

Myth and Christianity: Religious Symbolism in J.R.R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings

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This article explores how myth and Christianity evolve in the novel and explores themes of sacrifice, mercy, redemption, and providence within the moral structure of Middle-earth in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. Through character development, moral dilemmas, symbols, sacrifice, mercy, providence, and hope, Tolkien weaves a moral message that reflects his own beliefs in a subtle and literary form of symbolic imagery. The narrative subtly affirms spiritual ideals without overt religious expression. By good morals Tolkien certainly meant to include Christian virtues such as humility, hope, faith, love, sacrifice, renunciation, repentance, acceptance of the "Gift" of death, and forgiveness. *The Lord of the Rings* is a masterful blend of myth and moral philosophy. Though Tolkien explicitly rejected allegory, the novel embodies profound spiritual truths, particularly those resonant with Christian thoughts. Tolkien's narrative draws from ancient mythologies while embedding Christian ideals and spiritual motifs within its characters, events, and landscapes. Without direct allegory, Tolkien presents a deeply theological framework where hope, grace, temptation, and redemption operate through mythic storytelling.

Keywords: Symbolism, Religion, Myth, Redemption, Christianity, Allegory.

Introduction

J.R.R. Tolkien was a philologist and a professor of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford University, and he was a Roman Catholic. This has greatly influenced him in the invention of Middle-earth, myths and legends that make up the back story of his works. His interest in myths was aroused especially by his love for the old northern European languages; this resulted in the myths of Northern Europe that came to us from the Middle Ages. Tolkien was the world's foremost scholar in inventing languages and myths.

Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* is more than a fantasy epic. It is a work steeped in the moral imagination of its creator. Tolkien as both a philologist and a devout individual approached storytelling with a deep reverence for language, myth and morality. Though he firmly disapproved of allegory describing his work instead as applicable rather than symbolic, the text reveals a coherent spiritual vision.

One of the most compelling spiritual themes in the novel is the concept of sacrifice and Moral Heroism. The One Ring functions as a symbol of temptation, corruption, and spiritual trial. It increases the desires of the Ring bearer and reveals their deepest flaws. In *The Lord of the*

Rings the interplay between providence, mercy and moral choice forms the heart of Tolkien's narrative structure. He does not portray a world ruled by fixed fate or destiny where everything is pre-decided instead of that world he presents a layered and meaningful vision of freedom. In his universal ways a quiet but powerful divine presence often referred to as providence seems to guide events gently from behind the scenes. The guidance which guides them does not take away the freedom of the characters. It respects the dignity of the individual, recognizing that each character is free to choose between right and wrong, and those choices truly matter.

Tolkien considered *The Lord of the Rings* as "The Lord of the Rings is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision..." (The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien, 172). The acts of mercy done by the characters being often small quiet decisions made in moments of doubt but they carry deep weight. For instance, both Bilbo and Frodo at different times choose to spare their life when they face struggles with Gollum. These decisions are not made with full understanding of what Gollum will later do, but they are made from the thought of pity and mercy. In the end, it is Gollum who destroys the ring which Frodo himself could not do. This outcome is not forced by fate, but made possible because of the earlier moral decisions made in mercy.

The divine guidance, moral responsibility, and compassion into a story that ultimately celebrates hope are combined all together.

Tolkien suggests that even in the darkest times, the smallest good actions matter. The grand events of Middle-earth are not shaped only by warriors or kings, but by quiet choices made with love, humility, and trust. Frodo Baggins is not the typical hero of legend. He does not bear any sword of ancient kings, does not wield any magic, he is a small hobbit who lives in his shire. Frodo Baggins's decides to carry the ring and starts his journey to destroy it. His decision to bear the One Ring is not a quest for glory but a burden he accepts for the sake of others. Yet, his journey is arguably the most spiritually significant in *The Lord of the Rings*. Frodo's heroism is not built on the grandeur of victories but on the willingness to suffer for the good of others a form of self-emptying that shows deep moral and spiritual truths. His sacrifice is not just for a short time it lasts long sustained till the end internally. His journey from the Shire to Mount Doom is marked by increasing isolation, suffering and internal conflict. Frodo's endurance particularly through Mordor reflects a form of spiritual self-discipline. He does not emerge triumphant but transformed deeply wounded and forever changed. He decides on his own, his decision is voluntary not forced by prophecy or destiny. "I will take the Ring, though I do not know the way" (270). This act of surrender, humble, quiet, and uncertain is the foundation of his moral heroism.

Frodo does not choose the quest for reward or fame, he takes up a burden that promises only pain, danger and potential ruin. From the moment Frodo accepts the Ring in Rivendell he becomes a marked figure. As the Ring-bearer, Frodo enters into a path of progressive suffering. Each step towards Mordor weighs more heavily upon Frodo. He suffers both mentally and physically and also it makes him spiritually alive. The Ring does not merely test his will, but also it erodes his sense of self. Unlike other characters such as Thorin, Isildur, Boromir who succumb quickly to the Ring's influence, Frodo resists for an extended period which itself is a form of internal martyrdom. His resistance even when he is weak is an act of self-denial. "There was more than one power at work, Frodo. The Ring was trying to get back to its master"

(56). Gandalf says this to Frodo during their discussion of how Bilbo came to possess the One Ring and how Frodo inherited it. It comes after Gandalf reveals the true identity of the Ring and its connection to Sauron. He implies that behind the apparent randomness of events lies a divine purpose. This notion of providence aligns with Christian belief that God's will operates through and above human choices, guiding even small acts toward a greater plan. Frodo is overwhelmed by the revelation that he now carries a burden of immense evil and power. He wonders why this happened to him, why Bilbo found the Ring, and why he must now bear its burden.

The climb through Mordor is one of the most harrowing depictions of moral struggle in the entire narrative. Mordor itself is a hellish, barren, volcanic, and oppressive land. The terrain is lifeless, choked with ash and smoke. Every step towards Mount Doom is not just a physical struggle, but a way into a deeper moral trial, which is a harder test of right and wrong.

Frodo is skinny, lean, weak, fevered and barely able to move. He doesn't speak of hope or victory, but he exists in this struggle only to endure. Frodo continues this journey not because he believes in success, but because he cannot turn back. Through this it is presented as a portrait of sacrificial love that is deeply spiritual. His suffering becomes redemptive and meaningful not because it absolves guilt, but it permits the possibility of salvation and others to be saved. As they near Mount Doom, Frodo becomes increasingly attracted by the Ring. His will weakens, his body deteriorates and his thoughts become clouded. The burden is no longer just weight it is a moral corrosion. Frodo begins to lose his sense of purpose and identity.

Frodo's struggle is not about surviving, but about resisting surrender to the Ring's will. This climb represents the climax of his inner battle between goodness and corruption, duty and temptation. This hostile environment mirrors the internal desolation and spiritual burden Frodo carries due to the Ring. The climb reflects the toll evil takes on a person's soul the land itself resists purity and hope. It is a spiritual wasteland, symbolic of how power and domination have stripped away life.

Importantly, Frodo's failure at the end and his claim of the Ring for himself at Mount Doom does not negate his moral heroism. On the contrary, it shows the truth of even the strongest moral will have the chances of surrendering to the ring. The significance of Frodo's journey lies not in his perfection, but in his perseverance. He carries the burden until he can bear it as long as much he can. This is a deeply human expression of sacrifice to give everything until there is nothing left to give which reflects the character of Christ. In failing, Frodo becomes a symbol of the broken hero one who's worth is not defined by flawless action, but by the willingness to bear unbearable weight for the sake of others. This echoes the idea that some forms of sacrifice leave a mark that cannot be erased in this life

Frodo's moral heroism is not the heroism of conquest but of compassion, endurance, and suffering. He is a vessel of grace carrying a burden no one else could bear. His story embodies the paradox of spiritual heroism that the truest victory may lay not in conquering evil, but in surviving its presence without surrendering the soul. "And yet, this way-bread of the Elves had a potency that increased as travellers relied upon it alone and did not mingle it with other foods. It fed the will, and it gave strength to endure, and to master sinew and limb beyond the measure of mortal kind" (936). This describes the mystical and sustaining power of lembas.

Lembas, the elvish meal cakes are among the most obvious religious symbols in the story. Similar to the Blessed Sacrament from medieval tradition, this way bread gained greater power

when eaten alone, without mixing it with other food. It nourished not just the body, but also the will of the people giving them the strength to endure hardship and push their physical limits beyond what ordinary humans could manage. Frodo and Sam rely on it during their final journey through Mordor. It is often interpreted as an allegorical parallel to the Christian Eucharist, reflecting Tolkien's subtle Catholic symbolism.

Samwise Gamgee embodies another aspect of sacrifice and loyalty in the situation of despair. His willingness to carry Frodo, both figuratively reflects a spiritual kinship rooted in love rather than duty. Sam is not called by prophecy or power, but by love and friendship. His humble background contrasts with his enormous moral strength making him a symbol of the quiet enduring heroism that sustains the world, which relates to spiritualism. Tolkien explained that Sam's purpose was "Precisely to bring out the comicalness, peasantry, and if you will Englishry of this jewel among the hobbits" (88). "I know we are going to take a very long road, into darkness; but I know I can't turn back. It isn't to see Elves now, nor dragons, nor mountains, that I want - I don't rightly know what I want: but I have something to do before the end, and it lies ahead, not in the Shire" (*The Fellowship of the Ring* 88).

Boromir, though noble has been overcome by the lure of the Ring, believing it could save his people. His fall is tragic not because of malice but because of his inability to resist what he sees as a necessary evil. Frodo's gradual deterioration under the Ring's influence illustrates the cost of resisting evil. His final refusal to destroy the Ring is a moment of failure, yet it is countered by the unintentional intervention of Gollum. This unexpected truth that failure leads to victory emphasizes that triumph over evil does not always come through strength but sometimes through grace.

Gollum is perhaps the most complex figure in this regard. He is both victim and villain, torn between his residual identity as Smeagol and the domination of the Ring. Frodo's pity for Gollum is critical, without it the quest would have failed. This recurring theme of mercy overcoming judgment illustrates a spiritual logic where compassion holds redemptive power. The grand events of Middle-earth are not shaped only by warriors or kings, but by quiet choices made with love, humility and trust. It has created a belief that while they may not always see the full picture and their actions. The characters especially rooted in mercy might be part of something greater, something guided by a light beyond their knowing.

Throughout the trilogy, Gandalf repeatedly hints at a force greater than chance. When Frodo wishes that Bilbo had killed Gollum, Gandalf responds that, even the very wise people could not see all ends. This moment reframes mercy not as weakness or impracticality, but as a spiritual act aligned with unseen purpose. Frodo's later decision to spare Gollum again reinforces this act of mercy despite the risk. These decisions are not made because the characters know the future, but because they choose empathy over justice.

Several moments in the story appear as coincidences but carry the weight of providence. Gollum's presence in Mordor, the sparing of his life and his final seizure of the ring all tie directly to the ring's destruction which Frodo himself could not complete. This outcome pivotal to the salvation of Middle-earth depends entirely on mercy and unexpected intervention. Though, Tolkien resists giving these events a forced moral lesson or overt theological explanation. The hidden meaning lies in how characters free will cooperates unknowingly with providential design.

Faramir's character also reveals the theme of moral choice amidst temptation. When he meets Frodo and Sam in Ithilien, Faramir resists the Ring's lure declaring, "I would not take this thing, if it lay by the highway" (673). This action contrast to his brother Boromir, who attempted to seize the Ring from Frodo, further illustrates that each character is presented with a moral choice. Faramir's restraint is not born from ignorance of the Ring's power but from a cultivated inner discipline a kind of spiritual clarity that resonates with the Christian notion of insight.

Sam's decision to spare Gollum, despite witnessing Gollum's duplicity is another act of mercy that resonate the idea of right and wrong. Sam is suspicious and angry, yet cannot bring himself to kill a wretched creature in his sleep. Though Gollum later betrays them, his presence remains crucial to the narrative's resolution. These moral decisions move the characters throughout the struggle. Mercy does not always result in immediate peace or reward. Mercy is valuable precisely because it is difficult and unpredictable. The climax at Mount Doom encapsulates this entire spiritual arc. Frodo, broken and exhausted, claims the Ring. This failure so human, so tragic would seem to invalidate his entire journey. Yet it is Gollum, whose life was preserved through mercy, who unwittingly completes the quest. He bites the Ring from Frodo's finger and falls into the fire. In this final moment, the world is saved not by Frodo's strength, but by the consequence of earlier acts of compassion. Providence works through failure, redemption comes through ruin, and salvation arrives not through might, but through grace.

The narrative affirms that moral choice is real, potent, and consequential. At the same time, it affirms a moral order beyond human understanding one in which mercy may achieve what power cannot. Tolkien's world is not one of fate, but of layered intention, where the choices of individuals echo in harmony with unseen hope. The narrative is structured around chance but is subtly revealed as providential. Characters retain the ability to choose moral ways and their moral decisions shape the outcome of events. Gandalf's earlier assertion that even the smallest creature can change the course of the future is vindicated here reinforcing the spiritual message that unseen forces can redeem failure.

The imagery of light and darkness serves as a powerful symbolic language throughout the narrative. Light is consistently associated with hope, purity, and spiritual guidance. Galadriel's phial, which contains the light of Earendil's star, becomes a beacon for Frodo and Sam in their darkest moments. Its effectiveness against Shelob, a creature of ancient darkness, emphasizes light as a symbol of moral and spiritual resilience. The white tree of Gondor, though withered represents a hope that is not dead but dormant. Its flowering upon Aragorn's return signifies the renewal of rightful order and the reawakening of a forgotten harmony. These visual symbols reinforce the idea that goodness may fade but is never entirely extinguished. In contrast, darkness in Mordor is not just a representation of physical but also it represents metaphysical. It represents despair, domination, and spiritual blindness. The Nazgul, shrouded in darkness, are figures of fear and loss of self. Sauron's great eye is always watching but it does not truly understand it's like a fake version of God's all-seeing power, used only to spy on and control others. "May it be a light to you in dark places, when all other lights go out" (376-77). Galadriel gives Frodo a phial containing the light of Earendil's star. The light symbolizes hope and divine grace especially when evil and despair seem stronger. It functions like a spiritual weapon against darkness echoing Christ's role as the Light of the World.

Galadriel represents a figure of moral clarity and restrained power. When the Ring is offered to her, she imagines becoming a dark queen, beautiful and terrible. Her refusal is a pivotal moment of self-awareness and spiritual strength. She acknowledges the temptation but refuses away, portraying the theme that the greatest strength lies in restraint.

The return to the Shire is not the end of Frodo's journey. Though the Shire is restored externally, Frodo remains wounded internally. His physical and emotional scars mark him as someone who cannot fully return. His departure to the Undying Lands is not a reward, but a form of healing beyond the world. This spiritual conclusion affirms that some wounds are too deep for temporal healing. Frodo's departure is symbolic of a soul seeking rest after suffering. Frodo's endurance, particularly through Mordor, reflects a form of spiritual asceticism. He does not emerge triumphant but transformed deeply wounded and forever changed.

Sam's continuity, in contrast to this represents the renewal of life. He marries, plants trees, and tells stories becoming a steward of memory and hope. The novel *The Lord of the Rings* is not a religious text, yet it embodies a deeply spiritual vision. Through sacrifice, mercy, providence, and hope a moral imagery emerges that reflect own beliefs in a subtle and literary form. Characters do not preach, but their actions resonate with meaning. The world of Middle-earth, though fantastical feels spiritually real because it mirrors the human struggle for goodness in a broken world. In this way, Tolkien offers not an allegory, but a myth that speaks to the soul. Light in this novel is presented as biblical light, and serves the story in much the same way as light serves to communicate and symbolize the revelation of god in the Bible. The comparisons of Tolkien with the presentation of myth will show that Tolkien's Christian faith and worldview of Middle-earth.

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