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The Atheist Aspects of the *Lord of the Rings*

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Table of Contents

Introduction and Theoretical Framework	3
An Atheist Reading of the <i>Lord of the Rings</i>	7
Discussion and Conclusion	17
Works Cited	19

Introduction and Theoretical Framework

The *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (1954) has made an everlasting impact on the literary genre of fantasy. J.R.R. Tolkien's magnum opus has almost single-handedly shaped the fantasy genre as the contemporary audience knows it today. Many a childhood was shaped by the fantastic world created by Tolkien to support his wonderful story, and yet his story contains a level of depth that is simply not found in many of the more popular fantasy stories of today. There is a tendency in critical readings of the *Lord of the Rings* to regard the work as inherently Christian, not in the least because this is the author's stance. As Tolkien himself wrote in a letter to Robert Murray, he regarded his own writings as "a fundamentally religious and Catholic work. (Letter 142)" Due to the religious views of the author, many scholars have tended to assume a similar interpretation of the *Lord of the Rings*. But even this well-founded base of religious influences does not mean that the story itself is inherently religious. Rather, it can be said that Tolkien's work is a story about fleeting power, of powerful figures cast down from their pedestals and left to dwell in the nothing. This interpretation of nihilism is also reflected in the ways in which the various inhabitants of Middle-Earth are depicted. Although the religious roots of the work are still firmly in place, the text itself can be interpreted as one may, which leaves the possibility of an atheist reading within reachable goals. This paper aims to support such a viewpoint. It has become important not only to dismiss any Christian influences on the classic work that *The Lord of the Rings* has become, but to open the work to many more alternate views. This thesis is based on the belief that *The Lord of the Rings* can be interpreted as an atheistic work. This theme becomes all too relatable when compared with the stance of religions in modern-day society. According to the World Religion Database, the number of religious people is steadily declining, indicating that modern society is slowly becoming less interested in the concept of a god. Because the *Lord of*

the Rings was written over 50 years ago, the standards in which it was written have been replaced.

Many critics, such as Richard L. Purtill and Margaret Hiley, have made essential strides in uncovering the religious roots of Tolkien's mythology. Purtill writes in his book *Myth, Morality and Religion* that the success of Tolkien's fantasy lies in its ability to create secondary belief. What Purtill means by this is the creation of entities that are able to be taken seriously by the reader. In order to believe in a fictional universe, a reader must be elevated above the feeling that they are playing pretend. Purtill argues that Tolkien's world of fiction is ultimately so successful because he himself believes. Because Tolkien believes in something, he is able to make others believe as well. He channels, as it were, his own experience of believing and projects it onto his characters and heroes (6).

Margaret Hiley links the debate about the religious foundation of the *Lord of the Rings* to the topic of semiotics. Semiotics, which is regarded by some scholars as the base of all language, can be seen as the precursor of myths. Owen Barfield argues that signified and signifier were not always related. When the concrete finally distinguishes itself from abstract, myth is born. In this sense, a myth can be interpreted as a conveyor of a moral or believed truth (855). Tolkien most likely based his myths in his believed truth, which is Christianity. Another interesting argument for the theory that the *Lord of the Rings* is inherently a Christian work, is made by Charles W. Nelson in his essay "The Sins of Middle-Earth: Tolkien's Use of Medieval Allegory." Nelson argues that the races of Middle-Earth are based on the classic ecclesiastical concept of the Seven Deadly Sins. Nelson argues that these seven sins are not just the foundations for the different creatures and inhabitants of Middle-Earth (84), they are also at the very core of the story because they act as catalysts. It is especially Sauron's greed that plunges the world into chaos, but the

other six sins are frequently at the start of some deeper issue as well. The argument that the background of the races of Middle-Earth is based on an inherently Christian theme is strong indeed.

One of the most important points that has been made in regards to the religious and spiritual aspects of Tolkien's work is made by John R. Holmes. He argues in his essay "Religion as Palimpsest in Tolkien's Fiction" that it is useful, and almost necessary to regard the religious background of the author and the religious traits of the story as two independent entities.

Therefore, it could be possible to dismiss Tolkien's own opinions in order to assume a very different viewpoint of the religious aspects, if there are any, in the *Lord of the Rings*. Tolkien is writing up his story through his own theological framework and is therefore both consciously and subconsciously using his own religion, Christianity, as a foundation. Holmes is not the only one that interprets the story of *The Lord of the Rings* as being free from Christian traits. Ronald Hutton argues in his conversational essays with Nils Agøy that it is important to understand that what Tolkien himself has said about his own works is inherently rooted in Tolkien's own opinions and bias. As such, Hutton dictates that there should always be a distance between the author and the work. This seems to be the general consensus amongst contemporary literary critics, and it is a stance that is necessary to adopt when looking at *The Lord of the Rings* as anything but a Christian modernist fantasy story.

Although it is impossible to deny that Tolkien himself was a Christian, his works are not so easily labeled in the same fashion. Defining Tolkien's most well-known work is difficult altogether, at least according to Marjorie Burns. She claims in her essay "J.R.R. Tolkien: The British and the Norse in Tension" that the successfulness of the story is for a large part based on the fact that Tolkien's work is made up of oppositions and dissimilarities. Whether it is good

versus bad or darkness versus light, Tolkien, as Burns claims, creates extremes out of certain stereotypes that amplify and enhance the story through the conflicts that they create. Burns mostly devotes her essay to the differences between *Lord of the Rings*' British and Nordic inheritance and not to its Christian and pagan inheritance, but the point she raises is very interesting nonetheless. If the point of the many oppositions in the work of Tolkien are aimed at creating an amusing conflict for the reader, one could easily start to wonder why did Tolkien not settle for the easy opposition of religious vs unreligious. The lack of explicit religious references now almost becomes conspicuous, as if Tolkien did his best to avoid any and all reference in order to steer clear of this exact opposition. Which is perfectly logical. As Verlyn Flieger argues in her essay "J.R.R. Tolkien and the Matter of Britain", inserting Christianity into the lively fantasy world of Middle-Earth could have been proven "fatal to its credibility and integrity" (51). She argues that is the lack of enforced religion that makes the works of Tolkien stand out from both its contemporary competitors and the Arthurian legacy. The literary liberty of the *Lord of the Rings* thus lies in its uncertainty if it is actually a Christian work. But given the fact that *Lord of the Rings* remains clear of any explicit Christian references, it allows many more viewpoints that differ from the classic Christian Modernist fantasy story. And perhaps that is exactly what needs to be done, breaking apart the different molds that have made up the spectrum of categories in which The *Lord of the Rings* is classified, and allowing new readings to occur that are vastly different from their predecessors.

2. An Atheist Reading of the *Lord of the Rings*

2.1 The lack of faith in Middle-Earth

In the introduction of the trilogy, there is a noticeable lack of religious background. For all the history the reader receives, there is not a single word devoted to the beliefs and faiths of the Hobbits. This lack of a belief system is not reserved purely for the halflings but also applies to the elves, dwarfs and men of Middle-Earth. There is not a single race that is notably devoted to anything extraordinary or magical. Although it is possible to adopt the viewpoint of Nelson and argue that the foundation of the races of Middle-Earth are based on Christian imagery, for example the Seven Deadly Sins, this can easily be dismissed by a sceptic reader. The races themselves are more interested in devotion to particular aspects of their ancestry that they are proud of. For the race of man, this means devotion to king and country, which is reflected in the pride that shines through their quests. A good example of this is Boromir, who is extremely proud that he is given the honor of representing Gondor as messenger to the elves of Rivendell (239). For the dwarfs, it is honor and ancestral ties that are the most important aspects. This is evident in the speech of the elves in Lothlorien, as they often refer to Gimli as one of “Durin’s folk”(346). Despite not being necessarily related to Durin by blood, Gimli still prides himself on his ties to this legendary figure. The elves are a bit different. Although they are for the most part concerned with the well-being of Middle-Earth, and fight to preserve it from the enemy, they also travel to the west to sail out of their harbors on the coast to sail over the Great Sea to the Undying Lands. This duality between protector and refugee is to play an important role in the story’s plot development. It is important to highlight the difference in values that each of the different races of Middle-Earth possess, not just for understanding the motives of its heroes and villains. The values of the inhabitants of Middle-Earth also provide them with conviction in the face of peril. As such, it could be argued that the conviction that is based upon faith is replaced

with a sense of conviction that is based upon values that are inherent to the different races and cultures. In the case of the *Lord of the Rings*, a very obvious trait that is missing is the belief in a god. It is entirely possible that the values such as honor and kinship are meant to replace religion.

2.2 The mundane and the extraordinary

Marjorie Burns' essay about oppositions offers an interesting viewpoint from which to address an atheist reading of the *Lord of the Rings*. If the trilogy is based on oppositions, the opposition between any possible religious imagery and the nihilistic world of Middle-Earth is very strange. If Tolkien's work is truly based on the comparative contrast between oppositions, it is strange to notice the major lack of any religious contrasts. The fight of Middle-Earth's heroes against Sauron is often described as a battle between light and dark, with Galadriel being an agent of the former and Sauron being the latter. Galadriel mentions that, if she had the ring, she would be the Queen of Light (356). Sauron is often associated with darkness by the people of Middle-Earth, as he is known as the Dark Lord (60), and his loyal servants are known as Black Riders (74). The opposition between light and dark is used at a steady rate. If the *Lord of the Rings* were a Christian work, surely there would be a fight between the faithful and the faithless as well.

There is a constant opposing force involving the struggle between the mundane and the extraordinary that could have its roots in some form of religious opposition. Frodo and the Hobbits are, leaving aside the fact that they are halflings, not especially attuned to any sort of special abilities or powers. In a world that is riddled with wraiths, elves, living mountains and wizards, the main character and his close companions are surprisingly ordinary. It could be argued that this opposition of the mundane against the extraordinary forms the basis of the

fantasy genre as a whole. In order for fiction, and perhaps more specifically fantasy, to be successful it requires itself to have roots in some aspects that the reader can relate to. Although the three fantastical races of Middle Earth, which are the halflings, dwarfs and elves, are slightly physically different from the average human reader, they are still familiar enough to form a connection. The fact that the mundane rather than the extraordinary is fighting the war against Sauron suggests that the power of the people of Middle-Earth comes from themselves and not a magical or ephemeral source. There is some degree of magical power that aids Frodo and the fellowship in their quest. But all this extraordinary power is very much pushed to the background, so much so that it becomes more of an afterthought at times. An example is Gandalf's imprisonment at the hands of Saruman. Confined to the very top of Saruman's tower, Gandalf is able to escape the tower by riding on the back of a great eagle who has come to aid him. The form in which the exchange is presented makes it seem as if it is a very common interaction in Middle-Earth:

So it was that when summer waned, there came a night of moon, and Gwaihir the Windlord, swiftest of the Great Eagles, came unlooked-for to Orthanc; and he found me standing on the pinnacle. Then I spoke to him and he bore me away, before Saruman was aware. (255)

This conversation is presented as a standard exchange between characters. Aside from the manner in which Gandalf mentions his conversation partner, there is no clue to the reader that one of the participants in the dialogue is a mythical being. By presenting this extraordinary exchange background information it is conveyed to the reader as a natural occurrence, thus making it seem irrelevant. The simplicity of the conversation is aimed at blending in the

fantastical with the ordinary. Gandalf does not require any magical powers or artifacts to converse with Gwaihir, nor is Gwaihir called to him by any magical means. This is a strategy used in order to make other magical occurrences, such as Gandalf's fight with the Balrog, more incredible. It also amplifies the realism of the story, as the overall number of extraordinary events is lowered. This citation also provides an interesting counterpoint to Richard Purtill's argument about secondary belief (6). It could be argued that the ease with which Tolkien creates secondary belief is not the result of Tolkien's religious background, as Purtill argues. Rather, the ease with which the reader is able to take the world of Middle-Earth for granted is the result of the extraordinary being pushed to the background, creating what could be described as a suppressed mythical background.

2.3 Nihilism and meaninglessness

A reoccurring theme in *Lord of the Rings* that supports an atheist reading of the story is the theme of meaninglessness. Meaninglessness could be interpreted as a sign of nihilism. Nihilism is interpreted in relation to this essay as the lack of belief in any meaningful aspect of life. In chapter 1, the opposition between the extraordinary and the mundane was discussed as an important part of the story of the *Lord of the Rings*. However, there are a few instances where this opposition is challenged. When the extraordinary is left out of the comparison, only the mundane is left. It could be argued that this reflects nihilism. Since the magical side of the story is no longer apparent, there is nothing meaningful to facilitate the secondary belief of the reader, which, as Richard Purtill argues (6), is rooted in the religious aspect of Tolkien's work. Therefore, the transition from extraordinary to mundane is a sign of opposition towards the religious roots of Tolkien's work. Across the story there are multiple storylines and events that

can be interpreted as part of this theme.

The first major example is the story of the elves. The reader learns very early on in the story that the elves are leaving Middle-Earth, and have been doing so for a very long time. Although this may seem trivial background information at first, the exodus of the elves is very important. The flight of the elves over the Great Sea is relevant to the atheist reading as the elves are considered to be more mystical than the other races of Middle-Earth. Compared to the dwarfs, men and halflings of Middle-Earth they are more mystical in their actions. This applies not only to their culture but also to their physique, as their keen sense of hearing (333) and their ability to easily traverse the harshest environments (284) are definitely superhuman, and possibly could be considered magical as well. As such, they represent the magical element of the inhabitants of Middle-Earth, whereas the other races are representative of the mundane. The exodus of the elves is an important event whereby the fantasy world of Tolkien's work is steadily being drained of the magical, leaving only the mundane. In this manner, the disappearance of the elves can be interpreted as nihilistic. If only the mundane remains, there is nothing magical or extraordinary to believe in.

Another interesting example of the transition of extraordinary to mundane is Arwen. Being the daughter of Elrond, she has access to an unending life if she chooses to join the other elves in their journey to the west. However, it is revealed in Appendix A of the *Lord of the Rings* that Arwen is so deeply in love with Aragorn that she gives up this opportunity to stay with him as his queen. Immortality is obviously a magical trait. In a world that is permeated with death, shadow and strife, immortality is a trait to be admired. To the halflings of the Shire, especially Sam, the elves are revered as mystical beings. As such, the fact that Arwen turns her back on her own immortality to join Aragorn in marriage can be seen as a figurative step down from a

pedestal. As she is giving up one of her most extraordinary abilities, Arwen is the leading example of the change from extraordinary to mundane that the entirety of Middle-Earth is subject to.

The ultimate example of fleeting and ultimately meaningless power is the main enemy, Sauron. Sauron is extremely powerful, and extraordinary in a few interesting ways. The first show of Sauron's massive power is obviously the One Ring. The reader learns very early on that the Ring is not just a simple piece of jewelry, but possesses numerous magical powers of its own. Its first trait is its indestructibility. The Ring can only be destroyed in its own birthplace, the fires of Mount Doom. Although its immortality is arguably its most important trait, there is another very important trait attached to Sauron's most coveted artifact. The second major trait of the Ring is its ability to influence minds. Sméagol's transition to the wretched abomination Gollum was fueled purely by the Ring. The largest part of Sauron's power lies with the ring, as his own immortality is bound to this artifact. But Sauron himself possesses the most important power, that of omniscience. The only magical power that is truly Sauron's own is his omniscience. Throughout the novel, Sauron is sometimes addressed or described as a giant eye (823). The eye symbolizes perception. When Sauron is described as a giant eye, it automatically makes the reader associate Sauron with perception and knowledge. As such, it could be argued that Sauron himself is representative of the very concept for omniscience, and perhaps even omnipotence. Gollum shares with Frodo the tales of his torture at the hands of Sauron, and mentions that Sauron only has nine fingers (627). When Isildur cut off the ring at the end of the first conflict against Sauron, the finger that held the ring was lost as well. The number nine is important to Sauron. The Ringwraiths, mortal men that once held the nine rings given to men, are enthralled to Sauron. They are the nine most loyal companions of Sauron, and carry out his will wherever

and whenever he wishes. The Ringwraiths are therefore both literally and figuratively the hands of Sauron. Sauron sees all and is able to spread his influence across the world through his mystical helpers. It could be argued that Sauron is the closest to a god in the *Lord of the Rings*. Sauron is omniscient, omnipotent, and supposedly immortal, save for the destruction of his ring. At the end of the book, when Sauron is slain, the fall of the most important of the magical beings, who very well could be interpreted as a god, is complete. The Ring is destroyed, making it the second example of perishable immortality that is present in the book.

2.4 Atheist Symbolism

Aside from the larger atheistic themes in the *Lord of the Rings* there are many more smaller symbolic story-elements and aspects that reinforce an atheist reading of the work. A lot of the seemingly Christian elements can be used to reinforce an atheist reading as well. An example of one of these elements can be found in chapter four of the first book, when the fellowship reaches Moria. Flanking the doors of the entrance to Moria are two gigantic trees, said to be planted by the elves when they still traded with the dwarves. Gandalf remarks that the trees are holly trees, as the elves were from Hollin. Holly trees are associated with Christmas, and some scholars believe that Holly was associated with Christianity in medieval times (William Ciesla, 13). It makes sense that Tolkien would use Holly as a symbolic plant for peace. However, the way in which the trees are described is very negative: “Stumps and dead boughs were rotting in the shallows, the remains it seemed of old thickets, or of a hedge that had once lined the road across the drowned valley. (295)” The trees, once symbols of peace and friendship, have decayed and are nothing more than rotting boughs. The theme of decay could be related to the transition of extraordinary to mundane, as that too is a form of decline. The fact that a historically Christian

symbol is now decayed is the pinnacle of this decline. Furthermore, it could even be interpreted as a literary motif for the decline of religion. As the symbolic references have faded away, so too has faith in Middle-Earth.

Another example of atheist symbolism could be found in the figure of Tom Bombadil. Although he is in no way an explicit example of either Christian or atheist imagery, Tom Bombadil nevertheless stands out from the other characters through his magical skills. Although he is no elf, Bombadil is immortal. A reader might guess that a non-elf that has access to immortality would surely be an important character. However, Tom Bombadil becomes an afterthought after the first book. The apparent importance of the character is quickly lost after the Hobbits reach Bree. Although it could be argued that this is, once again, evidence for the transition from extraordinary to mundane that permeates the *Lord of the Rings*, it could be the introduction of an altogether new theme, the theme of the disinterested deity. Tom Bombadil lives a perfectly content life far from civilization. He has seen the rise and fall of many peoples and powers, and is content with the small land that he is “the Master” of (122). Although Bombadil has the power to help the weak and banish evil, he does not actively do so, although the reader never gets any reason as to why he is not helping anyone beyond his small borders with his supreme powers. It may be that Tom Bombadil is not as powerful and righteous as he may seem, and that his powers end with the borders of his lands. The fact that his magical abilities are somewhat limited does relate to the theme of the extraordinary to the mundane, as it suggests that Tom Bombadil’s powers cease to exist once he leaves the borders of the lands under his control. As such, Bombadil is both a representative of this theme, and also an example of naturalism. Tom Bombadil is the only person in the *Lord of the Rings* that operates without a motive. All the other characters act purely to further their own goals, whatever those goals may

be. Bombadil purely operates to preserve the balance of nature in his lands, and is therefore a sort of neutral bystander.

2.5 The dead and undead

Another aspect of the *Lord of the Rings* that could be interpreted as atheist is the presentation of the dead and undead. Undead are deceased beings or individuals that continue to behave as if they were still alive. Popular examples of undead are zombies and ghosts. The appearance of the undead is in itself evidence against Christian imagery. The concept of undead beings is in direct contrast with the classic Christian model of heaven, hell and purgatory. For a soul to be left behind on earth and not be transported to one of these places is a break from Christian traditions. There are two types of undeath presented to the reader in the *Lord of the Rings*. The first type of undeath is introduced halfway through the first book, and comes in the form of the barrow-wights. Although the exact motives and backgrounds of these undead spirits are not shared with the reader, there is some information to be found in Frodo's encounter with one of their kind. For instance, they inhabit the grave-hills between the Shire and Bree, can control the fog that shrouds their hills, and are able to enslave others into undeath (136-138). The fact that the wights are able to spread their own undeath makes them particularly un-Christian, as they are able to prevent others from entering the afterlife as well. There are some similarities between these barrow-wights and the undead from Nordic legends that makes them stand out. In some of the Nordic sagas, such as the Eyrbyggja Saga and the Grettis Saga, the hero encounters an undead creature that is referred to as a draug. These undead creatures are resurrected folk that have been very greedy or jealous in their life, and are then doomed to guard the treasures in their gravemounds until they ultimately perish. The similarities between the barrow-wights and the

draugr are not without reason.

The second appearance of undeath in the *Lord of the Rings* is in the third book, when Aragorn seeks out the ghosts of Dunharrow to aid him in the war against Sauron (765). Just like the barrow-wights, these ghosts have been cursed, and are forbidden to rest in the afterlife until their duty is complete. Not being able to move on into the afterlife is particularly harrowing for a follower of the Abrahamic faiths, as the believers of said faiths are promised an afterlife. The similarities between Tolkien's barrow-wights and the draugr of the old Norse sagas are probably not coincidental, and it is likely that Tolkien was inspired by the sagas and incorporated the designs of their undead into his own fantasy world. The apparent lack of an afterlife and the appearance of eternal unrest make the general appearance of undeath in the *Lord of the Rings* quite un-Christian. The fact that Tolkien opted for a form of resurrection that is in no way related to Christian traditions could be interpreted as a conscious move to dismiss any Christian influences on this specific story-element.

3. Discussion and Conclusion

Despite its general perception by the public as a Christian work, Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* is perfectly able to stand on its own as an atheist work as well. This is for a very large part because the opposition between faithful and godless is not present in the work, whereas other oppositions, such as that between light and dark, are at the very forefront of the story. The two major themes of fleeting power and the nihilistic transition from the extraordinary to the mundane provide a solid foundation to anyone who would wish to read Tolkien's magnum opus free from religious influences. These religious influences are notably absent in the depiction of the inhabitants of Middle-Earth, suggesting that the mythological background of Middle-Earth is lacking in gods. The theme of fleeting power is present in many story elements, such as the exodus of the elves towards the lands over the great sea and the fall of Sauron. The transition from mundane to extraordinary permeates the text both in a literal and a stylistic sense. Not only is the world of Middle-Earth steadily being drained of its wondrous things, sometimes the wondrous things that remain are depicted as normal or bland. It is this steady transition from magical to normal that could be interpreted as nihilism. Since the suspense of disbelief is purely reserved for the rare occasions that something magical does occur, the magical aspect of the story is refuted. It could be argued that, because the magical aspect of the story is slowly being drained, the meaningful aspects of the story are being drained because the mundane is, at the end of the book, the only thing that remains. As such, the magical, and thus meaningful, aspects of the book are replaced by a perhaps unsettling sense of normalcy. The lack of meaningful aspects could be interpreted as nihilistic and to a greater extent atheistic.

Because the atheist aspect of the *Lord of the Rings* is not a topic that has been explored much by literary scholars, it is possible to expand upon the theoretical framework of this theory

in a much greater fashion. A solid addition to the atheist theory of the *Lord of the Rings* would be a study of the *Silmarillion*, as that work provides much more information and depth on the mythological, and perhaps even religious, framework of Tolkien's Middle-Earth. By analyzing the *Silmarillion* it could also be possible to expand upon the theory that Sauron is a god or half-god, by further developing the theory of omnipotence and omniscience provided in this paper. The theory of oppositions could also be used in future studies. The oppositions between the extraordinary and the mundane, as well as the theme of fleeting power is persistent throughout the story, and it is possible that there are many more examples of these two themes present in the *Lord of the Rings*. There could very well also be future studies dedicated purely to analyzing some of the smaller details that could be interpreted as atheist, details such as religious or anti-religious imagery of names, plants or locations. There are countless examples of details that could be interpreted in a nihilistic manner as well. Perhaps it is because Tolkien's greatest work is so rich and exquisitely detailed that it will be possible for many generations of literary scholars to interpret the story in a way that they see fit or, perhaps more importantly, in a way that suits the standards of modern-day society.

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