

The Subcreation Theory of J.R.R. Tolkien

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“We have come from God, and inevitably the myths woven by us, though they contain error, will also reflect a splintered fragment of the true light, the eternal truth that is with God. Indeed only by myth-making, only by becoming 'sub-creator' and inventing stories, can Man aspire to the state of perfection that he knew before the Fall.”

—J.R.R. Tolkien

“Let there be Light” - in the coming forth of Light in the Darkness, the world of created order is brought forth from the dark undifferentiated chaos. Light expresses through vast waves, glimmers, shining glints, soft diffusions, and subtle geometries, an infinite language of Light brings forth creation, and illuminates our own creations, our own subcreated worlds.

“Though all the crannies of the world we filled with Elves and Goblins, though we dared to build Gods and their houses out of dark and light, and sowed the seed of dragons, 'twas our right (used or misused). The right has not decayed.”¹

Tolkien's quote describes how creation was born out of dark and light, and refers to our creative right, which is exercised in what he called 'subcreation'. To put it simply, “[Tolkien] could view sub-creation as a form of worship, a way for creatures to express the divine image in them by becoming creators”²

Tolkien was a Christian and saw sub-creation as an opportunity to exercise our God-like characteristics endowed in Genesis 1:26, “Then God said, “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness.”. God created, therefore, we in His image, have the ability to create as well:

“Fantasy remains a human right: we make in our measure and in our derivative mode, because we are made: and not only made, but made in the image and likeness of a Maker.”

A "subcreator" is Tolkien's term for the true artist of Faërie, the one who constructs an alluring secondary world which we believe in so long as we are in it. It is not merely a case, as Coleridge argued, of the reader's suspending disbelief, but of the artist's sustaining *enchantment*.

1 Mythopoeia

2 David C. Downing - R. W. Schlosser. Sub-Creation or Smuggled Theology: Tolkien contra Lewis on Christian Fantasy

Enchantment – The High Elvish Craft

Fantasy, for Tolkien, is at heart the "making or glimpsing of Other-worlds"³. The "Elvish craft" of fantasy, properly practised, produces *enchantment* :

“(enchantment) produces a Secondary World into which both designer and spectator can enter, to the satisfaction of their senses while they are inside; but in’ its purity it is artistic in desire and purpose”⁴

To produce and sustain enchantment, one seeks to create “*the inner consistency of reality*”.

The inner consistency of reality is a fusion of true appreciation of the world as it is (Tolkien's 'primary creation'), and expressing the sub-created world within the laws of the world as we have previously found it (“*we make still by the law in which we’re made*”⁵).

“To make a Secondary World..commanding Secondary Belief will probably require labour and thought, and will certainly demand a special skill, a kind of Elvish Craft. Few attempt such difficult tasks. But when they are attempted and in any degree accomplished then we have a rare achievement of Art, indeed narrative story, story making in its primary and most potent mode”⁶

Bearing in mind that although Tolkien refers here to the 'narrative story', this notion of 'Elvish Craft' transcends authorship and certainly encompasses visual image making. Tolkien was a painter and illustrator as well as an author, and it is telling his definition of the Imagination is the “*mental power of image-making*”⁷ Tolkien uses the term “*Art*” which could potentially include various media, to designate “*the operative link between Imagination and the final result, Sub-creation*”⁸

The consistency of the inner world must be rigorous for the spell of enchantment to be successful, Tolkien cautions:

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

3 Essays 63

4 *ibid.*, pp. 52-53

5 Mythopoeia

6 On Fairy-stories

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Is 'enchantment', in the Tolkeinian sense, escapism? Tolkein pre-empted this criticism with an apologia:

“I have claimed that Escape is one of the main functions of fairy-stories, and since I do not disapprove of them, it is plain that I do not accept the tone of scorn or pity with which 'Escape' is now so often used. Why should a man be scorned if, finding himself in prison, he tries to get out and go home? Or if he cannot do so, he thinks and talks about other topics than jailers and prison-walls?”

What does Tolkein mean by 'prison-walls'? It should be at least vaguely apparent now that Tolkein's Catholicism is unconventional and tends toward the Neo-Platonic — medieval in spirit—thus human life is a form of trial of the soul, an incarnate purgatory, thus creativity functions as a positive escape, a contemplation and worshipful exploration of God's ideal forms, a positive endeavour that strives to bring us closer to an understanding of providence and of a spiritual level of truth that exists beyond experience in time and the sensual world. Thus enchantment offers a fulfilment, albeit partial, of the desires of the soul :

“(Fairy stories are) primarily concerned with possibility, but with desirability. If they awakened desire, satisfying it while often whetting it unbearably, they succeeded.”

Through enchantment, the product of fantasy, we retrieve the childlike wonder we may have left behind somewhere. And more importantly, through enchantment we regain, as Tolkien says, *"a clear view"*

Sanctified Sub-creation

In Tolkien's religious philosophy of creation and sub-creation, true creation is the exclusive province of God, and those who aspire to creation can only make echoes (good) or mockeries (evil) of Truth, of ideal forms. The sub-creation of works that echo the true primary creations of God is one way that mortals honour God.

*“I would with the beleaguered fools be told,
that keep an inner fastness where their gold,
impure and scanty, yet they loyally bring
to mint in image blurred of distant king,
or in fantastic banners weave the sheen
heraldic emblems of a lord unseen.”*

'Subcreation' may be 'made real' as it is vivified by God. For instance, in the Lord of the Rings legendarium, Aulë, creates the Dwarf race as an act of subcreation that honoured Eru Ilúvatar (The equivalent of God in Tolkien's writings), and which Eru accepted and made real.

But Morgoth created the Orc race as a foul mockery of the elf. All of Melkor, Morgoth's and Sauron's negative actions depend on lies and distortions, playing upon human's fear of death, which unbeknownst to the mind of humanity is Ilúvatar's greatest Gift.

Tolkien makes strong moral distinction between *Magic* and *Enchantment*. Magic, Tolkien says, is based on the desire

for power and control: it is "self-centred power which is the mark of the mere Magician." As C.S Lewis puts it in *The Abolition of Man*:

"For magic and applied science alike the problem is how to subdue reality to the wishes of men: the solution is a technique; and both, in the practice of this technique, are ready to do things hitherto regarded as disgusting and impious – such as digging up and mutilating the dead" ⁹

Tolkein himself casts a denigrating view upon applied science:

"Our myths may be misguided, but they steer however shakily towards the true harbour, while materialistic 'progress' leads only to a yawning abyss and the Iron Crown of the power of evil."

In contrast, *Enchantment*, is about the desire for God and the divine paradise, and not control. God is

"Uncorrupted it does not seek delusion, nor bewitchment and domination; it seeks shared enrichment, partners in making and delight, not slaves" ¹⁰

So, our right to creation is 'used and misused', and yet where sub-creations are made without mockery, drawn from Gods *evangelicum*, or subtle plane, in the spirit of worshipful craft, they are thence realised.

"...In Fantasy he may actually assist in the effoliation and multiple enrichment of creation. All tales may come true; and yet, at the last, redeemed, they may be as like and unlike the forms that we give them as Man, finally redeemed, will be like and unlike the fallen that we know."

The Effoliation of Creation

Effoliation refers to a tree giving forth new leaves, and trees figure heavily in Tolkein's imagery, both literary and visual. Tolkein describes at the end of *Lord of the Rings*, the leafless white tree of Gondon re-effoliating, resurrection like, after the defeat of Sauron. Tolkein also evokes the tree as a symbol of sub-creation itself, which we will come to shortly.

But first, in terms of sovereign sigils and heraldic illuminations, Tolkein explains in a letter, "I have among my 'papers' more than one version of a mythical 'tree', which crops up regularly at those times when I feel driven to pattern-designing"¹¹.

In these drawings, Tolkein repeats the subject while creating differently shaped flowers and leaves in each visualization

9 *OFS* p. 84.

10 *OFS* p. 74

11 (Letters 342)

of the Tree. Repetition is also evident in his technique. In his pen and ink illustrations for *The Hobbit*, he uses pointillism and basic cross-hatching, requiring the artist to obsessively repeat the same patterns in order to complete the picture ¹²

Tolkien's pattern-making in the heraldic devices he created for his characters in his repeated paisley designs and in drawings such as his color pencil designs of Numenorean Carpets. Tolkien's choice of technique and subject reveal much about his interest in repeated patterns as an aesthetic.

*“Each leaf, of oak and ash and thorn, is a unique embodiment of
the pattern, and for some this very year may be the embodiment,
the first ever seen and recognised, though oaks have put forth
leaves for countless generations of men”* ¹³

It may reasonably be asked what is meant here. He expresses that there exists 'the pattern' which has put forth and blossomed over countless generations. He refers to the similitude yet novelty of creation, something like the repetition of grand themes, symbols and archetypes that hold true to a certain form and essence, which is seen as 'new' to the fresh eyes that behold them. *“There is nothing new under the Sun”* (Ecclesiasties) and yet for ourselves, this ancient, primary creation may be witnessed as new and we may draw from it for fresh sub-creations, fresh blossomings unique for each soul. Tolkien expresses this using another tree metaphor: *“The seed of the tree can be replanted in almost any soil”* (“OFS” 66).

The Music of The Ainur

In speaking of consecrated subcreation, the seeking for 'divine effoliation' rather than mockery, one may find some further guidance in *The Simarillion*, where Tolkien wrote a genesis story for the world of the Lord of the Rings, to give cosmological gravitas, whereby he invokes these subtle patterns of God's laws as the "*Music of the Ainur*", chanted by the holy spirits or angelic pantheons emanated by *Eru*, The One (I.e God). This harmonic choral brings forth the world.

Music works with repetition of vibrational pattern. In this Music of the Ainur, which we can suppose is as vast as the Zodiacal 'music of the spheres' or equivalent to the Vedic seed syllables A or OM, we find the perfection of God's creativity.

Only a fallen Ainur, called Melkor, supposes he devises without Eru's consent, and at odds to the cosmic harmony, produces his own music in the midst of the choir —his pompous and overly-clever 'free jazz' introducing something like unpredictability, evil and chaos and 'mockery' into the world —which is represented in Midgard (Middle-earth, our mythic pre-history) as the manifestation of the diabolical Morgoth and later the Dark Lord Sauron. These dark forces mock the creation —they cannot actually create anything, but ravage and torture elves to create the orcs, and attempt to conquer the Human realm primarily by exploiting man's fear of Death by twisting minds and using lies and deceit, to further this end.

But also, since nothing is ultimately outside of Eru, The One, Melkor's existence may, on the level of the Absolute, have something to do with free will and the final perfecting of Creation. But this concern is philosophical, and far beyond the relative sphere of humans, who need to put up a strong and courageous fight against Melkor's manifestations, in order to continue existing free and unenslaved by fear and pain, and prevent Middle Earth from being twisted away from its intended divine design.

Thus, to uphold the Good, one must actively uphold the divine principles, which are in some way in tune with or in universal harmony with the “Music of the Ainur”, which in essence means echoing and playing in tune with 'the true, good and beautiful', even in situations of great duress. Through conflict and tragedy, the light-bearing valor of his

12(A&I 90-151).

13 OFS 66.

heros may be better expressed.

“Moonlight drowns out all but the brightest stars.”¹⁴

And, most importantly, Tolkein stresses ones elfin craft to contain at least glints of a powerful redemptive transcendent vision.

“Fairy tale does not deny the existence of sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance. It denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat...giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy; Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief.”

Thus Tolkein, through his telling of the Music of the Ainur, within the subcreation of Middle-earth, echoes and pays homage to his personal understanding of the nature of the Gospels and his faith, Christianity.

Happy Endings

“The Evangelium has not abrogated legends; it has hallowed them, especially the "happy ending." The Christian has still to work, with mind as well as body, to suffer, hope, and die; but he may now perceive that all his bents and faculties have a purpose, which can be redeemed.”

The short story "Leaf by Niggle" is Tolkein's nearest work to allegory, and was an expression on his beliefs about the nature of subcreation. A hobbit, Niggle, who's yearnings after truth and beauty (God's creations) are echoed and expressed in his great painting of a fantastic tree. After death, Niggle is rewarded with the realisation (the making-real) of his yearning¹⁵. Or, if you prefer, Niggle's Tree always existed in 'The All' —he simply echoed it in his earthly art. On arrival to paradise, Niggle beholds the tree he spent so long painting and exclaims *“Its a Gift!”*

14 *The Lord of the Rings*

15 Letter 153 *“I tried to show allegorically how [subcreation] might come to be taken up into Creation in some plane in my 'purgatorial' story Leaf by Niggle.”*