlach but speaking for Morgoth spreads dissent among the Men of Estolad. In an attempt to turn the men against the Eldar, he describes the war against Morgoth as nothing "but Elvish lore, tales to beguile newcomers that are unwary" (145). He frames the Eldar as oppressors and denies the stories that form the early chapters of *The Silmarillion*, and his words lead many of the men to disbelief. The moment establishes that for the characters in these stories, belief in the mythology is not a given. It also once again emphasizes that in Middle Earth, these stories are legends, not historical facts. However, these moments of disbelief in *The Silmarillion* do not encourage skepticism. The

extent to which the legends are true is open to debate, yet in this scene, it is worthwhile to note that the one spreading disbelief is Morgoth, a force of evil. Thus the effect of this framing is twofold. It blurs the line between story and reality and gives both characters and readers the choice to accept or reject the texts. Yet it also begins to encourage belief in stories, an effect that is seen even more strongly in *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy.

Repeatedly, characters in the trilogy encounter creatures or figures that they have known only in legends and come to believe in what they once saw as pure fantasy. Hobbits, for instance, are foreign to the men beyond the mountains. When Gimli references Halflings, one of the Riders of Rohan dismisses them as characters of “old songs and children’s tales” (*Two Towers*, 424). For him, the idea that hobbits exist seems laughable. Aragorn’s response is interesting. He claims that everything, even them, even the very earth itself, will someday become legend. Here, Sam and Frodo’s imagined future as characters in a story and its realization in *The Silmarillion* are once again relevant. The idea that reality can become stories is also the idea that stories could be reality. For readers, who will return to Merry and Pippin in the very next chapter, the skepticism of the Rider looks foolish. Within this text, hobbits are an established truth. A similar interaction occurs when Théoden sees the Ents in Fangorn Forest. Startled by them, he asks Gandalf what they are, and is scolded for neglecting the stories he was told as a child of the shepherds of the trees, stories that he likely dismissed as mere fancy (*Two Towers*, 536). Once again, the stories are proven true, and any attempt by Théoden to deny them would be ridiculous.

Though less grounded in fantasy, Sam’s encounter with oliphaunts in *The Two Towers* can be read as another example of this pattern. In a conversation with Gollum, he recites the rhyme of the oliphaunt (632). Although he clearly wants to believe in them, he mentions multiple times

that he doesn't know if they are real or not. However, one chapter later he sees one in battle in all its glory, and the experience leaves him full of wonder and delight (646-647). He is rewarded for his belief in oliphaunts with the discovery that they are real. Taken together, these incidents encourage the reader to invest in the story. The text may be a work of fiction, but the message it sends is that there is sometimes truth in fiction. Better to believe, to go forward with an open mind, than to shut oneself off to the possibility that this could be, in some way, true.

Of course, belief has its limits. Although readers may become immersed in the tales of Middle Earth, they remain aware that they are not literally true. The stories can still offer escape, however, as long as they appear real on a spiritual or emotional level. To understand this abstract truth, it is helpful to examine times when the lines between reality and fantasy seem to blur for characters in the *Legendarium*. These are often moments where the depths of Tolkien's mythology are explored, as in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, when Sam and Frodo accompany Gimli to view Durin's Stone and look into Mirrormere (325). There they see the mountains and the sky reflected in the water, but in a strange and beautiful way. The rich, vivid language describes a world that is unlike their reality. This vision, just a short interlude in the narrative, leaves both readers and the characters with a sense of wonder and awe. When they return to the rest of the fellowship, Pippin asks for a description, but Sam is unable to offer an explanation, too lost in thought to try to describe the scene. For Sam, looking into Mirrormere seems to be something akin to a religious experience. More than anything, this passage emphasizes the strangeness of the world and the idea that reality is anything but simple and easy to define.

In *The Hobbit*, Bilbo experiences a moment of escape that encourages belief. After days of wandering through the gloomy, oppressive forest, Bilbo climbs up a tree to look around

(137-138). At the top, he is greeted with an altogether new world, one full of light and fresh air and beautiful butterflies. He finds a moment of escape as he sits and feels the breeze. But for the dwarves, to whom he describes the experience, the story is frustrating. They can't feel the breeze down on the ground, and this story, despite their belief in it, is only frustrating. The moment lends itself well to an allegorical interpretation. The forest of Mirkwood acts as a dark reflection of our world, a cynical interpretation of life as cold, hard, and empty. But above the treetops there is hope and light, divinity ever present but out of sight. If the wider world above the trees is heaven (or a similar interpretation of the divine, perhaps even God himself), then it is real no matter how difficult it is for those on the ground to believe in. This reading is complicated by the fact that Bilbo, having climbed a tree in the bottom of a valley, fails to see that the forest ends soon. Even with his glimpse of the divine, he is unable to believe that he will soon be saved, and falls deeper into despair. The omniscient narration provides perspective and reveals that Bilbo's hopelessness is both unproductive and unnecessary, emphasizing the importance of belief. Even without an allegorical reading, the moment of optimism discourages cynicism on the part of the reader. After the darkness of the forest, it is refreshing to spend some time above the treetops and linger for a moment on the butterflies.

What unites these two scenes is that they allow characters to glimpse something like the divine, whether that's the strange rich world of the Mirrormere or just a breeze and a sunny day above the forest of Mirkwood. In both instances, characters experience a moment of escape and connect with a world beyond their understanding. These moments are optimistic because they point to a world that is, against all odds, beautiful and full of possibility. The Legendarium does

not present a universally positive outlook on life, but the stories through which most readers encounter Tolkien are fundamentally hopeful, even as they address evil and sorrow.

The reward of escape into fantasy is a happy ending, which Tolkien calls consolation. In “On Fairy Stories,” he describes the eucatastrophe, a joyful turn in a moment of crisis; the eucatastrophe brings joy and salvation to the characters but also emotionally impacts the reader with “a catch of the breath, a beat and lifting of the heart” (153-154). The eucatastrophe is simultaneously escapist and meant to be wholeheartedly believed, the truest example of the link between escape and reality.

The quintessential eucatastrophe in the *Legendarium* is the arrival of the Eagles. In *The Hobbit* and *The Return of the King* (though not in *The Silmarillion*), the Eagles signal salvation just as the characters have given up hope. For example, in the scene discussed earlier in which Pippin believes that all is lost in *The Return of the King*, just before losing consciousness, he hears others crying out that the Eagles are coming. He assumes that he must be imagining it, confusing his reality with the stories that Bilbo told of his own encounter with eucatastrophe (874). Yet the Eagles are real, and they play a critical role in the battle and in rescuing Frodo and Sam (927-930). Within the text, the eucatastrophe is a moment of grace that challenges, but ultimately rewards, belief. Pippin understandably finds it difficult to trust that his salvation has come, unexpectedly and unasked for, at the last possible moment; it seems too good to be true, but it is not. The escape that the *Legendarium* offers is the possibility that consolation is possible.

Placing the value of escape on the potential for consolation opens it once more to criticism as unrealistic. Yet the case made by the text is that a happy ending is, if not inevitable, then possible. Here, the optimistic turn towards the divine offers the potential to understand

consolation on an emotional or spiritual level rather than a literal one. Certainly, from a Christian perspective the idea that salvation will come in the end is not an unrealistic expectation, just one that may not happen on earth. Thus escaping into fantasy is not hollow, even though the reader does not believe in the literal truth of the story, as long as they accept its message of hope and light. The eucatastrophe cements the optimistic stance of much of the *Legendarium* and facilitates the ultimate escape, belief in the triumph of goodness.

Escapism, as presented in Tolkien's writings, is not an attempt to avoid reality. Instead, it is a way to cope with it by seeking comfort in something no less real. The *Legendarium* encourages belief, facilitating investment in the story and pointing to the possibility of greater truth contained within fiction. The stories offer escape through the promise that there is goodness and wonder in the world, and the escape is made full when readers are able to truly believe in that promise.

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