



**SURPRISED BY JOY, STEEPED IN SACRAMENT:  
SHAPING THE CREATIVE IMAGINATIONS OF C.S. LEWIS AND J.R.R. TOLKIEN**

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“Eh? What’s that? Yes, of course you’ll get back to Narnia again some day. Once a King in Narnia, always a King in Narnia. But don’t go trying to use the same route twice. Indeed, don’t *try* to get there at all. It’ll happen when you’re not looking for it. And don’t talk too much about it even among yourselves. And don’t mention it to anyone else unless you find that they’ve had adventures of the same sort themselves. What’s that? How will you know? Oh, you’ll know all right. Odd things, they say – even their looks – will let the secret out. Keep your eyes open. Bless me, what *do* they teach them at these schools?”

—C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*

“And yet their wills did not yield, and they struggled on.”

—J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King*

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## INTRODUCTION

“I miss you very much”

—*C.S. Lewis to J.R.R. Tolkien, October 1949*<sup>1</sup>

Like children in school who presume that their teachers live in their classrooms and do not exist outside school walls, most people imagine C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien only as the dynamic fantasy-writing duo, an inseparable pair of middle-aged men smoking pipes in an Oxford pub. This image fairly characterizes the middle period of their lives, roughly 1930-1950, but excludes more than two-thirds of their lives (Duriez 205). Those two-thirds of their lives contain the clues to unlocking the door to understanding their magical worlds, from inspiration to publication. For, despite their similarities, Lewis and Tolkien produced very different fictional worlds in Narnia and Middle-earth. Analyzing each author’s approach to storytelling and symbolism, it becomes apparent that their different approaches originate in different denominational persuasions. In order to understand how theological differences translated into their fiction, a biographical tracing of the relationship will prove useful.

Neither man sprang up fully-grown, pen in hand; indeed, Lewis and Tolkien began as boys in Ireland and South Africa, respectively, and only later moved to Oxford to attend university, where they met (Carpenter 14; Smith 22). In their early years, both experienced the early death of their mothers and the absence of fathers, Tolkien’s by death and Lewis’s by estrangement (Carpenter 38; Smith 48). Each had intimate, but different, experiences with religion. Lewis’s grandfather, Reverend Thomas R. Hamilton, served as the rector at St. Mark’s, an Anglican church in Belfast, Ireland (Smith 35). Growing up in Ulster, Lewis learned early on to dislike Catholicism with its “incense, robes, and fanfare” and to take pride in his Protestantism

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<sup>1</sup> (Jacobs 200)

(Bresland 14). Miles away, the young Tolkien under his mother's guidance became a loyal Catholic. Upon her untimely death, he took it upon himself to honor her memory by committing wholeheartedly to his faith (Carpenter 39).

Throughout his teenage years, Tolkien's churchgoing waxed and waned, but his faith never faltered, and by the time he met C.S. Lewis in 1926, Tolkien had made Catholicism the foundation of his life (Carpenter 73). Lewis, by contrast, had departed from the faith instilled in him as a child (Jacobs 37). This falling away began after the death of his mother, which took place despite his fervent prayers that it would not. Lewis found the Sunday School version of Christianity suited his palate far less than the ancient mythologies and epic tales he discovered in his youth. Though he hungered for the beauty and goodness he read in stories, Lewis believed them to be imaginary only; conversely, everything he perceived to be real was grim and devoid of meaning (*Surprised by Joy* 138). Lewis disparaged those who believed in God and instead pursued a life oriented towards earthly materialism. He wrote to Arthur Greeves in 1915, "I believe in no religion. There is absolutely no proof for any of them, and from a philosophical standpoint Christianity is not even the best" (*Letters* 52).

Lewis and Tolkien met in 1926, both returning to academia after serving in the war (Carpenter ix). United in love of Norse mythology and a desire to write poetry,

There was no reason why we should not have been happy; we had both just emerged safely from a war which (we then believed) had ended war for ever. We had survived the trenches, the nightmare was over, we were at Oxford, we were in our early twenties. The old order seemed not only restored but renewed; life and art lay before us for exploration and the interchange of ideas. (Lewis, qtd. Duriez 47)

As their friendship strengthened, Tolkien became the chief Christian apologist to Lewis. Through many long walks in the country and late nights in Lewis's study, and one particular ride to the zoo, Tolkien gradually wore down the militant Lewis (Wilson 127). Tolkien drew on their shared

love of myth, framing Christianity as a myth like all the others, but with one crucial difference—that it was *true* (*Letters* 976-77). In the person of Christ, history and mythology met and fused. For Lewis, who had once rejected the possibility of latent spiritual meaning in the material world, this was a revelation. Shortly thereafter, he became “a most reluctant convert,” essentially “dragged” into belief (*Surprised by Joy* 266).

After Lewis’s conversion in 1931, the group of friends which had already begun to form around him gained new life. They became known as the “Oxford Christians,” connected in their fundamentally religious approach to life and literature (Duriez 179). As has been well-chronicled, they lingered over pints at The Eagle and Child, fondly known as The Bird and Baby, discussing all matter of theological, linguistic, and mythological subjects. While the Inklings never met without Lewis, Tolkien also played a central role in the group, particularly as the resident expert in Celtic and Anglo-Saxon languages. These years were full of mutual support, (mostly) constructive criticism, and camaraderie. Though Tolkien expressed his disappointment at Lewis’s failure to become a Catholic, and perhaps harbored hope that eventually he would (Sayer 421-22), Tolkien’s pleasure at his friend’s change of heart was great, and their friendship flourished.

That is where many readers leave Lewis and Tolkien: happily together at the Bird and Baby. However, following the “Golden Years” as biographer Colin Duriez calls them, Tolkien and Lewis experienced a significant cooling of their friendship, or rather, as Humphrey Carpenter points out, a “cooling in Tolkien’s feelings, for Lewis behaved as warmly and magnanimously towards Tolkien as he had ever done” (Carpenter 232). While there was no dramatic falling out, several factors and events in succession ruptured the relationship. It is perhaps unsurprising that the unhappy ending of their relationship has faded from public

memory; hindsight makes it easy to embrace caricatures rather than complexities. Still, the question is a puzzling one: how did two men who shared so many similar passions, goals, and beliefs, fall apart so thoroughly?

It appears that the agency for the emotional separation lay largely with Tolkien, though both shared responsibility (Carpenter 232). Tolkien felt distanced from Lewis, who had many other close friends; he objected to Lewis's work as a lay theologian and criticized *The Chronicles of Narnia*; and he must have envied Lewis's creative alacrity, compared to his own excruciatingly meticulous approach to writing. Some of Lewis's theological views, particularly on marriage (in *Mere Christianity*) and prayer (in *Letters to Malcolm*), horrified Tolkien (Carpenter 242). Finally, Tolkien heartily disapproved of Joy Davidman's divorce and inclusion in the Inklings circle (Duriez 197).<sup>2</sup> Lewis ultimately chose to conceal their marriage from Tolkien, a fact which clearly demonstrates the gulf which had widened between the once-close friends (Jacobs 198-99).

As an adult, Tolkien had no other friends as close as Lewis; biographer Humphrey Carpenter confirms, "The friendship was not quite so important to Lewis as it was to Tolkien" (Carpenter 33). Indeed, Lewis counted at least three other men—Arthur Greeves, Owen Barfield, and Charles Williams—who could compete with Tolkien for Lewis's best friend (Carpenter 33). Lewis's and Williams's closeness was unfathomable to Tolkien, who suggested that Williams's

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<sup>2</sup> Feminist readings of Lewis's and Tolkien's have pointed out the lack of complex female characters in Tolkien's writing, and have pointed out how he excluded his wife from his intellectual life. He certainly did not hate women, and many of his female figures, particularly Arwen and Éowyn, approach the heroic in their wisdom and courage. Yet Tolkien prioritized male heroism and friendship in his writings as well as his personal life. His opinion reflects the academic culture of Oxford at mid-20<sup>th</sup> century which either mocked female writers or ignored them entirely. Lewis, too, pontificated on the subject of women in terms so reductive and conservative as to approach the ridiculous (see: *The Four Loves*). Yet Lewis's early writings about women ring less of true misogyny and more of an author who simply does not know what he is talking about. After meeting his wife, Joy Davidman, his first and only close female friend, the tone of Lewis's writings shifts markedly, culminating in both *Till We Have Faces* and *A Grief Observed*. Tolkien, on the other hand, resented Davidman's presence in their group and felt it tarnished the masculine camaraderie he so highly valued (Carpenter 241).

influence on Lewis's final book in his space trilogy "spoiled it" (*Letters* 257). Some biographers have suggested that Tolkien harbored jealousy of Williams and that this was one of the things that drove them apart; however, none of Tolkien's letters express dislike of Williams personally. Many of them actually assert the opposite: though Tolkien found his work "wholly alien, and sometimes very distasteful, and occasionally ridiculous, he asserts "we liked one another and enjoyed talking" (*Letters* 276). His nastier comments, including calling Williams a "witch-doctor" in reference to his fascination with the occult emerged only later, after reading biographies of Williams upon his death in 1945 (Carpenter 121). More likely, Charles Williams's presence likely demonstrated to Tolkien that Lewis could be, a trait which Tolkien neither shared nor admired.

Further, Tolkien found Lewis's writing increasingly unpalatable. Himself a linguist, Tolkien began the stories with an invented language, complete with vocabulary, grammar, and etymology, and then created a people who spoke it (the Elves) and a land in which they lived (Middle-earth) (Shippey 126). For Tolkien, the coherence of this world and its mythology was essential to its success. Tolkien believed his calling as a Christian was to create as he had been created; thus, the world he created must necessarily function and cohere to reflect the function and coherence of God's creation ("On Fairy-Stories). Lewis, by contrast, began not with words but with images: a faun carrying parcels in a snowy wood, a roaring lion, a framed picture of a ship ("It All Began With a Picture"). From these images Lewis constructed Narnia, a land populated with figures from a vast assortment of mythologies, representing the pastiche of images from around the world which evoked in Lewis a sense of longing for God. Lewis's approach to writing the Narnia books relied on supposition: "Suppose a world like Narnia existed, and needed redeeming—what would that look like?" (Dorsett 92). Though he was not,



as some have suggested, an allegorical writer, through his work Lewis hoped to reawaken readers to the beauty of Christian theology and of Christ himself. All of this proved “outside the range of [Tolkien’s] sympathy” (Carpenter 228); Tolkien simply could not respect or believe in a world which drew from so many irreconcilable sources, and which existed not primarily for itself, but for its ability to reimagine the Gospel story (Carpenter 224).

By the end of the 1940s, the relationship was clearly under significant strain. Between 1942-44, Lewis gave a series of radio talks which were ultimately compiled into the book *Mere Christianity*. These talks focused on what Lewis considered the fundamental tenets of the Christian faith, attempting to explain to citizens of a war-torn world exactly how their lives fit in the cosmic scheme (Duriez 182-83). Lewis gained wide recognition and public acclaim, to Tolkien’s displeasure. Biographer Alan Jacobs explains: “More than he disagreed with any particular idea or element in Lewis’s writings, he repudiated the very idea of a layman serving as a popular apologist for the Christian faith... what Lewis took upon himself was, in Tolkien’s judgement, none of Lewis’s business” (Jacobs 199). Again, Tolkien’s Catholic perspective informed his judgment: the defense of Christianity belonged with the priest, not with the layman (Jacobs 199).<sup>3</sup> In 1948, Tolkien wrote Lewis a long and tortured letter, which Jacobs describes as “apologetic, defensive, wounded, and complimentary by turns, but always inscrutable... what virtually shouts from the letter is a profound discomfort, a simple inability to write directly to someone who had once been an intimate friend” (Jacobs 198-99).

The arrival of Joy Davidman in 1952 snuffed whatever hope there had been for renewal of Tolkien and Lewis’s relationship (Duriez 197). A divorced American, Davidman and Lewis wrote incisive, witty letters for years before Davidman ultimately moved to Oxford with her two

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<sup>3</sup> “The minister of the sacrament is the priest alone. This in fact is the essence of the priest’s authority, that he can prepare and offer the body and blood of Christ” (Niesel 102).

boys. Not only did Lewis admire and ultimately fall in love with Davidman, devoting most of his leisure hours to her, but he also concealed most aspects of their relationship from Tolkien. Lewis's motivation for this seems clear. His previous writings on marriage, which Tolkien professed to abhor, took on personal significance when Lewis agreed to marry Davidman in order to secure British citizenry and protection for her and her sons (Duriez 197). Acting on his theory of the difference between civil and Church marriages, Lewis knew Tolkien would disapprove. Lewis could easily separate the earthly function of marriage from its spiritual function, calling his civil marriage to Davidman a "pure matter of friendship and expediency... simply a legal form" (qtd. Jacobs 274). Tolkien could not. Indeed, in a letter Tolkien wrote but never sent to Lewis, he likened Lewis's ideas about marriage and toleration of divorce to "human abuse" (*Letters* 61). Steeped in Catholic tradition and theology, Tolkien found Lewis's ideas "abominable... and also ridiculous." He only heard of Lewis's marriage long after the fact, through his son (Jacobs 278), and when he did he was both "profoundly injured" that Lewis had concealed it from him and "distressed" by the fact that Lewis had married a divorcee (Carpenter 242). From this betrayal Tolkien never recovered.

By the mid-1950s, the group that had been the Inklings had largely dissipated. In a letter to a friend hoping to visit the group, C.S. Lewis wrote, "There is still a weekly meeting at the Bird and Baby: but whether you can call it the Old Group when there is a new landlord and Charles Williams is dead and Tolkien never comes is almost a metaphysical question" (Duriez 202). Like a wedge, their minor theological differences ultimately drove these two friends apart, ending one of the most fruitful friendships of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

A common thread of theological disagreement runs through all these relational pressure points. Both Lewis and Tolkien are the children of embattled religious cultures, but of divergent

varieties. Lewis, as a Protestant in Belfast, though he supported home rule for Ireland, inevitably represented the imperialism of England which the majority of Irishmen despised.<sup>4</sup> The British Protestants who settled in Ulster, though the minority, dominated the majority of poor Irish Catholics, excluding them from advancement or social equality. Thus Lewis represented a type of person who loved Ireland passionately and yet met resentment among its people. Lewis's deeply entrenched dislike of Catholics prejudiced him initially against people like Tolkien, and also ensured that his own conversion would be to Protestantism. Tolkien, on the other hand, grew up Catholic in Anglican England. Tolkien was both a religious and cultural Catholic, appreciating what Charles Coulombe calls the "uniquely Catholic world-view. In fine, it is a sacramental one. At the heart of all Catholic life is a miracle, a mystery, the Blessed Sacrament" which underpins art, drama, and symbolism of oaths, coronations, marriages (Coulombe 54-55). Though most of the outright persecution against Catholics had settled by the 20<sup>th</sup> century, English Catholics continued to be viewed as anachronist, even backwards. As a Catholic, Tolkien undoubtedly faced prejudice among the established academia. Given these experiences, Lewis and Tolkien both held fast to their denominational beliefs; respecting, but not swayed, by the other.

Placing Lewis and Tolkien side-by-side, readers often split over which author they prefer. Some find Tolkien inscrutable and Lewis nourishing; others find Lewis cloying and Tolkien enthralling. Some are fortunate enough to value both. Regardless of personal preference, however, I argue that the aesthetic separation between Narnia and Middle-earth emerges from their authors' distinct literary purposes, a consequence of diverse theological perspectives. Lewis, the relentless pursuer of Joy, uses his books to add to the story of Christian theology;

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<sup>4</sup> For this paragraph, I draw on notes from Provost Conner's Ireland course and conversations with Professor Gertz.

Tolkien, with his long-suffering, sacramental perspective, adds to the story of earthly history (Purtill 145). Lewis emphasized the beyondness of Paradise, the longing for which might be stirred by common objects; Tolkien emphasizes the presentness of spirit in created things and the work to be done on Earth. Neither is strictly allegorical, as some critics have suggested. Tolkien operates primarily on a sacramental understanding of history, while Lewis explores a suppositional experience of theology.

In the first chapter, I examine the character and creations of C.S. Lewis. First and foremost, I seek to characterize Lewis as a fundamentally Irish writer. Very few scholars and still fewer members of the public acknowledge the influence Lewis's homeland had on his imagination, his faith journey, and his relationships. To illustrate this point, I begin by elucidating a term which appears in the title of Lewis's autobiography: Joy. A concept derived from the German *sehnsucht*, "Joy" to Lewis meant the intense longing for a place beyond this world, a place where one truly belongs (*Surprised by Joy* 17). Lewis first experienced this sensation in Ireland, a country Lewis described as "the land of longing" (*Studies* 126). I go on to elucidate how the Irish experience shaped *The Chronicles of Narnia* and aided Lewis's purpose of eliciting Joy in his readers. For Lewis, the fundamental purpose of storytelling was to awaken the reader to the beauty and truth of the Christian story. Lewis wrote his stories through image and supposition: beginning with a picture of a faun, he asked himself, "Suppose a world like Narnia existed...what would happen there?" Thus, while not allegorical, the world of Narnia exists for the purpose of understanding our world better. I dedicate the second half of the chapter to a discussion of Lewis's Irish life, introducing him briefly to Protestantism at an early age, but also ingraining in him a love of myth which would ultimately lead him to return to Christianity as an adult. Finally, I argue that the ebb and flow of Lewis's relationship with Ireland ultimately

dissipated when Lewis managed to tell a story in *The Chronicles of Narnia* which bridged the gap between this world and the world beyond, allowing him to release his grasp on Ireland and embrace the reality of Heaven.

In the second chapter, I approach the theology and mythology of J.R.R. Tolkien. As with the Lewis chapter, I trace Tolkien's Catholic upbringing, exploring how the theology he learned as a child shaped the writer he became as an adult. Tolkien's philosophy of storytelling relied on two key concepts: storytelling as creation and the centrality of the Eucharist. Tolkien took the task of creating a world very seriously; different from Lewis, Tolkien began his creative process with an invented language, the cornerstone of what Tolkien called the "inner consistency of reality," in which every piece of a created world fits together. This idea grows to full life in light of Tolkien's Eucharistic approach to symbolism. Devoted to the Blessed Sacrament, Tolkien believed that the physical and spiritual functions of an object could not be separated. Tolkien orients his focus toward Earth, concerning himself with the daily sanctification of his characters through obedient suffering.

Before embarking on this analysis of the differences between Lewis's and Tolkien's approaches to literature, I must emphasize: while Lewis and Tolkien differed on certain theological points, and thus formed different philosophies of storytelling and approaches to creating magical worlds, these disputes diminish alongside their agreements (Purtill 169). They agreed that Jesus was the son of God, that He sacrificed himself to atone for the sins of humans, and that paradise awaited the believer after death. Lewis himself made this point:

Those who have always lived within the Christian fold may be too easily dispirited by [the divisions]. They are bad, but such people do not know what it looks like from without. Seen from there, what is left intact despite all the divisions, still appears (as it truly is) an immensely formidable unity. I know, for I saw it; and well our enemies know it. (qtd. Jacobs 216)

Though I will spend a good portion of this essay discussing the differences between these two authors, I do not mean to imply that they disagreed more often than not. Undoubtedly, this renowned pairing shared more with each other than with most other people, and neither forgot the closeness they once shared. Upon Lewis's death in 1963, Tolkien wrote:

So far I have felt the normal feelings of a man of my age—like an old tree that is losing all its leaves one by one: this feels like an axe-blow near the roots. Very sad that we should have been so separated in the last years; but our time of close communion endured in memory for both of us. I had a mass said this morning, and was there, and served. (Duriez 204)

Tolkien could not have done his friend a greater honor.

## CHAPTER 1

### JOY IN THE SHADOWLANDS: THE IRISHNESS OF C.S. LEWIS

“Ascetic Mr. Lewis’ --!!! I ask you! He put away three pints in a very short session we had this morning, and said he was ‘going short for Lent.’”

—*J.R.R. Tolkien, responding to a news story on Lewis*<sup>5</sup>

#### I. Introduction

Ever since his childhood days of sailing across the sea six times a year to attend school in England, Irish-born C.S. Lewis imagined the narrative of his life as a pilgrimage: a journey marked by transitory experiences which made him hunger for the eternal. The early years of his life were filled with rich visions of the Irish landscape and the mythology it brings, as well as early instruction in Protestant values. These two strains of thought, combined with Lewis’s avid study of Renaissance literature, intertwined to create the lens through which Lewis viewed the world. In order to create stories of his own, Lewis relied on experiences, sensations, and images from his early Irish experience; Lewis’s displacement from Ireland heightened his sense of detachment from the physical world and accentuated his desire for something more.

Lewis named this something for which he longed “Joy,” which ultimately provided the title of Lewis’s autobiography *Surprised by Joy*. “Joy,” for Lewis, meant a desperate longing for another, perfect world to which he felt he truly belonged. This idea grew from Lewis’s reading of Plato, certainly, but also from Lewis’s uniquely Irish experience. As a young boy looking to the Mourne Mountains, Lewis felt awash with the grandeur of the beyond, to something else beyond his grasp which made his heart ache for want of it. In pursuit of this, Lewis turned to literature, finding that storytellers seemed able to capture, at least for as long as it took to read them, the elusive and mysterious something for which he longed.

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<sup>5</sup> (Jacobs 190)

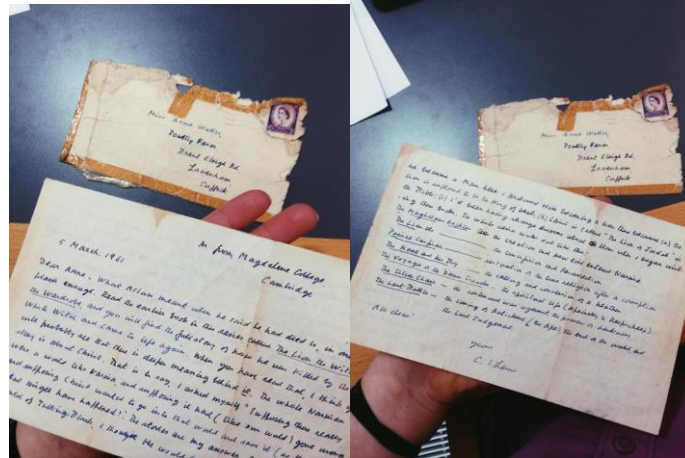
Lewis's subsequent conversion to Christianity satiated his feelings of Joy. Convinced that the myth of Christianity was, in fact, true, Lewis found the home for which he had longed in the promise of Heaven and a new Earth. Thus, Lewis developed his own idea of storytelling as the vehicle for or a signpost pointing to God's truth. Lewis argues that all stories echo one Great Story, the story of God's work on Earth; story finds its truest telling in the Christian Gospel, which to Lewis, "lay at the exact intersection of myth and history" (Nelson). This discovery allowed Lewis to release his grip on Ireland as the source of his addictive Joy. Lewis concludes:

For this is the marriage of heaven and earth: Perfect Myth and Perfect Fact: claiming not only our love and our obedience, but also our wonder and delight, addressed to the savage, the child and the poet in each one of us no less than to the moralist, the scholar, and the philosopher. (*God in the Dock* 67)

Many believe that Lewis intended *The Chronicles of Narnia* to be an allegory for the Christian story, and they do contain elements of allegory informed by Lewis's scholarship in Renaissance studies. Yet Lewis rejected the assertion that *The Chronicles* served merely as direct representations of the Earthly experience (*Letters* 1113). Rather, *The Chronicles* were designed to act as a vessel to carry truths which rumbled in Lewis's soul and which required expression in the form of children's stories. In a letter to a girl named Anne Jenkins, who wrote to Lewis asking why Aslan died and what it meant, Lewis replied:

The whole Narnian story is about Christ. That is to say, I asked myself, "Supposing there really were a world like Narnia, and supposing it had (like our world) gone wrong, and supposing Christ wanted to go into that world and save it (as He did ours), what might have happened? The stories are my answer. (*Letter to Anne Jenkins*)





This letter makes apparent a fundamental distinction between Lewis's approach to literary creation and Tolkien's. Lewis approached story with an intent to capture some piece of truth about the Christian story in the pages of a narrative. While not strictly allegorical in the sense of one-to-one representation, the details of a plot cohere around a supposition derived from the earthly Christian experience. Lewis offers a brief sketch of the fundamental "supposition" in each of the Narnia books:

- The Magician's Nephew — the creation and how evil entered Narnia
- The Lion the... — the Crucifixion and Resurrection
- Prince Caspian — restoration of the true religion after a corruption
- The Horse and His Boy — the calling and conversion of a heathen
- The Voyage of the Dawn Treader — the spiritual life (especially in Reepicheep)
- The Silver Chair — the continual war against the powers of darkness
- The Last Battle — the coming of Antichrist (the Ape), the end of the world, and the Last Judgement

All clear? (*Letter to Anne Jenkins*)

Thus, rather than describing Lewis's tales as an allegory, they might better be described as a series of suppositions. Even the most allegorical character, Aslan, is not a strict one-to-one representation of Christ. To illustrate the difference, Lewis contrasts the character of Aslan to the Giant Despair in Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (qtd. Purtil 136). Unlike the Giant Despair, which is a direct allegory for Despair, Lewis calls Aslan "an invention giving an imaginary

answer to the question, “What might Christ become like, if there really were a world like Narnia?” (qtd. Purtil 136). As the prideful horse Bree and haughty girl Aravis learn the hard way in *The Horse and His Boy*, Aslan is a real lion, with fur and whiskers and claws. He is the “King of Beasts” (*Letter to Anne Jenkins*). However, the true meaning of his kingship is unveiled in the fact that “Christ is called ‘The Lion of Judah’” (*Letter to Anne Jenkins*). A lion devoid of that association, devoid of the capacity to talk, would be nothing but a lion in the country of Narnia. But Aslan can certainly take the form of an albatross, or a lamb, as he does in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, and be no less Aslan.<sup>6</sup> Thus, while Lewis’s work is not allegory in any strict sense, he is concerned primarily with the theological weight of symbols and the glimpses they provide into the Christian imagination (Purtill 149). Indeed, as he tells the children, “The very reason you were brought to Narnia is that by knowing me here for a little, you may know me better [in England]” (*Chronicles* 541).

Lewis addresses his own approach to storytelling in his essay *On Three Ways of Writing for Children*. He rejects other approaches which begin with the question of entertainment-value, “What do modern children like?” and the question of moralism, “What do modern children need?” (6). He writes:

I feel sure that the question ‘What do modern children need?’ will not lead you to a good moral. It would be better to ask ‘What moral do *I* need?’ for I think we can be sure that what does not concern us deeply will not deeply interest our readers, whatever their age. But it is better not to ask the question at all. Let the pictures tell you their own moral. For the moral inherent in them will rise from whatever spiritual roots you have succeeded in striking during the whole course of your life.  
(6)

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<sup>6</sup> This implies that Christ’s body is illusory, an implication which Tolkien did not support (Sammons 163).

Herein lies a key element of Lewis's aesthetic theory: for Lewis, a "good" story is one which enlivens the reader's desire for something beyond what this life has to offer. For Lewis, striking a spiritual root is the aim of fiction. "That is what matters most," writes Rowan Williams, "the possibility Lewis offers of coming across the Christian story as if for the first time...the surprise of this joy is worth tasting" (Williams 7). In essence, the point of Narnia is to flush out what is stale in our thinking about Christianity.

For Lewis, the building blocks of plot, and character matter much less than the overall atmosphere evoked by a story. He writes, "We must not sit down to examine it detail by detail for clues to its meaning as if we were trying to work out a cipher... We must surrender ourselves with childlike attention to the mood of the story" (*Studies* 137). In the second of his space trilogy, *Perelandra*, a female character Tinidril undergoes a temptation similar to that of Eve in the Bible. Rather than eating forbidden fruit, however, Tinidril is tempted to live on the "Fixed Land," which the creator Maleldil has forbidden. When the evil Un-Man encourages her to imagine the possibility, she resists: "If I try to make the story about living on Fixed Land I do not know how to make it about Maleldil" (*Perelandra* 244). In her pure, unfallen state, her reality is fused with what on Earth can only be called myth; all her stories must ultimately be about Maleldil, and so Lewis's must ultimately be about God.

## II. Joy and the Dialectic of Desire

### a. Defining "Joy"

In his autobiography *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis introduces the German word *sehnsucht* (zeen-sookt). *Sehnsucht* means an ardent yearning for or intense missing of something unknown, almost a homesickness for some far-off country to which one truly belongs. This yearning for a satisfying conclusion is a familiar feeling for everyone. It is that feeling that comes from hearing

a particularly beautiful piece of music; watching a dancer perform on stage; or cresting a mountaintop to see the whole valley spreading before you. A feeling of immense purpose or greatness or splendor wells up inside, and you must take a deep breath or weep or burst into song. For me it feels something like desperation, like I have just brushed up against something really real and eternal and heartbreakingly good.

Lewis encountered *sehnsucht* during his early youth in the Irish landscape and literature, and the pursuit of it became his life's work. Lewis called the feeling "Joy." Initially that might seem like an odd term for a feeling of such intense unfulfillment. For Lewis, however, the feeling gave him hope, because it suggested that there was a purpose in his life; that there was such a thing as good; that there was a place where his soul belonged.

Lewis's childhood was plagued by experiences of this feeling of indefinable loss. The Castlereagh Mountains loomed outside his window, beckoning to him agonizingly, but staying forever out of reach. A tiny garden created in the lid of a cookie tin by his brother Warnie shocked Lewis by provoking a combination of "bliss, loss, and longing all at once, a desire beyond words" (*Surprised by Joy* 16). An illustration of Wagner's *Ring* cycle, saturated with ethereal Celtic spirit, washed over the boy Lewis like a wave of aching despair and barrenness that was never meant to be. This feeling burned like a coal inside him, sustaining him through the traumas of his personal life and the horrors of war. He hungered for more of these ephemeral glimpses into the vast expanse of the something more. The empty evil Lewis faced paled in comparison with the rich, mysterious realness of Joy.

Though at first Lewis sought the answer to his longing in the material world, he discovered in the horrors of the World War I trenches that this world could not offer him what he sought (Loconte xv). Instead, Lewis found the answer to his seeking in the Christian story. He

recognized at last the indefinable loss he felt as the loss of the perfection God meant for this world and His Creation. Following his conversion (in which Tolkien played a significant part), Lewis's appreciation for story swelled, for now he saw that story had the power to capture what the fallen world could only dream of: a just and joyful end in a true and perfect homeland. In *Mere Christianity*, Lewis says of Joy: "I must keep alive in myself the desire for my true country, which I shall not find till after death...I must make the main object of life to press on to that other country and help others do the same" (120). Lewis sought to fulfill that obligation by writing stories.

### **b. Joy in *The Chronicles of Narnia***

C.N. Manlove writes, "The whole of [Lewis's] Christian life is founded on a totally new approach to God by way of a 'dialectic of desire', by tracing the powerful emotions awakened by certain images to what was for him their divine source" (Manlove 215). Lewis's dialectic of desire evolved from his concept of "Joy." Through his fiction, he sought to create images which would awaken Joy in his readers. This intention surfaces at the end of *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, when Aslan tells Lucy and Edmund that they shall never return to Narnia. This news utterly overwhelms the children. Lucy cries:

"It isn't Narnia, you know," sobbed Lucy. "It's you. We shan't meet *you* there. And how can we live, never meeting you?"

"But you shall meet me, dear one," said Aslan.

"Are—are you there too, Sir?" said Edmund.

"I am," said Aslan. "But there I have another name. You must learn to know me by that name. This was the very reason why you were brought to Narnia, that by knowing me here for a little, you may know me better there."  
(*Chronicles* 541)

In this brief exchange, Lewis summarizes what he believes the true power of stories to be: the power to awaken the reader to the existence of the divine. Stories of fairy land, Lewis argued,

produce in the reader “a longing for he knows not what” (*On Stories* 38). This was Lewis’s own experience; reading stories lent a new and spiritual dimension to the world he lived in. Lewis writes autobiographically of the child reader: “he does not despise real woods because he has read of enchanted woods: the reading makes all real woods a little enchanted” (*On Stories* 38). The enchanted land of Narnia likewise makes the ‘real’ world a bit enchanted. Mentally inhabiting the magical world of Narnia opens a reader’s eyes to the magic of the everyday.

Lewis’s firm belief in the necessity of story to reveal God opposes that of another Christian writer whom Lewis ironically admired in the years before his conversion. George Herbert, known for his anthology *The Temple*, wondered through his poetry whether art did not sometimes obscure the nature of God. Lewis writes of Herbert,

Here was a man who seemed to me to excel all the authors I had read in conveying the very quality of life as we live it from moment to moment, but the wretched fellow, instead of doing it all directly, insisted on mediating it through what I still would have called the “Christian mythology.” ...Christians are wrong, but all the rest are bores. (qtd. A. N. Wilson 78)

Typical of this time, then-atheist Lewis expresses his grudging admiration for the overtly Christian poet. In his poem “Jordan (I),” Herbert writes, “Is there in truth no beautie? / Is all good structure in a winding stair?” Herbert questions whether art must be complex and ornate, like a winding stair, in order for it to approach the spiritual, or if the spiritual might be contained in a straightforward shepherd’s song. In the end, he concludes: “I envie no man’s nightingale or spring; / Nor let them punish me with losse of ryme, / Who plainly say, *My God, My King*.” The goodness of faith for Herbert lay in its barefacedness, finding beauty in simplicity. After his conversion, Lewis took a different tack. While Herbert wrote in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, a child of the Renaissance which saw the power of God and of the Church emphasized through grandiose art

projects which became more about the artists and the art than worship (“George Herbert”). By contrast, writing at the end of the Modernist period (*The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* was published in 1950), Lewis found himself in a culture that had lost its belief in social structures, including the Church. The time called for a re-awakening, a restoration of the desire for Eden; ultimately, story alone had the power to bridge the gap between the gritty experience of war-torn Europe and the vision of goodness which Lewis felt lingered just beyond.

In story, a reader can stand face to face with the “something else” that she only glimpses in real life. The setting, characters, and happenings in a story create a world which capture the meaning that exists beyond our reach; story awakens Joy. Of this concept, Lewis writes:

Shall I be thought whimsical if, in conclusion, I suggest that this internal tension in the heart of every story between the theme and the plot constitutes, after all its chief resemblance to life?...if the author’s plot is only a net, and usually an imperfect one...is life much more? ...Art, indeed, may be expected to do what life cannot do: but so it has done. The bird has escaped us. But it was at least entangled in the net for several chapters. We saw it close and enjoyed the plumage. How many ‘real lives’ have nets that can do as much? (*On Stories* 504)

This “bird” which Lewis describes might best be imagined as a dove, for Lewis means to say that the act of creation and the experience of creation through art, turns back the curtain and for a moment reveals the promise and presence of God, something “real life” can never do. Aslan calls himself “the great bridge-builder” (541), opening “the door in the sky” (541) to send Lucy and Edmund home. This is the power of story: to build the bridge between a child’s mind and Aslan’s country, to show her the source of greatness which undergirds her imagination.

Lewis explores the elusive, bird-like nature of Joy in his writings on the Arthurian Poems in collaboration with his friend Charles Williams. He writes of the “Beatrician” experience, a term which derives from Williams’ interpretation of Dante’s recorded encounter with Beatrice, a woman who awakens a desire for love and longing in him which is ultimately fulfilled by a

vision of God (Root 86). Lewis writes: “The Beatrician experience does not usually last...but a transitory vision is not necessarily a vision of the transitory...It has in fact been a glimpse into what is eternally real” (*Torso* 117). Lewis’s own Beatrician experience with his wife, Joy Davidman, certainly did not last; yet it informed and inspired his understanding of the “something else” that existed beyond. He writes of this in his novel *That Hideous Strength*, which chronicles the collision of celestial and earthly creatures and suggests the hope of restoration and recreation for “the dark planet,” Earth of the future. The male protagonist Mark undergoes disturbing and amoral yet ostensibly “scientific” proceedings, in which he is forced to perform mind-numbing tasks and look at distorted images, even a series of dots in which one dot is slightly out of place, which become more horrible the longer he looks. Mark survives the torture designed for him because its disturbing irregularity reminds him of the goodness and regularity of the real world which he had never before noticed. He reflects:

Something else—something he vaguely called the ‘Normal’—apparently existed...solid, massive, with a shape of its own, almost like something you could touch, or eat, or fall in love with. It was all mixed up with Jane and fried eggs and soap and sunlight and the rooks cawing at Cure Hardy and the thought that, somewhere outside, daylight was going on at that moment. (*That Hideous Strength* 635)

Mark clings to the simple goodness of fried eggs and daylight and the love he feels for his wife, Jane, in order to survive the attacks of rampant materialism and corruption. The evilness of the images he sees convinces him of the existence of goodness. Mark comes out of his experience of the godless horror of purely materialist existence much like Lewis the experience of war, alerts individuals to the existence of something beyond the material for which they fight and long.

Lewis brings that awakening of longing to full fruition in *The Last Battle*, which depicts the end of Narnia and the beginning of life in Aslan’s Country. These final chapters in the Narnia chronicles illustrate Lewis’s eschatological paradigm. It begins with death: once King Tirian of



Narnia crosses the threshold into the stable, his life as he knew it is over. Similarly, characters from other worlds appear within the stable: three of the Pevensie children appear there, having been killed in a railway accident in England. All are united in the new, shining, and fruitful land within the stable as Aslan brings the land of Narnia to an end in a flurry of star showers, giant's horn, and lion's roars.

As Lucy mourns the loss of Narnia, Aslan turns and springs away, crying "Come further in! Come further up!" (753). This command becomes the mantra for the group as they slowly discover that the land they are in, which feels strangely familiar, appears to be a version of Narnia. While the others exult at the likeness between the two countries, Queen Lucy, with her childlike intuition, peers at the distant mountains and says: "Yet they're not like... They're different. They have more colours on them... and they're more... more... oh, I don't know." The Lord Digory finishes her sentence: "More like the real thing" (759). He goes on:

That was not the real Narnia. That had a beginning and an end. It was only a shadow or a copy of the real Narnia which has always been here and always will be here: just as our own world, England and all, is only a shadow or copy of something in Aslan's real world. You need not mourn over Narnia, Lucy. All of the old Narnia that mattered, all the dear creatures, have been drawn into the real Narnia through the Door. And of course it is different; as different as a real thing is from a shadow or as waking life is from a dream. (759)

What the Narnians have found is "real" Narnia, in the most Platonic sense of the word. The Narnia in which they had lived all those years was not real, in the sense that it was stained, imperfect as it was never meant to be. Lewis writes in his *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Literature*, "The essential attitude of Platonism is aspiration or longing: the human soul, imprisoned in the shadowy, unreal world of Nature, stretches out its hands and struggles toward s the beauty and reality of that which lies (as Plato says) 'on the other side of existence'" (Lewis

144). Real Narnia exists as an extension of Aslan's Country, perfect, as it was meant to be: "world within world, Narnia within Narnia" (765).

The realness, the vibrancy, the solidity of everything in Aslan's world make the things of the Narnia they knew before seem static and shallow in comparison. Lewis uses the metaphor of a looking-glass to describe this phenomenon:

You may have been in a room in which there was a window that looked out on a lovely bay of the sea or a green valley that wound away among mountains. And in the wall of that room opposite to the window there may have been a looking-glass. And as you turned away from the window you suddenly caught sight of that sea or that valley, all over again, in the looking glass. And the sea in the mirror, or the valley in the mirror, were in one sense just the same as the real ones: yet at the same time they were somehow different – deeper, more wonderful, more like places in a story: in a story you have never heard but very much want to know. The difference between the old Narnia and the new Narnia was like that. The new one was a deeper country: every rock and flower and blade of grass looked as if it meant more. I can't describe it any better than that: if ever you get there you will know what I mean. (760)

Lewis suggests that the daily experience of Narnia over the hundreds of years of its existence was not the "real" Narnia; in fact, the real Narnia lay beyond permanent grasp, only to be accessed in transitory glimpses. Lewis unifies the Biblical understanding of 1 Corinthians, "For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face" (13:12), with Platonic ideas of apparent "realities" as mere shadows of true reality. Of the interaction between Platonism and Christianity, Lewis writes, "both systems are united with one another...by their conviction that Nature, the totality of phenomena in space and time, is not the only thing that exists: is, indeed, the least important thing...both believe in an 'other' world" (*Studies* 144). It is the glimpse in the mirror that reveals the mysterious depth behind what we might call the "real" scene outside the window.

When Lord Digory introduces the idea, he concludes by chiding the students, “it’s all in Plato, all in Plato, bless me, what *do* they teach them at these schools?” (*The Last Battle* 759). Lewis’s neo-Platonism informs his conception of Heaven not as something outside or separate from the physical world, but something beyond it: or perhaps, more accurately, something within it (Edwards 122). “Keep your ears open and your mouth shut and everything will lead you to everything else in the end – *ogni parte ad ogni parte splende*,” Lewis writes (*Surprised by Joy* 60). Here Lewis quotes Dante’s *Inferno*, which translates “That every part may shine unto the other” (Mandelbaum 62). “Every part” refers to the nine angelic choirs who lend radiance to “the other,” the nine celestial spheres (Mandelbaum 62). This relationship combines the Platonic model of the universe with Catholic teaching about the angelic hierarchies, imbuing the physical order of worlds with heavenly meaning (C’Meara 205). In this, Lewis takes the common definition of “real” and turns it on its head. Real Narnia is more than the physical reality; it has a spiritual and emotional depth that satisfies the Narnians’ souls as real Narnia never could.

A good illustration of this idea appears in Lewis’s *The Screwtape Letters*. Here, an older devil mentoring a younger devil discusses how this mentality will be helpful to seducing a human “patient” amidst the horrors of war:

It turns on making him feel...that this is “what the world is really like” and that all his religion has been a fantasy. You will notice that we have got them completely fogged about the meaning of the word “real”. They tell each other, of some great spiritual experience, “All that really happened was that you heard some music in a lighted building”; here “Real” means the bare physical facts, separated from the other elements in the experience they actually had. (30)

For Lewis, the scene out the window represents those “bare physical facts,” while the reflection in the mirror lends ethereal brevity which captures a hint of the truth within the landscape. Lewis uses this argument to defend the genre of fantasy and fairy tales:

It [the fantasy and fairy tale genre] is accused of giving children a false impression of the world they live in. But I think no literature that children could read gives them less of a false impression. I think what profess to be realistic stories for children are far more likely to deceive them. I never expected the real world to be like the fairy tales. I think I did expect school to be like the school stories. The fantasies did not deceive me: the school stories did. (*On Three Ways of Writing for Children* 4)

Further, Lewis argues, the same answer might be given “for the popular charge of escapism,” the idea that children use fantasy as a retreat from the problems of the “real world” (*On Stories* 4).

Lewis argues that, in fact, almost the opposite is true. Those stories which take place in the “real world” teach us to long to be “the immensely popular and successful schoolboy or schoolgirl, or the lucky boy or girl who discovers the spy’s plot or rides the horse that none of the cowboys can manage” (*On Stories* 4). This longing “sends us back to the real world undividedly discontented, for it is all flattery to the ego.”

By contrast, the longing for fairy land is very different. Rather than facilitating the reader’s self-absorbed longing for personal success, “Fairy land arouses a longing for he knows not what. It stirs and troubles him (to his life-long enrichment) with the dim sense of something beyond his reach and, far from dulling or emptying the actual world, gives it a new dimension of depth” (510-11). As we have seen, Lewis’s concept of the real world is exactly inverse to that of the common vernacular, which emphasizes physical reality over emotional experience.

Indeed, it is only when the Narnians experience Narnia in its full richness of emotion and spirituality that they experience “real” Narnia. Not the shadow of Narnia with its evil and war and bloodshed, but the true Narnia which sometimes peeked out in moments of brief clarity.

Jewel the unicorn sums up the experience of fulfilled Joy, crying:

“I have come home at last! This is my real country! I belong here. This is the land I have been looking for all my life, though I never knew it till now. The reason why we loved the old Narnia is that it sometimes looked a little like this. Bree-hee-hee! Come further up, come further in!” (760)

The Narnians do go further up and further in, eventually arriving at the gate to Aslan's country. And who is there to greet them after the restoration of all of Narnia but Reepicheep, a mouse with a knight's soul, to whom Aslan had restored his tail and who did not die but sailed to Aslan's Country at the end of *Voyage of the Dawn Treader*.

Yet the Narnians' joy is only complete when, at last, they meet Aslan. Lucy expresses her fear that He will send them away as He sent them home from Narnia time after time. Then Aslan gives them the great news: they have died, and their stay in Aslan's Country this time will be permanent. He tells them, "The term is over: the holidays have begun. The dream is ended: this is the morning" (766). The last chapter of the last Narnia story ends thus:

For us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on for ever: in which every chapter is better than the one before. (766)

Lewis concludes his *Chronicles* much the way he concludes his sermon, "The Weight of Glory," first delivered at Oxford University Church of St. Mary the Virgin in June of 1941. Lewis took it as an opportunity to impress upon the students the importance of pursuing their studies with honor, knowing that, in doing so, they fight the powers of evil alongside the soldiers on the battlefield. Having explored those things which give joy, which make life worth living, he points out that though we can touch and taste and study these things, we cannot hold them in our grasp. *The Chronicles of Narnia* can awaken us to the divine, but in and of themselves they cannot permanently bridge the gap between us and it. While we are on Earth, the things of Heaven can only appear in glimpses, and those may be few and far between indeed. But "the walls of the palace are painted with stories" (*Faces* 267), and we know that "it will not always be so" (*Weight*

8); some day we *will* have faces; some day we *shall* understand; “Some day, God willing, we shall get in” (*Weight* 8).

### III. Lewis’s Irish Life

Haunted by and at the same time hungry for experiences of Joy, Lewis invested in his Irish homeland as a place uniquely positioned to provide them. Though many scholars have noted this fact, none have yet connected Lewis’s mystic sense of the presence of God to Lewis’s Irishness. Immersed in mythology and fraught with religious loyalties, the people of Ireland often turned to the spiritual to explain the hardships of their physical reality. Lewis’s first experiences of Joy—in Ireland and the stories he discovered there—embedded themselves in his psyche, drawing him back to Ireland as long as his hunger for Joy remained unsatisfied.

Lewis primarily accessed Joy through his encounters with Irish image and story; image and story thus became the origin of his own creative efforts. Lewis expounds at length on his philosophy of storytelling in his essay *On Three Ways of Writing for Children*. He writes:

I have never exactly ‘made’ a story. With me the process is much more like bird-watching...I see pictures. Some of these pictures have a common flavor, almost a common smell, which groups them together. Keep quiet and watch and they will begin joining themselves up. (6)

For Lewis, then, stories always begin with images: the image of a faun in a snowy wood; a romping, golden lion; a magic picture frame. But from where do these images come? Lewis anticipates this question and answers it:

Everything in the story should arise from the whole cast of the author’s mind. We must write for children out of those elements in our own imagination which we share with children...the matter of our story should be a part of the habitual furniture of our minds. (6)

If it is true that “everything in the story” ultimately derives from “the habitual furniture” of an author’s mind, then we need to take a look at Lewis’s mental furnishings. For that, we need to

return to Lewis's own childhood in Belfast, Ireland. There we discover the origins of a life-long relationship with a country that formed Lewis's character, inspired his imagination, and claimed his heart; studying the country where Lewis's story was set, illuminates the underpinnings of all the stories Lewis would later tell. Though Lewis's attitude toward his homeland waxed and waned over the course of his life, the essence of his Irish identity never left him.

Until recently, few scholars have taken note of Lewis's Irish roots; indeed, his association with "The Inklings," a group composed entirely of English authors, leads many to assume that Lewis was English as well. To the average reader, the difference may seem insubstantial: Lewis lived in England most of his life; England and Ireland are both part of the British Isles; both serve fish and chips at pubs; what difference does it make? I propose that Lewis's Irishness makes all the difference in the world. The myth-soaked history, landscape, and language of Ireland founded his conception of the world and gave him a vocabulary to communicate truth. Life as an Irishman among the English provoked a sense of unbelonging that drove him to seek relationships with other Irish people that altered the course of his life. The sectarian collision in his home city of Belfast wrought the religious paradigm which made him deliberately insist on the ubiquity of God's truth yet irrevocably, and perhaps unconsciously, subscribe to Protestantism upon his conversion. Lewis did come to love England, especially Oxford, and Ireland increasingly became a place of memory; but the impact of his Irish identity reverberated until the end of his life. Lewis summarized in a letter to his good friend Arthur Greeves: "There is no doubt, ami, that the Irish are the only people: with all their faults I would not gladly live or die among another folk" (qtd. Brown 162).

**a. Mythology of Childhood Scenes**

The mythology of Ireland is self-reinforcing, producing poets and authors who contribute to the pool of literature that idealizes the character of the country: “Come near; I would, before my time to go, / Sing of old Eire and the ancient ways: / Red Rose, proud Rose, sad rose of all my days.” These lines penned by William Butler Yeats capture the desperate yearning of the Irish for old Ireland: the land of mythological heroes, green fields, liminal spaces, and indomitable spirits.<sup>7</sup> Yeats articulates the collective idealization of the Irish motherland and its Celtic mythology with haunting, near-mythic style. Yeats, however, spent much of his life in London, away from his beloved country. That distance forced him to fight for his identity as an Irish poet, fanning the dreamy romanticism that constructed Yeats’s internal Ireland. An impassable cavern yawns between the lines of his poetry, exposing his dissatisfaction with the offerings of the physical world which drove him to occultism.

Scholars like Smith and Bresland have done important work cataloguing the importance of specific Irish events and places, but neither have written about how Irish mysticism laid the foundation for Lewis’s theology. In March 1921, Lewis, then a twenty-three-year-old aspiring poet, found himself in Yeats’s living room (Brown 160). Then a third-year Oxford student, Lewis had long admired Yeats for his commitment to the legends and spirit of Ireland. Lewis felt a kinship with Yeats; both found themselves living in a country inimical to their national and mythical roots. Lewis wrote to his Belfast friend Arthur Greeves, “I am often surprised to find how utterly ignored Yeats is among the men I have met: perhaps his appeal is purely Irish—if so, then thank the gods that I am Irish” (*Letters* 1917). Yeats was perhaps the first person to take seriously what Lewis had long loved as fantasy (Bresland 63). Like Yeats, Lewis too created an ideal Ireland. Yeats called his internal Ireland “Innisfree”; Lewis called his “Narnia.”

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<sup>7</sup> Again, I rely on my notes from Provost Conner’s Ireland course.



Though Lewis has often been identified as a British or even English author, the comparison with Yeats illuminates that the core of his personal identity was Irish, and that reality permeates every aspect of his theology, philosophy, and vocabulary. Lewis's childhood in Ireland shaped his imagination, filling it with images which he would use to populate his magical world. Lewis was born on Dundela Avenue in a small village in what is now East Belfast. From the top of that hill, Lewis had a sweeping view of the Antrim Hills, within which perched Belfast Castle. In the other direction stretched the Castlereagh Hills of County Down. Lewis spoke of that particular view as one of his first experiences of what he called "Joy" (Smith 30). The image of the hill, which looks like a giant sleeping on its back, against the soundtrack of the technology of the city which built and launched the *S.M.S. Titanic*, made for a juxtaposition that Lewis would remember all his life.



In a letter to Arthur Greeves, Lewis described it thus: "I find more and more a something in almost every Irish scene which you can't get elsewhere, and which, though not better in itself, is better *for us*. I think 'roughness without severity' is the nearest one can get to it. It is grand and desolate and yet somehow feels at home" (*Letters* 792). As discussed, Lewis would chase that feeling for the rest of his life, trying to satisfy the heartbreaking desire that arose so unexpectedly and followed him so doggedly.

One of the Lewis family's favorite vacations was their trip to the Antrim coast (Bresland 106). He would have visited the Giant's Causeway, a vast expanse of peculiarly shaped rocks.

Formed by magma, the rocks stack on top of each other like pillars or stairs, perhaps the ruins of a giant city.



Indeed, that is the legend associated with the place; that the great giant Finn MacCool built his home there. It also undoubtedly precipitated Lewis's Giant City Ruins in *The Silver Chair*.



A misty haze shrouds the place; indeed, that haze is ubiquitous in Ireland, varying in degree but always present. Often the mist hangs like a blanket, obscuring the point where land meets sea and sea meets sky.



The world might well end right there in the mist; it is a liminal space, where fairies might live, where magic might happen, where Joy might be created. The land itself reflects what Lewis explains in his autobiography: moments of Joy are “the moments of clearest consciousness, when we became aware of our fragmentary and phantasmal nature and ached for that impossible reunion which would...reveal not that we had had, but that we *were* a dream” (*Surprised by Joy* 258). The illusionary effect of the misty, mythical landscape accentuates the possibility of a new dimension, in which this world is the passing dream and the one beyond is the real one. Lewis calls space, meaning distance, “one of the most glorious gifts we have been given” (*Surprised by Joy* 182). Increasingly efficient and enclosed forms of transportation annihilate distance and, in so doing, kill the “liberation and pilgrimage and adventure” of traversing across distance (182). For a man who envisioned his life as a pilgrimage urged on by the power of myth, there could be no greater loss.

Dozens of other images pepper the Narnian landscape which originate unmistakably in Irish memories. Lewis’s description of the landscape of the Holywood Hills parallels his descriptions of Narnian landscape (“On Stories”); giant lore pervades both the Irish mythology and Narnian history; Lewis’s mother’s diary tells of a chess set sent to them while holidaying in County Down, and in *Prince Caspian* Susan discovers a chess piece which begins the children’s conversation about whether the ruined castle might be Cair Paravel. “Well I’m—I’m jiggered,” said Peter,” holding a “little chess-knight, ordinary in size but extraordinarily heavy because it was made of pure gold... ‘Why!’ said Lucy, ‘it’s exactly like one of the golden chessmen we used to play with when we were Kings and Queens at Cair Paravel” (*Prince Caspian* 324). The chess piece sends the children into nostalgic reverie. On the verge of tears, Susan recalls, “such lovely times. I remembered playing chess with fauns and good giants, and the merpeople singing

in the sea, and my beautiful horse—and—and—and—” (*Prince Caspian* 324). Susan breaks off, unable to articulate the powerful memories and emotions awakened by the chess piece. This mirrors Lewis’s own longing for his past, for those holidays at the sea with his mother and brother and the imaginary playmates they invented.

This scene from *Prince Caspian* is a subtle continuation of a theme which Lewis uncharacteristically bares when he describes the castle of Cair Paravel itself in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. When first introduced, Cair Paravel sounds unmistakably like Dunlce Castle, which Lewis would have passed while on a trip to the coast: “The castle of Cair Paravel on its little hill towered up above them; before them were the sands, with rocks and little pools of salt water, and seaweed, and the smell of the sea and long miles of bluish-green waves breaking for ever and ever on the beach. And oh, the cry of the seagulls! Have you heard it? Can you remember?” (*Lion* 193).



(Medievalists.net)

In a rare shift in tone, Lewis cries out to the reader to reach back in her memory and join him on the beaches of Ireland, the place of his birth and the source of his imagination (Smith 115). Lewis lifts up his voice with other Irish poets who yearn for the regeneration of Irish culture, capturing the experience of loss by colonization and emigration. More than that, he creates an atmosphere of nostalgia which invites the reader to experience the Joy Lewis felt amidst the

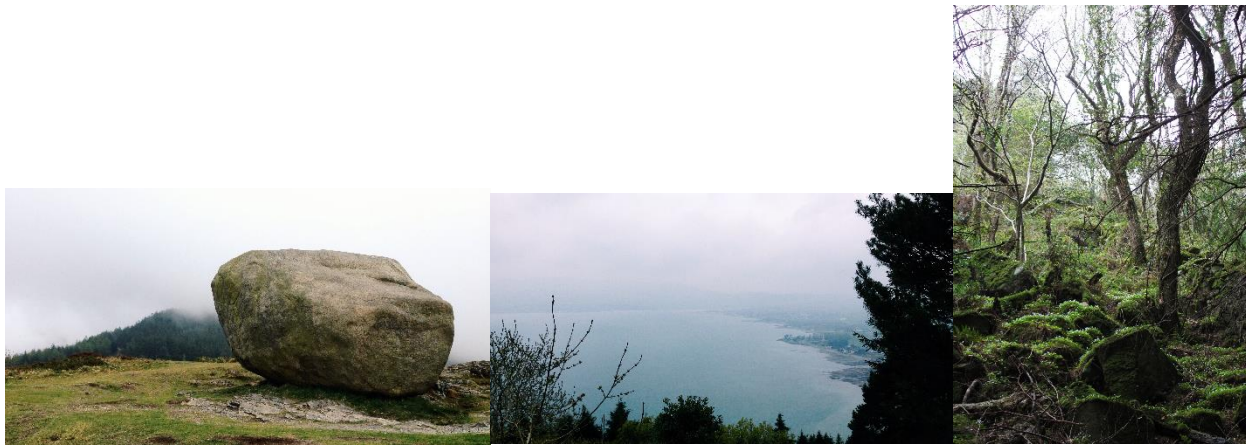
liminal Irish landscape. As Lewis himself wrote, Ireland has a way of forcing a writer “to sink deeper and deeper into the world he was creating” (*Studies* 125).

The departure from Dundela Flats to Little Lea was what Lewis called “the first great event in my life” (*Surprised by Joy* 6). Lewis called himself a child of this house, “I am a product of long corridors, empty sunlit rooms, upstairs indoor silences, attics explored in solitude, distant noises of gurgling cisterns and pipes, and the noise of wind under the tiles” (*Surprised by Joy* 6-7). Little Lea opened new doors in Lewis’s imagination. There, among the gurgling cisterns, young Lewis first began to write. He crafted a magical world inhabited by trains and ships and mice and rabbits which he called Boxen, and in which he worked out themes of war, honor, and economics (Smith 47). Lewis later drew on these memories to create the house in the *Magician’s Nephew*, the story of the origins of Narnia, complete with endless magical attic corridors for Polly and Digory to explore and discover the entrance to new worlds.



In a letter to his brother Warnie, Lewis wrote: “That part of Rostrevor which overlooks Carlingford Lough is my idea of Narnia” (“Northern Ireland”). That bit of the world is preserved in Kilbroney Park, featuring amazingly varied topography from gently rolling hills covered in springy grass to steep cliffs embedded with mossy rocks and craggy trees. For the most part, trees and mist shroud the view, making it easy to believe that the world ends with the ring of mountains and trees. Occasional glimpses of Carlingford Lough between the branches, however,

remind the viewer of the existence of the world below and the world beyond: the home of the “Emperor-beyond-the-Sea” and the source of the “Deep Magic” which rules all Narnia (*The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* 146). On the top of the hill which overlooks the Lough sits the Cloughmore Stone (“Mourne Mountains”). Legend has it that a giant launched the stone to its current resting place from the mountains on the other side of the Lough. Perhaps this is a rough version of the Stone Table, upon which Aslan would be sacrificed to save Edmund and all Narnia from the White Witch.



### **b. Faith and Theology**

As a child, Lewis often visited his grandfather, the Reverend Thomas R. Hamilton, who worked as the rector at St. Mark’s Parish Church (Smith 34). The door to the rectory features a rather extraordinary wrought-iron doorknob. An adult has to squat down to look at it closely, but a small boy about two feet high would see eye-to-eye with a lion. Little Jack Lewis’s tubby face would have been inches from the lion’s cavernous eye sockets shrouded by heavy, furrowed eyebrows, from which protrude striking corneas. A regal, curly mane crowns the almost human expression of benevolent concern.



St. Mark's, called "The Lion on the Hill" by locals (Smith 41), cemented this image in little Lewis's mind. Is it any wonder that, once the adult Lewis had created his snowy, wooded land of Narnia that a lion came "bounding in" ("It All Began With A Picture"?)

Given Lewis's familial connection with the church, Lewis spent many Sunday mornings in that church, soaking up its Gothic architecture and interior motifs. The chapel was designed by William Butterfield, who also designed the chapel at Keble College in Oxford (Smith 41). Butterfield designed the inside of the church in the traditional crucifix form: a long nave leads from the entrance to the apse, intersected by a crossing. Multi-colored chevrons run along the aisle, leading from the baptismal font to the cross at the altar. When children were baptized in the church, they were carried from the font to the cross, symbolizing the journey from life to death upon which they were embarking (Smith 41). Every Sunday that children were baptized, young Lewis would have heard this theme reiterated by his grandfather as his eyes traveled the blue, red, and orange patterns on the floor, up the columns to the pointed archways reminiscent of the bow of a ship. This early emphasis on pilgrimage combined with Lewis's love of the sea and the regularity of his journeys across the sea to attend school in England to detach Lewis from the physical land, enhancing his longing for an unknown country just beyond his reach.

In a sense, Lewis's faith journey began in this church with his christening and subsequent confirmation. However, as Lewis himself acknowledged, by the time of his confirmation he had given up all but the pretense of religious belief (Bresland 55). Decades later, Lewis would mark the beginning of the decline of his relationship with Ireland with the installation of a stained glass window in honor of his parents (Smith 147). The window features St. James, unusual alongside St. Mark and St. Luke, but perfect as the patron saint of pilgrims. Other iconography related to pilgrimage, including the pilgrim's purse, staff, and shell, circumscribe the figures (Smith 147). This trip to Belfast in 1933, months after the publishing of *The Pilgrim's Regress*, marks what Smith calls a "notable tidemark in Lewis's relinquishing of the ties to Belfast," which will be discussed in a later section (Smith 148).

The writing of *The Pilgrim's Regress* further illustrates what I believe to be a central influence in Lewis's life: his Protestant theology. *The Pilgrim's Regress* is Lewis's only strictly allegorical work (Brown 31), chronicling his own philosophical journey through communism, fascism, nihilism, paganism, occultism, and, ultimately, Christianity. The title is a play on John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*; the substitution of "Progress" with "Regress" indicates the all-important fact that Lewis's conversion in 1931 represented a return to an old faith long lost. Being born in Ireland to a family who liked to read automatically imbued him with a sense of spirituality; one cannot pick up a book of Irish poetry without encountering the supernatural world. Further, being a boy in Belfast at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century taught him the practical implications of religious beliefs. Lewis quotes Plato, Spenser, Milton, Pascal, Virgil, Bunyan, and George MacDonald, tracking the literary experiences by preachers, philosophers, and authors alike which marked Lewis's pilgrimage of faith (Pearce 49). In Lewis's experience,



spiritual encounters took two forms: stories of the *Sidhe*, the Irish fairies, and Ulster Protestantism.

As we have seen in Lewis's fascination with Yeats and his poetry, Lewis was charmed by the spiritual realm so diligently preserved by Irish mythology. As a young man, Lewis aspired to be a playwright, and wrote to Arthur Greeves that he hoped to write an Irish drama about Queen Maeve, queen of Connacht in the Ulster Cycle of Irish mythology (*Letters* 81). In his *Spirits in Bondage* cycle, Lewis wrote a (rather bad) poem entitled "Irish Nocturne," which speaks of a "wizard," "ghosts," "demons" and "the grey, grey walker" who haunt the "land where poets sang." Note the past tense of the verb—"sang," not "sing." By placing this mythical Ireland in the past, Lewis conjures up the feeling of desperate nostalgia for something greater which can only be found beyond the edges of the material world.

Lewis paired this appreciation for the mythical spirituality of Ireland with a strong familial religious bent. Like Lady Gregory, Yeats's patron, Lewis found himself in the unusual position of being a Protestant Nationalist, even writing an essay defending Home Rule (Bresland 16). Lewis developed a love for "real" Ireland (Bresland 58), not the Anglicized Unionist part which would ultimately become Northern Ireland. Whatever his national loyalties were, however, Lewis's early religious allegiance was undoubtedly Protestant. In Lewis's hometown of Belfast, the depth of the divide between Catholics and Protestants manifests itself vividly. While the conflict peaked in the second half of the twentieth century, the tension between the two sects simmered and occasionally boiled over for decades prior. This tumultuous environment required staunch sectarian loyalty which penetrated deep into Lewis's psyche.

In 1920 in a letter to his father, Lewis wrote: "I can't understand the Irish news at all. One of the most curious things is the *rapprochement* which seems probable between English

Trades Unionism and Sinn Fein. I was always confident that the religious differences, the *odium theologicum* would prevent a junction between the two” (*Letters* 486). Lewis viewed the conflict with the assumption that Catholicism and Protestantism were irreconcilable. His friendship with J.R.R. Tolkien and his readings expanded his worldview to acknowledge God’s workings in every faith, but the *odium theologicum* Lewis references subconsciously shaped the way he approached his own practice. Tolkien, who was instrumental in Lewis’s conversion, made note of this even at the time. Tolkien certainly hoped that Lewis would become Catholic; but he eventually had to recognize that Lewis’s Protestant roots pulled at him too strongly. Tolkien wrote of the significance of Lewis’s title *The Pilgrim’s Regress*, “Lewis would regress. He would not enter Christianity by a new door, but by the old one...he would become again a Northern Ireland Protestant” (Pearce 61). Lewis did indeed “regress” to Northern Ireland Protestantism, a fact which undoubtedly contributed to the eventual dissolution of his friendship with Tolkien (Pearce 61). The crucial scene in Lewis’s journey to faith occurred between the two men, in which Tolkien used the concept of myth, which Lewis understood almost innately, to explain the nature of Christian truth. Lewis records the conversation in a letter to Arthur Greeves on October 8, 1931:

What Dyson and Tolkien showed me was this: that if I met the idea of sacrifice in a Pagan story I didn’t mind it at all: again, that if I met the idea of a god sacrificing himself to himself...I liked it very much and was mysteriously moved by it...provided I met it anywhere except in the Gospels. The reason was that in Pagan stories I was prepared to feel the myth as profound and suggestive of meanings beyond my grasp even tho’ I could not say in cold prose ‘what it meant’. Now the story of Christ is simply a true myth: a myth working on us in the same way as the others, but with this tremendous difference: that it *really happened*. (*Letters* 976-77)

It was this comparison which ultimately tipped Lewis over, causing him to lay down his arms and welcome the truth which had been at his door for years.

### c. Seeking Security in Irish Relationships

Examining Lewis's childhood experiences, impermanence emerges as a key theme. One of Lewis's first memories following the death of his mother at the age of nine is the image of the calendar in her bedroom which bore the words "Men must endure their going hence" (Bresland 48). This phrase embedded deeply in his consciousness, and eventually he requested it be put on his own gravestone. Lewis's sense of disconnection grew as he began attending school in England, where he witnessed abusive behavior among the boys (*Surprised by Joy* 52). Given the trauma of these early experiences, it is unsurprising that Ireland became a refuge as England became anathema. Six times a year he made the journey across the channel, lending a literal transience to his life that fostered his hunger for something more than what life he had thus far experienced (*Surprised by Joy* 149).

The discovery of Norse myth amplified that desire, and also connected him to his neighbor Arthur Greeves, who would become a lifelong friend (Bresland 53). At a shop called T. Edens Osborne, Lewis came upon an illustration entitled "Siegfried and the Twilight of the Gods" done by Arthur Rackham for *The Ride of the Valkyries* of Wagner's Ring cycle. Lewis writes:

Pure 'Northernness' engulfed me: a vision of huge, clear spaces hanging above the Atlantic in the endless twilight of Northern summer, remoteness, severity...and almost at the same moment I knew that I had met this before, long, long ago...And with that plunge back into my own past there arose at once, almost like heartbreak, the memory of Joy itself, the knowledge that I had once had what I now lacked for years, that I was returning at last from exile and desert lands to my own country; and the distance of the Twilight of the Gods and the distance of my own past Joy, both unattainable, flowed together into a single, unendurable sense of desire and loss, which suddenly became one with the loss of the whole experience. (*Surprised by Joy* 83)

Lewis's moment in the bookshop reveals the powerful connection between his Irish experience and the development of Joy, his great theme. In the bleak hopelessness of Norse myth, Lewis experienced a desperate longing for something which he had yet to name, but which would ultimately lead him back to Christianity. At this point, he sought to trace the source of his longing by reading as much Norse myth as he could acquire. One of the unexpected fruits of this pursuit was his friendship with Arthur Greeves. The two bonded over mutual love for the Myths of the Norsemen (Bresland 53), a bond which lasted throughout Lewis's life. As I will discuss later, it was to Arthur's home that Lewis returned upon his father's death, and it was to Arthur that Lewis dedicated *The Pilgrim's Regress*, his mythical and autobiographical tale of a pilgrim's journey home.

Indeed, Lewis's displacement from his Irish home to England caused him to seek out Irish companionship, whatever form it took. One of these companions was Paddy Moore, who fought alongside Lewis in the war (Sayer 126). The nearly immediate strength of their bond grew from the mutual trust and understanding that accompanied a shared national and cultural heritage. Each agreed to support the other's family in the event that one of them died (Sayer 135). When Paddy did indeed become a casualty of the war, Lewis made good on his promise and took in Mrs. Janie Moore, Paddy's mother. The strong and somewhat bizarre relationship which developed between the two of them must, likewise, have stemmed from the security Lewis felt in the company of fellow Irishmen.

In addition to Paddy, Lewis made friends with half a dozen Irishmen displaced by the diaspora (Bresland 54). These included a university friend, Theobald Butler, who possessed the ability to wax eloquently in the words of Irish poets while roaring drunk. Another Ulsterman, Eric Dodds, often participated with them in their drunken escapades at University (Bresland 55).

Later, Lewis developed a close friendship with Nevill Coghill of Cork (Bresland 96), of whom he wrote: “Apropos of my condemnation of Ulster he asked me if I were a Catholic which made me suspect he might be one himself” (Bresland 96). Fortunately for the pair, Coghill was a staunch Anglo-Irish Protestant, whose family had suffered at the hand of the Catholic Republican army, threatening to lynch Coghill and holding up in front of a firing squad (Wilson 80). Lewis was surprised to discover a fellow Irishman who was, as biographer A.N. Wilson describes him, “so urbane and so charming, yet who shared with Arthur Greeves and Owen Barfield the mental quirk of believing in another world” (Wilson 80). Having earned Lewis’s trust, Coghill nudged Lewis another inch closer toward a return to faith, while also encouraging and facilitating the publishing of his poetry (Bresland 97). Other friends of Lewis included Louis MacNeice and Forrest Reid, whom Lewis “liked...better than I could find it easy to explain—something about his voice and face and manner” (Bresland 103). His relatives, Mary Warren Hamilton and her daughter Lillian, whom Lewis valued for their “literary criticism and forthright views” provided another Irish community which Lewis often inhabited (Bresland 104).

Upon the death of his father, Lewis returned to his friend Arthur Greeves’s house while he made preparations to sell his childhood home of Little Lea (Sayer 227). There Lewis wrote *The Pilgrim’s Regress*. The writing of this book in many ways punctuates Lewis’s own journey from the loss of faith which began with the loss of his mother to the rediscovery of it which he commemorated on the death of his father. In many ways, this visit marked the end of his life in Ireland. After it, his communication with Arthur slowed and his visits dwindled. Indeed, often Warnie’s drinking habits were the only thing which recalled him, but even these occasions became rarer as time passed (Smith 153).

As I have argued, Lewis's Irish experience fundamentally prepared him for his conversion to Christianity; thus, Lewis's need for Ireland decreased following his return to faith. Ireland had acted as a cradle for experiences of Joy; once Lewis found the source of his longing. As he famously wrote in *Mere Christianity*, "If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world." Ultimately, Lewis determined that the answer to his longing was faith in Jesus Christ and belief in Heaven and the restoration of Earth. Lewis writes:

I now know that the experience [of Joy], considered as a state of my own mind, had never had the kind of importance I once gave it. It was valuable only as a pointer to something other and outer. While that other was in doubt, the pointer naturally loomed large in my thoughts. When we are lost in the woods the sight of a signpost is a great matter. He who first sees it cries 'Look!' The whole party gathers round and stares. But when we have found the road and are passing signposts every few miles, we shall not stop and stare. They will encourage us and we shall be grateful to the authority that set them up. But we shall not stop and stare, or not much; not on this road, though their pillars are of silver and their lettering of gold. 'We would be at Jerusalem.' (*Surprised by Joy* 276-77)

With his eyes set on Jerusalem, Lewis no longer needed to look to Ireland for guidance, security, or spirituality. Thus, he let his connections to Ireland dwindle and threw himself into his writing in Oxford. Still, when it came time to plan a honeymoon with Joy, Lewis chose Ireland as the ultimate romantic experience, and they "returned drunk with blue mountains, yellow beaches, dark fuchsia, breaking waves, braying donkeys, peat smell and the heather just coming to bloom" (Bresland 158).

#### **IV. Conclusion**

In his analysis of Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, amid lengthy discussions of the nature of symbolism, allegory, and history in the author's work, Lewis briefly digresses to Spenser's experiences in England and in Ireland.

Spenser's visit to England had been a disappointment. He was not made for the fashionable world...Shepherds, hermits, satyrs, even the Savage, become types to which he turns with love. It is difficult not to conclude that this represents his growing (though perhaps unadmitted) reconciliation to what had once been his place of exile but had now become home. He was coming to need that Irish life: the freedom, the informality, the old clothes, the hunting, farming, and fishing...He may, as a poet, have needed the very country. There is a real affinity between his *Faerie Queene*, a poem of quests and wanderings and inextinguishable desires, and Ireland itself—the soft, wet air, the loneliness, the muffled shapes of the hills, the heart-rending sunset. It was of course a different Ireland from ours, an Ireland without potatoes, whitewashed cottages, or bottled stout: but it must already have been 'the land of longing'. *The Faerie Queene* should perhaps be regarded as the work of one who is turning into an Irishman. (*Studies* 126)

In describing Spenser's Irish experience, Lewis reveals a sense of solidarity and kinship with the author stemming from a shared sense of profound but elusive Irish identity. Published posthumously, Lewis penned these reflections with the benefit of hindsight of the importance of Ireland in his own life and Spenser in influencing his own writing style. The nostalgia in his voice is nearly audible. For Lewis, Ireland and Irishness felt like Joy, filling him with desperate longing for the heavenly realms which he attempted to reach through his prose.

Lewis's relationship with Ireland was not static. He idealized it as a boy, identified with it as a young man, and grew apart from it in his later adulthood as unhappier memories took the place of happy ones. Lewis exemplified Yeats's theory of Ireland as a land of youth. All of Lewis's protagonists eventually become too old for Narnia and must return to their own worlds, as he left Ireland to return to England. Yet Ireland never left Lewis's soul; he found he "needed that Irish life" in England as he had hardly noticed in Ireland. In Aslan's Country, as in Heaven, they get the perfect combination of all the best worlds. This is why, for Lewis, "Heaven is Oxford lifted and placed in the middle of County Down" (Smith 125).

Returning to Lewis's boyhood window on Dundela Avenue, the young Lewis could just make out the profile of one of the Antrim hills. This "Cave Hill" takes the shape of a recumbent giant. When it came time to end the adventures of Narnia, Lewis awoke that giant, called Father Time. One blow of Time's horn, "high and terrible, yet of a strange, deadly beauty" (749), and the stars cascade from the heavens "like silver rain" (749), leaving behind "simply emptiness...Aslan had called them home" (750). After the stars come the creatures; after the creatures, "the forests disappeared. The whole country became bare...the grass died" (752) until all of Narnia lies cold and empty. Then with "first a murmur, then a rumble, then a roar" (752) a "foaming wall of water" (752) levels the land and a dark red sun and moon intertwine, becoming "one huge ball like a burning coal" (753). Finally, on Aslan's instruction, the giant Father Time "took the sun and squeezed it in his hand as you would squeeze an orange. And instantly there was total darkness" (753). And then: "'Peter, High King of Narnia,' said Aslan. 'Shut the Door'" (753).

Having found Heaven, Lewis put to rest that distant view of Irish mountains which gave him irrepressible Joy. The loss of his father, the writing of *Pilgrim's Regress*, and his own return to faith gave him the knowledge like that which Aslan imparts to Lucy and Edmund at the end of *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*: Christ is the great bridge-builder between Heaven and Earth, permanently closing the gap which story can only briefly traverse. Because Aslan's Country existed, Narnia could end; because Heaven existed, Lewis's Ireland could be put to rest.



## CHAPTER 2

### SACRAMENTAL SYMBOLISM: TOLKIEN AND THE CREATIVE EUCATASTROPHE

“No one ever influenced Tolkien. You might as well try to influence a Bandersnatch...He has only two reactions to criticism: either he begins the whole work over again from the beginning or else he takes no notice at all.”

—C.S. Lewis<sup>8</sup>

#### I. Introduction

Perhaps no single person played a greater role in developing the C.S. Lewis known and loved by millions of readers than J.R.R. Tolkien, for it was largely through their friendship that Lewis returned to the faith of his childhood. These men had much in common: a love for literature and lore, an appreciation of nature, and a proclivity for tobacco. Given Tolkien’s instrumentality in Lewis’s conversion, they shared many beliefs about the relation between myth and Gospel, agreeing essentially that the Christian story was a ‘true’ myth (*Letters* 976-77). Shadows of each appear in the writings of the other, reflecting the many hours spent in consultation about their authorial work. Indeed, Tolkien acknowledges that, without Lewis’s urging, *The Lord of the Rings* might never have come to completion (Duriez 180).

As detailed earlier, the convergence and comradeship of these two men is widely known; less well known is the fact that, over time, the friendship waned and ultimately ended. Of the theories suggested for this, including Tolkien’s disapproval of Lewis’s *Chronicles of Narnia* and of his marriage to the divorced Joy Davidman, originate in theological differences. As Tolkien wrote, “The ‘protestant’ search backwards for ‘simplicity’ and directness...is mistaken and indeed vain” (*Letters* 394), and Tolkien undoubtedly viewed Lewis’s choices as deeply mistaken. Tolkien’s English Catholicism—like Lewis’s Ulster Protestantism—suffused both his personal

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<sup>8</sup> (Jacobs 195)

and professional life. Catholic theology shaped Tolkien's philosophy of storytelling and, thus, laid the foundation for his magical world of Middle Earth.

Tom Shippey contextualizes Tolkien as a fantasy writer on the tail of Modernism, a time when "the dominant literary orthodoxy of the past century...has been ironic and self-doubting" (Shippey 18). In his fiction, Tolkien addressed the questions which everyday people were asking and offered an alternative understanding of the world to the one offered by texts like James Joyce's *Ulysses* (Shippey xviii). He opened many unwitting readers to the possibility of the existence of something greater than ourselves, something that is "the guiding factor in the events of our life and world" as well (Brown 178-79). Though the role of Catholicism in Tolkien's life and works has emerged into public knowledge through his published letters, many contemporary critics miss this element entirely. Lin Carter, writing in 1969, observes, "The work has no hidden meaning; it is nothing more than a fantasy novel, a story, a made thing" (Carter 92). In fact there *is* a hidden meaning, tucked just beneath the surface of Tolkien's created reality. In this, Tolkien hoped to "broaden and sharpen" his readers' vision, inviting them to "look for and recognize the evidence of things unseen as well as things seen" (Paul Pfothenauer, qtd. Brown 178-79). By contrast to Carter, Charles Coulombe in 1992 called *The Lord of the Rings*, "this age's great Catholic epic" (Coulombe 65), providing both comfort to the individual Catholic and paying tribute to the endurance of the Catholic tradition.

In order to understand how Lewis and Tolkien define good literature, I turn now to a brief analysis of two works of literary criticism: Lewis's *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Literature*, particularly Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queen*, and Tolkien's *The Monsters and the Critics*, focusing on the poem *Beowulf*. These two works—one, a post-Reformation

Renaissance allegory, the other an Anglo-Saxon medieval poem, provide a beautiful contrast of the different styles of literature which spoke to these two men.

In Spenser, who pronounced Lewis's homeland of Ulster "a most beautifull and sweete countrie as any is under heaven" (qtd. *Studies* 125), Lewis found both an Irish kindred spirit and a philosophical inspiration for his own approach to writing. "Spenser," asserted Lewis, "wrote primarily as a (Protestant) Christian and secondarily as a Platonist" (*Studies* 144). The same could be said about Lewis himself. Note the careful clarification of which kind of Christian Spenser was. This suggests, as his writings confirm, that Lewis sensed a valuable difference between the Protestant and Catholic strains of Christian thought. Lewis, the Protestant Platonist, embraced and admired Spenser's allegory for its symbols.

Lewis analyzes one moment in which Queen Elizabeth I is welcomed by Mercy, Chastity, and Beauty, pointing out that the abstract, allegorical figures "are self-explanatory" (*Studies* 17), already elevated to the highest level of meaning. Thus, "It is the Queen, instead, who is being equated and complimented by the momentary identification with them" (*Studies* 17). This assertion supports the notion that, while Lewis did not dismiss the embodied function of literary symbols, he believed their primary meaning was in the spiritual truth they reflect, but do not generate themselves. Because of its allegorical symbolism, Lewis writes, "Much of *The Faerie Queene* will seem thin or over-obvious if judged by modern standards" (*Studies* 143). Having suffered the same critique himself, Lewis argues Spenser's relative lack of scholarly attention to the medieval world actually "set him free to embody, almost unconsciously, those elements of the Middle Ages which were still alive all round him in tournament and heraldry, pageant and symbolical pictures, whereas accurate knowledge might have made him merely a pedant and an antiquarian" (*Studies* 131). For Lewis, symbols come alive in the atmosphere they

evoke or the larger picture they contain; thus, while his own world of Narnia lacked the linguistic coherence of Tolkien's, it succeeded in creating an atmosphere which launched the reader into the beyond. "The movement of the interpreting mind," Lewis writes, "is from the real people into the work of art, not out of the work into them" (*Studies* 17). This reflects his own experience with literature, both as a young reader experiencing Joy and an adult crafting a fictional world to tell the Christian story afresh.

Tolkien's meditation on *Beowulf* reveals equal admiration for the work of story to connect everyday objects and characters to cosmic meaning; however, the rules of the game prove fundamentally different. In this seminal piece of *Beowulf* criticism, Tolkien argues against critics who have used *Beowulf* only "as a quarry of fact and fancy" rather than a work of art (*Of Monsters*). Tolkien suggests that the strong "illusion of historical truth and perspective" in *Beowulf* "is largely a product of art" (*Of Monsters*). Contrary to what other critics argued, and quite different from Spenserian allegory, Tolkien suggests that, in *Beowulf*,

The large symbolism is near the surface, but it does not break through...something more significant than a standard hero, a man faced with a foe more evil than any human enemy of house or realm, is before us, and yet incarnate in time, walking in heroic history, and treading the named lands of the North. (*Of Monsters*)

In this, Tolkien reflects his own sacramental approach to literature: the figure of Beowulf matters both as a real, living man, and as part of some large, indefinable movement.

Tolkien also admired *Beowulf* for the role it played in recording the early history of the "English temper" which Tolkien so cherished. For Tolkien, the English identity relies on a Catholic perspective of the world and a love of English history, back to the Norman Viking invaders and the Celtic mythologies before that. He writes:

The author of *Beowulf* showed forth the permanent value of that *pietas* which treasures the memory of man's struggles in the dark past, man fallen and not yet saved, disgraced but not dethroned. It would seem to have been part of the English temper in its strong sense of tradition, dependent doubtless on dynasties, noble houses, and their code of honour, and strengthened, it may be, by the more inquisitive and less severe Celtic learning, that it should, at least in some quarters and despite grave and Gallic voices, preserve much from the northern past to blend with southern learning, and new faith. (*Of Monsters*)

Tolkien observes that the Norse gods are, "within Time," beholden to men as allies, defined by "humanness...however titanic" (*Of Monsters*). They are redolent with meaning and emotion, but firmly connected to the time and space in which they move. To Tolkien's ear, the poem provides "the echo of an ancient dirge, far-off, and hopeless...it is to us as a memory brought over the hills, an echo of an echo" (*Of Monsters*). Tolkien's emphasis on sorrow, suffering, and hostile darkness reflects to his primary appreciation for that which exists in the present world. He hears the echo of something beyond in *Beowulf* which "glimpses the cosmic" but which also "moves with the thought of all men concerning the fate of human life and efforts" (*Of Monsters*). Tolkien suggests that the strength of this poem lies in its ability to inhabit the narrow, physical experience while also appreciating the spiritual dimensions it contains.

Like the author of *Beowulf*, when Tolkien begins writing his tales of Middle-earth, he does so for the twofold purpose of adding to English history and mythology and depicting the "desire of the good for truth" (*Of Monsters*) which ultimately leads to Christianity. In the ordinariness of everyday objects, characters, and themes, Tolkien found eternal importance.

Tolkien provides a clear window into his theory of symbolism when he writes of Milton:

Even if Milton had [recounted the story of Jack and the Beanstalk in noble verse] (and he might have done worse), we should perhaps pause to consider whether his poetic handling had not had some effect upon the trivial theme; what alchemy had been performed upon the base metal; whether indeed it remained base or trivial when he had finished with it. (*Of Monsters*)

In the context of a story—whether the Christian story enacted on Earth or the fictional story enacted in *The Lord of the Rings*—the physical properties of objects change, acquiring deeper meaning which hums just beneath the surface. As I will explore, this stemmed from Tolkien's love of the Eucharist and shaped his approach to fiction.

In the following chapter, I will explore Tolkien's childhood, noting the major events which shaped his staunch theological beliefs. I will then turn to Tolkien's philosophy of storytelling based on the concepts of sub-creation and Eucatastrophe. Finally, I will discuss the influence of Catholicism on Tolkien's fiction, demonstrating how his Eucharistic theology led him to use sacramental symbolism which relies the unity of earthly presence and spiritual meaning, depicting both the inevitability of human suffering and omnipotence of providential creator.

## II. A Catholic Childhood

Tolkien once wrote in a letter to a student, "Though it is a great compliment, I am really rather sorry to find myself the subject of a thesis" (*Letters* 199, To Caroline Everett, 24 June 1957). Tolkien goes on to express his dubiousness at the relevance of biography to literary criticism; and yet, not a few sentences later, he acknowledges, "The chief biographical fact to me is the completion of *The Lord of the Rings*...from the beginning it began to catch up in its narrative folds visions of most of the things that I have most loved or hated" (*Letters* 199). At the risk of incurring his disappointment, it seems that to understand the origins of Middle Earth, we must understand the heart of Tolkien—his loves and his hatreds.

Tolkien and his younger brother were born in South Africa, in what was then known as the Orange Free State, to Arthur Tolkien and his wife Mabel Suffield Tolkien (Carpenter 14). Arthur's job with the Bank of Africa had led the couple there, but Mabel missed the climate and

company of England (Carpenter 20). Like her, “Ronald” Tolkien seemed born for English weather; he suffered increasingly serious feverish illnesses, and ultimately the doctor recommended returning to a more temperate climate. Mabel took three-year-old Ronald and his baby brother back to England in 1895, leaving Arthur behind, when Ronald was three years old. Less than a year later, Arthur contracted rheumatic fever, suffered a hemorrhage, and died (Carpenter 24). The loss of his father left a void in Tolkien’s life and introduced him to the experience of suffering, a theme which heavily influenced his writing.

Mabel Tolkien set about making a home in England for herself and the two boys. She worked assiduously to provide for them both physically and spiritually. It was through his mother that Tolkien was first introduced to Catholicism (Carpenter 31). Against her Protestant family’s wishes, Mabel converted in 1900 when Tolkien was eight (Carpenter 31). She was immediately disowned by her father and condemned by her husband’s family (Carpenter 32). Mabel and her two sons moved often over the next few years, exchanging the verdure of the countryside for the grime of coal cars—redeemed for Tolkien by the Welsh names emblazoned on them (Carpenter 33). Tolkien shuffled in and out of different schools, including several years under his mother’s dedicated tutelage at home (Carpenter 35). Tolkien was as devoted to his mother as she was to him, and her devotion to her faith he doubtless sought to emulate.

Tolkien’s relationship with his mother was tragically cut short when she succumbed to diabetes and passed away (Carpenter 38). Tolkien was twelve years old (Carpenter 37). Later in life, he expressed his gratitude to her for raising him “in a Faith that has nourished me and taught me all the little that I know; and that I owe to my mother, who clung to her conversion and died young, largely through the hardships and poverty resulting from it” (*Letters* 142, To Robert Murray, S.J., 2 December 1953). Tolkien viewed his mother as a martyr for her faith, specifically

for her Catholicism, suggesting that the treatment she received at the hands of her family ultimately caused her death (Carpenter 39). Tolkien felt the burden of her sacrifice for him, and his commitment to his faith strengthened in honor of her memory (Carpenter 39).

Sharpening the sense of the loss of his mother, the Tolkien brothers were moved away from the country cottage where they had been living to a house in town. Humphrey Carpenter writes:

The green countryside was just visible in the distance, but it now belonged to a remote past that could not be regained...and because it was the loss of his mother had taken him away from all these things, he came to associate them with her. His feelings towards the rural landscape, already sharp from the earlier severance...now became emotionally charged with personal bereavement. (Carpenter 40)

This experience harkens back to that of Lewis's: the loss of the mother, the loss of the countryside, and the experience of forever reaching for, but never grasping, both. This sentiment underlies the fantasy realms of both Narnia and Middle Earth, in which both writers redeemed their personal losses in the context of the sanctification experience. For Tolkien, however, this longing was irrevocably connected to his Catholic faith, which he learned from his mother in their country cottage. Thus, just as Lewis could not but be loyal to the Protestantism of his childhood, so Tolkien experienced life through the loyally Catholic lens he inherited from his mother. Though he often found himself the butt of jokes, looked down upon by colleagues, and bitterly disagreeing with friends, Tolkien never wavered. He writes:

One is now often patted on the back, as a representative of a church that has seen the error of its ways, abandoned its arrogance and hauteur, and its separatism; but I have not yet met a 'protestant' who shows or expresses any realization of the reasons in this country for our attitude: ancient or modern: from torture and expropriation down to 'Robinson' and all that. Has it ever been mentioned that Roman Catholics still suffer from disabilities not even applicable to Jews? As a man whose childhood was darkened by persecution, I find this hard. But charity must cover a multitude of sins! (*Letters* 394)



As do his fictional characters, Tolkien suffered in silence, understanding his suffering to be part of his sanctification. For in the Eucharist, “there the Author of Sanctity is Himself present” (Niesel 103).

### **III. Tolkien’s Philosophy of Storytelling**

Tolkien began his literary career in the midst of the modernist movement, and indeed his stories might be said to have arisen in response to many of the same sensations to which the Modernists responded: the loss of innocence and sense of displacement wrought by World War I. Tolkien sympathized with the Modernist disillusionment with social progress, especially industrialization; however, Tolkien offered a wholly different answer to the Modernist despair at the darkness of humanity discovered in the war.

In his essay “On Fairy-Stories,” Tolkien explains why, of all genres, fantasy was best suited to express the longing of humankind in the wake of such an atrocity. He writes, “A real taste for fairy-stories was wakened by philology on the threshold of manhood, and quickened to full life by war.” Tolkien did not deny the horrors of world; rather, he found that it fit with his personal losses and the broader context of Catholic suffering. The war did not shatter Tolkien’s faith. If anything, it reaffirmed it; for nothing he met in the world during the war could offer him hope, but stories—fairy-stories—could. If the Moderns were disillusioned with the world as they saw it, Tolkien sought to re-illusion the world through story (Smith 82).

Tolkien’s philosophy of storytelling outlined in “On Fairy-Stories” relies on two concepts: storytelling as creation and the centrality of the Eucharist as the fusion of myth and history. These two concepts are embedded deeply in his theological perspective, and merit further exploration.

#### **a. Sub-creation and the “inner consistency of reality”**

*“Dear Sir,” I said—Although now long estranged,  
 Man is not wholly lost nor wholly changed.  
 Dis-graced he may be, yet is not de-throned,  
 and keeps the rags of lordship once he owned:  
 Man, Sub-creator, the refracted Light  
 through whom is splintered from a single White  
 to many hues, and endlessly combined  
 in living shapes that move from mind to mind.  
 Though all the crannies of the world we filled  
 with Elves and Goblins, though we dared to build  
 Gods and their houses out of dark and light,  
 and sowed the seed of dragons—'twas our right  
 (used or misused). That right has not decayed:  
 we make still by the law in which we're made.”*

Tolkien penned this response to a man who described fairy-stories as “lies told through silver” (“On Fairy-Stories”), arguing instead that stories emerge like beams from a crystal, reflecting a piece of what was once a unified glory. Tolkien viewed storytelling as a fundamentally creative act, establishing the author as the “god” of his own world, in the sense that the authorial act mirrors the creative act of God in making the universe and all its living inhabitants. For Tolkien, being made in the image of God means being made to create. In his “Leaf by Niggle,” Tolkien explores this concept, depicting a man who feels a calling on his life to paint a beautifully intricate tree. Upon the man’s death, Niggle’s painting turns out to be an echo of a great, real tree that exists somewhere beyond the limits of what Tolkien calls the “Primary World.” Niggle is in many ways an autobiographical character, and indeed Tolkien viewed his creation of the world of Middle Earth as the recording of a history that was “given” rather than “invented.” He shared the sentiments expressed by Niggle who, when confronted with the true, living tree which he has been painting all his life, exults, “It’s a gift!”

The purpose of art for Tolkien is to glorify God by acting out that part of us which, as His creations, must likewise create. For an author, the created world must be believable in order for

the story to succeed. The successful story-maker must become a “sub-creator” (“On Fairy-Stories”). Tolkien explains:

He makes a Secondary World which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is “true”: it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside. The moment disbelief arises, the spell is broken; the magic, or rather art, has failed. You are then out in the Primary World again. (“On Fairy-Stories”)

An “inner consistency of reality” is thus vital to sustaining a reader’s experience of the created world (“On Fairy-Stories”). Tolkien labored intensively over every detail in his story; Tolkien felt every twig and shade and character to be vital to the magic of his created world. Martha Sammons records, “Practically every reference was recorded with the exception of Queen Berúthiel’s cats and the names of two wizards” (Sammons 121). Tom Shippey deemed Tolkien’s method “asterisk reality” (qtd. Sammons 121). This refers to a philological practice of using an asterisk to denote a word which does not appear in any documents but is nonetheless inferred to exist. Likewise, Tolkien intended to create a mythology which would fit into the historical record (Sammons 121).

In creating Middle Earth, Tolkien initially hoped to furnish a mythology for England akin to that of Greece or the Norsemen. He writes, “I was from early days grieved by the poverty of my own beloved country: it had no stories of its own (bound up with its tongue and soil)” (*Letters* 131, To Milton Waldman, late 1951). Though he ultimately gave up on such a grand undertaking,<sup>9</sup> the sights and smells of ancient Britain hang in the air of Middle Earth, air which

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<sup>9</sup> To Milton Waldman, late 1951: “Once upon a time (my crest has long since fallen) I had a mind to make a body of more or less connected legend, ranging from the large and cosmogonic, to the level of romantic fairy-story—the larger founded on the lesser in contact with the earth, the lesser drawing splendor from the vast backcloths—which I could dedicate simply to: to England; to my country. It should possess the tone and quality that I desired, somewhat cool and clear, be redolent of our ‘air’ (the clime and soil of the North West, meaning Britain and the hither parts of Europe: not Italy or the Aegean, still less the East), and, while possessing (if I could achieve it) the fair elusive beauty that some call Celtic (though it is rarely found in genuine ancient Celtic things), it should be ‘high’, purged of the gross, and fit for the more adult mind of a land long now steeped in poetry. I would draw on some of the great

Tolkien identifies as of “the North-western temper and temperature” (*Letters* 163, To W.H. Auden, 7 June 1955). To Tolkien, this North-western air smelled both of “home and something discovered” (*Letters* 163). Indeed, though the majority of his life was spent breathing that air, his earliest memories are in South Africa, “a hot parched country” (*Letters* 163). Such a sentiment must inevitably intertwine the air of England, and thus of Middle Earth, with his Catholic faith; it represented another “discovery” made later in his childhood but which became his “home” in a world where little was sacred or safe.

Importantly, the created world could not contain anything “religious” in the sense that those in the Primary World mean it. In a letter to Robert Murray, Tolkien writes:

The Lord of the Rings is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work...That is why I have not put in, or have cut out, practically all references to anything like religion... the religious element is absorbed into the story and the symbolism. (*Letters* 142)

Tolkien sought to imbue his works with an “inner consistency of reality.” By this, Tolkien meant that his responsibility as a “sub-creator” was to create a secondary world “derived from Reality” (“On Fairy-Stories”). In A Letter to Milton Waldman in 1951, Tolkien writes: “Elven ‘magic’ is Art...more effortless, more quick, more complete...and its object is Art not Power, sub-creation not domination tyrannous re-forming of Creation” (*Letters* 131). For Tolkien, the writer could only create by acting as a sub-creator through whose pen flows the reality of Earth, God’s creation. In order to reflect that reality, every detail from the chronology to the topography of Middle-earth had to be “consistent and plausible, so that the reader would (as Tolkien wished) take the book in a sense as history” (Carpenter 224). Indeed, this is one of the more staggering aspects of Tolkien’s accomplishment: complete with language, history, customs, and lineages,

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tales in fullness, and leave many only placed in the scheme, and sketched. The cycles should be linked to a majestic whole, and yet leave scope for other minds and hands, wielding paint and music and drama. Absurd.”

Middle-earth is itself a “real and whole and genuine place” (Carter 93). This is why Tolkien could not abide Narnia, and indeed found it “outside his sympathy” (Carpenter 228) all his life. Unlike Middle Earth, which exists in a plausible temporal space, Narnia is a cornucopia of elements, some from Lewis’s own imagination, but many drawn from mythologies of our own world, from fauns to Father Christmas to talking animals—“anything that seemed useful for the plot” (Carpenter 224). On top of this, Lewis wrote with speed that anyone would envy, and to Tolkien, Lewis’s lack of attentiveness to inner consistency of reality was positively offensive.

### **b. Eucatastrophe**

The second prong of Tolkien’s understanding of the purpose of fairy-stories focuses on “the Consolation of the Happy Ending” (“On Fairy-Stories”). This is the moment when, just when all seems lost, the story suddenly turns for the good, and the reader’s breath catches and heart lifts (“On Fairy-Stories). Tolkien names this joyous and unexpected turn the “eucatastrophe.” Far from being escapist, this moment

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 is evangelium, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief. (“On Fairy-Stories”)

The eucatastrophe represents a moment of hope provided not by the characters within the story, but rather by the agent of the plot: by chance, fate, or providence.

In the epilogue to his essay, Tolkien reveals the etymology of his invented term: the Incarnation of Christ. Unlike most fairy-stories, the Gospel story “has entered History and the Primary World...the Birth of Christ is the eucatastrophe of Man’s history” (“On Fairy-Stories”). Tolkien understands that God inserted himself into the story of His own Creation in order to rescue the hopelessly lost humanity—like Shakespeare walking into *Romeo & Juliet* just in time

to tell Romeo that Juliet is not dead, but sleeping. In this, Tolkien asserts that the Gospel “story” has been elevated from sub-creation to Creation. Thus, “Art has been verified. God is the Lord, of angels, and of men—and of elves. Legend and History have met and fused” (“On Fairy-Stories”).

For the Catholic, the power of the Incarnation can be relived in the taking of the Eucharist. Undoubtedly Tolkien’s first love was for the Blessed Sacrament of the Eucharist. Throughout his life, Tolkien insisted on regular confession and Communion, to an “almost medieval” degree according to his biographer (Carpenter 160). In a letter to his son Michael, dated March 1941, Tolkien writes:

Out of the darkness of my life, so much frustrated, I put before you the one great thing to love on earth: the Blessed Sacrament... There you will find romance, glory, honour, fidelity, and the true way of all your loves upon earth, and more than that: Death: by the divine paradox, that which ends life, and demands the surrender of all, and yet by the taste (or foretaste) of which alone can what you seek in your earthly relationships (love, faithfulness, joy) be maintained, or take on that complexion of reality, of eternal endurance, which every man’s heart desires. (*Letters* 54)

By his own acknowledgement, all the great themes of Tolkien’s work are bound up in his understanding and practice of the Eucharist: hope and faith in the midst of life-long suffering; the inescapability and great gift of Death; the necessity of surrender to the working of God; and the glimpse of ‘reality’, that is, the way God meant the world to be, or the way it is in Him.

Tolkien’s approach to storytelling as a Eucharistic practice has significant implications for how we read his stories. Tolkien writes: “Faerie contains many things besides elves and fays...it holds...tree and bird, water and stone, **wine and bread**, and ourselves, mortal men, when we are enchanted” (“On Fairy-Stories,” emphasis added). For the Protestant, the wine and bread of Communion are important because of what they *represent*; for the Catholic, the wine and bread are important because of what they *are*. According to Catholic proscription, “If anyone

denies that, in the sacrament of the most holy Eucharist, are contained truly, really, and substantially, the body and blood together with the soul and divinity of our Lord Jesus Christ, and consequently the whole Christ...let him be anathema” (Niesel 103). Informed by this perspective, Tolkien uses sacramental symbolism in which every aspect of his world is important for what it is, rather than merely what it represents. It is a gift given, not an image invented. As Patrick Grant pointed out, this helps explain “the inordinate pains spent on the appendices, the background history, the landscape, names, traditions, annals and the entire sense of ‘real world’ of Middle-Earth” (Grant 376). If story is sacramental, then every aspect of the magical world must contain the mystery of the Incarnation.

#### **IV. The Catholic Experience in Tolkien’s Fiction**

After Niggle exclaims “It’s a gift!” Tolkien comments, “He was referring to his art, and also to the result; but he was using the word quite literally” (113). This summarizes Tolkien’s use of symbolism: literal objects matter, for they contain both themselves and echoes of the beyond. This “beyond” for Tolkien remains quite beyond; unlike in *The Chronicles of Narnia* in which we see the end of Narnia and the Aslan’s Country (Heaven), Tolkien offers no such satisfying conclusion. Indeed, *The Lord of the Rings* ends on a forward-looking note, relying on past experience to inform the future battles which await them. This future is secure, however, in the recognition that no character in the tale was responsible for the completion of the mission to destroy the Ring; the agency lies with some much more powerful Being. These three elements—sacramental symbolism; the perdurance of suffering and battles with evil; and the redemption by Providence—are deeply rooted in Catholic understanding.

##### **a. Not Merely Allegory**

Tolkien's Catholic theology shaped his philosophy of storytelling to be a fundamentally sacramental act. For Tolkien, the physical and spiritual were intertwined, just as the bread and wine of the Eucharist are intertwined with Christ. Though to the five senses they smell and taste and are digested as any other bread and wine would be, they are wholly transformed, embodying—not representing—the body and blood of Christ. The Eucharist is a “wonderful and singular conversion of the whole substance of the bread into the body and of the whole substance of the wine into the blood” (Niesel 104), Christ's divinity and His humanity concomitant. Just as the bread and wine of the Eucharist *are* Christ's body, so the people and objects which populate Middle Earth *are* sacramental symbols, important both in their visible and invisible natures. In *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, Eustace remarks to Ramandu, a retired star, “In our world... a star is a huge ball of flaming gas.” Ramandu replies: “Even in your world, my son, that is not what a star is, but only what it is made of.” Here, Lewis belies his Platonic understanding of symbolism, suggesting that a thing is important not for its physical composition but for its true essence which exists beyond the perception of the five senses. Lewis did exhibit an understanding of the sacramental,<sup>10</sup> expressing a respect for the “Blessed Sacrament” the Eucharist as “the holiest thing” presented to one's senses (“The Weight of Glory”).<sup>11</sup> Tolkien, however, standardized and exemplified sacramental symbolism in his fiction (Ware 57).

Lewis's fervent attachment to the concept of “Joy,” the feeling of longing evoked by something in this world for something beyond it, moved his use of symbolism and even his plot structure away from the sacramental and toward the Platonic. Lewis was also not so adverse to

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<sup>10</sup> “There is no good trying to be more spiritual than God,” Lewis writes; “That is why He uses material things like bread and wine to put the new life into us” (Ware 57).

<sup>11</sup> An exasperated Tolkien once wrote: “Hatred of our church is after all the real only final foundation of the C of E – so deep laid that it remains even when all the superstructure seems removed (C.S.L. for instance reveres the Blessed Sacrament, and admires nuns!). Yet if a Lutheran is put in jail he is up in arms; but if Catholic priests are slaughtered—he disbelieves it (and I daresay really thinks they asked for it)” (*Letters* CITE).



allegory as Tolkien was; he suggested that allegory at its best approaches myth, making meaning come alive in story that cannot be stated conceptually (Sammons 151). At the end of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, Lewis gives the reader the answer to the longing many of them shared with the Pevensie children for the land of Narnia. He takes them through death to Aslan's Country, to Heaven, where all worlds converge. The children look across the valley and spot "England...the real England, just as this is the real Narnia. And in that inner England no good thing is destroyed" (*Chronicles* 766). Lewis shows us what lies beyond both England and Narnia, giving us the tonic for our Joyful longing. Tolkien, on the other hand, restrains all activity to the world of Middle Earth. We get a sense of the beyond; it hovers around the edges in moments like Gandalf's stand on the edge of the cavern and Tom Bombadil's mysterious musings. But Tolkien never takes us there; the focus remains on the work that must be done in Middle Earth. As Paul Kocher writes, "Many of the wise on Middle-earth have such general glimpses of the future, but they are never more than vague and unspecific. The future is the property of the One who plans it" (Kocher 12). Such was Tolkien's understanding.

This understanding stems directly from Catholic beliefs about the Eucharist. According to the Catholic Catechism, "It is by the conversion of the bread and wine into Christ's body and blood that Christ becomes present in this sacrament" (1375). This conversion is brought about by "the faith of the Church in the efficacy of the Word of Christ" and "the action of the Holy Spirit" (1378). The text goes on, "It is Christ himself, the eternal high priest of the New Covenant who, acting through the ministry of the priests, offers the Eucharistic sacrifice. And it is the same Christ, really present under the species of bread and wine, who is the offering of the Eucharistic sacrifice" (1410). Regarding the essence of the bread and wine, the text quotes St. Ambrose: "By the blessing nature itself is changed" (1388). This idea informed Tolkien's conception of

symbolism, though he fervently asserted “There is *no* ‘symbolism’ or conscious allegory in my story.” (*Letters* 203).<sup>12</sup> Tolkien repeatedly expresses his frustration at being asked to “explain” what *The Lord of the Rings* was “really about,” for each element of his story contains within itself the spiritual truth of Christianity. In June 1955, he wrote to the Houghton Mifflin Company of his story of Middle Earth, “It is not ‘about’ anything but itself” (*Letters* 220).

In a letter to Deborah Webster on 25 October 1958, Tolkien writes:

I am a Christian (which can be deduced from my stories), and in fact a Roman Catholic. The latter ‘fact’ perhaps cannot be deduced; though one critic...asserted that the invocations of Elbereth, and the character of Galadriel as directly described...were clearly related to Catholic devotion to Mary. Another saw in waybread (lembas)=viaticum and the reference to its feeding the will (vol. III, p. 213) and being more potent when fasting, a derivation from the Eucharist. **(That is: far greater things may colour the mind in dealing with the lesser things of a fairy-story).** (*Letters* 288, emphasis added)

Despite his earlier assertion that there is no symbolism in his stories, Tolkien acknowledges that he may have unconsciously imbued his fairy story with “greater things” that have formed his own mind.<sup>13</sup> And Tolkien’s mind since boyhood was fundamentally shaped by Catholicism.

Tolkien’s uniquely Catholic sensibility in his work emerges in three commonly acknowledged aspects: the prayers uttered by various characters, the Marian imagery (especially Galadriel), and the Elven *lembas* or waybread, which sustains Frodo and Sam on their journey.

Though much could be said about the role of each in the novels, the *lembas* offers the cleanest

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<sup>12</sup> He continues: “Allegory of the sort ‘five wizards = five senses’ is wholly foreign to my way of thinking. There were five wizards and that is just a unique part of history. To ask if the Orcs ‘are’ Communists is to be as sensible as asking if Communists are Orcs. That there is no allegory does not, of course, say that there is no applicability. There always is... But I should say, if asked, the tale is not really about Power and Dominion: that only sets the wheels going; it is about Death and the desire for deathlessness. Which is hardly more than to say it is a tale written by a Man!” (To Herbert Schiro, 17 November 1957)

<sup>13</sup> Tolkien suggests the same is possible in *The Silmarillion* (37-39). Inspired by Ilúvatar’s creation of Men, the Vala Aulë attempts to create his own version. He fails, creating mere robotic minions of his own mind. Ilúvatar has mercy on Aulë’s creations and gives them life, making them the first generation of dwarves. Like Aulë, Tolkien envisioned himself as a creator; the comparisons suggests that Tolkien’s creations can be read as extensions of his mind.

understanding of Tolkien's sacramental approach to symbolism. As Bradley Birzer points out, the word *lembas* translates to "way-bread" or "life-bread" (Birzer 62). The *lembas* serves two functions: first, it works like any bread would and literally feeds Frodo and Sam on their journey, curbing their hunger and strengthening their bodies. Second, however, the *lembas* "has a virtue without which they would long ago have lain down to die...it fed the will, and it gave strength to endure, and to master sinew and limb beyond the measure of mortal kind" (*The Return of the King* 227). I refrain from saying that the *lembas* has "dual" functions; rather, the *lembas* acts as a single symbol with as "outer" and "inner" pieces of the same function, both of which are necessary for the symbolism to succeed.

To illustrate this concept, I turn to the Catholic Catechism's explanation of the Eucharistic experience. It reads:

What material food produces in our bodily life, Holy Communion wonderfully achieves in our spiritual life. Communion with the flesh of the risen Christ, a flesh 'given life and giving life through the Holy Spirit,' preserves, increases, and renews the life of grace received at Baptism. This growth in Christian life needs the nourishment of Eucharistic Communion, the bread for our pilgrimage until the moment of death, when it will be given to us as viaticum. (1392)

For the Catholic, the Eucharist involves the "outer" symbolism of consuming literal bread and wine as Jesus commanded in The Last Supper; however, it also involves an "inner" symbolism in which the elements are transformed into the body and blood of Christ. The taking of communion, thus, re-enacts the sacrifice of Christ within the individual's body. It is a "real setting forth of the sacrifice of the Cross...made present in a sacramental way in the Mass" (Niesel 108). The Eucharist cleanses, acting as an "antidote against ordinary venial sin" and a "prophylactic against moral sins" (Niesel 101). It is a cleansing process from which the individual goes forth filled with renewed grace (Niesel 100). The outer and inner functions together create the sacrament; without one, the other would not be possible. Unlike twins who function as individuals as well as

a pair, in sacramental symbolism the symbol cannot function without both the inner and outer components. Or, unlike the concept of regeneration which may be symbolized equally effectively by a shoot growing from a stump or a phoenix rising from the ashes, a sacramental symbol depends on both consistency with the world in which it functions and a unique higher plane which it accesses as a result. As Tolkien himself asserted, “the actors are individuals—they each, of course, contain universals, or they would not live at all” (*Letters* 109). Thus, upon reading a manuscript for a film adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien was appalled to discover that *lembas* had been replaced by “food concentrate” (Birzer 62). In Tolkien’s mind, both the outer function of material congruence in Middle Earth and the inner function of spiritually fueling those who eat it, depend on the preservation of the *lembas*’s unique properties. The goodness of the *lembas* dwells in both its “flesh” (outer function) and “soul” (inner function).

In the tradition of Ulster Protestantism, which savors strongly of Scottish Presbyterianism, the Eucharist is a remembrance, not a re-enactment, of Christ’s sacrifice. The bread and wine remain only bread and wine, though they act as “signs of the spiritual reality of the Lord’s Supper, which proclaims the Word to us, and at the same time tokens and pledges which make the spiritual reality ‘as certain for us as if we had seen it with our own eyes’” (Niesel 271). The Anglican tradition is a bit more ambiguous, but leans toward the Reformers in believing in the powerful symbolism, but not the actual presence of Jesus’s body in the elements (Niesel 308). The prayer Lewis would have heard in Church growing up reads: “With Thy Holy and Life-giving Spirit vouchsafe to bless and sanctify both us and these Thy gifts of Bread and wine, that they may be unto us the Body and Blood of Thy Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ” (Niesel 308). By the work of the Spirit, the bread and wine become a blessed metaphor. The

importance of Communion depends only on what the bread and wine represent, not what they actually contain.

This conception of symbolism plays out in Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia*, a cornucopia of mythologies, characters, and objects cobbled together to suit Lewis's authorial purpose. Lewis hoped to demonstrate how the concept of Joy appears in many cultures and mythologies, showing how even a Calormene soldier can be saved when his heart is drawn to the Truth he experiences through Joy. "In Lewis's Protestant Christian imagination," writes Richard Purtill, "there is no human or quasi-human mediator between God and man" (Purtill 118). The common accessibility of God was anathema to Tolkien; none could be saved but through Christ. Tolkien's use of symbolism thus tended toward the sacramental, rather than the allegorical, obsessing over the internal consistency which Lewis readily eschewed. Though some readers (including Tolkien's publishers) bemoan his meticulousness, others like Grant believe that "the great pains taken with the historical background to Middle-earth...save the book from becoming allegory, or a thin fantasy of 'interior space,'" (Grant 366). Through his Eucharistic approach to symbolism, Grant argues, Tolkien "addressed the key problems of the Christian epic in modern times: the possibilities of sacramentalism, and the relation of the archetypes of inner vision to Christian ordinances and heroic themes" (Grant 366). "The imagined beings have their insides on the outside; they are visible souls" (Tolkien qtd. Sammons 143).

Indeed, the sacramental symbol of the *lembas* as a symbol exhibits both material congruence and spiritual depth. The history of *lembas* unfolds in *The Silmarillion*. We learn that it is "the waybread of the Elves" and "the threads that bound it were sealed at the knots with the seal of the Queen...for according to the customs of the Eldalië the keeping and giving of *lembas* belonged to the Queen alone" (202). Thus we discover that this is no ordinary sustenance, but

something with enough power as to only be given by the Queen herself. The Queen of Elves acts as a mediator just as a priest would, bestowing the bread on those who are fit to receive it.

Tolkien grafts his love for the Eucharist onto the *lembas*, writing, “In nothing did Melian show greater favour to Túrin than in this gift; for the Eldar had never before allowed Men to use this waybread, and seldom did so again” (202). Túrin gives the bread to his sick or wounded men, and “they were quickly healed...for [the Grey-elves] had a wisdom beyond the reach of Men” (205). In *The Two Towers*, when the Lady of Lórien offer *lembas* to the Fellowship, they find it strengthens them in the same way. At one point, the two hobbits Merry and Pippin are captured and bound by orcs. They manage to escape, but even before they undo all their bonds, Pippin whispers to Merry, “You’d better have a bit of *lembas* first” (447). As the exhausted hobbits chew the waybread, “the taste brought back to them the memory of fair faces, and laughter, and wholesome food in quiet days now far away. For a while they ate thoughtfully, sitting in the dark, heedless of the cries and sounds of battle nearby” (447). Merry reflects, “*Lembas* does put heart into you! A more wholesome sort of feeling, too, than the heat of that orc-draught” (448).

In *The Return of the King*, we learn more about the nature of *lembas* and its power to repel evil. The orcs who ransack Sam and Frodo’s camp apparently “disliked the very look and smell of the *lembas*, worse than Gollum did” (893) and left it behind. In the final stages of their journey, “though weary and under a shadow of fear, [Sam] still had some strength left. In the passage quoted above, the narrator relates that, while “*lembas* did not satisfy desire, and at times Sam’s mind was filled with the memories of food, and the longing for simple bread and meats...yet this waybread of the Elves had a potency that increased as travelers relied on it alone and did not mingle it with other foods. It fed the will, and it gave strength to endure” (915). This detail deepens the Eucharistic associations, emphasizing the potency of the sacrament on its own.

It also demonstrates the centrality of the sacrament to the survival of everyday life. The Papal Bull *Exultate Deo* of 1439 exults, “Every effect that natural food and drink have on the physical life, maintaining, increasing, renewing and rejoicing it, this sacrament has on the spiritual life” (Niesel 100). Rather than emphasizing the power of the food to enchant or magically fulfill all hobbit needs, Tolkien’s *lembas* gives them enough physical and spiritual sustenance to survive.

### **b. A Broader Background**

Tolkien’s Eucharistic symbolism also critically informs his understanding of time and space. In Narnia, Lewis creates a parallel world that exists alongside the Pevensies’ world—which, importantly, is also the reader’s world. “The other world often represents the real but invisible spiritual world that a character must learn exists even when he is not present or to which he will return after death” (Sammons 127). Nothing in Narnia “is” anything in our world, because they exist simultaneously. The two worlds share lore of each other; humans of our world enter Narnia at various points in history, and vice versa (Lindskoog 37). By contrast, no one in Middle Earth has heard of Earth as we know it. Indeed, the very title suggests that Middle Earth might be some kind of precursor to the Earth we know today, and Tolkien confirmed in a letter to Houghton Mifflin in June 1955, “Imaginatively this ‘history’ is supposed to take place in a period of the actual Old World of this planet” (*Letters* 165). Tolkien himself intended this. In writing the series, he hoped to create a mythology for England. He had originally intended to frame *The Silmarillion* with a character in modern day England stumbling upon a trove of books containing the tales (Drout 217). The continuity of time and place in Tolkien reflects a deeply Catholic understanding of life.

In a letter to Amy Ronald, 15 December 1956, Tolkien writes: “I am a Christian, and indeed a Roman Catholic, so that I do not expect ‘history’ to be anything but a ‘long defeat’ –

though it contains (and in a legend may contain more clearly and movingly) some samples or glimpses of final victory” (*Letters* 288). For a Catholic living in England, some degree of suffering and persecution were inevitable. Tolkien believed, as he beautifully expresses in his short story “Leaf by Niggle,” that attentiveness to the present reality proves more rewarding than dwelling on imagined possibilities. Critic John Davenport calls this a “Norse-like resignation to the fact that we cannot overcome [evil] by our own power” (Davenport 210); indeed, it is Norse-like, and it is also Catholic-like.

The story of the Catholic Church is more continuous than that of the Protestant, and contains far more ritual practice to guide daily life, intertwining history with theological belief. For Protestants, the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross was a one-time event which is remembered in Communion, while for Catholics the sacrifice of Christ is re-enacted every time the Mass is carried out. In the “Credo of the People of God,” Pope Paul VI writes:

We believe that the Mass, celebrated by the priest representing the person of Christ by virtue of the power received through the Sacrament of Orders, and offered by him in the name of Christ and the members of His Mystical Body, is the sacrifice of Calvary rendered sacramentally present on our altars. (Paul)

Tolkien expressed his own understanding of this concept thus: “Though always Itself, perfect and complete and inviolate, the Blessed Sacrament does not operate completely and once for all in any of us. Like the act of Faith it must be continuous and grow by exercise” (To Michael Tolkien 1 November 1963, *Letters* 250). Thus, the continuity of time and singularity of creation takes central importance. While in Narnia we see heavenly resolution for imperfect characters, in middle Earth the gulf between the “already” and the “not yet” remains wide. Tolkien writes, “Men may sail now West...as far as they may, and come no nearer to Valinor or the Blessed Realm, but return only into the east and so back again; for the world is round, and finite, and a



circle inescapable—save by death” (*Letters* 131). The lack of resolution emphasizes the ongoing nature of the sacrifice and need for a temporal as well as eternal perspective.

Tolkien’s story is full of unanswered enigmas. References like Gandalf’s to the “Secret Fire” (*Fellowship* 322) are never explicated, and characters like Tom Bombadil pass through the pages without satisfactory explanation. Tom is a highly symbolical character, speaking in riddles and wearing specifically delineated colors, but what exactly he symbolizes is never revealed. When Frodo asks Goldberry who Tom Bombadil asks, she replies simply and frustratingly, “He is...He is, as you have seen him” (124). In *The Fellowship of the Ring*, after the hobbits meet Tom Bombadil in the forest, he says:

‘Few now remember them,’ Tom murmured, ‘yet still some go wandering, sons of forgotten kings walking in loneliness, guarding from evil things folk that are heedless.’ The hobbits did not understand his words, but as he spoke they had a vision as it were of a great expanse of years behind them, like a vast shadowy plain over which there strode shapes of Men, tall and grim with bright swords, and last came on with a star on his brow. Then the vision faded, and they were back in the sunlit world. (142)

Tom Bombadil reflects Tolkien’s understanding the unity of outer and inner function. Though he serves an apparent outer function of caring for his part of the forest, he contains a greater story within himself to which neither the hobbits nor the reader is privy. His inner function remains a mystery, though united in purpose with his outer function. He provides a glimpse of the larger story in which *The Lord of the Rings* is set, which, like “seeing the towers of a distant city gleaming in a sunlit mist. To go there is to destroy the magic, unless new unattainable vistas are again revealed” (*Letters* 333).

This concept plays out in Lewis and Tolkien's differing conceptions of time. For Lewis, enchantment meant seeing beyond our own world; for Tolkien it meant "seeing things as we are (or were) meant to see them" ("On Fairy-Stories" 113). In Tolkien's view, to be enchanted does not mean to leave the world, but to be in it differently, to view it in a new way, to discover it again—or, rather, for the first time (Sandner 180). With his novels, Tolkien added to the fabric of our history, rather than simply re-telling an already familiar story; he suggests that our past informs how we think of our present, and can equip us to face the future (Smith 96). The oft-quoted exchange between Frodo and Sam summarizes this:

"I wish it need not have happened in my time," said Frodo.

"So do I," said Gandalf, "and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us." (*Fellowship* 50)

### c. Fallible Created, Providential Creator

Tolkien's conviction that creatures cannot defeat evil on their own apparently contradicts the fact that the quest succeeds. The ring is destroyed; peace is restored. How does that come about, if not through Frodo's action? Indeed, many who know *The Lord of the Rings* from popular culture but have not actually read the books (or seen the movies) assume that Frodo succeeds in his mission to destroy the ring. This is a crucial error which undoes Tolkien's fundamental message. Tolkien's Eucharistic perspective drives his plot to climax in the moment when Frodo decides to keep the ring for himself, crying "I will not do this deed. The Ring is mine!" (*Return* 924). In this wretched moment of arrogant disobedience,<sup>14</sup> Gollum returns. He

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<sup>14</sup> Sean Austin, the actor who plays Sam Gamgee, expresses the numb hopelessness combined with disbelief which the reader or viewer feels at this moment. I have never seen a better rendering of this emotion than his facial expression at 1:47. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ac9a3FhPvyA>, 1:30-50.

bites Frodo's ring finger off, loses his balance, and falls into the fire of Mordor clutching his Precious. This is the central Eucatastrophe, the moment at which all seems lost, but instead the story takes a "sudden joyous 'turn'...a sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur" ("On Fairy-Stories"). Because of the Eucatastrophe, the quest succeeds; Frodo, however, fails. Though the Eucharist acts as an "antidote against ordinary venial sin" and a "prophylactic against moral sins" (Niesel 101), it does not replace the role of penance to atone for mortal sins. Frodo certainly undertakes his penance: in losing a finger in the fiery innards of Mount Doom, he is ultimately saved. In this, Tolkien makes clear that the power to control fate and defeat evil lies outside of human action.

According to the Catholic Catechism, in the Eucharist "the sacrifice of Christ becomes also the sacrifice of the members of his Body...their praise, sufferings, prayer, and work, are united with those of Christ and with his total offering, and so acquire a new value" (1378). Frodo, fed on a steady diet of *lembas*, has united his suffering with those of Christ, offering all of himself to his mission. The Catholic Catechism reads, "As bodily nourishment restores lost strength, so the Eucharist strengthens our charity, which tends to be weakened in daily life; and this living charity wipes away venial sins" (1394). The Eucharist makes present the sacrifice of Christ in those who partake of it. Thus, the Eucharist is a fundamental part of cleansing sin and inspiring the same sacrifice for others and for Christ that He made for humans (Niesel 107).

Based on this, Tolkien's idea of heroism lies not in living perfectly but in living obediently. Indeed, Tolkien suggests that the quest ultimately succeeds because Frodo shows mercy to Gollum. In the midst of the hobbits' journey, the machinating Gollum attacks in an attempt to seize the ring. Frodo, with his sword pressed against Gollum's throat, suddenly recalls a conversation he had with Gandalf:

*What a pity Bilbo did not stab the vile creature, when he had a chance!  
Pity? It was Pity that stayed his hand. Pity, and Mercy: not to strike without  
need.*

*I do not feel any pity for Gollum. He deserves death.*

*Deserves death! I daresay he does. Many that live deserve death. And some die  
that deserve life. Can you give that to them? Then be not too eager to deal out  
death in the name of justice, fearing for your own safety. Even the wise cannot see  
all ends. (Two Towers 601).*

Frodo is moved to pity because, as Roger Sale points out, Frodo knows personally what the Ring does to its wearers. Because of their shared suffering, Frodo feels “kinship with Gollum” and understands “the weight of the Ring and its power to corrupt” (Sale 51). Frodo empathizes with Gollum, seeing in him the creature he might well become (Sale 51). By sparing Gollum, Frodo spares himself. In a letter to Naomi Mitchison in 1954, Tolkien confirms, “It is the Pity of Bilbo and later Frodo that ultimately allows the Quest to be achieved” (*Letters* 144). In the end, Frodo is restored to himself not by any effort on his part, but as a reward for the pity he shows Gollum and the charity Sam shows him.

Many readers have called Sam the real hero of the story, given that Sam’s loyalty to Frodo in his various moments of need seem to ensure the success of the mission. And indeed, Sam has great inner strength, akin to that of the common soldiers in the trenches of WWI whom Tolkien called so superior to himself. Yet Sam fails in perhaps the most devastating passage of the book. In the light of Frodo’s charity to him, Gollum begins to remember his old identity. He begins to break loose of the Ring’s hold and become Sméagol again.

*The gleam faded from his eyes, and they went dim and grey, old and  
tired...slowly putting out a trembling hand, very cautiously he touched Frodo’s  
knee—but almost the touch was a caress. For a fleeting moment, could one of the  
sleepers have seen him, they would have thought that they beheld an old weary  
hobbit, shrunken by the years that had carried him far beyond his time, beyond  
friends and kin, and the fields and streams of you, an old starved pitiable thing.  
(Two Towers 699)*

At that moment, however, Sam wakes up and, seeing Gollum so close to Frodo, accuses him of “sneaking off and sneaking back, you old villain” (699). Hardened by Sam’s harsh response, “a green glint flickered under [Gollum’s] heavy lids” (699). Though Sam offers an apology, Gollum has made the decision to lead them into the spider’s lair, “and the green glint did not leave his eyes” (699). Had Sam treated Gollum with kindness in that moment, perhaps Sméagol might have won out over the corrupt Gollum. Tolkien said himself to be “most grieved by Gollum’s failure (just) to repent when interrupted by Sam: this seems to me really like the *real* world in which the instruments of just retribution are seldom themselves just or holy; and the good are often stumbling blocks” (*Letters* 165 to Houghton Mifflin June 1955).

One commentator suggests that, “Without the violent grafting on of a spiritual meaning through their essays...Tolkien offers a bleak portrait of humanity (or hobbitry) as undeserving of grace” (Sandner 176). Indeed, Tolkien does offer a bleak portrait; but in that bleakness Tolkien offers hope, for despite hobbit shortcomings, the quest succeeds. For Tolkien, the very nature of grace is that it is undeserved. Neither Frodo, Sam, nor Gollum can be called the hero of the story; yet the quest succeeds. The hero is the force beyond the vision of the characters in the novel, who directs and guides and works all things together for good. As Elrond says in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, “This quest may be attempted by the weak with as much hope as the strong. Yet it is oft the course of deeds that move the wheels of the world: Small hands do them because they must, while the eyes of the great are elsewhere” (262). For Tolkien, the hero of the story is God alone. As Thomas Smith writes, Tolkien’s use of tradition “has a kind of fecundity that makes it alive by helping us to become reconciled to our own contingent, vulnerable, needy humanity. In the end, the trajectory of this train of thought leads to theology” (Smith 94). It is by God’s grace,

and human emulation of God's grace through the taking of the Eucharist, that humans are allowed to take part in the story.

On this point Lewis and Tolkien agree. One of the most poignant scenes in the Narnia series is one in *Prince Caspian* when Reepicheep the High Mouse has his tail cut off in battle. When he regains consciousness, he is humiliated, and asks Aslan to restore his tail and his dignity with it. When Aslan demurs, all the other mice knights, led by Peepiceek, draw their swords to cut off their own tails, refusing "the shame of wearing an honor which is denied to the High Mouse" (*Chronicles* 413). Aslan groans, saying, "Ah...you have conquered me. You have great hearts. Not for the sake of your dignity, Reepicheep, but for the love that is between you and your people, and still more for the kindness your people showed me long ago when you ate away the cords that bound me on the Stone Table...you shall have your tail again" (413). Blessings come not to boost individual egos, but in response to a heart which longs to emulate Christ in showing love to each other and serving Him.

## **V. Conclusion**

An early commitment to Catholicism ultimately shaped Tolkien's philosophies of life and of storytelling. Tolkien viewed his role on Earth to be a sub-creator, to "assist in the effoliation and multiple enrichment of creation" ("On Fairy-Stories"). Through his experience of the Eucharist, Tolkien learned to view creation through a sacramental lens, valuing things and people for their external, operational use and their internal, spiritual depth—to him, inseparable. Tolkien imbued his stories with moments of Eucatastrophe, when God demonstrates his divine abundance and shows mercy to struggling, finite humans (Smith 75). In this way, Tolkien invites his readers to wonder at the world around them, rather than seeking to dominate it, as he witnessed in both World Wars. He encourages readers to perceive the redemption in the midst of fallenness and to

embrace their role in the larger story through their own submission to the work of Christ. We may hear an echo of Tolkien's own feelings when Gimli states, "For my part...I wish that with our victory the war was now over. Yet whatever is still to do, I hope to have a part in it" (878).

## CONCLUSION

“All tales may come true”

—*J.R.R. Tolkien, “On Fairy-Stories”*

C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien re-introduced the world to fantasy, jumpstarting massive book and film industries and touching millions of readers (Shippey xvii). Their stories struck a chord with a people longing to hope in the aftermath of World War II, and have since provided both safe haven and conviction for readers all over the world. Though this essay has emphasized their differences, Lewis and Tolkien shared a love for fairy story and a belief that good would win out in the end. They believed in Fantasy as a human right: “we make...because we are made: and not only made, but made in the image and likeness of a Maker” (“On Fairy-Stories” 39). And yet, though this result was by no means inevitable, their theological differences proved powerful enough to diverge their literary approaches and damage their friendship. In a forward to the Ballantine edition of *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien writes:

An author cannot of course remain wholly unaffected by his experience, but the ways in which a story-germ uses the soil of experience are extremely complex, and attempts to define the process are at best guesses from evidence that is inadequate and ambiguous. (qtd. Carter 85)

This, then, is my best guess (from what inadequate and ambiguous evidence I have gathered), as to how the story-germs of *The Chronicles of Narnia* and *The Lord of the Rings* grew in the soil of Lewis’s and Tolkien’s experiences.

Lewis’s Narnia, shaped by Protestantism and Platonism, employs supposition and occasional allegorical elements to grab the reader’s attention and then point her eyes outward and upward. Lewis writes, “The books or the music in which we thought the beauty was located will betray us if we trust to them; it was not *in* them, it only came *through* them, and what came through them was longing” (Lewis, qtd. Manlove 218). This longing, which Lewis called Joy,



tugs at the reader's heart, calling her to pay attention to the memory of her distant past. To Lewis, nothing in our fallen world can contain the goodness of the beyond; stories do it best, and yet they "are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never yet visited" (Lewis, qtd. Manlove 218). The symbols in Lewis's fiction are there to remind the reader of something else; their primary purpose is spiritual. Having discovered Christianity, Lewis named the object of his longing and found his life's calling: "I must keep alive in myself the desire for my true country, which I shall not find till after death...and help others do the same" (*Mere Christianity* 120). Lewis created literature to capture the essence of Christianity through the experience of Joy, slipping truth past the often-watchful guards of skepticism and materialism into the reader's heart.

By contrast, Tolkien approached the creation of Middle-earth from a Catholic medieval perspective. He understood suffering on both a personal and cultural level, and his works reflect a serious focus on the human experience. Further, Tolkien took his role as sub-creator very seriously. Tolkien thought the reader needed to believe in the reality of the secondary world in order for the story to succeed; the moment the reader realizes she is reading a story, the magic is lost. Thus, Tolkien cautions against hurried creation through Legolas: "Do not spoil the wonder with haste!" (*Return of the King* 758). Tolkien crafted the world of Middle-earth assiduously, uniting the inner and outer functions of objects in a sacramental fashion. For Tolkien, the Eucharist embodied "that complexion of reality, of eternal endurance, which every man's heart desires" (*Letters* 54), and that concept informed his approach to symbolism and structure in his fiction. Though Tolkien's tale restrains the reader's vision to Middle-earth, it is "at bottom a hopeful tale. The whole venture always looks desperate...yet those who fight hope on and keep acting upon their hope" (Kocher 25). For Tolkien, all his hope was in the incarnation of Christ,

the perfect fusion of myth and history, of which he had the privilege to partake in the sacrament of the Eucharist.

These two differing approaches, rooted in theology and scholarly emphasis, drive toward similar ends: the glorification of the Creator, the One whom all true sub-creators reflect. Though they disagreed on the best way to achieve that purpose, both relentlessly pursued their God-given callings. Speaking to Walter Hooper, Pope John Paul commented, “C.S. Lewis *knew* what his apostolate was...and he *did* it!” (qtd. Pearce 194). The same could be said about Tolkien. Both authors believed that they had been gifted the seeds of their magical worlds and it was their task as servants of God to grow them to fruition.

In Lewis’s *The Silver Chair*, a Narnian named Puddleglum and two humans from our world are captured by a witch and imprisoned in her underground realm. The witch begins to cast a spell to convince them that they have only imagined the world above. It almost works, but at the last moment, Puddleglum stamps out her magic fire and says:

Suppose we have only dreamed, or made up, all those things – trees and grass and sun and moon and stars and Aslan himself. Suppose we have. Then all I can say is that, in that case, the made-up things seem a good deal more important than the real ones... We’re just babies making up a game, if you’re right. But four babies playing a game can make a play-world which licks your real world hollow. That’s why I’m going to stand by the play world. I’m on Aslan’s side even if there isn’t any Aslan to lead it. (*Chronicles* 633)

This, in Lewis’s view—and I think Tolkien would agree—is the power of story: to identify truth in the midst of lies, to preserve beauty in the midst of war, and to offer hope for a better world to come. Narnia and Middle-earth provide the keys for readers to escape the cells which prevent their escape not *out* of the real world, but *into* it. Lewis and Tolkien may have been two babies making up a game, but they created worlds in which life had purpose, beauty was real, and redemption was possible; and that is a story worth believing.

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*“He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.”*  
*1 Thessalonians 5:24*

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