

I Cordially Dislike Allegory in All Its Manifestations

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Discovering J.R.R. Tolkien: Intellect and Imagination

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Introduction

In this essay, I will argue that Tolkien's famous protest against allegory in favour of the "varied applicability of history" was a conscious overstatement meant to deflect simplistic interpretations of his work, though he knew well that the line between the two, though real, is often ambiguous and amorphous. Precisely what the true relationship is between allegory and Tolkien's "varied applicability" I shall elaborate shortly, but first I will set the stage by examining what Tolkien has said about allegory, both his famous remark in context and additional material that sheds light on his views.

Tolkien's famous "dismissal" of allegory comes from the forward to the second edition of *The Lord of the Rings*, where he addressed many allegorical interpretations readers had devised.

In explaining why these readings are misguided, he claimed the following:

But I cordially dislike allegory in all its manifestations, and always have done so since I grew old and wary enough to detect its presence. I much prefer history, true or feigned, with its varied applicability to the thought and experience of readers. I think that many confuse 'applicability' with 'allegory'; but the one resides in the freedom of the reader, and the other in the purposed domination of the author.¹

At first this seems straightforward. We have, on one hand, "allegory" as literature in which the author makes certain elements correspond in some identifiable way to elements of the primary world. This contrasts with the idea of "applicability," that is, the many ways a reader may find lessons, parallels, or illumination from a story written with no such authorial design.

1. J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1968), "Forward to the Second Edition", e-book.

However, there is more to Tolkien's view. For example, in a letter to Milton Waldman, Tolkien wrote that he disliked "the conscious and intentional allegory,"² implying that there may be "allegory" which is *not* conscious and intentional, perhaps evading his distaste. Yet this concession seems *prima facie* to lie in tension with the unambiguous distinction cited above. This is the first hint that all is not so simple.

Further complicating the picture are other comments of Tolkien's that contradict his apparently flat denial that *The Lord of the Rings* is an allegory. In an unsent letter to Joanna de Bortadano, Tolkien opened, "Of course my story is not an allegory of Atomic power, but of *Power* (exerted for Domination)."³ He denies the story⁴ is an allegory of the atom bomb, but suggests it is allegorical of dominating power in general.

Then there is the case of Tom Bombadil. In a drafted letter to Peter Hastings, Tolkien remarked that he did not mean Tom to be an allegory, but he does serve certain functions for which he could be called an "allegory" of an undefiled natural science.⁵ This again qualifies Tolkien's expressed disapproval of allegory, but in a more complicated way. Tolkien said he did not mean Bombadil to be an allegory *per se*, yet he intentionally included him with the apparent reason⁶ that he felt those "allegorical" functions should not be left out. This roundabout element of authorial intent blurs what seemed to be a very simple demarcation.

2. J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, ed. Humphrey Carpenter and Christopher Tolkien (Houghton Mifflin, 1981), letter 131, e-book.

3. Tolkien, letter 186, emphasis original.

4. Probably especially the Ring itself.

5. Tolkien, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, letter 153.

6. Or at least one of the reasons.

Of course, Tolkien was no fool.⁷ Given the great efforts Tolkien expended to understand fairy stories and sub-creation, it would be too hasty to assume he was inconsistent or even confused either on his literary purposes or his distinguished terms. I will proceed, then, to offer a plausible understanding of why Tolkien spoke as he did in the *Lord of the Rings* forward and how we may relate allegory and applicability more accurately.

The simple explanation for Tolkien's comment: it was a preemptive attempt to prevent lazy and superficial readings of his creation. However deep the "rabbit hole" of Tolkien's intentions and allusions in *The Lord of the Rings* goes, it was not essentially or generally pedagogical, satirical, or prophetic. In a 1962 interview with BBC's John Bowen, he was asked why he created his secondary world before even working on *The Hobbit*. At the question he was first silent, as if it had never occurred to him. Then he only shrugged before saying he was not sure an answer is possible.⁸ This gets to the heart of the matter. Tolkien's sub-creative work was not born⁹ of an *agenda* or moral or even grand vision. As Flieger and Anderson explain in their introduction to "On Fairy Stories", his concept of fantasy was "[t]he ability of humankind to create an imagined world out of words."¹⁰ His work was just imagination applied to his peculiar interests, especially the philological ones.¹¹ Indeed, he slowly felt more that he had *discovered*

7. See: his life's work.

8. Sidh Aníron, *J.R.R Tolkien 1962 interview (subtitles)*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bi8q1Eopk2U>, YouTube, 2022, 3:12.

9. So far as his own knowledge and will were concerned.

10. Verlyn Flieger and Douglas A. Anderson, "Introduction," in *Tolkien on Fairy Stories*, ed. Verlyn Flieger and Douglas A. Anderson, (author: J.R.R. Tolkien) (HarperCollins), pg. 11.

11. For more on this, consult Raymond Edwards, *Tolkien* (Robert Hale Non-Fiction, 2014).

Middle Earth rather than created it,¹² thus for the reader to suppose in him the level of authorial domination implied in the usual meaning of allegory would give quite the wrong impression.

We should see the simplistic division of allegory from fiction with free applicability, then, as a rhetorical oversimplification. The point was to still readers before they hastily saw Tolkien's work and said, "This is about the War"¹³ or "Frodo's journey is about our spiritual pilgrimage." These shortcuts are inimical to a full appreciation of Tolkien's work, which is better understood in light of "On Fairy Stories." Tolkien saw fairy stories as *sub-creation*, making a "Secondary World" with an integrity of its own and into which your mind can enter with "Secondary Belief."¹⁴ While inside this world you believe it, in a sense, and returning to the "Primary World" happens when the spell is broken and the magic has failed.

The trouble with allegorically reading *The Lord of the Rings*, indeed allegory in general, is that it makes such a spell nearly impossible. If you enter the tale with the knowledge (or even the erroneous belief) that every part is *really* about the primary world, you can never fully plant both feet in the secondary world at all. Rather, you have a foot in each realm, never reaching that imaginative belief, alert at every moment to the strings connecting the elements of the secondary world to their origins and "real versions" in the primary world.

12. Edwards, *Tolkien*, ch. 15, § III. We also discussed this in Jason Lepojärvi, "Tolkien on Sub-creation," in *J.R.R. Tolkien: Intellect and Imagination* (Zoom, May 2022).

13. One of the examples he specifically lamented (Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, "Forward to the Second Edition").

14. J.R.R. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf* (HarperCollins Publishers, 2012), "Children" in "On Fairy Stories", e-book.

This inability to believe, the immunity from elvish magic, seems to be what Tolkien detested and tried to deflect by flatly denying that *The Lord of the Rings* is an allegory. Before concluding, I will incorporate this insight into the distinction between allegory and applicability.

To complete this puzzle, we will need to examine two more remarks Tolkien made on the nature of allegory. First, in the letter to Waldman cited above, Tolkien remarked that a fairy tale cannot avoid allegorical language. He then added that “the more ‘life’ a story has the more readily will it be susceptible of allegorical interpretations: while the better a deliberate allegory is made the more nearly will it be acceptable just as a story.”¹⁵ This intriguing comment receives further illumination from a related remark in another letter:

Of course, Allegory and Story converge, meeting somewhere in Truth... You can make the Ring into an allegory of our own time, if you like: an allegory of the inevitable fate that waits for all attempts to defeat evil power by power. *But that is only because all power magical or mechanical does always so work.*¹⁶

The final sentence is key. The “link” between the notions of allegory and of applicability is reality — the primary world — itself. Because even a pure imaginative invention, without ulterior motive or moral, must draw on the author’s “stock” of ideas and creatures in real life,¹⁷ he can never create a secondary world without infusing organic ties to the primary world, consciously or not.

We can therefore posit a spectrum, with “pure allegory” on one side and “pure story” on the other, measured by the *intentionality* and *specificity* of symbolic links between the primary world and the secondary world. On the side of pure allegory, the author designs every detail of the

15. Tolkien, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, letter 131.

16. Tolkien, letter 109, emphasis added.

17. Aníron, *J.R.R. Tolkien 1962 interview (subtitles)*.

story to map onto reality. By reading the allegory, you are reading commentary on the world you live in, just in an entertaining and thought-provoking way.¹⁸

The danger of pure allegory is that described above: failing to cast the spell of secondary belief. In translating elements of the primary world into a fictional form of (usually) a *very* different character, an author is liable to force elements of the secondary world into unnatural or incoherent relations.¹⁹ This phenomenon seems plausible as the precise object of Tolkien's intense literary displeasure.

The opposite is pure story, in which the author writes without any conscious interest in the primary world. This method presents no obstacles to constructing a coherent, credible secondary world. Since the author focuses directly on the sub-creation, he can perfect it on its own terms. However, since *sub*-creation is not creation *ex nihilo*, even its most original products remain derivative. Everything carries *some* connection to the real world materials of which the author forged it. Thus the objective character of these primary world sources always gives some inward form and direction to the artifices of the secondary world, and these artifices necessarily reflect *something*, however clear or distorted, about the world that is.

This category is the natural home of "applicability." Unlike in an allegory, where the authorial purpose dominates, in story *qua* story, the reader is free to observe and discover whatever truth about the primary world has found its way into the art. Even where the author did not resolve to symbolize or teach anything, the realities on which his creativity fed may manifest

18. At least if the tale is well-written.

19. For example, allegories which portray the Christian life as a tangible journey tend to skirt very awkwardly around the precise nature of any mortal perils into which the protagonist is thrown. If the real Christian life ends in death...

themselves in the story of their own accord, giving alert readers the opportunity to gain insight about the primary world in any unexpected place, even a Hobbit hole.

Naturally, in reality stories rarely (if ever) belong solely to one of these hypothetical archetypes. In Tolkien's commentary on Bombadil, for example, we find a strange admixture of intentional representation and sheer story, as he confessed to including Tom and all he represents on purpose, while at the same time he was a character designed in his own right for a number of unrelated ends, sufficiently so that (so far as Tolkien was self-aware) his name reflected nothing of his allegorical significance.

These ambiguities allow for the extended sense of the term "allegory" in general. Where an author clearly intends his sub-creation to have meaning for the primary world, yet he backs away from letting the shape of the primary world contort the inner integrity and coherence of the secondary world in its own right, we might equally consider affirming or denying the label "allegory." In a sub-creation as sprawling, diverse, and intricate as Tolkien's legendarium, it is hardly possible to predicate equal levels of allegorical intent (or lack thereof) to every element, and Tolkien was certainly sufficiently scrupulous about the coherence of his work to militate against any instrumentalization of the story to a "moral" or "symbolism" even where he had one in mind. There certainly *were* cases where Tolkien had primary world concerns in mind,²⁰ and this combined with his passion for sub-creational integrity suffices to explain how he could both apply and deny the name of "allegory" to his work.

20. A chief example of such concerns no doubt involve his Catholicism, since he described his work as "fundamentally religious and Catholic." Holly Ordway has argued on these grounds that although *The Lord of the Rings* may afford *insight* for Christian thought and apologetics, we err if we instrumentalize the story for these ends. See Holly Ordway, "The Maker of the Maker of Middle-earth," *Christianity Today*, 2018, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2018/august-web-only/tolkien-maker-of-middle-earth-bodleian-museum-oxford.html>.

In conclusion, I have argued that Tolkien's notorious rejection of allegory was not a true denial of any allegorical sense in his work but a simplified rhetorical move to prevent lazy readings which would prevent his stories from being understood as art in their own sub-created coherence. If we take the difference between allegory and applicability as a spectrum of intent rather than a binary, and we account for the inextricable organic interrelations between elements of the secondary world and their origin in the primary world, then all Tolkien claimed about *The Lord of the Rings*, even where it appears contradictory, becomes intelligible, and so indeed do the general qualities of allegory and other forms of story from which we learn profound truth about world fashioned by the Word and Spirit of God.

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