

Cosmic Renewal in J.R.R. Tolkien

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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 view of the cosmic and personal destiny visible in *Leaf by Niggle*, especially in light of its distinctive portrayal of Purgatory, could be called a kind of "gracious apocalypticism," a hope which expects a happy ending but not on human terms and only as unexpected gift, and indeed little other than decline and death on the human plane along the way. To explain this, I will begin with the structure of the story.

Under the Sun

As Holly Ordway noted, despite his reputation, Tolkien did write allegory at times, and *Leaf by Niggle* explicitly is one.¹ This allegorical tale divides naturally into three sections: Niggle's life at home, his time in the Workhouse, and at last the green country. Even a cursory reading with vague awareness of Catholic theology will suffice for a reader to grasp that only this first section represents the present life, after which comes Purgatory, as Craig Boyd has rightly noted.² The portrayal of the present life in *Niggle* is far from positive. The sheer dominance of negative words sets the tone: "distasteful," "nuisance," "uncomfortable," "bothered," "interruptions," "neglected," "unlucky," "awkward," "swearing," etc.³ The ending⁴ of the present life confirms this gloomy quality, as Niggle's work was destroyed thankless and incomplete.

1. Holly Ordway, "Discovering Tolkien Q&A," in *J.R.R. Tolkien: Intellect and Imagination* (Zoom, May 2022), 1:39-1:40.

2. Craig A. Boyd, "The Thomistic Virtue of Hope in Tolkien's *Leaf by Niggle*," *Christian Scholar's Review*, 2019, <https://christianscholars.com/the-thomistic-virtue-of-hope-in-tolkiens-leaf-by-niggle/>.

3. J.R.R. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf* (HarperCollins Publishers, 2012), "Leaf by Niggle", e-book.

4. An element of stories to which Tolkien attached the utmost importance: Tolkien, "On Fairy Stories".

This corresponds to what else we know of Tolkien's views on life "under the sun." A concise example is Tolkien's comment to Amy Ronald that, as a Christian, he does not expect human history to be anything but a "long defeat."⁵ This seems related to another famous declaration: there "cannot be any 'story' without a fall — all stories are ultimately about the fall."⁶ This presumably applies not only to fictional stories but just as much to reality, for he also identified the Gospel as the great and true *story*. In yet another letter he referred to the temporal order as a "chain of death."⁷

"On Fairy Stories" also supports this by contrast with "euchatastrophe." Tolkien speaks of the saving "good turn" as a "sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur."⁸ This confirms the generally negative and fragile character Tolkien saw in all human labors in this life. A happy ending comes from without: the immanent frame does not produce it. If the future will be truly good, it requires a miraculous break from before, given as a gift.

If we judge Tolkien simply in terms of the present life, then, he seems something like a "pessimist." Further support could readily be seen in the events of *The Silmarillion*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and the sequel which Tolkien briefly considered, in which all victories are bittersweet, no works of men or elves endure, and every glory lasts but for a moment. So much for the present. For the future, we must return to *Leaf by Niggle*.

5. J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, ed. Humphrey Carpenter and Christopher Tolkien (Houghton Mifflin, 1981), letter 195, e-book.

6. Tolkien, letter 131.

7. Tolkien, letter 89.

8. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, "On Fairy Stories".

Transitory Flames

If the present is such a mess, what of the future? In *Leaf by Niggle*, after Niggle goes on his journey, he moves to the Workhouse, which seems evidently to represent Purgatory. The place begins miserably, with bitter medicine, a severe doctor, and ceaseless hard labor. There Niggle felt no pleasure or relief for a long time, but he was able to reflect and improve upon many of his past failings. Perhaps in most extreme contrast to his prior life, in the Workhouse Niggle became “master of his time,” aware and productive in all his tasks. Eventually, after much of this development and an assessment of his case tempered by mercy, Niggle is free to move on.

What can be made of this? There is no reward or pleasure at this stage. Niggle is simply working and mostly suffering, but at the same time he is *improving* in ways that specifically counter his earthly faults. This need for improvement, however unpleasant, seems to be central to what Tolkien had in mind. For Tolkien, the sufferings of the present seem to result entirely (or nearly so) from the abuse of free will, whether our own or someone else’s.⁹ As Ordway explained of Tolkien’s view,

Looking at the most deep-rooted corruption, exploitation, and cruelty in our own world, we should recognize both that the immediate cause of this evil can be found in human choices to do evil, and also that diabolic activity has a role as well.¹⁰

To further confirm this, I will summarize the Catholic dogma which Tolkien, ever traditional and orthodox,¹¹ no doubt acknowledged. The Roman view holds that men earn both

9. A number of references are relevant here, but see Tolkien, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, letter 153 and some of the discussion in John Garth, “Discovering Tolkien Q&A,” in *J.R.R. Tolkien: Intellect and Imagination* (Zoom, May 2022). Of central importance are his reflections on the falls of angels and men and his presentation in the *Ainulindale* of all evils in the world descending from Melkor’s pre-creation rebellion.

10. Holly Ordway, “Recovering a Vision of the Cosmos: Tolkien’s Creation Narrative in the *The Silmarillion*,” in *The Story of the Cosmos*, ed. Daniel Ray and Paul Gould (Harvest House Publishers, 2019), 167–180.

11. Raymond Edwards, *Tolkien* (Robert Hale Non-Fiction, 2014), pt. 1, ch. 1, § 2.

temporal and eternal punishments for sin, and that if temporal punishments remain at death, these must be inflicted after death to purify the soul for the Beatific Vision.¹² This tracks with Niggle's situation, in which his complete lack of preparation for death on account of several vices leads him to his long and unpleasant stay in the Workhouse. Yet I believe there is more going on in Tolkien's conception of Purgatory than the standard Catholic accounts incorporate.

Purgatorial Peace

Earlier I cited Craig Boyd on the identification of the Workhouse with Purgatory, but now I must dissent from him. Boyd also identified the beautiful green country in the last act with the Beatific Vision. I believe he is simply wrong. The country in which Niggle finds the Tree cannot truly be Heaven, for it bears clear marks of penultimacy: First, Niggle and Parish continue to labor and to learn from their past mistakes, even if more pleasantly than at the Workhouse. This process only makes sense in purgatorial terms.¹³ Second, the conversation with the shepherd, Parish's decision to await his wife, and the Second Voice implying that people sometimes have to return to the Workhouse after visiting this country¹⁴ all join with context to show the Mountains are the final destination.¹⁵

12. Hanna Edward, "Purgatory," *The Catholic Encyclopedia* 12 (1911), <https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/12575a.htm>.

13. It seems odd that Boyd would not recognize this, since he comments on precisely this feature of their time there: "Together they begin the work and after time passes they complete the Tree. They regret their failure to perceive the goodness and gifts the other person possessed in the world before the Workhouse and they begin to realize that they could not have accomplished the work on the Tree as individuals working alone." Boyd, "The Thomistic Virtue of Hope in Tolkien's *Leaf by Niggle*."

14. "I am sending more and more there. They seldom have to come back."

15. Raymond Edwards correctly recognizes this and connects it to C. S. Lewis's Mountains in *The Great Divorce*. See Edwards, *Tolkien*, appendix, II

If Niggle's Parish is not Heaven, it seems more like a final stage of Purgatory, far less unpleasant than the rest and meant more for healing than reformation *per se*. This claim may seem strange: certainly the traditional doctrine of Purgatory is not known for including such an idyllic recovery near its end. However, it seems Tolkien himself had such a notion, wherever he got it. I shall demonstrate this from a few references in his letters.

The chief evidence involves Frodo's stay in Valinor after *The Lord of the Rings*. In a draft letter to Elieen Elgar, Tolkien spoke of this as going "both to a purgatory and to a reward."¹⁶ He referred to the sojourn as "a period of reflection and peace and a gaining of a truer understanding." Similarly, in a letter to Roger Green, he said it was a "'purgatory', but one of peace and healing."¹⁷ In a footnote to another draft letter, he used the adjective "purgatorial" here,¹⁸ precisely the same term he used to describe the story of *Leaf by Niggle* to Peter Hastings.¹⁹

This suggests that Tolkien viewed Purgatory not only in terms of the more "punishing" purification but, after a certain point, as a place of rest and healing before the Beatific Vision. The difference between the two might come down to the will. Niggle has no choice how long he spends in the Workhouse. Rather, he is judged by superiors. By contrast, when the time comes to leave for the Mountains, he is asked and accepts. This parallels Tolkien's comment about mortals in Valinor: "they can and will 'die' — of free will, and leave the world."²⁰ So perhaps his view

16. Tolkien, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, letter 246.

17. Tolkien, letter 325.

18. Tolkien, fn. 119, letter 297.

19. "...my 'purgatorial' story *Leaf by Niggle*..." in Tolkien, letter 153.

20. Tolkien, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, letter 154. Cf. letter 325 ("they would eventually pass away (die at their own desire and of free will)").

was that Purgatory held one only for a time, but after the penalties are satisfied, a man may need further time to prepare to make the final advance to God freely. Whether this is exactly his view is speculative, but it would make sense of the story and its parallels in how Tolkien explained Frodo's fate using purgatorial language.

The Apocalypse of Grace

If it is true that *Leaf by Niggle* ends with Niggle on his way out of Purgatory but stops before the Beatific Vision, can we learn anything of Tolkien's ultimate vision of the end of the story, for us as individuals or cosmologically? Indeed we can. To set this part straight, we will need to briefly recall Tolkien's concept of "euchatastrophe." The topic can hardly be introduced better than by Tolkien himself:

The consolation of fairy-stories, the joy of the happy ending: or more correctly of the good catastrophe, the sudden joyous 'turn' (for there is no true end to any fairy-tale): this joy, which is one of the things which fairy-stories can produce supremely well, is not essentially 'escapist', nor 'fugitive'. In its fairy-tale — or otherworld — setting, it is a sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur. It does not deny the existence of *dyscatastrophe*, 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 and in so far is *evangelium*, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief.²¹

The euchatastrophe is the ultimate "gift," being a sudden grace from beyond the walls of the world. This seems to be Tolkien's final vision for the cosmos, especially given his regular identification of the Gospel euchatastrophe as the climax of the True Myth. It also, however, can be glimpsed in *Leaf by Niggle* when Niggle first sees the Tree. He exclaims "It's a gift," and it does indeed serve as a sudden, miraculous turn which changes everything for Niggle for the

21. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, "On Fairy Stories".

better. Though we have seen reason to believe he is still in Purgatory, this moment seems to be the first taste of what is to come.²²

It is also precisely the gift of the Tree which sets Niggle on his final path of improvement and reconciliation in partnership with Parish. This, I suggest, is of great consequence for my initial argument. To Tolkien, the happy ending shall come, but it does not emerge from human efforts. Niggle's work in life could not make the Tree suddenly stand before him; nothing short of the Secret Fire could do that. This is much more so since his vices prevented him from even approaching completion before his journey.

Yet it is *Niggle's work* which finds a home in the end, one of enduring significance, even if on earth he was forgotten. Despite the inadequacies and limitations both Niggle and Parish possessed in their lifetimes, their labors were taken up into something that transcended either of them. Though this was beyond their efforts in themselves, by miraculous grace their subcreative labors transcended their mundane lives.

Putting this together presents a clearer view of how Tolkien saw the future. Our present world is decaying, and though there are smaller euchatastrophes along the way, the long story is collapse and decline. Even the best men are beset with sins and failings that compromise and sabotage all human efforts. The most we can hope for are temporary, small-scale victories that time will one day wash out.

However, this is only true within the immanent frame. Though human vice and error poison everything, God above can distil the poison into new medicine, occasionally now but ultimately in the life to come. As John Garth put it, "Despite the worst intentions and outcomes,

22. He does glimpse the Mountains at this time, after all.

despite the evils and sufferings within the created world, the discord will somehow enhance Creation. With it, the story of our world will be a better, braver and more beautiful one.”²³ Even our failings will contribute to the final product, but in spite of themselves, and only by the euchatastrophic grace of God, who from beyond the walls of the world weaves all things into beauty. (Indeed, as some have noted, even Tolkien’s linguistic love arose from this dynamic after Babel.)²⁴ Nothing men do has the power to secure this destiny, but if we do good in our small, silly ways, God may give our works supernatural persistence and craft them into something unimaginable.

23. John Garth, “Ilu’s Music: The Creation of Tolkien’s Creation Myth,” in *Sub-creating Arda: World-building in J.R.R. Tolkien’s Work, its Precursors and its Legacies*, ed. Dimitra Fimi and Thomas Honegger (Walking Tree Publishers, 2019), 9–43.

24. Jason Lepojärvi, “Tolkien on Sin and Suffering,” in *J.R.R. Tolkien: Intellect and Imagination* (Zoom, May 2022), 39:00-40:00.

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