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# The Hidden Meaning of *The Lord of the Rings*

The Theological Vision in Tolkien's Fiction

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Joseph Pearce

LECTURE GUIDE

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## The Hidden Meaning of *The Lord of the Rings*

The Theological Vision in Tolkien's Fiction

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#### BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Joseph Pearce is English-born Writer in Residence and Associate Professor of Literature at Ave Maria University in Ave Maria, Florida. In 2011, Professor Pearce was awarded an honorary doctorate of higher education from Thomas More College in New Hampshire. He is also the recipient of the prestigious Pollock Award for Christian Biography.



Professor Pearce has written over fifteen books, including *Tolkien: Man and Myth, a Literary Life* (HarperCollins, 1998) and *The Quest for Shakespeare* (Ignatius Press, 2008). He is the editor of *Tolkien: A Celebration, Collected Writings on a Literary Legacy* (HarperCollins, 1999).

An accomplished speaker, Professor Pearce lectures regularly at a wide variety of literary events at major colleges and universities in the U.S., Canada, Britain, Europe, Africa, and South America.

In addition to several major newspapers, Professor Pearce's articles have been published by *Lay Witness*, *National Review*, *Distributist Review*, and the *National Catholic Register*. He is a co-editor of the *St. Austin Review*, an international journal of Christian culture, literature, and ideas; editor-in-chief of Ignatius Press' *Critical Editions*; and editor-in-chief of Sapientia Press.



### Introducing J.R.R. Tolkien: The Man behind the Myth



*The personhood and beliefs of the author are crucial to understanding his works.*

John Ronald Reuel Tolkien, the author of *The Lord of the Rings*, was a devout Catholic writer of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His life and beliefs inform his work, *The Lord of the Rings*, which Tolkien described as “a fundamentally religious and Catholic work.” It is arguably the greatest literary work of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, deserving of a place in the canon of literature of Western Civilization, an opinion proved by several British opinion polls in 1997. According to both book-seller Waterstone’s poll and a later poll by the Folio Society, *The Lord of the Rings* is considered by most people to be not only the greatest work of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but indeed, of all time.

Our task is to engage with the deepest meaning of the work to discover its greatness. In order to appreciate any author’s writings, you must accept that his philosophy, theology, and the historical context of his life are crucial dimensions which inform the meaning of his work. To discover the real meaning of *The Lord of the Rings*, we must look at the work through the eyes of its author, Tolkien, and try to understand why he insists that it is fundamentally Catholic.

J.R.R. Tolkien was born in Bloemfontein, South Africa, on January 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1892. Arthur, his father, died when Tolkien was three years old, leaving the family in poverty. Mabel Tolkien, his mother, returned to England and became

dependent on her relatives for financial sustenance. In June of 1900, when Tolkien was eight years old, Mabel became a Catholic. Her conversion outraged her anti-Catholic family, who cut off much of their financial support, throwing Mabel and her sons from poverty into destitution.

Mabel died in November 1904, when Tolkien was twelve years old. Tolkien believed his mother was a martyr for the Catholic Faith, driven to an early grave because of her conversion. He said that she was “worn out with persecution, poverty, and largely consequent disease, in the effort to hand on to us small boys the Faith.” Nine years after her death, he wrote the following: “My own dear mother was a martyr indeed. And it was not to everybody that God grants so easy a way to his great gifts, as he did to Hilary and myself, giving us a mother who killed herself with labor and trouble, to ensure us keeping the faith.” A lifelong Catholic, Tolkien saw his mother’s spirit of self-sacrifice as a means of giving him strength and sustenance in the Faith.

Following Mabel’s death, her friend, Father Francis Morgan of the Birmingham Oratory, became the



## Tolkien on the Eucharist

*“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, honor, 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.”*

guardian to both J.R.R. Tolkien and his brother, Hilary. Tolkien said that he was “a guardian who had been a father to me more than most real fathers.” With Father Morgan’s support, Tolkien went on to Oxford and received a first class honors degree in 1915.

In 1916, he married his childhood sweetheart, Edith Bratt, and within weeks of their marriage, was deployed to what he called “the animal horror of the Somme.” The Battle of the Somme was one of the bloodiest and most gruesome battles in the whole of human history. Tens of thousands of people lost their lives in a matter of hours. When Tolkien went to war, his wife was pregnant with their first son, John, who later became a Jesuit priest. Between the end of the First World War and 1929, they had three other children: Michael, Christopher, and Priscilla.

After the war, Tolkien took up his academic career as a philologist and became an expert in Old English and other languages. He translated *Beowulf*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and *Pearl*—all medieval classics—from Old English and Middle English. His essay on *Beowulf*, called “The Monsters and the Critics,” is still regarded as the definitive work on that classic Anglo-Saxon poem.

Tolkien described what he considered the significant factors of the relationship between the author and his work in a letter about the hierarchy of creative value. For Tolkien, one of the more significant factors in his own writings was his academic vocation as a philologist and linguist. Also important, at least to the creation of *The Lord of the Rings*, was his childhood in a rustic village—the inspiration for the Shire—and in the slums of a modern city which we can find represented by the industrialism of Isengard and Mordor.

According to Tolkien, “that I am a Christian, which can be deduced from my stories, and, in fact, a Roman Catholic,” is the most significant factor connecting him to his stories. Tolkien’s work is informed by a Christian realist philosophy and Thomistic theology. His world view includes the meaning of evil and of virtue, the necessity of self-sacrifice—these are the aspects of his philosophy and theology which we identify when Tolkien says that *The Lord of the Rings* is both fundamentally religious and Catholic.

# Introducing J.R.R. Tolkien: The Man behind the Myth

## *Discussion Questions*

1. What are some parallels between Tolkien's life and places, scenes, or events written into *The Lord of the Rings*? How much does his life experience influence his work?
2. In what sense could *The Lord of the Rings* be autobiographical? Do you think Tolkien thought he had written himself into the story?
3. How is Tolkien's Catholicism the most significant factor connecting him to his stories?

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### True Myth: Tolkien, C.S. Lewis & the Truth of Fiction



*Tolkien's friendship with C.S. Lewis helped him to express his "philosophy of myth."*

J.R.R. Tolkien first met C.S. Lewis in 1926. Now, friendship between these two men might have seemed quite unlikely. Tolkien was a practicing Catholic and very committed to his faith. Lewis was born to Protestant parents in Belfast, Northern Ireland, where to be a Protestant or a Catholic was far more tribal than religious. In spite of Lewis's background as an Ulster Protestant and residual life-long anti-Catholicism, Lewis and Tolkien shared a particular love for Norse and Germanic mythologies. In 1928, J.R.R. Tolkien formed a club called the *Kolbitar* with the specific purpose of reading the *Elder Edda*, an ancient Icelandic saga.

Lewis asked to join even though he wasn't an expert in Old Norse, and he regularly attended all the club's meetings until the group finished its reading and disbanded. Lewis so greatly enjoyed the fellowship of these adventurous and rigorous intellectuals that he formed the Inklings, the most important and influential literary group of the whole of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Ultimately, Tolkien's and Lewis's abiding friendship came about through these group meetings and because of their shared love for mythology. Indeed, this relationship with Lewis helped Tolkien articulate his philosophy about creativity and writing.

On September 19, 1931, Tolkien and Lewis were having one in a series of discussions—this one in particular C.S. Lewis later referred to

as the “long night talk.” Their topic of conversation was the nature of mythology and the nature of creativity. C.S. Lewis said to Tolkien: “Myths are lies, and therefore worthless, even though breathed through silver.” He meant that myths aren’t historically factual and so aren’t true, no matter how beautifully they might be told. Tolkien immediately responded: “No, myths are not lies.” He then went on to elaborate his philosophy of myth. We can reconstruct the essence of the ensuing conversation from Tolkien’s letters, short stories, and anecdotes told about him in biographies.

Tolkien said that we know God is the Creator. He’s a literal poet—from the Greek *poesis*, meaning “to make.” Therefore, the image of God in man is creativity, our imaginations. Because our imaginations are a share in God’s, they must ultimately point towards truth. According to Tolkien, instead of seeing myths or stories as lies, even those that are pagan, we should see them as containing splintered fragments of the one true light that comes from God.

From Tolkien’s perspective as a Christian, creativity is the incarnation of the relationship between the imaginative gift from God and the



## Four Levels of Interpretation

The most complex method of literary interpretation is Saint Thomas Aquinas’ fourfold exegesis of the Bible. Aquinas teaches us to read scripture on four levels: the literal, the allegorical, the moral, and the anagogical. The literal is also called the historical—what actually happens in the story. The allegorical meaning, at least in Scripture, is usually the connection between the Old and New Testaments. The moral level is how the story or the message affects our daily lives, while the anagogical level is how it affects our eternal destinies.



personhood of the poet. Whatever a person's gift—be it art, writing, science, any natural ability or talent—it is given by God from conception. These gifts work with inspiration, with the gift of grace, to produce works of art. This process is the same regardless of good or bad art. The differential in producing bad art is the person, not a deficiency in the gift. Sin obstructs the operation of grace through an artist's talent. Artists who are given talent and inspiration can abuse both because God gives us the freedom to use or abuse his gift of creativity.

Tolkien's philosophy of myth directly affects how we can interpret *The Lord of the Rings*. He believed that his job was to act simply as a guiding channel for the grace that poured in through his creative gift, allowing the story to flow forth unobstructed. Tolkien disliked formal allegory—the personification of theme or topic—because he thought that in order to tell a good story, the artist cannot insert too much of his own personality. The writer of a formal allegory intentionally works to convey a specific message and all too often leaves no room for grace and his imagination to operate freely. The author dictates how his reader can interpret the work. The more

the artist inserts himself, the more his creative gift is stifled, and the story suffers as a result.

We're not meant to read *The Lord of the Rings* in terms of formal allegory because there are no personified abstractions in *The Lord of the Rings*. But, we can find figures of Christ or of everyman in an allegorical dimension of the work which gives us the whole salvation history of humanity and the centrality of Christianity without ever mentioning the Church. This sort of allegorical significance is best described by the word "applicability." No one in Tolkien's story is ever a personification of Truth or Justice or Philosophy, but certain characters, certain characteristics, and certain moments in the story are points of applicability which have significance to the real world. Like Christ's imaginative parables which illustrate truth by using allegorical leaps, so *The Lord of the Rings* illustrates truths which are applicable to all of us. Frodo, Sam, Gandalf, Aragorn, and the Ring all have an applicable dimension which points to the fact that *The Lord of the Rings* is "a fundamentally religious and Catholic work."

# Discussion Questions

1. Do you agree with C.S. Lewis or with Tolkien about whether or not “myths are lies?”
2. How can Tolkien claim that all art contains shards of truth when so much that is called “art” is ugly, distorted, or carries an evil message?
3. Why did Tolkien distinguish between creation and sub-creation? What does this say about the relationship between the Creator, creation, and human creativity?

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# The Use of Language in *The Lord of the Rings*

J.R.R. Tolkien's academic career is inseparable from his love for language expressed by his ongoing studies in philology—from the Greek words *philo*, meaning “love,” and *logos*, “word.” Tolkien was a master of languages, a polyglot—another word from Greek meaning “many tongued.”

He learned Latin, French, and German from his mother, Mabel Tolkien. At school, he learned Old and Middle English, Finnish, Gothic, Greek, Italian, Old Norse, Medieval and Modern Welsh, and Spanish. His understanding of Danish, Dutch, Lombardic, Icelandic, Russian, Norwegian, Swedish, and Lithuanian reveals his deep knowledge of and love for Germanic languages.

With such a keen interest in the many expressions of human language, it's no wonder Tolkien considered his “secret vice” to be the creation of new and invented languages. Among the languages he created for *The Lord of the Rings* are at least fifteen Elvish languages and dialects, including *Quenya* and *Sindarin*. He also invented the Dwarvish language *Khuzdul* and the evil “Black Speech” used by Sauron. In order to write his languages, Tolkien also invented a variety of scripts and alphabets.

Even though Tolkien's languages were invented, they were influenced and inspired by a variety of real languages. Thus we can find similar roots in *mortis*—Latin for “death”—and Mordor—the land of death surrounding Mount Doom. Tolkien adapts the root, *mor*, with its connection to death, to mean “black.” Morgoth's name means



“black foe of the world,” reflecting his enmity with Ilúvatar and all creation. Sauron and Saruman share a Greek root *saur*—“lizard”—which connects their names etymologically to both serpents and dragons.

Tolkien also appreciated the power of names to describe—many of his characters have several names, each expressing a different facet of personality, history, or destiny. For example, Aragorn is called “Strider” by the hobbits because he is a wandering ranger when they meet him, but the Elves call him “Estel”—“hope”—signaling his return as the king who will reunite mankind.

In other instances, important characters are given honorific titles. Tolkien wrote in a letter that he put all his love for the Blessed Virgin Mary into his characterization of Galadriel, the elf queen of Lothlorien. Like the Blessed Mother, Galadriel has a litany of titles; she is called the White Lady, Lady of Lórien, Lady of the Galadhrim, Lady of the Wood, Lady of Light, and Queen of the Stars. Tolkien draws on the beauty of the prayers of the Faith to indicate Galadriel’s sanctity and power.

Interestingly, Tolkien’s style of writing evolved and changed based on his subject material. *The Hobbit* is informal, jovial, and includes commentary by the narrator on the events and reactions of the characters. *The Hobbit* is an adventure story about a humble creature who lives in a cozy hole in the ground. *The Lord of the Rings*, however, is written in a more formal style and includes many poetic songs and acclamations by certain characters as they embark on a serious and burdensome quest to rescue the world from evil. *The Silmarillion*, in further contrast, is written in highly-stylized prose suitable for the majesty and grandeur of an account of creation and the noble history of the first created beings of Middle-earth. When Tolkien’s language adopts a regal tone, the reader should stop to consider what deeper truths might be conveyed through the narrative.



### The Meaning of the Ring: “To Rule Them All, and in the Darkness Bind Them”



*The One Ring is a symbol of Original Sin which seeks to rule and bind all in darkness.*

*The Lord of the Rings* is the only completed part of a huge, unfinished canvas of stories about Middle-earth. Among Tolkien's other works is Middle-earth's creation myth, which states: "In the beginning was the one, Ilúvatar, the All-Father," clearly echoing Genesis. Ilúvatar asks the Ainur, the first-created beings who are like angels, to join him in the Great Music of creation. To use the analogy, we as Catholics can use our talents in harmony with God's creation, or we can play discordantly, attempting to ruin it.

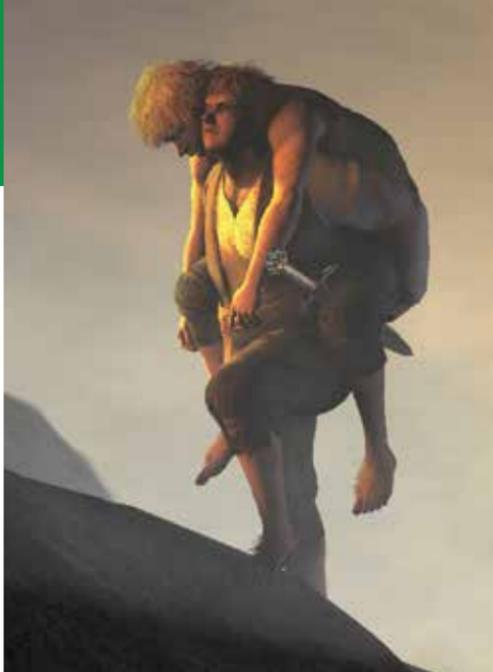
Mirroring Christian tradition, Melkor, the mightiest of the Ainur, decides he doesn't want to play in tune. Consequently, disharmony enters the cosmos. In completely orthodox theology, Ilúvatar says that no matter what discordant theme Melkor might introduce to the Great Music, he will always incorporate it into a greater and more beautiful strain beyond Melkor's imagining. Comparatively, there's no evil that Satan can bring into the cosmos which God will not turn into a good beyond his imagining. Ilúvatar's complete mastery of all creation sets up the providence at work in *The Lord of the Rings*.

Following Melkor's rebellion, there is a war in Middle-earth's heaven and he is cast into the void. Tolkien is using Biblical language to elicit the comparison between Lucifer and Melkor. Lucifer's name means "bright one" because he was the brightest of all the angels, and Melkor's

name means “mighty one” as he is mightiest of all the Ainur. Lucifer is called by another name after he falls because of pride into Hell, and Tolkien uses the same linguistic technique to inform his reader of the parallel. When Melkor falls, he forfeits his name “mighty one” and is called Morgoth or “enemy,” which is also the meaning of Satan’s name.

This discussion of Melkor-become-Morgoth is pertinent to *The Lord of the Rings* because Sauron is described as the greatest of Melkor’s servants. Tolkien continually employs his linguistic training to illustrate the nature of the evil characters in *The Lord of the Rings*, connecting them to the satanic. Sauron’s name comes from the Greek root *saur* meaning “lizard” or “dragon.” Saruman, the fallen wizard, has an anagram of the same letters in his name.

Wormtongue, Saruman’s servant, takes us an explicit step closer to Tolkien’s use of Christian typology in which dragons represent Satan and evil. In Old English, “worm” is spelled “wyrn,” which did not mean a little harmless earthworm, but a dragon. Wormtongue literally means “dragon-tongue,” or “serpent-tongue.” Thus, in *The Lord of the Rings*, when Gandalf



## Food for the Journey

What sustains Sam and Frodo as they make their journey through Mordor, the valley of death? *Lembas*, the Elvish bread, provides the bulk of their sustenance. The linguistic connection to the Catholic Faith is that *lembas* in Elvish means “the bread of life” or “way-bread.” *Viaticum*, the Eucharist of the Last Rites, is the bread which takes Catholics from this life to the next. *Lembas* signifies the Eucharist during Frodo and Sam’s journey to Golgotha, to Mount Doom.

commands Wormtongue, “Down on your belly, snake,” he echoes God’s verdict against Satan in the Garden. Wormtongue literally hisses his replies, making the parallel inescapable.

Tolkien also employs the Augustinian teaching that evil has no existence of itself—it is simply the absence of good. In *The Lord of the Rings*, evil is “the shadow” cast by Sauron, the dark lord—an echo of Satan, the lord of darkness. We also find that the evil characters in *The Lord of the Rings* are not creative—they can only subvert creation, twisting and fouling it. Sauron, Saruman, Wormtongue, and the Ring, as characters and an image of evil, are all corrupters. The secret that unlocks the whole of *The Lord of the Rings* is the date on which the Ring is destroyed—March 25. On the Christian calendar, the Word is made flesh on this day, the date of the Annunciation. In the medieval Church, it was widely believed that Christ’s crucifixion also happened on March 25. The Ring is destroyed on the same date on which God became man and on which God died for our sins. These two events constitute humanity’s redemption from Original Sin. Now we have our connection to the One Ring—it represents sin in general and Original Sin in particular.

The One Ring is created to rule them all and in the darkness bind them. Original Sin is the one sin which rules all men and binds them in darkness. The One Ring and the One Sin are destroyed on the same date, March 25.

Frodo and the Fellowship leave Rivendell on December 25 and arrive at Mount Doom on March 25. In an obvious parallel, Frodo, the one who makes that journey, is a Christ figure. His applicability as a Christ figure does make him a formal allegory; Frodo is not Christ all the time. Frodo is a Christ figure only in his capacity as the Ring-bearer (the sin-bearer, the cross-bearer) on his journey from December 25 to March 25. He carries the Ring (the sin, the cross) into Mordor, an analogue to *mortis*, Latin for “death.” Frodo carries the cross into the valley of death to the mountain of doom; we see the whole life of Christ figured in his actions.



# The Meaning of the Ring

## Discussion Questions

1. What are the elements of Tolkien's creation myth that echo the Christian story in the Book of Genesis? How is Tolkien's creation of Middle-earth theologically orthodox?
2. How does Tolkien express deeply religious themes through the names of his characters and places?
3. Why are the date on which the Fellowship leaves Rivendell and the date on which the Ring is destroyed so important? How do these dates help us unlock the deepest theological meaning of *The Lord of the Rings*?
4. When Frodo puts on the Ring, he disappears from the real world. How is his appearance in the shadow world a reflection of the consequences of sin?

### Notes:

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### Of Elves & Men: Fighting the Long Defeat



*Tolkien describes the contrast between Elves and Men as an allegory of death and immortality.*

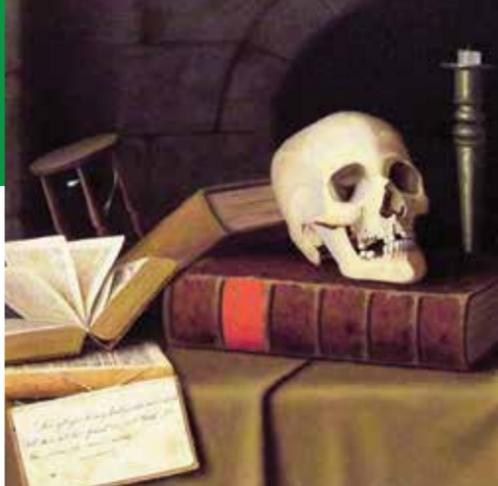
Despite his expressed dislike for allegory, Tolkien twice referred to *The Lord of the Rings* as just that. First, he described the novels as an allegory of power usurped for domination. To understand his meaning, we need to recognize that Tolkien is operating within a definite Catholic political philosophy. There are two uses of power—use by proper authority and use of power usurped from its proper authority.

For a Catholic, all authority comes from God, and therefore authentic political power has its ultimate source in God. The authority of the head of a government, whether king or president, has to come from God or it is held by usurpation. Any government that contradicts the law of God is guilty of usurping and abusing power. The principles of this Catholic political philosophy play out in various ways throughout *The Lord of the Rings*.

In Tolkien's mythology, Ilúvatar rules over Middle-earth just as God rules over our cosmos. Sauron, the greatest of the enemy Morgoth's servants, usurps the power of God for domination. Yet, according to a song in *The Return of the King*, "above all shadows rides the Sun." Even though Ilúvatar's presence in Middle-earth is overshadowed by the evil of Sauron's usurpation of power for domination, that power has limits because its source is Ilúvatar, who is the source of all power and who will orchestrate all things into the greatest good.

Tolkien also said that *The Lord of the Rings* is an allegory of death and immortality. Tolkien, as a Christian who believes in the Fall of Adam, described history as “the long defeat, with only occasional glimpses of final victory.” He meant that evil cannot be finally defeated this side of heaven; victory over evil is not for the powers of this world, but for those of the next world. The Christian knows that good will triumph, but in the meantime he continues to fight against evil, which whenever seemingly defeated grows back like a fungus. Ultimately, the victory of God—Ilúvatar—is guaranteed, but that comes after a long history of death and defeat.

Galadriel, the elf queen in *The Lord of the Rings*, echoes Tolkien when she says that she and her husband Celeborn “have been fighting the long defeat for centuries.” Elves are immortal; they only suffer death through heartbreak or violence. They fight against evil which they cannot completely defeat of their own power, and so the Elves experience immortality as millennia of drawn-out defeat. The Elves feel trapped in Middle-earth because they are exiles from their proper home. Many of the Elvish songs that grace *The Lord of*



## ***Memento Mori* in Literature**

Dante’s *Divine Comedy* is an entire journey exploring the four last things—an extended meditation on death and what comes after.

Shakespeare gives us the longest *memento mori* in literature in *Hamlet*’s famous graveyard scene: “Alas, poor Yorick.”

T.S. Eliot, in his famous poem *The Waste Land*, says, “I will show you fear in a handful of dust” because that is the end of Man’s earthly existence.

The *memento mori* is employed throughout Christian literature and art across the whole history of Christian civilization.



*the Rings* remind us, as Catholics, insistently of the *Salve Regina*. The Elves are the immortal “poor banished children,” trapped in time in a valley of tears.

Yet, Tolkien said the novels are an allegory of *death* and immortality. In the famous opening verse of *The Lord of the Rings* is the line, “Nine for Mortal Men doomed to die.” Death and mortality define Man’s existence. Tolkien makes it clear in some of his letters that death is an outrage. Catholic theology insists that the unified human body and soul is made for eternity because it’s made in the image of God. Death—the sundering of the body-soul union—is a consequence of the Fall; it is the fatality suffered by Men in the long defeat. Immortality is to live in this world and never die. Death, on the other hand, is to leave time and go home to the eternal presence of God.

The Elves don’t know where exactly Man goes after death, but they know he goes somewhere. There is no atheism in Middle-earth: everyone serves either the devil (Morgoth) or God (Ilúvatar), or they struggle between the two. The Elves are too wise to be atheists. Whatever happens to Man after death, he goes somewhere beyond the reach of the long defeat. Man’s death for the Elves is a glimpse of final victory. For this



reason, the Elves see death as a gift to Man from Ilúvatar.

In both uses of allegory—power usurped for domination and the contrast between death and immortality—we see Tolkien’s commentary on modern life. Scientists, searching endlessly for the immortality of the Elves, often usurp God’s power to dominate creation. Saruman’s workings at Isengard reflect this kind of technical manipulation of nature. The allegorical opposite to power usurped for domination is Tolkien’s theological reflection on death as a gift from Ilúvatar to Men. At the heart of *The Lord of the Rings*, this allegory of death and immortality acts as a *memento mori*—a Latin phrase meaning “remember, you must die.” In Catholic art—which *The Lord of the Rings* is—the *memento mori* reminds us of the four last things—death, judgment, Heaven, and Hell—urging us to prepare well for the end and to fight the good fight despite defeat.

# Of Elves & Men: Fighting the Long Defeat

## *Discussion Questions*

1. Tolkien described *The Lord of the Rings* as an allegory of death and immortality. What is the relationship between death and immortality in *The Lord of the Rings* and how does it connect the work with Tolkien's Catholic beliefs?
2. As Catholics in the modern world, are we fighting a "long defeat?" How can the Elves' example encourage us to keep fighting?
3. As "Mortal Men, doomed to die," what hope, if any, can we draw from the knowledge that death is inevitable? How do you think Aragorn and Denethor illustrate two different attitudes toward death?

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# The Scriptural Basis for Tolkien's Middle-earth

Because J.R.R. Tolkien imagined that Middle-earth was, in fact, our world prior to any historical records, he was writing a “pre-history.” It’s no wonder that his account of the creation of Middle-earth was inspired, in part, by the account of creation in the Holy Bible. Tolkien also incorporated elements of Catholic tradition which describe the creation of the angels and the fall of Satan from Heaven. The similarities are evident when we compare passages of Tolkien’s *The Silmarillion* to the Bible:

*In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth...and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters. And God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light.*  
(Genesis 1:1-3)

*In him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities.*  
(Colossians 1:16)

“There was Eru, the One, who in Arda is called Ilúvatar; and he made first the Ainur, the Holy Ones, that were the offspring of his thought, and they were with him before aught else was made.”

Although the fall of Satan from Heaven is not described explicitly in the Bible, certain passages refer to Lucifer’s sin of pride, which is readily reflected by Tolkien’s description of Melkor:

*You said in your heart, “I will ascend to heaven; above the stars of God I will set my throne on high.... I will make myself like the Most High.”*

*(Isaiah 14:13-14)*

“But as the theme progressed, it came into the heart of Melkor to interweave matters of his own imagining that were not in accord with the theme of Ilúvatar; for he sought therein to increase the power and glory of the part assigned to himself.”

Finally, in *The Silmarillion*, the Ainur (who are like angels) go to war with Melkor and cast him out of the paradise Ilúvatar created:



*Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon...but they were defeated and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth.*

*(Revelation 12:7-9)*

“From splendor he fell through arrogance to contempt for all things save himself, a spirit wasteful and pitiless. Understanding he turned to subtlety in perverting to his own will all that he would use, until he became a liar without shame...he descended through fire and wrath into a great burning, down into Darkness.”

The parallels between Lucifer and Melkor who become Satan and Morgoth simply reemphasize Tolkien’s assertion that *The Lord of the Rings* is truly a Catholic work.



### Seeing Ourselves in the Story: The Hobbits, Boromir, Faramir, & Gollum as Everyman Figures



*Art is the mirror of reality, and some characters reflect important truths about us.*

Tolkien believed that art, myth, and story are means of reflecting reality. *The Lord of the Rings* is the mirror he created in which we can see and know ourselves better. Throughout the story, Tolkien's characters emerge as everyman figures with applicability to our own lives. We can find echoes of our own journeys through life in Frodo's travels across Middle-earth and back. Like us, Frodo begins as a child in the Shire, immature and ignorant. During his adventures, Frodo struggles through the process of growing up and growing in wisdom to achieve virtuous maturity. His journey reflects a Christian understanding of life as a pilgrimage in which we are called to carry our crosses and follow Christ. Sam, Frodo's servant, appears as a figure of the faithful Christian who follows Christ into the valley of death, through suffering, to Mount Doom.

Suffering can do one of two things to us: it can either help us grow in wisdom, or it can embitter us, making us twisted. If we resent suffering and are angry because of it, or if we blame God, our neighbor, or someone else, then it becomes the thing that contorts us. If, on the other hand, we embrace suffering, taking up the cross as we're supposed to, then it ennobles us and allows us to grow in wisdom and virtue. In *Darby and Joan*, by Catholic novelist Maurice Baring, a priest says that "the acceptance

of suffering is the meaning of life. When you understand that, you will understand everything.”

Boromir is the only ordinary man in the Fellowship, and he is the most obvious everyman figure in *The Lord of the Rings*. Remember, the Fellowship of the Ring that sets out from Rivendell on December 25 consists of four Hobbits, a King, a Wizard, an Elf, a Dwarf, and a Man. Boromir is the one who represents us in the Fellowship. As readers, we can find his status as an everyman to be disconcerting because he’s the one who betrays Frodo and attempts to steal the Ring. We might object to Tolkien’s portrayal of this everyman. After all, Boromir is the traitor, the one that believes in the use of evil means for a good end.

One thing that characterizes us as human beings, from the very worst of us to the very best of us, is our tendency to believe it is acceptable to use evil if it’s for a good cause. Boromir wants to save his people with the Ring because they are on the verge of being destroyed by forces of evil from Mordor, the place of death. His desperation provokes the question: why destroy this weapon of mass destruction when it can be



### Three Elements of Confession

Boromir’s death echoes the three elements of a Catholic sacramental Confession. The first is contrition—Boromir says, “I am sorry.” The second is the full disclosure of sin—Boromir admits, “I tried to take the Ring from Frodo.” The third is reparation through penance—Boromir states, “I have paid” by laying down his life for the hobbits. Boromir dies a good and holy, noble and courageous death, having confessed his sins and received absolution from Aragorn, who acts as his confessor.

used against the enemy? And yet, the wise—Gandalf and Elrond—know that when we use evil means for a good end, we are tainted and ourselves become evil.

Even though Boromir repents of his sin, we can still feel slighted because our representative is the first of the Fellowship to fall. But, Tolkien also gives us Faramir, Boromir's brother, as another everyman figure. He depicts Faramir as a saint who would not pick up the Ring, the most powerful thing in the world, even if he saw it lying on the side of the road. Faramir is so virtuous, he would not deceive even an Orc—a purely evil creature—with a falsehood. Boromir represents the repentant sinner and Faramir represents the saint who lives a virtuous and uncorrupted life.

To balance the scales, Tolkien also presents Gollum as an everyman figure. Gollum exemplifies the consequences of doing what Faramir will not—he not only picks up the Ring, he becomes addicted to it. One of *The Lord of the Rings*' great lessons is that the thing possessed possesses the possessor. We compromise our very freedom of choice because of our subservience to sin. There's a price to be paid for bad choices; every time we choose the Ring and commit a sin, we

become corrupt and we Gollum-ize ourselves. When we sin, we lose the virtue of Faramir, we stop engaging in the struggle for what is right, unlike Boromir, and we become like Gollum—slaves to our sins.

In addition to his male figures, Tolkien presents three beautiful characterizations of womanhood. Arwen's strength and wisdom lie in her sacrifice of immortal life to be at Aragorn's service. Eowyn shows us courage in her defeat of the Lord of the Nazgul, the greatest, the most powerful of Sauron's servants. And of Galadriel, the Elf queen, Tolkien says in one of his letters that he put all of his love for the Blessed Virgin into her character. When Galadriel bestows gifts on the Fellowship, she reminds us of the Blessed Virgin who dispenses graces to all her supplicants. From male to female, imperfect to exemplary, Tolkien gives us a broad spectrum of figures that all have applicability to our lives.



# Seeing Ourselves in the Story

## Discussion Questions

1. With which character in *The Lord of the Rings* do you most strongly identify yourself? Why? What attributes does that character have that make him or her an “everyman” figure?
2. How does suffering ennoble or embitter the characters of *The Lord of the Rings*? Which characters are elevated through suffering and which descend into evil?
3. What does it mean that “the thing possessed possesses the possessor?”

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## Of Wizards & Kings: Frodo, Gandalf & Aragorn as Figures of Christ



*Through Frodo, Gandalf, and Aragorn, Tolkien subtly introduces Christ into the story.*

Frodo, Gandalf, and Aragorn are Christ figures in *The Lord of the Rings* through applicability. Frodo as a hobbit of the Shire, Gandalf as a wizard, and Aragorn as exiled and returning king, remind us of Christ only in certain attributes and actions. We've extensively discussed Frodo as a Christ figure in previous lectures. He is the Ring-bearer who leaves Rivendell on December 25 (the Nativity) and is involved in the destruction of the Ring on Mount Doom on March 25 (the Crucifixion).

Gandalf is called a wizard in the story, but he's actually a member of an order of angelic beings called the *Istari*. Gandalf's "magic" is a miraculous power which he receives through the "secret fire" to which he is a servant. In other parts of Tolkien's mythology, this secret fire is likened to the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Gandalf is more than a "wizard"; he is like a prophet or an angel, endowed with supernatural grace and therefore supernatural power. We can already see some similarities between Gandalf and Christ—Christ wielded supernatural power and is widely known (apart from the revelation that he is God) as a prophet of the highest nature.

The key moments in which Gandalf most reminds us of Christ are in his death, resurrection, and transfiguration. When Gandalf dies at the Bridge of Khazad-dum, it's a shock to

the reader. He really is dead and we believe it. Like the hobbits, as readers we have grown to love Gandalf and trust him. We believe that he is the one who has enough power to achieve the final destruction of the Ring. And then, suddenly, Gandalf is gone—dead—out of the story.

Together with an astonished Merry and Pippin, we witness Gandalf's return and hear about his resurrection. Yet, Gandalf's appearance is related in terms that are inescapably connected to the Biblical account of Christ's Transfiguration. When Christ appears on Mount Tabor in the presence of the prophets, he is clothed in robes so white and dazzling that he is likened to the sun. When Gandalf is resurrected, he is no longer Gandalf the Grey, he's Gandalf the White. And his robe is a dazzling, almost blinding, sunlike white—so much so that when he covers his robe with his grey cloak, it's as if the sun has been covered by cloud.

Gandalf becomes Gandalf the White through his death—the laying down of his life for his friends at the Bridge of Khazad-dum. Christ says there is no greater love than that of a man who gives up his life for his friends. Just as Christ is revealed



## Types of Magic

### *Supernatural "Magic"*

Gandalf wields good magic—a supernatural intervention into the natural world—through indwelling grace which manifests as his miraculous power.

Morgoth, Ilúvatar's enemy, and Sauron, his greatest servant, wield demonic power which we can call evil magic.

### *Natural "Magic"*

The Elves and Hobbits have abilities which seem magical, but are just natural faculties inherent to their races and are not truly magical at all.

Saruman, the fallen wizard, usurps scientific knowledge and technology—another kind of natural magic—to claim dominance over Ilúvatar's creation.



resplendent after his resurrection, so also Gandalf is transfigured entirely upon his resurrection. In the Scriptures, Christ comes and goes at will, appearing where he is most needed after his resurrection. In *The Lord of the Rings*, Gandalf comes and goes mysteriously, lending aid where it is most desperately required.

Before we delve into Aragorn's emergence as a figure of Christ, we need to understand the dimensions of kingship that Tolkien, a Catholic and a medievalist, would have also drawn from. Tolkien's inspiration for true kingship can be found in Charlemagne, the first Holy Roman Emperor who unites Western Europe. Because Tolkien was English, he cannot talk about kingship and the return of a king from exile without referencing King Arthur, the once and future king. This idea of the king who departs for a time and returns to the realm when it is in dire need resonates in Aragorn as the Ranger who comes back to claim his own and to rescue his kingdom from ultimate evil.

The third source of inspiration that plays into Tolkien's depiction of Aragorn as the exiled king comes from English history. The true king of England, Catholic James II, was forced into exile in

1688 by an army of Protestant mercenaries. Aragorn is like England's deposed Catholic king who was supported by the Jacobite political group which still hopes for the return of the true monarch. So all of this: Charlemagne the unifier, Arthur the once and future king, and the true Jacobite king in exile, goes into the characterization of Aragorn. Most importantly, Aragorn is a figure of Christ the King.

Aragorn has miraculous powers: "The hands of the king are the hands of a healer." Christ the King has healing powers; merely touching Christ's robe is enough to heal. Aragorn also takes the Paths of the Dead from which no one emerges alive. Not only does Aragorn survive, he has the power to relieve the very dead of a curse and they help him reclaim the throne. Aragorn's power reminds us of Christ's descent into Hell following the crucifixion and his liberation of the dead. Frodo, Gandalf, and Aragorn all carry traits which liken them to Christ, but it is Aragorn's actions which most strongly represent those of Christ the King.

# Of Wizards & Kings

## Discussion Questions

1. How does magic work in *The Lord of the Rings*? Where does the power wielded by Gandalf, Aragorn, or Galadriel come from? Where does Sauron's, Saruman's, or Wormtongue's power come from?
2. How is Frodo a Christ figure? Is he more strongly a Christ figure than Gandalf or Aragorn? Which of the three is most frequently and predominantly a Christ figure?
3. Many readers think *The Lord of the Rings* is a political allegory for the Second World War. We know Tolkien dislikes allegory, but if we interpret the Shire as an idealized depiction of England, how can the chapter entitled "The Scouring of the Shire" be seen as a political allegory?

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# The Five Races of Middle-earth

The Fellowship of the Ring, whose nine members banded together to carry the One Ring to Mordor, represents the five races of Middle-earth: Hobbits, Men, Elves, Dwarves, and Wizards. Because Tolkien's body of work is intended to be a pre-history for our own world, he developed explanations for how each race rose to power and prominence or faded from human remembrance.



## Elves

The Elves are the firstborn Children of Ilúvatar. They awoke under the night sky before the great lights of the sun and moon were created, and all Elves have a deep love for the stars. As immortals, the Elves acquired much wisdom and became leaders and guardians of the other races. Many Elves, including Legolas after the destruction of the One Ring, departed from Middle-earth on white ships sailing for the Undying Lands. Those Elves that remained faded in stature and presumably became the rustic folk known as “fairy” in our time.



## Wizards

The *Istari*, or Wizards, came from the Undying Lands to aid the races of Middle-earth in their war against Sauron. They appeared as old men and were great in power and wisdom. There are three *Istari* named in *The Lord of the Rings*: Saruman, who fell under the influence of Sauron's evil; Radagast, whose knowledge of birds, beasts, and plants knew no equal; and Gandalf, who loved and protected the residents of Middle-earth.



## Men

Ilúvatar created Men after he created the Elves. Men awoke in the world at the rising of the sun, and are mortal beings who are subject to sickness, old age, and eventual death. Aragorn is one of the Dúnedain—a direct descendant from the earliest Men—and heir to longevity, kingly stature, and proud nobility. Boromir is of a lesser bloodline. Men rose to power and dominance over Middle-earth at the beginning of the Fourth Age, which began with Aragorn's coronation.



## Dwarves

The Dwarves are called the “adopted children of Ilúvatar” because they were created by one of Ilúvatar's servants. Ilúvatar granted them true life and included them in his plan for Middle-earth. The Dwarves are strong and resistant to fire, which makes them excellent miners and craftsmen of precious metals and stones. Little is known about what happened to the Dwarves after the destruction of the One Ring. They faded from Men's knowledge like the Elves. Gimli was the only Dwarf to travel into the Undying Lands.

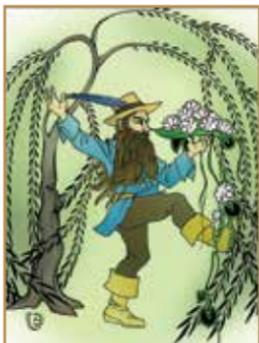


## Hobbits

Hobbits are most likely related to the race of Men, although of much reduced stature. They are also mortals and most live to be approximately 100 years old. Hobbits have lost any knowledge of the history of their origins but enjoy comfortable lives farming, gardening, and eating. Frodo, Merry, Pippin, and Sam are famous for having freed all the races of Middle-earth from Sauron's evil by helping destroy the One Ring. Hobbits, like the Elves and Dwarves, are now considered merely myth and legend of former days.



## Beyond the Power of the Ring: The Riddle of Tom Bombadil & Other Neglected Characters



*The lesser-known characters aren't superfluous; they all point to Tolkien's Catholicism.*

Tom Bombadil is certainly one of the most neglected characters in *The Lord of the Rings*. In fact, he's one of the most important characters in the book, and we neglect him at peril to our understanding of Tolkien's description of the story as an allegory of power usurped for domination. We might find it tempting to include Tom Bombadil with Aragorn, Gandalf, and Frodo as a Christ figure. After all, Tom Bombadil does some things which surprise us and which make us think, rightly, that he is more than he appears. Yet, he is not a Christ figure, and it will take some investigation into the evidence to uncover exactly who he is.

When Tom puts on the Ring, he doesn't disappear. When Frodo wears the Ring, Tom can still see him. Remember, the Ring symbolizes sin in general and Original Sin in particular. Yet, the Ring has no power or effect directly on Tom Bombadil, and he can see through its shadow of evil. Tolkien describes Tom's movements as dance-like. Tom speaks in verse and his words have rhythm and rhyme. He gives the ponies names to which they answer forever afterwards. After Tom saves the hobbits from the Barrow-wights, he tells them to run naked, preserved in innocence in his domain which is described as a garden. Tom is also called the eldest—the oldest living being in Middle Earth. Tom Bombadil is not a figure of Christ, but a figure of pre-lapsarian man—

unfallen Adam—and Goldberry is a figure of unfallen Eve.

Even though the Ents were in Middle-earth after Tom Bombadil, they are counted among the oldest creatures. They have a great deal of *gravitas*, and like the Elves, they live for thousands of years. Ents embody Tolkien’s respect for language as a philologist and are figures of linguistic tradition. They don’t say anything quickly, and their most commonly used phrase is “let’s not be hasty.” Ents are tree-like because they are rooted in tradition.

To speak well and use words correctly, we have to be in touch with the roots and heritage of our language. So we don’t need to speak quickly; we need to speak precisely and accurately. When the Ents come to a decision, it will be the right one because they have been absolutely precise in their use of words. The Ents also carry an ecclesiological significance—ecclesiology is an understanding of the meaning of the Church. Tolkien repeatedly uses a tree—and therefore the Ents—as a symbol of tradition.

Tolkien wrote in a letter during the 1960s that he could not understand the mania for trying to get back to the purity of the early Church.



## The Tree and Cloud

G.K. Chesterton describes two types of philosophies inherent to the modern world: the philosophy of the tree and the philosophy of the cloud. The former is the belief that reality is part of a continuum of human knowledge like the growth of a tree from seed to towering canopy. Chesterton contrasts the tree of Western Civilization with the philosophy of the cloud: formless relativism. Tolkien unhesitatingly sides with the tradition of the philosophy of the tree—utterly rejecting relativism and its vagaries—in his characterization of the Ents.



He said it's as if we're saying that the sapling was more pure than the full-grown tree. In a sense, the Catholic Church's tradition is very much like a tree. The more it branches out through history, the deeper its roots are. Tolkien says that if we presume that the sapling was more pure than the full-grown tree and we cut it down, we don't get back to the sapling, we kill the tree. So even if it were true that the early Church was more pure than it is now, we cannot get back to the sapling.

Denethor and Theoden are figures of pagan and Christian kingship respectively. Denethor is actually not even a king, but he's sitting on the throne. He represents pagan kingship because he is a usurper. The true king is in exile, and Denethor, the steward of Minas Tirith, is supposed to be guarding his throne, not ruling from it in his absence. The power of the kingship is not rightfully his. Denethor is tempted by the forces of evil by looking into the Palantir stone. He succumbs to the propaganda of the enemy and becomes convinced that all resistance to the might of Sauron is futile. Denethor despairs.

Theoden is Denethor's literary parallel and opposite. Theoden is king of the Rohirrim who is also tempted by a servant of evil—Wormtongue. We know the significance

of Wormtongue's name: serpent-tongue or dragon-tongue. Theoden comes close to despair because of Wormtongue's insidious whisperings. Gandalf the White, acting *in persona Christi*, exorcises the poison of Wormtongue's words from Theoden's mind and heart. Restored in body and soul, Theoden embraces hope and triumphs over despair.

Denethor, an image of pagan kingship, ultimately despairs, and Theoden, an image of Christian kingship, ultimately prevails through hope over evil. Denethor's name carries the Norse *thor*, emphasizing a connection to the pagan god of thunder. Theoden's name is a composite of the Greek *theo* and German *den* which literally translates to "of God." Tolkien contrasts his pagan king who despairs with the Christian king who triumphs through hope and faith, ultimately laying down his life for his friends. "No greater love," says Christ in John 15:13, "has any man than to lay down his life for his friends."



# Beyond the Power of the Ring

## Discussion Questions

1. If Tom Bombadil is a figure of unfallen Adam, of pre-lapsarian man, what do you think he adds to the story of *The Lord of the Rings*?
2. How do the Ents embody Tolkien's respect and love for language? Furthermore, how do they represent tradition, especially in relation to the Catholic Church?
3. Tolkien thought the technology of radio was being used to promote propaganda from both sides of the Second World War. The *palantiri* in *The Lord of the Rings* serves, not only as a communication device for Sauron's forces, but as a method of propaganda to which Denethor succumbs. Is modern media used to distribute propaganda, and if so, what are the messages sent?

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## Frodo's Failure: The Triumph of Grace



*Frodo's failure on Mount Doom highlights the paradox of triumphant, providential grace.*

The climactic action at the precipice of Mount Doom represents the greatest flourish of Tolkien's genius in the whole work of *The Lord of the Rings*. Frodo arrives on Mount Doom, followed by his readers, after hundreds of grueling pages. We've followed him across the bridge of Khazad-dum to the path of Cirith Ungol and across the barren plains of Mordor to Mount Doom. We have followed Frodo every inch of the way, willing him to destroy the Ring. The whole story hinges on the completion of this quest to destroy the Ring.

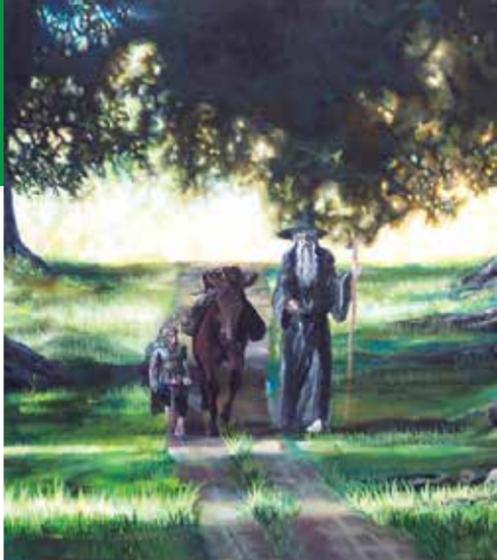
Frodo approaches the edge of the precipice. He's walked across Middle-earth, almost been eaten by a giant spider, encountered Orcs, temptation, Gollum, and now all he has to do is let go of the Ring. But, in this crucial moment, Frodo claims the Ring for himself. Worse, along comes Gollum, the miserable creature who's dogged Frodo's footsteps throughout the whole journey. He takes the Ring against Frodo's will and falls into the precipice. Frodo fails; he gets no credit for the success of the quest. As readers, we feel cheated: we want Frodo to be a successful hero, an edifying example of Christian virtues.

Yet, from a perspective rooted in theological reality, Frodo's failure is Tolkien's greatest success. Tolkien uses Frodo as an everyman figure, reflecting the faults of humanity. We are utterly unable to overcome the power of sin without

the presence of grace. What a strange paradox—Gollum as an agent of grace! Gollum’s actions show forth the presence of God’s providence, which makes the victory over sin possible. We cannot overcome the power of evil purely through the force of our own wills. We will always fail without God’s help and grace. So Gollum, paradoxically, is part of God’s action of bringing good out of evil.

Frodo, speaking to Gandalf in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, cannot understand why Bilbo, or the Elves for that matter, did not kill Gollum—after all, he deserves death. Gandalf rebukes Frodo’s eagerness to judge his fellow creature. The pity Bilbo showed—the grace and mercy operating in the moment when he refused to strike Gollum—may have protected him from the insidious evil of the Ring. Gandalf reflects that even the very wise cannot see all ends and meanings, and so no one should be overeager to dispense ultimate justice.

Throughout the story, Frodo grows in virtue, wisdom, and maturity. After all, part of the purpose of *The Lord of the Rings* is to serve as an echo or mirror of ourselves and of life. Through the acceptance of suffering, Frodo’s character develops



### Gandalf’s Advice to Frodo

“Many that live deserve death, and some that die deserve life. Can you give it to them? Then do not be too eager to deal out death and judgment. For even the very wise cannot see all ends.... Pity may rule the fate of many, yours not least.”

—*The Fellowship of the Ring*



in holiness. Later, when he has the chance, Frodo doesn't try to kill Gollum either, but shows the pity counseled by Gandalf. Sam becomes the one who is irritated with Frodo for showing so much pity to Gollum. Yet, in the climactic moment on Mount Doom itself, Sam also shows Gollum pity and mercy.

The hobbits Bilbo, Frodo, and Sam, growing in sanctity and wisdom, show pity at key moments. Tolkien illustrates for his readers the most difficult of Jesus Christ's commandments: love thine enemy. Our desire for justice makes this a bitter pill to swallow, but if Bilbo, Frodo, and Sam had not loved their enemy, Gollum would not still be alive at the crucial moment. The mission to destroy the Ring would have failed. Only through the hobbits' practice of virtue in cooperation with grace can God providentially use the enemy to destroy evil.

Does God have mercy and pity on Gollum—or does he fall into the fires of Hell? As a Catholic, Tolkien knows that God does not send Gollum into the flames. God doesn't send anyone to Hell; people go to Hell because that's where they want to be. Gollum gets what he wants. Falling into the fires of Mount Doom, he does not echo Boromir's spirit of penitence

at his moment of death. Gollum rejoices, saying, "Preciouss." His last moments are happy because he has what he desires most, the Ring, in his hands.

Remember, the thing possessed possesses the possessor. Sin, symbolized by the Ring, draws us into Satan's world. We become like the Ringwraiths—mere shriveled shadows of our full potential. As shadows, we belong more and more to evil which is the negation, the shadow, of good. This is Hell—the complete turning away from the light and wholeness of God because we are so addicted to our sins.

One of the main themes of *The Lord of the Rings* is the triumph of humility represented by the hobbits. Remember, Satan's—and Morgoth's—sin is pride. While Sauron and the Ring are mighty, the hobbits are small and humble. And it's the power of humility that overpowers the power of pride. Sin is overcome by virtue acquired through suffering. What further proof could be given of Tolkien's revelation that "*The Lord of the Rings* is, of course, a fundamentally religious and Catholic work"?

# Frodo's Failure: The Triumph of Grace

## Discussion Questions

1. Why is Gollum necessary for the success of Frodo's quest? If we apply the action of the story to real life, why and how does God use sinners to accomplish good? Can God truly take all the discordant themes of human action and weave them into music greater than we could imagine?
2. Does Frodo and Gandalf's conversation about pity have any real-world applications? How can we balance justice against pity and mercy?
3. The whole of *The Lord of the Rings* can be read as a *memento mori*, a meditation on death and the Last Things. How does Gollum's fall into the fires of Mount Doom illustrate the predicament of sinners who wind up in Hell? How does Frodo's discontent in the Shire after the destruction of the Ring illustrate the longing of a saint for Heaven?

### Notes:

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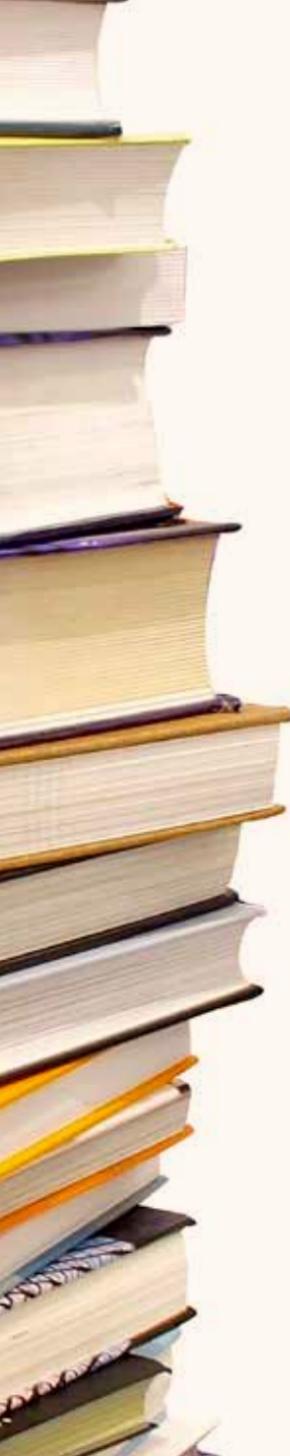
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## Suggested READING

If you would like to learn more about J.R.R. Tolkien, his Catholicism, or *The Lord of the Rings*, Joseph Pearce recommends:

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"Enano Practica Concept Art" pg. 33; "Going to Orthanc"

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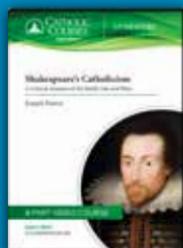
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### Joseph Pearce

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Joseph Pearce is Writer in Residence and Associate Professor of Literature at Ave Maria University in Ave Maria, Florida. He is author of *Tolkien: Man and Myth, a Literary Life* (HarperCollins, 1998) and editor of *Tolkien: A Celebration, Collected Writings on a Literary Legacy* (HarperCollins, 1999). He is a co-editor of the *St. Austin Review*, an international journal of Christian culture, literature, and ideas; editor-in-chief of Ignatius Press' *Critical Editions*; and editor-in-chief of Sapientia Press.



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