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Hope Without Assurance: The Eucatastrophic Nature of Tolkien's Arda

Grant Glavin
University of Central Florida

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HOPE WITHOUT ASSURANCE:

THE EUCATASTROPHIC NATURE OF TOLKIEN'S ARDA

by

GRANT GLAVIN

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ABSTRACT

J.R.R. Tolkien's massive body of work represents decades of effort from a man who, burdened by the suffering and grief of a world he considered to be fallen, wished to combine his love of fairy-stories and mythology with the otherworldly hope of *eucatastrophe*, Tolkien's word for unexpected divine joy amid suffering, present at the heart of his strong Catholic beliefs. Tolkien's world of Arda is consequently full of suffering; it is written as a dark and dangerous place, where *dyscatastrophe*, the prerequisite suffering before eucatastrophe, exists within the world from its conception and Eden has never been obtainable for Men. By chronologically tracing the existence of suffering in Tolkien's world, from its origin through the fall of Melkor, to the grievous immortality of the Elves and their possessive love of the world, and finally to the fear of death present in Men, this paper aims to combine these moments of suffering and the underlying hope within them in order to show the necessity of eucatastrophe to Tolkien's world through several of his major works. By focusing primarily on *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion* while showing his use of *amdir* and *estel*, the different hopes of Men and Elves, as tools in service of eucatastrophe to highlight the hope present within our own world, this paper argues for eucatastrophe, dyscatastrophe, *amdir*, and *estel* as primary components to the major theme of death and immortality within Tolkien's works, purposeful inclusions designed to give readers a glimpse of joy beyond their own world, which Tolkien held to be the most important function of the fairy-stories he loved.

DEDICATION

About suffering they were never wrong,
The old Masters: how well they understood
Its human position: how it takes place.

W.H. Auden

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Introduction

In a hole in the ground there lived an author. The genesis of John Ronald Reuel Tolkien's writings is often traced to his experience as an officer in the muddy trenches of World War I, where he witnessed the kinds of suffering, death, and hope which would come to define his future works like *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and *The Silmarillion*. Within these works, J.R.R. Tolkien's world of Arda is indeed filled with suffering: characters are killed, corrupted, or injured, hope is commonly described as an impossibility, and the pain inflicted by evil is woven throughout his stories. Arda, at a first glance, is a bleak place, but it is not defined by the suffering present within it.[1] Instead, Tolkien defines Arda through several different concepts commonly threaded by hope.

The most prominent of these is *eucatastrophe*, Tolkien's concept of an unlooked-for "good catastrophe, the sudden joyous 'turn' (for there is no true end to any fairy-tale)" which he often placed directly within moments of intense suffering (Tolkien, *On Fairy-stories* 75*).* To Tolkien, eucatastrophe is not a direct solution to its opposite, *dyscatastrophe*, which he uses to refer to the suffering and loss present in the world. Instead, he uses dyscatastrophe as a prerequisite for eucatastrophe, which "denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat" (Tolkien, *On Fairy-stories* 75). Tolkien defines the eucatastrophe within his stories by his own experiences with suffering and his Catholic beliefs; he contrasts the Catholic belief of the 'fallen' mortality of Men against the fictional race of his fallen immortal Elves, who are forever bound to the world and its suffering, using this contrast to highlight the joy presented by death, which allows Men an escape through an existence with their Creator.

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[1] The terms "Arda" and "Middle-earth" are often used interchangeably, but officially "Arda" refers to the entire world. "Middle-earth" refers to the specific continent within Arda where *The Lord of the Rings* primarily takes place. It is separate from Aman, which houses Valinor, the realm of the Valar.

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Threaded within Tolkien's contrast is hope of two kinds: *amdir*, the worldly hope common to Men, and *estel*, the deeper hope common to Elves. By highlighting, discussing, and comparing the moments of suffering, death and hope within Tolkien's life and works—particularly *The Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings*—through his recurring patterns of dyscatastrophe, *amdir*, *estel*, and eucatastrophe, I hope to show the necessity of these concepts to the thematic structure of Tolkien's works. Focusing on the moments of suffering, death, and hope within Arda will show how Tolkien specifically uses his concepts as tools to create works which fulfill what he considered to be the highest function of fairy-stories: "Christian joy, which produces tears because it is qualitatively so like sorrow," and which ultimately transcends the death and grief within our fallen world (Tolkien, *Letters* 100).

Tolkien, Allegory, & Experience

J.R.R. Tolkien's influence has been inescapable since the popularization of his works. From Dungeons & Dragons to *Game of Thrones*, it is hard to find a piece of fantasy media from the last fifty years which has not been influenced in some way by the author's works. Due to Tolkien's massive popularity, details of his life have been intensely sought out by fans wishing to better understand both the author and his works. Tolkien, both typically and frustratingly, did not make this easy during his lifetime. Tolkien remained an intensely private person throughout his life, frequently refusing interviews and expressing a distaste towards works which placed him as the center of attention. In a 1966 letter to the poet W.H. Auden, a former student of his, Tolkien curtly dismisses Auden's proposal of a biography about him:

> I regret very much to hear that you have contracted to write a book about me. It does meet with my strong disapproval. I regard such things as premature impertinences; and unless undertaken by an intimate friend, or with consultation of the subject (for which I have at present no time), I cannot believe that they have a usefulness to justify the distaste and irritation given to the victim. I wish at any rate that any book could wait until I produce the *Silmarillion*. I am constantly interrupted in this – but nothing interferes more than the present pother about 'me' and my history. (Tolkien, *Letters* 367)

This letter offers a glimpse of Tolkien's attitude: dry, forward, witty (biographical 'victims' is a wonderfully understated jab), and unflinchingly earnest about his passion for his work. Tolkien, as a rule, tended to redirect much of the focus on himself towards his works, which he spent much of his life writing and editing. This insistence on privacy created both an air of mystery around him as well as his works. Somewhat ironically, despite being a very private man Tolkien's personal writing output was enormous, and many of his letters, even those written to fans, are remarkably intimate.[2]

This leaves us to try and piece together a picture of him from the words he left behind, both in his stories and his personal letters. While this is a relatively straightforward process with his personal letters, it becomes much harder when looking at his published works. Tolkien very famously rejected any allegorical readings of his works, stating:

> 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 (Tolkien, *Rings* xxiv).

Tolkien's purposeful resistance to allegory and his insistence on privacy make it difficult to trace his influences within his stories. C.S. Lewis once commented on this difficulty, stating that "No-one ever influenced Tolkien—you might as well try to influence a Bandersnatch" (Jones 72).

While Tolkien may have resisted allegory, he understood well that the line between applicability and allegory is thin, stating, "[a]n author cannot of course remain wholly unaffected by his experience" (Tolkien, *Rings* xxiv). Any creation from a particular person will inevitably reflect some of the infinite number of experiences and viewpoints which form them. To Tolkien, the effort of trying to trace it all entirely is vain, as "the ways in which a story-germ uses the soil

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[2] Tolkien's letters were published by Humphrey Carpenter with the approval and assistance of his son, Christopher, whose life was dedicated to editing and publishing his father's writing while honoring his father's vision as closely as possible. It is impossible to know if Tolkien would have approved of his letters being published.

of experience are extremely complex, and attempts to define the process are at best guesses" (Tolkien, *Rings* xxiv). For Tolkien, meaning defined by the reader through applicability rather than an author's allegory makes for a more approachable story. Despite this, he does not dismiss the idea of linking parts of his stories to his own experiences; he explicitly makes a "slender" link between the Scouring of the Shire and the "country in which I lived in childhood" which was "being shabbily destroyed before I was ten" (Tolkien, *Rings* xxv). All of this leads to a rejection of purposeful allegory as well as a simultaneous acceptance of the inevitable infusion of Tolkien into his own work. In this view, it would be folly to claim that Tolkien wrote Saruman as an explicit allegory for the evils of increasing industrialization, but it would be fair for a reader to draw a very distinct parallel between Tolkien's noted scorn for machines—particularly the "'infernal combustion' engine"— and the evil Saruman's "mind of metal and wheels" (Tolkien, *Letters* 77; *Rings* 473). Saruman is not an allegory; he is a fallen wizard. His fall just occurs through the mode of industrialized power, which Tolkien viewed as a horrid corruption of creative prowess.[3]

Tolkien, War, and Power

With Tolkien's preference for applicability in mind, we must still briefly explore Tolkien's experience in World War I, which had a profound impact on him as a young man, filling him with "urgency and gravity" and taking him "through terror, sorrow, and unexpected joy" (Garth 309). Dyscatastrophe must be included here; Tolkien's world was uncommonly dyscatastrophic, though his conception of it extends beyond its inherent suffering. For Tolkien, the horrific suffering of dyscatastrophe functioned as a necessary prelude to the fleeting joy of

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[3] Immediately after mentioning the "'infernal combustion' engine, Tolkien wishes, somewhat futilely, "since humanity and engineers in special are both nitwitted and malicious as a rule," that the engineering marvel "could have been put to rational uses – if any . . . ." (Tolkien, *Letters* 77).

eucatastrophe. As the war began, Tolkien was at Oxford, finishing his English literature degree. During this time, he remained in a club with his close friends they had formed at an earlier school called the 'Tea Club, Barrovian Society' [TCBS]. This club consisted mainly of a core of four: Tolkien and his three closest friends: Rob Gilson, Geoffrey Smith, and Christopher Wiseman. During his undergraduate studies at Oxford, they all continued to remain close. For Tolkien, this fellowship was crucial; in a letter to Smith, he writes:

> I cannot abandon yet the hope and ambitions . . . that first became conscious at the Council of London.[4] That Council was as you know followed in my own case with my finding a voice for all kinds of pent up things and a tremendous opening up of everything for me:— I have always laid that to the credit of the inspiration that even a few hours with the four always brought to all of us. (Tolkien, *Letters* 10)

His love and admiration for his friends in the TCBS became a foundational eucatastrophic focus in his young life, as he felt the group "had been granted some spark of fire" in order to "testify for God and Truth in a more direct way even than by laying down its several lives in this war" (Tolkien, *Letters* 10).

Unfortunately, the war quickly ripped the TCBS apart. In July of 1916, on the first day of the Battle of the Somme, Rob Gilson was killed while going over the trenches. Tolkien, upon finding out about Rob's death, wrote: "I do not feel a member of a complete body now. I honestly feel that the T.C.B.S. has ended" (Tolkien, qtd. in Carpenter 92). A few months later, Geoffrey Smith was killed as well. He had written an earlier letter to Tolkien in which he discusses death in a hopeful and poignant way: "Death can make us loathsome and helpless as individuals, but it cannot put an end to the immortal four . . . May God bless you, my dear John

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[4] The Council of London was a TCBS meeting in December of 1914. This meeting solidified Tolkien's developing interest in poetry, which led him to compose the "Shores of Faëry," a poem written in July of 1915. This poem features some of the earliest mentions of characters and locations which would become prominent in his Middle-earth stories, including Valinor, the land of the gods, and Eärendel, an early version of Eärendil the sailor, Elrond's father.

Ronald, and may you say the things I have tried to say long after I am not there to say them, if such be my lot" (Smith, qtd. in Carpenter 94).

The deaths of his friends and the horrors of World War I stayed with Tolkien for the rest of his life. Writing to Smith before his death, Tolkien places suffering as a prerequisite for glory in life; he uses Rob Gilson's death as a comparison: "The greatness which Rob has found is in no way smaller – for the greatness I meant and tremblingly hoped for as ours is valueless unless steeped with the same holiness of courage suffering and sacrifice" (Tolkien, *Letters* 9). As an officer in the military, he extended this view to the non-officers he was surrounded by and whose company he preferred to those in power above him. He wrote of the non-officers as "so far superior to myself" since their sacrifices made up the majority of the numerous deaths during the war. (Tolkien, qtd. in Carpenter 89).

While he viewed suffering as a necessary prelude to greatness, he continued to resent that the chance for greatness often came through something as horrific as war; writing to his son Christopher who was serving in World War II at the time, Tolkien bitterly rues "[h]ow stupid everything is," and complains that "war multiplies the stupidity by 3 and its power by itself" (Tolkien, *Letters* 73). Despite modernist literature of his time gravitating towards disillusionment after World War 1, Amanda Johnston states that "Tolkien was not a modernist writer in any traditional sense," and while he indeed expressed disdain towards many modern issues such as rapidly growing industrialization, he wrote in ways which reflected "real-world issues of his day through his fantasy world" through the lens of empathy rooted in hopeful faith (145–146). Much of Tolkien's sympathy for the common man and anger over the futility of war is expressed through bitter scorn towards both those in power who propagate the destruction of warfare and those among the lower classes who revel in it. He has empathy for those who are manipulated in

the name of power, sympathetically describing Germans under Nazi leadership during World

War II as possessing "virtues (and they are virtues) of obedience and patriotism . . . whose

industry is about 10 times greater . . . [a]nd who are – under the curse of God – now led by a man

inspired by a mad, whirlwind, devil: a typhoon, a passion" (Tolkien, *Letters* 55). This criticism

of mad power exemplifies Tolkien's consistent belief that power, when exercised through a

dominant will for controlling purposes, inevitably causes suffering; Tolkien viewed this suffering

as a rapidly increasing force throughout the history of man and greatly lamented its growth:

> There seem no bowels of mercy or compassion, no imagination, left in this dark diabolic hour. . . We were supposed to have reached a stage of civilization in which it might still be necessary to execute a criminal, but not to gloat, or to hang his wife and child by him while the orc-crowd hooted. The destruction of Germany, be it 100 times merited, is one of the most appalling world-catastrophes . . . the first War of the Machines seems to be drawing to its final inconclusive chapter – leaving, alas, everyone the poorer, many bereaved or maimed and millions dead, and only one thing triumphant: the Machines. (Tolkien, *Letters* 111)

Tolkien's derisive moniker for World War II, the "War of the Machines," at first seems only

fitting for one of his fantasy worlds, but he seems to be attaching his own dyscatastrophic

applicability to a war dominated by technology, which had transformed fighting so completely

since World War I that it could only appear alien to those, like Tolkien, who had fought in a

now-primitive mode. It is worth nothing here that on Tolkien's battlefield, the beginning stages

of this technological revolution were already underway. Industrial developments in World War I,

like advanced artillery fire, tanks, and the machine gun created an unprecedented slaughterhouse,

one so hellishly devastating that Tolkien's conclusive view of industry as merely a co-opted tool

for destruction feels unavoidable. To live through the unprecedented carnage of the Somme only

to hear of the unfathomable power of the atomic bomb years later only reinforced Tolkien's view

that life itself had become expendable, a useful sacrifice for those few 'great' men like Hitler,

whose lust for power ran boundlessly.[5] In Tolkien's view, the world was trending towards complete dyscatastrophic ruin, helped along by the Machines.

Tolkien's Writing

One of Tolkien's consistent escapes from such a miserably fallen world came in the form of writing, which was of sacred importance to him. This importance is seen in many of his published letters which humorously feature his complaints about having his writing delayed by some outside force. In 1937, J.R.R. Tolkien published the first of his works set in a fictional land: *The Hobbit*, a fairy-tale-like children's story about a Hobbit and his adventures with a wizard, a dragon, and dwarves. The success of *The Hobbit* prompted his publisher to begin discussions with him concerning a sequel; Tolkien wrote to them and showed them several of his writings which were in-progress at the time. Among these, he included an early version of *The Silmarillion*, his ongoing attempt at a cosmogonic narrative to supplement the world of Middle-earth. While *The Silmarillion* was rejected as a sequel, it was not fully dismissed, nor did Tolkien stop work on it. He kept his attention on the world of Arda and began to create a new story, far broader in scope than *The Hobbit* yet more restrained than the cosmogonic *Silmarillion*, one that would include more adult themes and function more in service towards the "construction of elaborate and consistent mythology" than *The Hobbit*'s "comic tale among conventional and inconsistent Grimm's fairy-tale dwarves" (Tolkien, *Letters* 26). This story would allow Tolkien an unrestricted chance to place his readers fully within the world he had envisioned since his time in the trenches of World War I. Somewhat ironically, the popularity of *The Hobbit* had also created a narrative problem for Tolkien. He wished to publish stories of Arda, yet none of his

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[5] Tolkien's thoughts days after the detonation of atomic bombs against Japan: "The news today about 'Atomic bombs' is so horrifying one is stunned. The utter folly of these lunatic physicists to consent to do such work for war-purposes: calmly plotting the destruction of the world!" (*Letters* 116).

unpublished writings about Arda contained anything about Hobbits. When he presented some of his legendarium writings to publishers, they rejected them for being too different from *The Hobbit*.[6]

This new story became *The Lord of the Rings*, an epic tale in the tradition of medieval romance spread over three volumes, which Tolkien used as an opportunity to connect the lighter world of *The Hobbit* with his more 'serious' mythological works by weaving dyscatastrophe, eucatastrophe, *amdir*, and *estel* more into its structure. Featuring several characters from *The Hobbit* while expanding on the world of Middle-earth and its history by melding parts of his serious cosmogonic mythology of Arda with the simple, rustic world of his Hobbits, Tolkien succeeded at creating a more elaborate world. The story's massive scope includes at its center the struggle between the free inhabitants of Middle-earth and the evil Sauron, a malevolent force bent on dominating all free will for his own power. The somber tone of the story features noticeably darker themes, sorrowful moments of painful dyscatastrophe, and a foreboding sense of loss, reflecting Tolkien's worldview more than the lighter tale of *The Hobbit*. This choice paid off: *The Lord of the Rings* was so successful that Tolkien quickly began work on revising *The Hobbit* closer to its more complex tone. The success of *The Lord of the Rings* fueled immediate theorizing about its meaning and wild speculation about hidden allegories within the text, with many post-war readers viewing the massive war against an apocalyptic power at the heart of the story as an allegory for the dangers of atomic power. While the applicability of this comparison is understandable given that the books were published in the immediate post-war era, Tolkien began writing these stories long before World War II and explicitly denied them as an allegory.

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[6] Tolkien writes that his "Elvish Legends," which is one of his terms for the stories of *The Silmarillion*, were "turned down" for being "too full of the kind of Celtic beauty that maddened Anglo-Saxons in a large dose. Very likely quite right" (*Letters* 215).

Tolkien, Catholicism, & Eucatastrophe

In a letter discussing *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien dismisses his story as an allegory for atomic power, stating that power is not the thematic center of the story. He points elsewhere, stating:

> The real theme for me is about something much more permanent and difficult: Death and Immortality: the mystery of the love of the world in the hearts of a race 'doomed' to leave and seemingly lose it; the anguish in the hearts of a race 'doomed' not to leave it, until its whole evil-aroused story is complete. (Tolkien, *Letters* 246)

This quote, while seemingly definitive and illuminating, was for a long time overlooked in larger academic conversations about Tolkien's works, which have tended to center around either the corrupting magic of the One Ring, or, more recently, racial disparities between the various peoples of Arda. Conversations about death and immortality in Tolkien's world have often focused on either Tolkien's own experiences with death during World War I or focused on his immortal Elves.[7] Dimitri Fimi talks about suffering in Tolkien's world and focuses heavily on eucatastrophe, Tolkien's invented word for the concept of a suddenly joyful resolution to a sorrowful tale. She connects Tolkien's eucatastrophe to the concept of 'charmolypi,' where "joy and sorrow blend seamlessly," arguing that the unexpectedness of eucatastrophe is what gives it such great impact in Tolkien's works (Fimi 189). While I largely agree with her view, I believe that the unexpectedness of Tolkien's eucatastrophe must be threaded with hope.

To Tolkien, the idea of 'eucatastrophe' was the most critical component of fairy stories, which he deeply loved, and the Christian Gospels, whose message of redemption he held to represent "the one great thing to love on earth" (Tolkien, *Letters* 53).[8] In Tolkien's view, the

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[7] See *Death and Immortality in Middle-earth: Proceedings of the Tolkien Society Seminar*, edited by Daniel Helen.
[8] Within this letter to his son Michael, Tolkien is referring to the Blessed Sacrament, the redemptive Catholic representation (wine and bread) of the body and blood of Christ, through whom humanity is redeemed. He states his belief that within the Sacrament can be found "romance, glory, honour, fidelity, and the true way of all your loves upon earth" (*Letters* 53).

great value of fairy-stories came from what he believed to be the 'good news' delivered from their highest function "as *evangelium*, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world" (Tolkien, *On Fairy-stories* 75). In his Catholic view, this eucatastrophic joy was a direct glimpse of God. This alone made them "worthy to be written for and read by adults," who he believed could "put more in and get more out than children can" (Tolkien, *On Fairy-Stories* 58). Likewise, he considered the Gospels to be the "greatest Fairy Story" ever written, as they told the story of the birth and resurrection of Jesus, the "greatest and most complete conceivable eucatastrophe" which "has entered history and the Primary world; the desire and aspiration of sub-creation has been raised to the fulfillment of Creation" (Tolkien, *Letters* 100; *On Fairy-stories* 78). To Tolkien, the birth of Christ represented "the Eucatastrophe of Man's history," while Christ's resurrection from the dead represented the "Eucatastrophe of the story of the Incarnation" (Tolkien, *On Fairy-stories* 100).

This points naturally towards a reading of Tolkien's works through the lens of both his belief in eucatastrophe—specifically how it illuminates and defines the suffering and death present within *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion*—as well as his focus on the Christian *fall*, which he incorporates into dyscatastrophe, the prerequisite suffering necessary for eucatastrophe to occur. While both *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion* can be read justifiably as strongly Catholic works—indeed, Tolkien himself did not deny this connection— Tolkien's infusion of his religious beliefs into his works is not "in the known form of the primary 'real' world" (Tolkien, *Letters* 144). Instead, Tolkien integrates these beliefs into his worldbuilding.

Tolkien was indeed a devout Catholic; he described *The Lord of the Rings* as "fundamentally religious and Catholic," but the meaning of his statement hinges on his use of the

word 'fundamentally' (Tolkien, *Letters* 172). Since, in his view, the Gospels represented the ultimate fairy story in their joyful eucatastrophe, they also existed as the ultimate benchmark when it came to depicting a reflection of underlying reality through literature, and while he had no interest in retelling their story, he believed new stories could inspire the same kind of eucatastrophic joy. He argues:

> Story, fantasy, still go on, and should go on . . . in Fantasy [a storyteller] 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 as unlike the forms that we give them. (Tolkien, *On Fairy-Stories* 78–79)

To Tolkien, the fundamental nature of existence in Arda was indeed Catholic in origin, but only because he viewed his literary world as an act of sub-creation stemming from a reality created by God, and thus representative of both the Catholic mind of the sub-creator and the inherent truths of a reality made by God. While his Catholic belief bleeds into his writing, Tolkien seems to treat it as an inevitable, almost unconscious inclusion from the experience of a deeply devout man. Tolkien did not direct intentional effort in his writing towards the inclusion of Catholicism; his intentional effort was instead directed towards representing what exists at the very heart of religious and spiritual belief: the metaphysical joy which stems from a joined existence with the Creator. Tolkien explicitly points out that "the religious element is absorbed into the story and the symbolism," and he even makes sure to state that "I have consciously planned very little" (Tolkien, *Letters* 172). Here, Tolkien's strong preference for applicability over allegory becomes quite useful, as applicability permits the reader to forge meaning from the text rather than have meaning dictated to them by the author.

The painful moments of death, sorrow, and loss within Tolkien's writings are not only natural inclusions for sub-creative works which echo our own world but were written with an underlying hope in mind; Tolkien's vision of eucatastrophe considers pain and sorrow to be inevitable, but only byproducts of an evil which can never fully destroy the light of God. Even a

cursory reading of *The Lord of The Rings* is enough to see that Tolkien's imaginary world is full

of sorrow. Characters suffer physically, emotionally, and even spiritually. Arda is razed and

forever marked by evil and hatred. Even after Melkor and Sauron's defeats, evil comes to bloom

in the heart of the Shire, a land which had long been so simple and pure that it appeared

untouchable. These various forms of suffering, collectively considered to be dyscatastrophe, are

the necessary product of a fallen world at the end of which is a boundless, infinite joy; the fall

may be transformed from an evil corruption to an opportunity for joy to appear unlooked for,

death may be transformed into a gift which should be loved instead of feared, and the sorrow of

Arda, much like our Primary world, is necessary, for without sorrow there can be no hope.

Tolkien and Hope

Hope is the defining characteristic of Tolkien's Arda. From the Valar's hope for the

fulfillment of Eru's plan, to the Elves' belief in *estel*, to Aragorn's fulfillment of *estel*'s promise,

hope permeates the numerous sorrows of Arda and exists in tandem with its death and loss. Hope

exists somewhat paradoxically within Tolkien's world; it is looked for and relied upon by those

who understand its power, scorned and sullied by those who wish to crush it, and, like all aspects

of Arda, experiences a decline as long years advance while sorrow seems to gain an ever more

permanent foothold in the hearts of Elves and Men alike. Tolkien distinguishes between Elves

and Men through hope; Men commonly view hope as *amdir*, which is "[a]n expectation of good,

which though uncertain has some foundation in what is known" (Tolkien, *Morgoth's Ring* 320).

This can be characterized as a worldly hope, one which remains within Arda. Elves, meanwhile,

separate the worldly *amdir* of Men from their eucatastrophic concept of *estel*, which is "founded

deeper . . . It is not defeated by the ways of the world, for it does not come from experience, but

from our nature and first being" (Tolkien, *Morgoth's Ring* 320). *Estel* is an explicitly

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eucatastrophic concept, as, while it is also uncertain, is placed beyond the world, in Eru. While

these concepts mark a general divide between the two races, Men and Elves can experience and

share both *amdir* and *estel*.

Verlyn Flieger points out the friction caused by the differences between Men and Elves in

her book *Splintered Light*, stating that "the two kinds do not simply inhabit the same space; they

work with—and sometimes against—one another . . . [a]s children of Illúvatar, deriving directly

from the godhead, they seem to need one another and to be mutually instrumental in working out

his purpose" (124). The conflict between Tolkien's Men and Elves often mirrors the racial basis

of *amdir* and *estel*; Men, bereft of the Elves' intimate knowledge of the Valar and the presence

Eru, often lack *estel* and turn to despair. 'Turn' is an instrumental phrase here, as Tolkien

explicitly presents *amdir* and *estel* as not just feelings, but conscious choices. Fëanor chooses to

reject hope and invites ages of ruin upon the Elves. Aragorn ultimately embraces both *amdir* and

estel, and in doing so he unites Men and Elves together and transforms death into its intended

existence as a eucatastrophic blessing.

While the idea of choice invites comparisons between a 'right' and a 'wrong,' Tolkien

resists the temptation to make a traditionally Catholic moral judgement on his characters. While

Dimitria Fimi draws connections between the preference shown by St. John Climacus for "those

who have sinned and then repent through tears and mourning" and the degree of eucatastrophe

experienced by Tolkien's characters who sin and then experience redemption, I disagree with her

argument for this kind of moral favoritism in Tolkien's world (191).[9] The existence of a fallen

world is anticipated from the very beginning of creation, when Eru rebukes the power of evil by

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[9] St. John compares active sinners to those who have not sinned and argues that the redemption of a sinner is more gratifying than a life of bliss since the moral gap between a fallen state and a redeemed state is much greater than a continuous state of purity.

declaring that "no theme may be played that hath not its uttermost source in me, nor can any alter the music in my despite" (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* 17).[10] A lesser degree of suffering in Tolkien's world does not fundamentally diminish the impact of a subsequent eucatastrophe; even characters who choose not to repent, such as Fëanor, may be judged by Eru as equally as those who live purely, like Aragorn, and all may be redeemed at the end of days. The lives of Tolkien's characters are often defined by how they choose to react to the inevitable griefs of their fallen world through either *estel, amdir*, or a combination of both.

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[10] See Dubs, Kathleen E. "Providence, Fate, and Chance: Boethian Philosophy in The Lord of the Rings." *Twentieth Century Literature*, vol. 27, no. 1, [Duke University Press, Hofstra University], 1981, pp. 34–42, https://doi.org/10.2307/441084.

The Nature of Suffering in Arda

The Creation of Eä, Melkor's Sin, and Choice

Arda is scarred. It is an imperfect world filled with both physical and intangible reminders of the suffering it has experienced at the hands of Men, Elves, and others. The sufferings generated within such an imperfect world form much of the conflict within both *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion*. Of course, the concept of a marred, imperfect world is familiar to Tolkien. One of the core beliefs within Catholicism is that humans live in a world forever marred by the 'Original Sin' committed by Adam and Eve when they submitted to temptation; at a broad glance, Arda is quite like the Catholic conception of our world. It is imperfect, there are evil forces at work against its peoples, and suffering is rampant. Tolkien was aware of the concept of original sin, and it features in *The Silmarillion*, though in a drastically changed form. In Tolkien's legendarium, the concept of sin is taken from the nature of mortals, reduced to its consequences (mainly various forms of suffering), and woven into the very nature of the universe. This suffering is primarily presented through various versions of the Christian 'Fall' experienced by Elves and Men who struggle to navigate the burden of a permanently corrupted world which, despite their best efforts, cannot ever be wholly healed by them.

The Silmarillion details the initially joyous creation of Eä, "the World that Is" (Tolkien 20).[11] Before the world is created, Eru Ilúvatar creates the Ainur, the 'Holy Ones,' angelic beings who are given themes to sing. As they sing these themes, Eru is pleased, though the Ainur are at first only able to sing "only each alone, or but few together . . . for each comprehended only that part of the mind of Ilúvatar from which he came . . . Yet ever as they listened they came to deeper understanding, and increased in unison and harmony" (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* 15).

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[11] Eä is called a "World," but it refers to the entire universe of Tolkien's legendarium.

This cooperative cohesion forms the basis of the 'Great Music' Eru then wills the Ainur to sing. This 'Great Music' begins in cooperation and harmony as the Ainur all bend their thoughts to its whole while still "adorning [the] theme . . . with [their] own thoughts and devices" (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* 15). During this, Eru is content to "sit and hearken, and be glad that through [the Ainur] great beauty has been wakened into song" (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* 15). This vision of a Creator enjoying the beauty of a perfect existence mirrors the account of creation in Genesis, where after each day "God saw that the light was good" (*New Oxford Annotated Edition*, Genesis 1.4). This is the singular moment of Tolkien's universe in a perfect state where eucatastrophe cannot exist simply because it is not necessary. There is no 'glimpse' of joy, as joy is all that can be seen, felt, or heard.

Here, Melkor the Ainur is introduced for the first time, and with him, sin and suffering. He begins to "interweave matters of his own imagining that were not in accord with the theme of Ilúvatar ; for he sought therein to increase the power and the glory of the part assigned to himself" (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* 16). Melkor's selfish desire for power and rebellion against the perfection of Eru breeds discontent around him as other Ainur join his discordant music out of despondency rather than cooperation. As Melkor's theme grows stronger and rages against the cooperative theme of the other Ainur, Eru intervenes three separate times, each time standing up and raising his hand. Ultimately, when Melkor's theme grows the strongest and the most violent, finding a "unity" which is "loud, and vain, and endlessly repeated," Eru ends the music in "one chord, deeper than the Abyss, higher than the Firmament, piercing as the light of the eye of Ilúvatar" (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* 17).

Crucially, Melkor commits the first sin outside of the world, instead of humans committing it within. Melkor is not tempted by any outside force; his sin is one of personal

choice. He chooses to walk "alone into the void places" and grows hostile towards Eru's design, wishing to increase his part in it for personal gain (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* 16). Yet, Eru purposely allows Melkor's discord to continue in order to create even more beautiful things from it. When Melkor's theme grows in power, Eru introduces a new one "like and yet unlike to the former theme, and it gathered power and had new beauty" (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* 16). Eru holds the power to immediately end Melkor's discord, yet he chooses not to.

Immediately after Eru ends the music, he talks to the Ainur and reveals why he let the discord of Melkor continue, telling Melkor specifically that "no theme may be played that hath not its uttermost source in me, nor can any alter the music in my despite. For he that attempteth this shall prove but mine instrument in the devising of things more wonderful, which he himself hath not imagined" (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* 17). Eru's gentle rebuke confirms that not only is Melkor unable to destroy Eru's work, but any evil he attempts has already been accounted for. This rebuke of Melkor's sin informs the entirety of Tolkien's legendarium, in which 'sin' is not an inherent moral disease ever-present in the Children of Eru. Instead, it has already been foreseen, justified, and incorporated into the song. This may be why Eru does not punish Melkor for his transgression, choosing instead to let the shamed Ainur witness the futility of his rebellion through the creation of Arda instead of banishing him to the void.

After creating Arda, Eru permits Melkor and other Ainur to enter it and become a permanent part of the world, but consequently allowing Melkor's evil to become tangible. When the Ainur enter the world and become the Valar, the "Powers of the World," they see that "the World had been foreshadowed and forsung, and they must achieve it" (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* 20). They begin to build it according to the Great Music, and Melkor, as he did during the music, creates suffering by interfering "in all that was done, turning it if he might to his own desires and

purposes" (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* 20). This forever mars Arda, "for as surely as the Valar began a labour so would Melkor undo it or corrupt it . . . nowhere and in no work was their will and purpose wholly fulfilled" (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* 22). Thus, even before Elves and Men come to exist, the world is marred by Melkor's sin.

It is important to note here that Melkor is not destroying the world; he is modifying it. Since Eru is the creator of the world, and the Valar are only the powers within it, their work is still laboring in the shadow of a greater power. Melkor is no exception. He cannot simply destroy the world that Eru has made. Verlyn Flieger highlights this reality through her concept of Splintered Light, in which elements of Tolkien's universe are merely smaller splinters of what they come from: "Each light that comes is dimmer than the one before it, splintered by Tolkien's sub-creators" (*Light* 60). Melkor represents the largest evil possible in Tolkien's world. Even Sauron, the prime antagonist of *The Lord of the Rings*, is only a shadow of Melkor. Since Melkor was born of Eru's thought, this makes him merely a splinter of Eru's light, a being lesser than Eru who exists in a world made by Eru. Massimilliano Izzo extends this to a hierarchical structure of evil within Tolkien's universe which is expressed through a race-specific "modality of fall," where each race expresses a turn to evil through different paths (148). At the beginning of creation, there is Melkor, whose choice to fall occurs through the desire to become like Eru and "bring into Being things of his own" (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* 16). From this worst, original fall, all the others are extended; Elves fall into possessiveness of the world, and Men fall into a fear of death. Thus Tolkien changes the concept of Original Sin. No longer does it pass spiritually from person to person through birth, dooming all from the moment of their creation; suffering is instead born of the consequence of Melkor's corruption of free will and is given a tangible presence in Arda. Melkor's choice to fall and his subsequent evil reflects itself infinitely

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in the choices presented to Men, Elves, and even the Valar, who may use their free will to follow Melkor's path as evil sub-creators or to trust in the unseen will of Eru.

The contrasting outcomes of choice are presented early on through the rebellion of Aulë the Valar, which acts as a fascinating eucatastrophic contrast to Melkor's. Tolkien directly connects the two Valar, writing that "Melkor was jealous of him, for Aulë was most like himself in thought and in powers" (*The Silmarillion* 27). When Aulë rebels against the will of Eru, he does so by creating dwarves before Elves and Men awake, impatiently and arrogantly wishing "to have learners to whom he could teach his lore and his crafts . . . he was unwilling to await the fulfillment of the designs of Ilúvatar" (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* 43). His unwillingness to trust in Eru's plan directly mirrors Melkor's meddling during the Great Music, as does his desire for subordinates. Like with Melkor, Eru immediately sees Aulë's rebellion and confronts him, and here Tolkien presents two crucial differences between the two. The first occurs when Aulë is confronted, as he describes his desire for subordinates as not a desire for "lordship," but for "things other than I am, to love and to teach them, so that they too might perceive the beauty of Eä, which thou hast caused to be" (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* 43). Instead of attempting to glorify his own power through the control of others, Aulë attempts to glorify Eru by allowing others to witness his beautiful creation. He even identifies this desire as stemming from Eru, stating that "the making of things is in my heart from my own making by thee; and the child of little understanding that makes a play of the deeds of his father may do so without thought of mockery, but because he is the son of his father" (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* 43). Aulë's recognition of his desire as stemming from Eru places both his and Melkor's desire on equal footing, with the only difference being how they choose to act upon it. This is illustrated in the second difference between them, when, in shame, Aulë places the dwarves at the mercy of the

will of Eru, saying: "I offer to thee these things, the work of the hands which thou hast made. Do with them what thou wilt. But should I not rather destroy the work of my presumption?" (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* 43). As Aulë raises his hammer to kill his own creations, weeping tears of sorrow, Eru gives the dwarves life of their own, and they "shrank from the hammer and were afraid" (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* 43). Eric Schweicher notes that "God's intervention in Aulë's favour transforms the potential evil of Aulë's rebellion into something positive" (167). I would take this a step further and note that it is specifically Aulë's *estel*, his hope and trust in the will of Eru, which leads to this early eucatastrophe through which the dwarves are given life through Eru. Aulë's story closely mirrors the biblical story of Abraham, who offers his son Isaac as a sacrifice to God. Tolkien twists the story to emphasize the importance of hope through free will; instead of being directed by Eru to kill his creations, Aulë explicitly decides to on his own. Despite the many similarities of their rebellions, Melkor and Aulë are primarily separated by *estel*, which Melkor rejects and Aulë fully embraces; Eru takes pity on Aulë explicitly "because of his humility" before him (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* 44).

Arda without a Christ Figure

The transferal of the nature of sin from an innate moral defect to a conscious choice in response to a world full of suffering carries fascinating ramifications with it in Tolkien's world. The biggest, and arguably the most different from Catholic teachings, is the removal of a need for a sacrificial Christ figure. It is theoretically possible for a man or elf in Arda to consistently choose a sinful, sorrowful path and still find redemption. Notably, this is a massive shift away from Christian teachings of *atonement*, which place the death of Jesus as a necessary sacrifice for the salvation of humanity, "since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3.23). By transferring sin from a spiritual mode to an earthly choice, Tolkien also transfers the

consequences of sin, removing them from the afterlife and placing them fully in the mortal world, manifested through suffering. It remains exceedingly difficult to reconcile this with Tolkien's Catholic beliefs. Robert Murray, a close friend of Tolkien, wrote about the relationship between Tolkien's works and his Catholicism, stating that, "Tolkien was a very complex and depressed man and my own opinion of his imaginative creation is that it projects his very depressed view of the universe at least as much as it reflects his Catholic faith" (qtd. in West, "A Letter from Father Murray" 135). While Tolkien's worldview was heavily informed by the suffering he experienced,[12] Douglass Kane argues that Tolkien's worldview was even more heavily informed by his faith in "divine grace, which for Tolkien superseded even the teachings of his beloved church" (158). This, paired with Tolkien's insistence that "The Incarnation of God is an *infinitely* greater thing than anything I would dare to write" and his belief that the story of Jesus is "supreme" and "true," provides insight as to why Tolkien deferentially viewed his literary world as a sub-creation within God's primary creation (Tolkien, *Letters* 237; *On Fairy-stories* 78). To take the supreme story of the incarnation and twist it to fit his own sub-creation would be to act as Melkor, mutating and polluting the perfect work of God for his own purposes. It would, in short, be blasphemous. Thus, Arda must exist without a Christ figure, and its inhabitants are consequently presented with a double-edged existence: the suffering they cause does not automatically damn them spiritually, yet they live with no promise of anything after death or the end of the world. They must rely on *estel*, trusting that the will of Eru covers even the unknown.

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[12] In the same letter to Christopher where he rails against engineers and engines, Tolkien talks explicitly about his thoughts on suffering in the world, stating that "If anguish were visible, almost the whole of this benighted planet would be enveloped in a dense dark vapour, shrouded from the amazed view of the heavens!" (Tolkien, *Letters* 76).

The Suffering of the Elves

In *Morgoth's Ring*, a conversation takes place in Middle-earth during the First Age between Finrod, an immortal Elf, and Andreth, an aging human woman. Finrod states at one point that "The eyes of Elves are always thinking of something else . . . in memory is our great talent, as shall be seen ever more clearly as the ages of this Arda pass: a heavy burden to be, I fear; but in the Days of which we now speak a great wealth" (Tolkien, *Morgoth's Ring* 319–320). Finrod's talk of the burden of memory elaborates on his earlier point that "Each of our kindreds perceives Arda differently, and appraises its beauties in different mode and degree" (Tolkien, *Morgoth's Ring* 315). Elves are effectively immortal, which is their "doom" (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* xiv). The word 'doom' is not inherently negative; Tolkien uses the word in its archaic Old English and Middle English meanings of both 'statute' and 'fate,' though in the case of the Elves, their fate is heavily defined by their suffering as immortal beings.[13] They do not die from old age or disease; instead, their soul is permanently bound to Arda. Like Men, they are subject to a decline, though Tolkien shifts theirs from a physical process to a spiritual / emotional one. The other half of their doom is to "love the beauty of the world, to bring it to full flower with their gifts of delicacy and perfection, to last while it lasts . . . and yet, when the Followers come, to teach them, and make way for them, to 'fade' as the Followers grow" (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* xiv). Thus, Finrod describes their 'great talent' of memory as a painful burden, as the world they love slowly fades in front of their eyes, eventually existing only in the memories of the elves who loved it. Their immortality is, then, not true immortality. The Elves fade as time goes on due to their soul, forever connected to Arda, "'consuming' their bodies," which become,

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[13] "Doom." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, March 2022, www.oed.com/view/Entry/56805. Accessed 8 March 2022.

by the end, "a mere memory" (Tolkien, *Morgoth's Ring* 219). Their existence is bound to the world and will end when Arda does. An important distinction must be made between the Elves of Valinor and the Elves of Middle-earth. Since the Valar live in Valinor it is "blessed . . . and there naught faded nor withered" (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* 37–38). The Elves who live in Valinor still experience fading, but much less severely as the elves of Middle-earth do. The fading of the elves of Middle-earth is ultimately magnified by the conflict over the Silmarils, their greatest creation. With the grief of loss growing stronger in their minds with every passing year, their suffering is compounded by their knowledge that Eru has given Men death as a gift, a guarantee beyond the ever-fading world, yet they have no such promise, doomed to watch the world decay in front of them. While there are countless examples of Elvish suffering and the eucatastrophic hope contained within, it is well beyond the scope of this paper to cover them all, so I am splitting the suffering of the Elves into two distinct parts. The first part covers the conflict over the Silmarils, where the Noldor Elves doom themselves and others to physical and spiritual suffering through their decision to abandon the will of Eru. The second part covers the fading of the Elves in the third age after the Silmarils are lost, as their suffering is experienced through loneliness and memory while dwelling in Middle-earth and they turn fully to hope.

Estel by Proximity

Within Arda, the *estel* of the Elves is often proportional to their proximity to the Valar, and it is often contrasted against their love of the world. It is this love which Melkor begins to exploit and change to grief. At the beginning of their existence in Arda, they wake up and their eyes "beheld first of all things the stars of heaven. Therefore they have ever loved the starlight" (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* 48). Melkor finds them first, sending "shadows and evil spirits to spy upon them and waylay them . . . indeed the most ancient songs of the Elves . . . tell of the

shadow-shapes that walked in the hills" (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* 50). When one of the Valar, Oromë, finds them, they are "filled with dread at his coming; and that was the doing of Melkor" (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* 49). Since the Elves first see the stars and love them the most, it is cruel and fitting that Melkor tries to darken the truth of the stars' beauty by turning the Elves against those who created them, the Valar.

Unfortunately, Melkor's goal seems to be realized throughout the history of Arda, as the Elves continually divorce themselves from the truth of all creation stemming from Eru. After fighting and imprisoning Melkor, the Valar summon them to Valinor, the land of the Valar, but the Elves "had as yet seen the Valar only in their wrath as they went to war . . . they were filled with dread" (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* 52). This leads to the first sundering of the Elves; some accept the summons and go to Valinor to live with the Valar, while others refuse, choosing instead to stay under the stars of Middle-earth. As the Elves travel to Valinor, this sundering is increased as some Elves stray from the path. In Valinor, there exist three main group of Elves: the Vanyar, the Noldor, and the Teleri. Originally, the *estel* of each collective group is represented by their proximity to the Valar. The Vanyar are the closest physically to the Valar, with their leader spending his days "at the feet of the Powers" (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* 53). These elves come to "love the land of the Valar and the full light of the Trees" above all (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* 61). The Noldor live upon a hill, further from the Valar, and they are explicitly linked with Aulë, whose imperfect *estel* is reflected in them. The Teleri reside on the shores, furthest from the Valar, and they are the last to come to Valinor, where they spend most of their time sailing ships in the bay. Despite the Teleri residing the furthest from the Valar, it is the Noldor who ultimately reject *estel*, as they are specifically targeted by Melkor, who

manipulates their love of their own works to possessiveness in order to separate them from the Valar.

As the Elves are doomed to love Arda, their sub-creative efforts are naturally focused on "the adornment of earth, and the healing of its hurts" (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* xix). Tolkien describes his Elves as "a representation or an apprehension of a part of human nature" and as "the representatives of sub-creation par excellence" (Tolkien, *Letters* 149, 147). Elves, especially the Noldor, are like both Melkor and Aulë in their desire to create, though Tolkien branches their desire off in a third, even different direction. While it is true that their sub-creative works do not stem from the dyscatastrophic desire to dominate or mock, like Melkor, neither do they purely stem from the eucatastrophic desire to highlight the purely joyful possibilities of Eru, like Aulë intends. It should be noted that while there are other Valar, like Manwë, whose sub-creative desires are entirely pure, this is an unobtainable standard for the Children of Eru, who are born into an already corrupted world. If Melkor and Aulë represent both intense extremes of the sub-creative limit for the Children, the Elves fall somewhere in the middle, a diluted light born of a higher sub-creative source. Since Tolkien intended his Elves to reflect a part of human nature, namely the artistic, their art, as perfect as it can possibly be, appears as another of Fleiger's splintered lights, inferior to the powers whose sub-creative extremes forever define the entire spectrum. Since the Elves fall on neither extreme, their works are uniquely neutral on their own, blank slates whose eucatastrophic or dyscatastrophic impact is determined by the free will of their creators, who are susceptible to both sides. Tom Shippey describes their sub-creative tendency as "a restless desire to *make* things which will forever reflect or incarnate their own personality" (332). This desire, combined with their ever-growing sorrow through loss, is exploited by Melkor, and often it is seen that the suffering of the Elves is due either to the sin of

pride and possessiveness in their own worldly creations or their chosen estrangement from the Valar and Eru. Nowhere is this more evident than in the character of the Noldor Elf Fëanor, whose pride and arrogance act as the catalyst for much of the Elves' suffering in Arda.

Fëanor's Fall & The Silmarils

Fëanor's fall is splintered from Melkor's, and while he is responsible for the fall of the Elves, it remains a byproduct of the original fall, enacted through choices influenced by the lies of Melkor. Richard Gallant asserts that Fëanor "functions as a Cain-figure: the first Kin-slayer for which he and his people are exiled and cursed by the Valar themselves" (120). In Tolkien's story, the curse is defined through varying forms of hope. Fëanor's birth in Valinor is marked by a unique dyscatastrophic event: the first death of an Elf. His mother, Miriel, chooses to die of free will, her body and spirit expended in the birth of Fëanor. Tolkien explicitly calls attention to his father Finwë's response, writing that "many . . . [judged] that if Finwë had endured his loss and been content with the fathering of his mighty son, the courses of Fëanor would have been otherwise, and great evil might have been prevented (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* 65). Since Miriel's death is the first known occurrence of it among the Elves, perhaps Finwë's overwhelming grief and withdrawal is understandable, as is his subsequent devotion to his only son. This choice, however understandable, is marked by a puzzling existence, as Finwë "alone in all the Blessed Realm is deprived of joy" (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* 64). To be joyless in the Eden of Arda during "the fullness and glory of its bliss" hints at Finwë abandoning *estel* early. Instead of accepting Miriel's death, Finwë overindulges in his grief, "[living] in sorrow" (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* 64). The widowing of Finwë, and his later re-marrying, has a bad effect on Fëanor, who "had no great love" for his father's second wife or their sons (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* 65). Thus, as between Cain and Abel, an early split occurs within the Noldor; as a

Noldor prince, Fëanor's dislike of his brothers, combined with his will which "few ever changed . . . by counsel," sets up an early source of conflict among the Elves (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* 64). His spirit which "burned as a flame," and his prowess in craftsmanship are initially all sources of joyful pride.

As Fëanor grows and becomes mighty, his sub-creative desire increases. This occurs as Melkor is released from captivity by the Valar, ages after they subdued him. At this point, Fëanor forges the Silmarils, the greatest creation by the Children of Eru in Arda. They are described as "more strong than adamant, so that no violence could mar it or break it within the Kingdom of Arda" (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* 67). Fëanor's forging of the Silmarils comes from his desire to preserve the light of the Two Trees, the holy light source of Valinor, forever. However, his desire is self-centered, "driven by the fire of his own heart only . . . and he asked the aid and sought the counsel of none that dwelt in Aman, great or small" (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* 66). He does not desire to create selflessly, like Aulë. By attempting to create a physical memory of the pure light of the Two Trees within the Silmarils, he taints it, as his heart becomes "fast bound to these things that he himself had made" (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* 67). Through Fëanor's possessiveness towards his creations, the Silmarils become a source of suffering instead of beauty. They drive Melkor "ever more eagerly" to "end the friendship of the Valar and the Elves," and his efforts to poison the Noldor against the Valar and each other through subtle lies reach Fëanor, in whose heart "burned the new flame of desire for freedom and wider realms" (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* 68). Fëanor continues to chafe against his existence in Valinor, becoming less and less content. Ultimately, Fëanor forgets that "the light within [the Silmarils] was not his own" (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* 69). Here is where Melkor's efforts against the Noldor produce fruit; as Fëanor becomes more and more greedy, he forgets the

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source of the light within his creations and mistakenly views himself as the source, pridefully usurping Eru's role. Through this, he becomes more like Melkor, forsaking *estel* for a distinctly selfish version of *amdir*, in which he places hope in his own sub-creative prowess.

Melkor's poisoning of the Noldor results in the creation of weapons, which the different factions of Noldor purpose to use against each other:

> In that time the Noldor began the smithying of sword and axes and spears. Shields also they made displaying the tokens of many houses and kindreds that vied one with another; and these only they wore abroad, and of other weapons they did not speak, for each believed that he alone had received the warning. (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* 69)

This marks the beginning of the end of peace in Valinor, as Fëanor begins to openly incite rebellion against the Valar while the Noldor are consumed by infighting. Melkor successfully splinters the *estel* of the Noldor. Fëanor's brothers plead with Finwë to restrain Fëanor's pride, but this is a fatal mistake, as Finwë long ago succumbed to his own sorrow and is unable to restore *estel* to his son, forsaking it himself long ago. As they plead, Fëanor comes in and accuses them of treachery, and the gap between him and his brothers is fully split open. He draws his sword against his brother, which completes the shattering of peace. From here on, Fëanor and his brothers are never reconciled, and the Noldor remain split by hatred and suffering. This culminates when Melkor comes with Ungoliant, destroys the Two Trees, kills Finwë, and steals the Silmarils.

Fëanor is given a choice then by the Valar Yavanna, who created the Two Trees: "The Light of the Trees has passed away, and lives now only in the Silmarils of Fëanor . . . Yet had I but a little of that light I could recall life to the Trees, ere their roots decay; and then our hurt should be healed, and the malice of Melkor be confounded" (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* 78). The fate of the Two Trees is placed into Fëanor's hands; he can trust the Valar with his most precious creations, in doing so restoring light, or he can refuse, fully giving in to his possessiveness. By

giving the Valar the light within the Silmarils, Fëanor risks breaking them forever, though it is unclear if he must break them all. Most importantly, Fëanor does not have the Silmarils at this point, as they are in the possession of Melkor. It is not within his power to give them to the Valar even if he wishes to do so. Flieger notes this, stating that "the Silmarils are gone, their fate already decided and out of Fëanor's control. But his interior psychology could be changed, and that change could affect the nature of his subsequent actions" (*Music* 168). Unfortunately, all the events of Fëanor's life, from being raised by Finwë who is distracted from *estel* by his grief, to the distrust formed against his brothers, have cemented his pride and cause him to unconsciously submit to Melkor's lies and reject the Valar, cursing them. Tolkien writes that "had he said yea at the first" to Yavanna's plea, "it may be that his after deeds would have been other than they were" (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* 79).

The choice between eucatastrophic *estel* and dyscatastrophe becomes clear here. The choice before Fëanor is not only about the fate of the Silmarils or the Two Trees, it is about himself, and consequently, the Noldor. No matter what he chooses, Melkor holds the Silmarils, and Fëanor will have to go after them. Should he say yes to Yavanna, he pledges himself to a eucatastrophic *estel*, trusting that by giving up the light within the Silmarils, the healing of the Two Trees will be worth the sorrow of having to destroy his most precious creations. When he ultimately rejects the plea of the Valar, he commits himself fully to the dyscatastrophic possessiveness of his sub-creative desire, and the Noldor suffer. They return to their city on the hill and mourn, not for the loss of the light of the Trees, but "for the darkening of their fair city" (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* 82). As they mourn, Fëanor appears and speaks; through his speech, the Noldor are "stirred to madness." He refuses "the decrees of the Valar" and equates them to Melkor, asking, "are not they and he of one kin?" Here, Fëanor spreads his embrace of the

dyscatastrophic ruin of Melkor to the Noldor, as "well nigh all that he said came from the very lies of Morgoth himself." Like Fëanor, the Noldor are then presented a choice:

> Long he spoke, and ever he urged the Noldor to follow him and by their own prowess to win freedom and great realms in the lands of the East, before it was too late; for he echoed the lies of Melkor, that the Valar had cozened them and would hold them captive so that Men might rule in Middle-earth . . . 'Fair shall the end be,' he cried, 'though long and hard shall be the road . . . we and we alone shall be lords of the unsullied Light, and masters of the bliss and beauty of Arda. No other race shall oust us!' (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* 83)

Fëanor's horrific desire is plainly stated: to usurp Eru and become master of the world. Of course, this is impossible; not even Melkor can become Eru, as Tolkien showed during his rebellion during the Great Music. Fëanor's rebellion, then, remains merely a splinter of Melkor's, and is doomed to failure.

The Shattering & Suffering of the Noldor

The fall of the Noldor Elves continues Tolkien's dyscatastrophic cycle of the diminishment of *estel*. Like Fëanor's fall which stems from Melkor's, the fall of the Noldor stems from Fëanor's rebellion against the Valar, which is cemented with a "terrible oath" between himself and his sons; they swear to "pursue with vengeance and hatred to the ends of the World Vala, Demon, Elf or Man as yet unborn, or any creature . . . whoso should hold or take or keep a Silmaril from their possession" (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* 83). His possessive focus on the Silmarils invites comparison to a warning in the Gospel of Matthew:

> Woe to you, blind guides, who say, 'Whoever swears by the sanctuary is bound by nothing, but whoever swears by the gold of the sanctuary is bound by the oath.' You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the sanctuary that has made the gold sacred . . . And whoever swears by heaven, swears by the throne of God and by the one who is seated upon it." (Matthew 23.16-22)

Fëanor, acting as the blind guide, swears his possessive oath by the Silmarils, invoking the name of Ilúvatar while doing so, whose will he has rejected and whose light exists in the gems. This vow is made in the presence of the rest of the Noldor, who must choose whether or not to abandon Valinor and follow Fëanor. Until now, the path of the Noldor has been set by Finwë and

marked by a time of relative peace and harmonious sub-creation with the powers of Eru. Unfortunately, Melkor's lies, given power through the choices of Fëanor, have already splintered the collective *estel* of the Noldor. Unlike the Vanyar, whose existence in Valinor is marked by their pure form of *estel* and their proximity to the Valar, the Noldor have now been split by both Melkor and Fëanor. Michaela Hausmann highlights two prominent patterns she sees in Tolkien's writing, both of which highlight "the eucatastrophic counterpart to a catastrophic moment in the narrative or vice versa;" 'parallel paths,' which "denote[] not only analogies between character traits, or situations, but also describes the similar development two characters may undergo," and 'distorting mirrors,' which "account for the unison of parallel and opposite features" and "is not restricted to the concept of character" (31). While Hausmann does not explicitly connect the two, her 'distorting mirrors' meld extremely well with Flieger's concept of 'Splintered Light.' Both of Hausmann's patterns feature heavily during and after Fëanor's oath. Immediately following his oath, various factions amongst the Noldor debate it; some speak against him, while others, like his niece Galadriel, are eager to "see the wide unguarded lands and to rule there a realm at her own will" (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* 84). Ultimately, the Noldor become a shattered mirror, with each shard reflecting the splintered light of Eru in different ways through *estel*.

Despite travelling a parallel narrative path to his brother Fëanor, Finarfin acts as his distorted mirror during the debate; he urges calm among the Noldor before "deeds were done that could not be undone," while Fëanor is impatient, "fearing lest in the cooling of their hearts his words should wane" (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* 83; 84). The parallel features here are plain: Fëanor and Finarfin are both Noldor princes, both have heard the words of Melkor, and both are attempting to influence the Noldor. When the Noldor finally decide to follow Fëanor, they do so with conflict, as "by no means all were of a mind to take Fëanor as King" (Tolkien, *The*

Silmarillion 84). Even though the Noldor agree to follow Fëanor, the unity of their people is forever split, marked by spiritual suffering through lessened *estel* caused by their chosen exile from Valinor and the Valar.

The decision of the Noldor to follow Fëanor impacts the rest of the Elves' existence in Arda. Immediately following their decision, the Noldor are warned by Manwë, who urges them to repent, telling them that that their road "leads to sorrow that ye do not yet forsee . . . The lies of Melkor thou shalt unlearn in bitterness" (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* 85). The distorted mirrors within the Noldor are "over-ruled" by Fëanor, who leads them to commit the first 'Kinslaying' against their kin, the sea-faring Teleri, who are collectively "unmoved" by Fëanor's words, instead grieving over the Noldor's decision to abandon Valinor (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* 85;86). The Teleri refuse to help the Noldor build ships or give up their own "against the will of the Valar," trusting in *estel* that "night would pass yet to a new dawn" (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* 86). The hopeful light of the Telari is dimmed through slaughter, as the fallen Noldor fully embrace dyscatastrophe under the leadership of the fallen Fëanor.[14]

After slaughtering the Telari and stealing their ships, the Noldor leave Valinor. They are greeted by a figure who delivers a prophecy from Manwë:

> Tears unnumbered ye shall shed . . . [t]o evil end shall all things turn that they begin well; and by treason of kin unto kin, and the fear of treason, shall this come to pass. The Dispossessed shall they be for ever . . . slain ye shall be: by weapon and by torment and by grief; and your houseless spirits shall come then to Mandos . . . [a]nd those that endure in Middle-earth and come not to Mandos shall grow weary of the world as with a great burden, and shall wane, and become as shadows of regret before the younger race that cometh after. The Valar have spoken (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* 88)

Though this prophecy is called the "Doom of the Noldor," and despite Tolkien calling it a "curse," this is not Manwë personally dictating their fate, rather, it is merely a foretelling of the path the Noldor have chosen. While Manwë seems to be describing a purely dyscatastrophic

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[14] Tolkien refers to the Kinslaying in strong biblical terms, calling it "the first fruit of their fall," as well as "war in Paradise." (*Letters* 148).

doom, his prophecy carries with it an example of Hausmann's eucatastrophic counterparts. The Doom of the Noldor is explicitly directed at "those that would not stay nor seek the doom and pardon of the Valar," leaving the possibility of forgiveness open for those who turn away from the fallen will of Fëanor (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* 88).

Despite the Noldor's existence as shattered shards of a mirror, with some, like Fëanor, reflecting almost none of Eru's light, eucatastrophe remains possible for all of them. When Fëanor rejects Manwë's warning, saying "the deeds that we shall do shall be the matter of song until the last days of Arda," his words are relayed back to Manwë, who invokes Eru's message to Melkor during the Great Music: "Dear-bought those songs shall be accounted, and yet shall be well-bought. For the price could be no other. Thus even as Eru spoke to us shall beauty not before conceived be brought into Eä, and evil yet be good to have been" (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* 98). Finarfin and some of his people immediately repent and walk back to Valinor, where they receive "the pardon of the Valar" and are thus spared from worse suffering (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* 88). The rest of the Noldor who follow Fëanor are immediately split apart, as he betrays his brother Fingolfin, whose people are left to make their own way through icy wastes as Fëanor travels to Middle-earth in pursuit of Melkor.

After Fëanor comes to Middle-earth, Manwë's dyscatastrophic prophecy is proven right. The Oath of Fëanor wreaks havoc on all Elves, Noldor and non-Noldor alike. The spiritual suffering of the exiled Noldor manifests into physical consequences; Fëanor is killed almost immediately after landing in Middle-earth, as his mind becomes "consumed by the flame of his own wrath," and he foolishly fights towards Melkor alone, ahead of his people (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* 107). Fingolfin's attack on Melkor is thwarted by hesitation and by hatred over Fëanor's betrayal. The Elves of Middle-earth become distrustful of their Noldor kin after hearing

of their evil deeds. The leadership of the Noldor is broken, with many princes and kings being killed by either Melkor or their own pride. Fëanor's sons remain compelled to follow his oath, and a second Kinslaying is committed by the Noldor against the greatest kingdom of Elves of Middle-earth, physically scattering them, similarly to how the Noldor scattered themselves earlier.

Reflecting the futile scattering of the Elves, the Silmarils are similarly scattered across Arda; one is placed in the sky as the star of Eärendil, and the two last sons of Fëanor, upon recovering the final two, find that they are no longer worthy to hold them after their abandonment of *estel*, as their "right thereto had become void, and that the oath was vain" (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* 254). Unable to handle the searing pain, one of Fëanor's sons casts himself and a Silmaril into a "gaping chasm filled with fire" while the other throws his "into the Sea . . . [a]nd thus it came to pass that the Silmarils found their long homes: one in the airs of heaven, and one in the fires of the heart of the world, and one in the deep waters" (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* 254). The Silmarils are fittingly returned to the various substances of Arda; both the light of the Silmarils and the substance of the world are born of Eru, and the jewels, like the Elves, must ultimately find healing in Eru, as "they could not be found or brought together again unless the world be broken and remade" (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* 254). The later ages of Middle-earth see the fragmentation of the Elves heal as they embrace both *estel*, *amdir*, and the possibility of eucatastrophe.

The Grief and *Estel* of Galadriel

Fading is often presented in Tolkien's works as a slow descent into grief, where existence for the Elves becomes "an island amid many perils" (Tolkien, *Rings* 348). The faded Elves of Middle-earth are scarred and scattered following the shattering of the Noldor, with many of their

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earlier kin choosing to sail back to Valinor, never returning to the land where "they had long

suffered and long dwelt" (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* 254). Their return is both eucatastrophic and

tinged with sorrow, for while the Elves who return to Valinor are completely forgiven and

"admitted again to the love of Manwë and the pardon of the Valar," others, like Galadriel,

choose to remain, unwilling to forsake Middle-earth after so much suffering for its sake. Many of

the Elves who remain become shadows of their earlier glory by the third age, fading to the point

where they are perceived by Samwise Gamgee as "old and young, and so gay and sad, as it

were," and much of their history before the destruction of the Silmarils, "before the fading time,"

is forgotten, the remnants existing only in songs, stories, and few individual memories (Tolkien,

Rings 87;191). Despite this grief, hope and eucatastrophe can still be found.

The sorrowful aspects of fading in the third age are most exemplified in the isolated land

of Lothlórien, where Galadriel rules. Lothlórien represents the last attempt to preserve the beauty

and light of Valinor in Middle-earth, "a timeless land that did not fade or change or fall into

forgetfulness," protected and enhanced by the ring of power wielded by Galadriel, whose power

is wholly dependent on sorrow; if Sauron and his One Ring are destroyed, the rings of the Elves

will lose their power, and the Elves of Lothlórien will fade out of Middle-earth (Tolkien, *Rings*

351). If Sauron lives, the Elves must continue to fight against him, though it is likely they will be

destroyed. There exists no truly happy outcome for them. Manwë's prophecy has come true, and

the Elves have become shadows of regret, their lives defined by a sorrowful balance. By the third

age, Galadriel has become far wiser, less rebellious, and much more sorrowful, transformed by

long years of grief and loss from "a leader in the rebellion against the Valar" who "proudly

refused forgiveness or permission to return" into "a penitent," who longs only to return to the

peace and light of Valinor (Tolkien, *Letters* 407). Galadriel seeks the forgiveness of Eru, hoping

for her own personal eucatastrophe through the potential destruction of the One Ring. Her

penitence comes through submission to the will of Eru; when asked by Frodo what she wishes

for, she responds,

> That what should be shall be . . . The love of the Elves for their land and their works is deeper than the deeps of the Sea, and their regret is undying and cannot ever wholly be assuaged. Yet they will cast all away rather than submit to Sauron: for they know him now. (Tolkien, *Rings* 365)

This stands in stark contrast to the earlier defiant words of Fëanor and the Noldor. Galadriel has

effectively recognized the downfall of possessiveness and rejected it for *estel*, trusting in the will

of Eru for her absolution. That this rejection comes after the fulfillment of her earlier desires is

significant; she has attained the power and the glory she came to Middle-earth for, and she

recognizes the possessive stain they have poisoned her with. This significance is displayed in her

final test, when Frodo offers her the One Ring:

> I do not deny that my heart has greatly desired to ask what you offer. For many long years I had pondered what I might do, should the Great Ring come into my hands, and behold! it was brought within my grasp. The evil that was devised long ago works on in many ways, whether Sauron himself stands or falls. (Tolkien, *Rings* 365)

Given a last chance to preserve the beauty of Valinor through the sustainment of Lothlórien,

Galadriel freely admits to Frodo that she still feels some of the same possessiveness which led

her to reject the Valar and refuse their pardon, suggesting that while she is still fallen, she has

become wise enough to become aware of her own limitations. She ultimately affirms this to

Frodo as she rejects the Ring, musing, "I pass the test . . . I will diminish, and go into the West,

and remain Galadriel" (Tolkien, *Rings* 366). Romuald Lakowski connects "echoes of the Virgin

Mary's *Magnificat*" to the now-penitent Galadriel, stating that "Galadriel is paradoxically exulted

because she is willing to be humbled" (101).[15] Her exultation in suffering is highlighted by

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[15] The *Magnificat*, also known as the Song of Mary, is spoken by Mary in the Gospel of Luke. In it, she praises God, "for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed" (Luke 1.48).

Tolkien, who describes her as "shrunken: a slender elf-woman, clad in simple white, whose gentle voice was soft and sad" (Tolkien, *Rings* 366). Despite the very clear parallel imagery here between Galadriel and the tender, motherly Mary, Galadriel is not, as Mary is often claimed to be, sinless. She remains in perpetual sorrow, grieved by guilt. And, since Arda must exist without a Christ figure, Galadriel cannot physically bring forth its savior. She can, however, provide *estel* to others from beyond Middle-earth through her connection to Valinor.

When Frodo and the Fellowship enter Lothlórien, they do so at their most hopeless point, after losing Gandalf, their leader and their best hope. After passing the test against the power of the One Ring, Galadriel gives the Fellowship gifts before they leave, tangible reminders of the *estel* she has now completely embraced. This embrace is reflected in the sad way she is then perceived by the Fellowship, as a figure "present and yet remote, a living vision of that which has already been left far behind by the flowing streams of Time" (Tolkien, *Rings* 373). Having placed her hope in Eru, Galadriel's appearance towards others begins to show her as an almost funerary figure of sorrowful memory rather than a living embodiment of Elvish power. Likewise, her gifts are given "in memory of Lothlórien," both as a sad reminder of the attempted preservation of Valinor and as a source of *estel* for those who truly need it (Tolkien, *Rings* 374). Notably, several of the gifts she gives only find their uses in the future: Sam's box of earth from her garden is only useful if he survives his journey, the three hairs she gives to Gimli will only be preserved if "hope should not fail" (Tolkien, *Rings* 376). Most striking is her final gift to Frodo of a phial containing "the light of Eärendil's star," the Silmaril in the sky. Here, she finally and completely rejects the Oath of Fëanor by giving away a small piece of the Noldor's most prized possession, and through it restoring purity to the tainted gem. Galadriel's gifts, while based in *estel*, are tinged with sorrow. While she provides hope for others, she keeps none for herself.

When the Fellowship leave Lothlórien, Frodo hears Galadriel singing a lament: "Who now shall refill the cup for me? For now the Kindler, Varda, the Queen of the Stars . . . has uplifted her hands like clouds, and all paths are drowned deep in shadow" (Tolkien, *Rings* 378). Galadriel has given her last hope to the Fellowship and does not expect to see either Valinor ever again.

Yet, in her despair, eucatastrophe comes for her, unlooked for. By rejecting Frodo's gift of the Ring, she proves that she has learned from the sorrow of her past well enough to avoid making the same mistake again. Tolkien treats her rejection of the Ring a bit paradoxically; in one letter, he makes it clear that Galadriel was not completely tempted by the Ring in the moment, as her "rejection of the temptation was founded upon previous thought and resolve" (Tolkien, *Letters* 332). In a later letter, he writes that "She was pardoned because of her resistance to the final and overwhelming temptation to take the Ring for herself" (Tolkien, *Letters* 407). Lakowski points out that these two beliefs represent two diametrically opposed versions of her character, as Tolkien spent time later in his life working to "rehabilitate and exonerate Galadriel" (104). I hold a preference for the Galadriel who rejects the Ring through pre-meditated reason, as it gives her gift of the phial and its brilliant light significantly more meaning, placing it as the catalyst for her eucatastrophe rather than the rejection of the One Ring. Galadriel has had many ages to resist Sauron, knowing him as only a splinter of a more potent evil, and despite the danger of his One Ring, it remains a far less ruinous work than any of Melkor's. After all, Galadriel's fall is caused, indirectly through her uncle, Fëanor, by the lies of Melkor. Despite not taking the Oath, she remains caught up in the fate of the Silmarils, in which "the fates of Arda . . . lay locked" (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* 67). By giving the phial up, she is rejecting an evil even greater than Sauron, and fully repenting for rejecting Eru and following Fëanor, the greatest sin of her past.

Notably, it is only after her gift to Frodo that a small hint of her desired eucatastrophe appears: "Frodo took the phial, and for a moment as it shone between them, he saw her again standing like a queen, great and beautiful, but no longer terrible. He bowed, but found no words to say" (Tolkien, *Rings* 376). In this instant, Galadriel is redeemed. She is no longer a "shrunken" elf-woman "clad in simple white." The beauty of Valinor is restored to her in one small moment of eucatastrophe through the light of the phial, reflecting the purified light of Eru. The language Tolkien uses immediately afterwards as she leaves reflects this, as the Fellowship perceive that "Lórien was slipping backward, like a bright ship masted with enchanted trees, sailing on to forgotten shores, while they sat helpless upon the margin of the grey and leafless world" (Tolkien, *Rings* 377). Beyond the use of the words "ship," by which all Elves travel to the Valar, and "forgotten shores," which entirely describes Valinor, there is a significant tonal shift here; while in Lothlórien, the Fellowship are soothed by Galadriel as she gives them hope: they are told to "sleep in peace" and not to "trouble your hearts overmuch" (Tolkien, *Rings* 368). Here, after receiving their gifts, they are "helpless" while Galadriel seems to head backwards in time, her eucatastrophe through Eru washing away the stain of Melkor. Interestingly, while Frodo and the reader are given the image of a restored Galadriel, she herself is not. The forsaken lament Frodo hears marks the farewell of Lothlórien, pining for forgiveness as Galadriel believes she is forever lost to both Middle-earth and Valinor.

Of course, her *estel* is rewarded. By the end of the story, Galadriel is allowed to return on the boat to Valinor, and as she travels, her phial provides one final glimpse of hope for those watching the boat depart to Valinor: "the glass of Galadriel that Frodo bore glimmered and was lost" (Tolkien, *Rings* 1030). In the final glimmer of light from her phial can be found the same

message she gave the Fellowship through their gifts: *estel* from beyond Middle-earth, while

intangible, is forever possible, and their suffering is not meaningless.

The Suffering & *Amdir* of Elrond

In contrast to Galadriel, whose suffering stems from her chosen severance from the light

and *estel* of Valinor, Elrond's suffering stems from the inevitable griefs of Middle-earth, and in

his fading can be found a benevolent form of *amdir*, the worldly hope of Men, mixed with Elvish

wisdom. Elrond is unique in Tolkien's world, as he is one of the Half-Elven, those given a choice

to either be counted among the races of Elves or Men. Elrond and his brother Elros are each

given this choice; Elrond chooses to be counted among the Elves, while Elros chooses to be

counted among Men, and Aragorn is descended from him. Thus, Elrond exists as a symbolic

bridge between the immortal Elves and mortal Men through his family.

Being closer to Men, his Half-Elven existence is marked by a more worldly, lonely kind

of loss than Galadriel's; Elrond's father is Eärendil, who forever sails the Silmaril through the

sky. His brother, Elros, dies and goes beyond the circles of the world, where Elrond cannot

follow. Elrond is separated from his wife after she receives a "poisoned wound," loses "all

delight in Middle-earth," and travels to Valinor while he remains behind (Tolkien, *Rings* 1043).

Elrond experiences the grief of fading as Galadriel does, yet his suffering comes from his love

for those around him instead of the land he holds. This is exemplified through his relationships

with Aragorn, descendent of Elros, and Arwen, his daughter. Elrond takes Aragorn to live in

Rivendell and comes "to love him as a son of his own" (Tolkien, *Rings* 1057). Aragorn and

Arwen fall in love, and Elrond is once again presented with inevitable suffering. Should Arwen

choose to remain Elven, she will be forever split from Aragorn after his death, and Elrond must

bear witness to their suffering. Yet should she become mortal and follow Aragorn after death,

Elrond will never see his daughter again, who cannot follow him to Valinor. Talking to Aragorn, Elrond outlines his pain: "But there will be no choice before Arwen, my beloved, unless you, Aragorn . . . come between us and bring one of us, you or me, to a bitter parting beyond the end of the world" (Tolkien, *Rings* 1059). Despite the painful losses Elrond suffers, he does not appear as resigned as Galadriel. He takes an active role as the leader of Rivendell, turning his home into a place of comfort for others rather than preserved isolation.

Elrond's home of Rivendell reflects his closer ties with Middle-earth and Men; unlike Lothlórien, which exists as an attempt to preserve the beauty of Valinor in Middle-earth, Rivendell is described as "the Last Homely House east of the Sea. That house was . . . 'a perfect house, whether you like food or sleep or story-telling, or singing, or just sitting and thinking best, or a pleasant mixture of them all'. Merely to be there was a cure for weariness, fear, and sadness" (Tolkien, *Rings* 225). Elrond gathers there "many Elves, and other folk of wisdom and power from among all the kindreds of Middle-earth . . . the house of Elrond was a refuge for the weary and the oppressed, and a treasury of good counsel and wise lore" (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* 297–298). The peace of Rivendell is open to all, providing worldly comforts rather than a glimpse of *estel*. Contrasted against the otherworldly Lothlórien, which does not "willingly have dealings with any other folk," Rivendell exists as a beacon of safety and wisdom for others within the world of the familiar (Tolkien, *Rings* 343).

Elrond does not come from Valinor and has not seen its light, and thus he does not reflect the *estel* of Eru as Galadriel does. Much of Elrond's life is dedicated towards becoming "a master of wisdom," which Tolkien asserts as representing "Lore – the preservation in reverent memory of all tradition concerning the good, wise, and beautiful" (Tolkien, *Rings* 1034; *Letters* 153). The clearest contrast comes from Frodo's reflection upon stepping into Lothlórien: "In

Rivendell there was memory of ancient things; in Lórien the ancient things still lived on in the waking world" (Tolkien, *Rings* 349). Elrond's wisdom exists as a form of *amdir*, which is based in what is known. It is fitting, then, that the quest to destroy the One Ring begins with Elrond's house of lore, where he presents, in very stark terms, the seeming impossibility of such a thing. Katherine Sas and Curtis Weyant point out that, "Like Galadriel, Elrond identifies their current predicament as yet another iteration of an ongoing, never-ending war against overwhelming evil," yet it is worth noting that Elrond's response to this hopelessness differs from Galadriel's in its origin (4).

While Galadriel implores the Fellowship to ease their burdens in Lothlórien, offering them gifts of *estel* for the future, the *amdir* of Elrond offers no immediate easement and is based on the knowledge of the past. At the Council of Elrond, he directs the Fellowship away from heading west towards the sea, saying, "The westward road seems easiest. Therefore it must be shunned. It will be watched. Too often the Elves have fled that way. Now at this last we must take a hard road, a road unforeseen. There lies our hope, if hope it be. To walk into peril – to Mordor" (Tolkien, *Rings* 267). The *amdir* of Elrond is not truly pessimistic – it is merely a hope without expectation of success. The quest is likely to fail, and Elrond laments having already witnessed "many defeats, and many fruitless victories," but insists that "the road must be trod . . . such is oft the course of deeds that move the wheels of the world: small hands do them because they must" (Tolkien, *Rings* 243, 269). Crucially, Elrond's *amdir* works to set the stage for potential eucatastrophe*,* which "does not deny the existence of dyscatastrophe, of sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance" (Tolkien, *On Fairy-stories* 75). Through Elrond, Tolkien places a second path to eucatastrophe within the dyscatastrophic worldly hope of *amdir*, supplementing the otherworldly hope of *estel*.

Perhaps it is fitting, then, that Elrond does not ultimately experience a personal eucatastrophe like Galadriel, as it is "never to be counted on to recur" (Tolkien, *On Fairy-stories* 75). Arwen's last meeting with her father is colored by sorrow: "bitter was their parting that should endure beyond the ends of the world" (Tolkien, *Rings* 978). Despite this bitter ending, Elrond's sorrow once again sets the stage for eucatastrophe. In Tolkien's characterization of Rivendell, he describes it as "not a scene of *action* but of *reflection*" (Tolkien, *Letters* 153). As the head of Rivendell, Elrond fulfills the role of counsellor, providing a framework of *amdir* for others to act upon. Before the destruction of the ring, Arwen acts upon the choice of the half-elven inherited from her father, choosing to become mortal and follow Aragorn in death beyond the circles of the world, echoing Elrond's own proclaimed doom: "Maybe, it has been appointed so, that by my loss the kingship of Men may be restored" (Tolkien, *Rings* 1061). By acting as an outside counsellor for others, Elrond helps to facilitate eucatastrophe for the world of Men in Middle-earth at the cost of his own happiness.

The Suffering of Men

The Gift of Death

In Tolkien's published works, there is no recorded unfallen state for Men.[16] They come into the world after the Elves, and by the time the Elves find them, all that is known is a rumor that "for a while they fell under the domination of the Enemy and that some repented" (Tolkien, *Letters* 148). This glossing over of their fallen nature can be attributed to Tolkien's insistence that his story's "view and interest is not Men but 'Elves'" (Tolkien, *Letters* 147). Despite this insistence, Men and their suffering form a large part of Tolkien's world, particularly because of their contrast with Tolkien's deathless Elves. Men are naturally defined in Tolkien's world by their mortality, often referred to as a gift; their mortality is viewed by the Elves as "a grief and an envy," and "as Time wears even the [Valar] shall envy" it (Tolkien, *Letters* 147; *The Silmarillion* 42). Eru gives Men true freedom as a response to the Elves' connection to Arda:

> Therefore he willed that the hearts of Men should seek beyond the world and should find no rest therein; but they should have a virtue to shape their life, amid the powers and chances of the world, beyond the Music of the Ainur, which is as fate to all things else; and of their operation everything should be, in form and deed, completed, and the world fulfilled unto the last and smallest. (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* 41–42)

This presents the clearest description of the difference between Elves and Men. The efforts of the Elves, being "all really a kind of embalming" come from their connection to Arda (Tolkien, *Letters* 151). Their fates are tied to it, and their spirits cannot ever travel beyond it, consequently, their *estel* must come from acceptance of the world's fading. Despite Men being untethered to

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[16] Andreth briefly hints at an unfallen state for Men in *Morgoth's Ring*: "[W]e cannot remember any time when we were not as we are — save only legends of days when death came less swiftly and our span was still far longer, but already there was death." (Tolkien 313).

Arda, they still love it, though not as deeply as the Elves do. They are grieved by their own existence, and often wish for the seemingly supernatural immortality of the Elves so that they might stay with the world and enjoy its beauty longer. Tolkien wrote against this viewpoint years before publishing any of his Middle-earth tales: "it is man who is, in contrast to fairies, supernatural (and often of diminutive stature); whereas they are natural, far more natural than he. Such is their doom (Tolkien, *On Fairy-stories* 28). Tolkien's inversion of the typical application of a supernatural nature is clearly reflected in Eru's gift, as the powerful will of Men goes "beyond the Music of the Ainur."

Death, then, is a supernatural gift in Tolkien's world, once which he explicitly ties to the will of Men:

> It is one with this gift of freedom that the children of Men dwell only a short space in the world alive, and are not bound to it, and depart soon whither the Elves know not . . . But the sons of Men die indeed, and leave the world; wherefore they are called the Guests, or the Strangers. (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* 42)

While Elves are given "the greater bliss in this world," they are denied any sort of control over it. Flieger describes the gift of Men as a "[r]elease from bondage to the circles of the world," and this illustrates Melkor's marring well (*Light* 144). "Bondage" is the key word here, as it is the domain of Melkor, who forever wishes to bind both Men and Elves to grief, pain, and loss. Tolkien states that "Ilúvatar knew that Men, being set amid the turmoils of the powers of the world, would stray often, and would not use their gifts in harmony" (*The Silmarillion* 42). Again, Eru anticipates and plans for the discord of Melkor by placing death as a path to his light, though it is, fittingly, without guarantees, as it requires "a blind trust, and a hope without assurance, knowing not what lies before us in a little while" (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* 265). Here, death is plainly framed in eucatastrophic terms, and crucially, seeing it in the light of Eru requires a choice. The choice of *estel*, the "deeper trust," is required of Men for them to truly understand Eru's gift. This gets to the heart of Tolkien's contrast between "Death and Immortality," as

without the Elves, who are supposed to "teach them, and make way for them," Men cannot know *estel* (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* xiv). Men must learn it through witnessing the light and *estel* of the Elves, who have seen the Valar, and accepting their death as the gift it is intended to be.

Men and *Estel*

Unlike the Elves, Men exhibit a distinct lack of *estel* from the beginning of their existence. Much of their suffering results from this; in *Morgoth's Ring*, the conversation between Finrod and Andreth eventually turns to *estel*, where the mortal Andreth says, "Do you not perceive that it is part of our wound that *Estel* should falter and its foundations be shaken? Are we the Children of the One? Are we not cast off finally? Or were we ever so? Is not the Nameless the Lord of the World?" (Tolkien, *Morgoth's Ring* 320). The invocation of "the Nameless" hints at Melkor's corruption as an influencing force, but, crucially, Men are sundered from the Valar from the beginning of their existence, placing them even further from *estel* than the Noldor, as "there came no Vala to guide Men, or to summon them to dwell in Valinor; and Men have feared the Valar, rather than loved them, and have not understood the purposes of the Powers, being at variance with them, and at strife with the world" (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* 103). Tolkien's characterization of Men as warring against the powers of the world places them in opposition to the Elves and the Valar, whom they remain estranged from, yet Men, through their freedom, carry *estel* for both races.

Finrod hints at this, hypothesizing that the purpose of Men is "to heal the Marring of Arda, already foreshadowed before their devising; and to do more, as agents of the magnificence of Eru: to enlarge the Music and surpass the Vision of the World" (Tolkien, *Morgoth's Ring* 318). The phrase "enlarge the Music" carries an interesting connotation here, as it does not represent a new theme, rather, it speaks of an addition to the themes already laid down by Eru.

Men, through their freedom from the world, must hold the power in some way to supplement the Great Music, granting them a power beyond even that of Melkor or the Valar. Flieger ties this idea to the end of Arda and argues for Tolkien's "clear intention for Men to join in the Second Music, in which the themes will be played aright because the task of Men has been to enable that playing" (*Music* 173). While the "Second Music" refers to after the end of the world, the phrase "has been" is critical, as the enabling task of Men must then happen in Arda, before the Second Music occurs.

Ideally, then, fallen Men are to be the direct fulfillers of Eru's *estel*, able to act through free will as agents of change in Arda, unlike the Elves, who must counsel Men and are doomed to hold Arda in memory. Through this, Tolkien again adapts to the lack of a Christ figure in his world, placing the burden of change on all of mankind rather than introducing a sacrificial figure to lead them beyond the world. As mentioned earlier, however, Men "stray often," and this reality is crucial to Tolkien's eucatastrophic vision, as the suffering of fallen Men who stray serves to illuminate those who have truly embraced *estel* and help to lead others to the light of Eru. Tolkien primarily uses the failure of Númenor in *The Silmarillion* as a dyscatastrophic mirror through which to contrast the actions of Men in *The Lord of the Rings*.

Death without *Estel*

The downfall of Númenor is primarily a failure of *estel* surrounding death. Tolkien attributes it as "the result of an inner weakness in Men – consequent, if you will, upon the first Fall (unrecorded in these tales), repented but not finally healed. Reward on earth is more dangerous for men than punishment! (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* xvi). The island of Númenor is given to Men by the Valar as a reward for assisting in their final war against Melkor. Through this gift, they also receive "wisdom and power and life more enduring than any others of mortal

race" (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* 260). By positioning the men of Númenor on an island "neither part of Middle-earth nor of Valinor . . . yet it was nearer to Valinor," the Valar make a crucial mistake. It is tempting to read the absence of the Valar in the lives of Men as a failure, but their summoning of the Elves resulted in Fëanor's disastrous rebellion and the fall of the Noldor. The Valar may simply not want to risk another disastrous intervention; Finrod hints at another reason for their absence, asking Andreth, "Has it never entered into your thought . . . that ye, the Children of Men, were not a matter that they could govern? For ye were too great. Yea, I mean this, and do not only flatter your pride: too great. Sole masters of yourselves within Arda, under the hand of the One" (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* 314). This insurmountable difference between Men and the Valar is reflected by an early attempt from the Valar to communicate with them through "steam and flood . . . Therefore they loved the water, and their hearts were stirred, but they understood not the messages" (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* 104). Men cannot understand the Valar like the Elves can, yet while they are not bound to Middle-earth, they hold the power to shape it. It is grievous, then, that the Valar do choose to intervene and reward them by separating them from Middle-earth, where they truly belong. This separation has immediate consequences, as while Númenor prospers, "Middle-earth went backward and light and wisdom faded" (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* 261). Without the leadership of the Men of Númenor who have been granted wisdom and greater light, dyscatastrophe increases across Middle-earth.

Initially, the Men of Númenor fulfill their role well, keeping contact with the Elves and learning *estel* from them while avoiding the mistakes of the Noldor, becoming "men of peace" and rejecting the making of weapons (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* 262). They begin to sail to Middle-earth, taking pity on it and instructing the forsaken Men they find there "in the ordering of their life, such as it might be in the lands of swift death and little bliss" (Tolkien, *The*

Silmarillion 263). "Such as it might be" is the key here. Men must accept the uncertainty of life, with its brief length, in order to fully enact change in the world. The immediate rewards are apparent, as under the leadership of the Men of Númenor, the Men of Middle-earth "shook off the yoke of the offspring of Morgoth, and unlearned their terror of the dark (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* 263). The power to shape things includes even mending the dyscatastrophe of Morgoth, it seems, even if Men cannot ever remove it. This moment shows Men as they should be: fallen, yet still illuminated and enhanced by their interactions with the Elves, not jealous of them, acting as healers for those who do not yet know *estel*, all reaching "toward a more hopeful future that remains out of sight but not out of mind" (Flieger, *Music* 177). Flieger's description of Tolkien's world frames a "hopeful future" for Men as its own eucatastrophe, unpromised but possible.

Unfortunately, Men's view of death has long since been corrupted through fear, and the Valar, also bound to the world, cannot understand it. The Men of Númenor abandon the chance of a hopeful future as they begin "to hunger for the undying city that they saw from afar, and the desire of everlasting life, to escape from death and the ending of delight, grew strong upon them; and ever as their power and glory grew greater their unquiet increased" (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* 263). Once Men begin to operate in the mode of Melkor, in service of possessive power, their *estel* naturally fades. The Valar's attempt to reason with them is bound to fail, as they "do not clearly understand" the purpose of death, nor will they, as "it will be revealed and not to the Valar" (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* 265). For Men, the Valar cannot provide *estel*. There are clear parallels here between the disquiet of Númenor and the rebellion of the Noldor; both groups begin to resent the Valar through the deceit of Melkor and begin to abandon *estel*, though Flieger points out that the impulse of the Elves "to go against the light" contrasts with "the

inborn, instinctive impulse of Men to go toward the light, even though they have never seen it" (*Light* 122). Consequently, instead of heading away from Valinor like the Noldor, Men reject *estel* by desiring to head towards it, as they wish to "escape death in their own day, not waiting upon hope" (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* 265). Instead of becoming, like Fëanor, "masters of the bliss and beauty of Arda," Men rebel against their own their internal nature.

Their rebellion against their own mortality causes a split among the Númenoreans, who, like the Noldor, become a fractured group, each reflecting the light of Eru in different ways. The Faithful, those who retain *estel* and remain in contact with the Elves, are subsequently ostracized and punished as the Men of Númenor grow more consumed by the fear of death, forming a "cult of the dead" as they "build great houses for their dead, while their wise men laboured increasingly to discover if they might the secret of recalling life, or at the least the prolonging of Men's days (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* xxii, 266). No longer does Númenor embrace life "such as it might be," instead they fear death, and have forgotten their earliest teachings of *estel* to the forsaken men of Middle-earth. Fittingly, by rejecting the *estel* within death and replacing it with fear, death comes to them "sooner and more often, and in many dreadful guises" (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* 274). Their actions have essentially accelerated their suffering; their possessiveness of their own lives only invites further death. The death cult of Númenor culminates in their acceptance of Melkor as their god, choosing to place themselves beyond any possible *estel* as they attack Valinor.

The attempted invasion of Valinor is notable for the response of the Valar. When the Númenorean fleet approaches, the Valar appear powerless. They do not fight, instead, they resort to *estel*, choosing to give up "their government of Arda" and place their fate in the hands of Eru, who directly intervenes:

Ilúvatar showed forth his power, and he changed the fashion of the world; and a great chasm opened in the sea between Númenor and the Deathless Lands, and the waters flowed down into it, and the noise and smoke of the cataracts went up to heaven, and the world was shaken. And all the fleets of the Númenoreans were drawn down into the abyss, and they were drowned and swallowed up for ever . . . the land of Aman and Eressëa of the Eldar were taken away and removed beyond the reach of Men for ever. (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* 279)

Eru's direct intervention initially appears extremely dyscatastrophic. It is described through horrific imagery, evoking the brutal punishments given by the God of the Old Testament rather than a glimpse of joy. Even Valinor, the "visible dwelling of the divine," acting as a physical glimpse of joy, is taken from the physical world and placed outside of it, "remaining only in the memory of the earth" (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* xxiii). Yet, threaded within this intervention is hope. Eru's response acts as a correction for not just the failure of the Númenoreans, but the failure of the Valar. By sinking Númenor, Eru ensures that Men must forever remain in Middle-earth, where they may yet choose to be as the Númenoreans once were, acting through *estel* in spite of their fallen nature in order to bring healing. To ensure this chance, Eru spares several of the Faithful from destruction through a last-minute eucatastrophe, choosing to "cast them away upon the shores of Middle-earth," planting seeds of *estel* in the middle of immense suffering (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* 280).

Conflicting Hopes

Unlike the Elves, the fragmentation of hope among Men only increases as time goes on and they become more numerous, leading to a decrease of *estel* as Men remain sundered from the Valar and remain grieved by death. Their decreasing *estel* results in an increasing reliance on *amdir*, the worldly hope, and conflicts between it and *estel* occur often within *The Lord of the Rings*. These conflicts are not meant to suggest a strict opposition between *amdir* and *estel*, rather, they highlight their coherence. In a response to Flieger's framing of hope and despair as an uneven conflict, Donald Williams suggests that the cohesion between hope and despair, rather than the contradiction, is Tolkien's point:

> The possibility of praise and thanks in the midst of present suffering and in the absence of any final victory yet experienced is precisely what Tolkien's Christian faith purports to offer. Such hope is based in the primary world on a knowledge of God that Tolkien thought Christian revelation could give us and in the secondary world on an understanding of the character of Ilúvatar that is ultimately what sustains the Wise. Tolkien would not have accused them of contradiction for holding to it. (217)

Amdir and *estel* represent hope of different kinds, and, much like light and darkness, hope and despair, both come into conflict and work together towards eucatastrophe.

Boromir, a descendent of Númenor, represents a mix of possessive *amdir* with a distinct lack of *estel*. He seeks counsel from Elrond concerning the Ring and the fight against Sauron, Melkor's servant, coming to Rivendell on an errand from the war-torn city of Gondor after he receives a dream where "in the West a pale light lingered" (Tolkien, *Rings* 246). His insistence on taking the journey comes at the cost of overruling his brother, Faramir, who wishes to go to Rivendell out of hope, seeing "how desperate" Gondor's situation is, while Boromir only comments on the path to Rivendell being "full of doubt and danger" (Tolkien, *Rings* 246). Boromir's focus on the road ahead is an example of a sort of dyscatastrophic tunnel vision reminiscent of Númenor's overwhelming fear of death; unlike his brother, he does not focus on the hope presented by the dream, choosing instead to only see suffering and potential destruction ahead of him. This dyscatastrophic vision is furthered by Boromir's focus on Gondor, which he holds to be doing more against Sauron than anyone else. He pointedly states that "it would comfort us to know that others fought also with all the means that they have" (Tolkien, *Rings* 268). Boromir asserts that Gondor is fighting and suffering with all they have available to them, placing the city as the sole "bulwark of the West," ignoring the eucatastrophic hope that destroying the Ring represents (Tolkien, *Rings* 245). Aragorn, also a descendant of Númenor, stands as a representative of the "deeper hope" and rebukes Boromir's misplaced *amdir*, offering both *amdir* and *estel* together:

If simple folk are free from care and fear, simple they will be, and we must be secret to keep them so. That has been the task of my kindred, while the years have lengthened and the grass has grown. But now the world is changing once again. A new hour comes. Isildur's Bane is found. (Tolkien, *Rings* 248)

Like Boromir, Aragorn focuses on deeds he has done, basing his *amdir* for the survival of "simple folk" in what he knows has been done to protect them. However, he does not exhibit a possessiveness over the suffering experienced through these deeds, choosing instead to focus on *estel*, through the hope the Ring brings to the world. Boromir, by focusing solely on the suffering of his own people, has blinded himself to the hope Aragorn carries.

Yet, as Amy Amendt-Raduege points out, "Boromir is not completely unrecognizable as a hero to a modern audience . . . Again and again, Boromir acts valiantly and courageously, saving the Fellowship from certain death, fighting wolves and orcs by Aragorn's side" (23). This is true; Boromir's lack of *estel* does not necessarily make him a villain. Unlike Fëanor, his possessiveness is still in service of others. He earnestly wishes to help the Fellowship, though his *amdir* can only contribute so much. His acts of heroism that Amendt-Raduege points out are merely exertions of this *amdir*, acts from a man who has placed all his hope in the past strength of Gondor, even though that strength is failing. When his *amdir* is called upon, namely in fights, Boromir excels. As he says, "when heads are at a loss, bodies must serve . . . The strongest of us must seek a way" (Tolkien, *Rings* 291). When *estel* is called for, Boromir is at a loss. When the Fellowship must decide on a route, Boromir rejects Gandalf's suggestion to go through the unknown danger of the Mines of Moria, suggesting instead that the Ring be brought to Gondor through familiar lands, even if the danger of those lands is significantly greater to their quest. Boromir's fear of death translates to his fear of the unknown, including *estel*. When the Fellowship comes to Moria, he laments, "I do not know which to hope . . . All choices seem to be ill, and to be caught between wolves and the wall the likeliest chance" (Tolkien, *Rings* 300). Instead of trusting in *estel*, he places his hope in the strength of Gondor, which is not enough to

overcome hopelessness. Much reference is made to the failing strength of Gondor. Boromir's worldly attachment to this strength precludes the possibility of *estel* from beyond Gondor and invokes the failure of Númenor, though to a less severe degree. Like Númenor, Gondor is "a withering people whose only 'hallows' were their tombs," yet their fear of death has not yet extended beyond the world (Tolkien, *Letters* 197).

Aragorn, holding both *amdir* and *estel*, clashes against Boromir. After Gandalf's death, he leads the fellowship to Lothlórien, the last remaining splinter of light from Valinor, yet Boromir resists the light, wishing to travel a "plain road, though it led through a hedge of swords" (Tolkien, *Rings* 338). Aragorn's leadership is defined by acts of *amdir* and an ever-lingering hope of *estel*. Like Boromir, he is a capable warrior, trusting in his own strength, but only to a certain extent. After Gandalf's death, Aragon asks "What hope have we without you? . . . 'We must do without hope'" (Tolkien, *Rings* 333). Aragorn's denial of hope is not truly denial, but an acceptance of its remote nature. Unlike Boromir, who places all his hope in his own strength, Aragorn recognizes the limits of *amdir* and does not rely solely upon it. This touches on Tolkien's belief that "the essence of a *fallen* world is that the *best* cannot be attained by free enjoyment, or by what is called 'self-realization' (usually a nice name for self-indulgence, wholly inimical to the realization of other selves); but by denial, by suffering" (Tolkien, *Letters* 51). Aragorn's suffering is highlighted throughout the book; in his rebuke of Boromir, he highlights the treatment of his people, the Dúnedain, also descendants of Númenor: "And yet less thanks we have than you. Travellers scowl at us, and countrymen give us scornful names" (Tolkien, *Rings* 248). Unlike Boromir, Aragorn is not bitter about the suffering he has endured. By understanding its necessity, he remains free to place his focus on helping others, achieving the "realization of other selves" by rejecting self-indulgent misery. Judy Ford and Robin Reid

argue that Aragorn "embodies the link between his people and their Edenic past, uniting the past with the present and the people with the gods" (76). Aragorn's divine link is his hope; Aragorn's *estel* represents the "best" because it extends beyond both himself and the world; he understands that *amdir* is a response to the suffering of Arda, and though it can fail, it must be balanced by the intangible hope of *estel* from beyond.

The Despair of Denethor

Hope often acts as an invisible line in Tolkien's world which separates characters. Aragorn, holding both kinds of hope, is a natural leader. Boromir, with his reliance on *amdir*, is not a villain, but neither is he a perfect hero. Even Gollum, a man long corrupted, is driven by his hope of reclaiming the Ring for himself. The worst suffering in Arda is reserved for those who have completely abandoned hope. Denethor, the father of Boromir, exemplifies this. Denethor acts as the Steward of Gondor, a successive line of rulers who exist to tend the throne in hope of the return of the king. Contrasted against Gandalf, an emissary of *estel*, Denethor appears to be "more kingly, beautiful, and powerful; and older. Yet by a sense other than sight Pippin perceived that Gandalf had the greater power and the deeper wisdom" (Tolkien, *Rings* 757). Tolkien's use of a sense other than sight reflects Peter's message that "we walk by faith, not by sight" (2 Cor. 5.7). Pippin's faith in Gandalf removes the worldly veil, allowing him to see Gandalf defined by his *estel*, which Denethor lacks. Denethor is explicitly defined by his "long sight," which can "perceive . . . the minds of men" (Tolkien *Rings* 759). Denethor's sight is, initially, based in his own *amdir*.

In conversation with Gandalf, Denethor refers to the hope of destroying the Ring as a "fool's hope," trusting instead in an even more corrupted version of *amdir* than Boromir's, as he wishes to keep the Ring "hidden dark and deep. Not used, I say, unless at the uttermost end of

need, but set beyond his grasp, save by a victory so final that what then befell would not trouble us, being dead" (Tolkien, *Rings* 813). Denethor does not show real concern for or guidance towards the people of his city, like Boromir. He instead imagines himself as Gondor, focusing more on his own lineage and allowing his rule of the city to corrupt his hope, wrongfully placing the entire fate of the city within his own.

Naturally, when Denethor learns that the ring is beyond his grasp, his *amdir* fails, and, having no *estel* to fall back on, he begins to despair, viewing death as imminent, yet still maintaining a false veil of hope. He sends Faramir, his remaining son, on a suicide mission. When Faramir returns, seemingly mortally wounded, Denethor removes any pretense of hope and openly despairs, his face "grey, more deathlike than his son's" (Tolkien, *Rings* 823). This leads to Denethor's fatal mistake; echoing Númenor, he allows evil to exploit his fear of death. He begins to speak of hopelessness openly, stating that Sauron "sees our very thoughts, and all we do is ruinous," and abandons his leadership, effectively dooming the people of Gondor. (Tolkien, *Rings* 824). He comes close to repentance, admitting that his own hopelessness is what has wounded his son, yet, instead of turning to *estel*, he chooses death, not by embracing it, but by corrupting it.

Death as a Reflection of Hope

Death, as discussed earlier, is intended as a eucatastrophic gift for Men regardless of how they choose to recognize it. Despite the wide range of hope between Denethor, Boromir, and Aragorn, Tolkien ensures that their deaths simultaneously function as reflections of their hope and in service of eucatastrophe, retrospectively rendering their choices in life either more grievous or joyous.

Denethor's death stands as the ultimate rejection of the gift and as a mirror image of the downfall of Númenor. In the throes of despair, Denethor decides to have himself and Faramir burned alive, stating, "Why should we wish to live longer? Why should we not go to death side by side?" (Tolkien, *Rings* 853). This should not be read as his acceptance of death, as it is an entirely perverted acceptance; it is a murderous rejection of life. Linda Greenwood frames his death as a failure of his long sight, saying, "The evil in him cannot imagine how the good in him can triumph, and so without vision, without imagination that sees the reversibility of the irreversible, Denethor perishes" (182). Her framing, though she does not mention it, touches upon both *estel* and eucatastrophe. Denethor cannot imagine any kind of victory because he has continually rejected *estel* and the possibility of eucatastrophe in favor of attempting to make himself the master of his own death. Unlike the Númenoreans and their attempt at conquering death through unnatural evolution by becoming immortal like the Valar, Denethor takes the opposite path, away from the Valar, choosing to "burn like heathen kings before ever a ship sailed hither from the West. The West has failed. Go back and burn!" (Tolkien, *Rings* 825). Through this de-evolution, Denethor rejects the collective *estel* of the Elves, the leadership of the early Númenoreans, and even the existence of the Valar or Eru.

While even the Númenoreans acknowledged the existence of the Valar, Denethor's use of 'heathen' is fitting, as he rejects the hope of Eru in all forms. Greenwood notes that Denethor would rather die by "an act of his own authority than become a slave to the Enemy," yet through his plan to murder his own son alongside himself, he has already done so, and his godless death becomes yet another tool for evil. Gandalf hints at this, stating that "Even in the heart of our stronghold the Enemy has power to strike us: for his will it is that is at work" (Tolkien, *Rings* 850). Denethor's death is described with vividly hellish imagery:

> Then Denethor leaped upon the table, and standing there wreathed in fire and smoke . . . he bowed and laid himself on the table, clasping the *palantir* with both hands upon his breast. And it was said that ever after, if any man looked in that Stone, unless he had a great strength of will to turn it to other purpose, he saw only two aged hands withering in flame. (Tolkien, *Rings* 854)

For Tolkien, then, to die by suicide as hopelessly as Denethor does is to die a slave to the evils of the world, unrepentant, godless, and doomed to burn. This is in line with Catholic beliefs during Tolkien's time which condemned suicide as a mortal sin.[17] Yet, even amid such a sorrowful, painful death, Tolkien shows us that eucatastrophe still exists, for through the death of his father Faramir is saved, and Denethor's line does not fail.

Fittingly, Boromir's death is more hopeful than Denethor's, and stands as the most 'human' death in Tolkien's world. His failed *amdir* causes him to succumb to the temptation of the Ring, and he begins to plead with Frodo to bring it to Gondor, saying:

> The fearless, the ruthless, these alone will achieve victory. What could not a warrior do in this hour, a great leader? What could not Aragorn do? Or if he refuses, why not Boromir? The Ring would give me power of Command. How I would drive the hosts of Mordor, and all men would flock to my banner! (Tolkien, *Rings* 398)

Here, much like Denethor, he begins to plainly state his true thoughts, and though they remain based in his hope for the salvation of Gondor, they are noticeably selfish, ignoring the *estel* presented by the destruction of the Ring in favor of his failed hope in the strength of Men. Unlike Denethor, his fear of death has not extended beyond the world of Arda. While he dismisses the Elves, stating that "often I doubt if they are wise and not merely timid," he does not dismiss the West like Denethor does, placing himself among the "men of Númenor" even as the Ring corrupts his hope (Tolkien, *Rings* 398–399). When he attacks Frodo to try and steal the ring, he does not try to murder him as Denethor tries to kill Faramir. He attempts to convince Frodo to give up the Ring and place his trust in the strength of Men: "Why not get rid of it? Why not be

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[17] The *Baltimore Catechism*, an introductory question-and-answer collection of Catholic doctrine commonly used to teach Catholic schoolchildren during Tolkien's life, frames suicide as a rejection of God's Commandment against murder. The Baltimore Catechism was later replaced by a revised version of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* in 2004.

free of your doubt and fear? You can lay the blame on me, if you will" (Tolkien, *Rings* 399).

When Frodo refuses, Boromir responds with forceful strength, the only way he knows how to

express his hope. Yet, Lynn Forrest-Hill correctly points out that "Boromir's personal destruction

is not directly a result of his pride; he does not die trying to take the Ring, nor having taken it.

Nor is his death directly the effect of his attack on Frodo" (80). Frodo escapes, and Boromir

returns to the other members of the Fellowship, ashamed. It is likely that, had Boromir taken the

ring, he would have eventually received a miserable, hopeless death like Denethor's. Instead, he

chooses to repent, and finally places his trust in both *amdir* and *estel*.

Boromir dies after a final act of *amdir*, trying and failing to save Merry and Pippin from

at least twenty orcs. Though his fight is hopeless, he finally accepts the "doubt and danger" of

the path ahead of him and places his hope beyond himself. When Aragorn finds him sitting

against a tree, pierced by arrows, he confesses his sin against Frodo to Aragorn, stating "I am

sorry. I have paid . . . Farewell, Aragorn! Go to Minas Tirith and save my people! I have failed"

(Tolkien, *Rings* 414). Boromir's belief that he has failed is his final reflection of his *amdir*,

tempered by the *estel* he has acted upon but does not yet understand. It is Aragorn who delivers

him understanding, gently telling him that "'You have conquered. Few have gained such a

victory. Be at peace! Minas Tirith shall not fall!' Boromir smiled" (Tolkien, *Rings* 414). With

this small smile of understanding, Boromir passes, and his death becomes eucatastrophic as his

last moments are filled with the heroism of his redeemed *amdir* and the joy of hope beyond the

world bestowed by Aragorn.

Aragorn's role as a bearer of both *amdir* and *estel* is highlighted throughout his life, and

his death reflects his status as the ultimate ideal for Men. Like Boromir, Aragorn is born of

Númenorean descent, but Aragorn is raised around the illuminated Elves, with Elrond in

Rivendell, where he is fittingly "called *Estel* . . . and his true name and lineage were kept secret at the bidding of Elrond" (Tolkien, *Rings* 1057). Tolkien makes no secret of Aragorn's role as an ideal; throughout *The Lord of the Rings*, Aragorn consistently acts through *estel*, keeping a hope beyond his own:

> Thus he became the most hardy of living Men, skilled in their crafts and lore, and was yet more than they; for he was elven-wise, and there was a light in his eyes that then they were kindled few could endure. His face was sad and stern because of the doom that was laid on him, and yet hope dwelt ever in the depths of his heart, from which mirth would arise at times like a spring from a rock. (Tolkien, *Rings* 1060)

The balance Tolkien strikes between Aragorn's sorrow and his hope is the key to his death. When Aragorn finally approaches death after a lifetime of suffering, leadership and hope through hopelessness, he tells Arwen that, "my world is fading. Lo! we have gathered, and we have spent, and now the time of payment draws near" (Tolkien, *Rings* 1062).[18] The word "payment" reflects his acceptance of life as a borrowed gift, something that comes from beyond the world, fitting with Tolkien's assertion that a "'good' Man would or should *die* voluntarily by surrender with trust *before being compelled*" (Tolkien, *Rings* 286). Aragorn's payment of his life is his final surrender to *estel*. Unlike Denethor, who attempts to control the final moment of his life without trust in anything, Aragorn surrenders himself voluntarily to death, trusting in *estel*.

He reassures Arwen through this *estel*, telling her that while "there is no comfort for such pain within the circles of the world . . . In sorrow we must go, but not in despair. Behold! we are not bound for ever to the circles of the world, and beyond them is more than memory. Farewell!" (Tolkien, *Rings* 1062–1063). Aragorn's final words are directly eucatastrophic, transmitting a glimpse of joy beyond the world to Arwen who must remain in a fallen Arda, grieving. Death may appear sorrowful within this fallen world, but ultimately it is hopeful, and the conflicted

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[18] Tolkien viewed the story of Aragorn and Arwen as "the most important of the Appendices," as it reflected his concern for "Death as part of the nature, physical and spiritual, of Man, and with Hope without guarantees. (*Letters* 237).

words spoken by Arwen after Aragorn passes reflect this: "*Estel*, *Estel*! she cried . . . the light of her eyes was quenched" (Tolkien, *Rings* 1063). Even after death, Aragorn retains his blending of *amdir* and *estel*:

> Then a great beauty was revealed in him, so that all who after came there looked on him in wonder; for they saw that the grace of his youth, and the valour of his manhood, and the wisdom and majesty of his age were blended together. And long there he lay, an image of the splendour of the Kings of Men in glory undimmed before the breaking of the world. (Tolkien, *Rings* 1063)

Here, Tolkien's eucatastrophe*,* dyscatastrophe, *amdir*, and *estel* are all combined through death, and Arda's lack of a Christ figure is reconciled fully. Aragorn, like Christ, defeats death, but not in the same way. Aragorn does not defeat death itself, but Men's fallen perception of death. During his life, he represents both *amdir* and *estel*, encouraging others to accept death but not to give up hope. Men, like Boromir. often do not see this hope until faced with death themselves. Through the preservation of Aragorn's "wisdom and majesty," hope is transmitted from beyond death, undefeated by the suffering of the world, as the body of Aragorn functions as a tangible eucatastrophe within the world, carrying a glimpse of joy for all who see it, without them needing to face death first. By making Aragorn's death a tangible rendering of eucatastrophe, Tolkien succeeds in providing "a great function for Strider-Aragorn" (Tolkien, *Letters* 347). As Aragorn does in the story, Tolkien leads his readers to hope beyond the walls of the world.

Conclusion

Tolkien's Arda is primarily a reflection of how he viewed his own world: contradictory and filled with suffering caused by evil, where hope is never assured but also ever-present. By taking his dyscatastrophic experiences of death and suffering during World War I, infusing them with the wonder and myth of the fairy-stories he loved, and placing them within his own understanding of God, Tolkien's world is ultimately defined by eucatastrophe, which he held as not just a storytelling tool, but a reflection of truth. By creating a world where suffering is not just present but assured, Tolkien is able to highlight fleeing moments of hope not just within Arda, but within ours. His Elves, fallen mortuary figures of sorrow, point us to the grief of immortality, inviting us to reflect upon our ever-present fear of death and the suffering within our lives as we read the stories of a race who, like us, suffer and grieve, but are denied our ability to escape. Despite their mythological status, the Men of Tolkien's Arda were not written to be better than Men in the primary world were or could be. Like us, they suffer, fail, despair, and they die. They are a fallen race who exist beyond the grace of Eru. By giving Men the power to shape the world beyond fate, Tolkien uses both *amdir* and *estel* as metrics through which to judge their choices in life.

Through Denethor, Tolkien displays the futility of hopelessness, balancing his horrific suicide with the eucatastrophe of Faramir's recovery. Through *amdir*, Tolkien points his readers to the acts of heroism and courage we see in everyday life. While there is no Boromir in front of us hewing orcs, there are still figures of courage. Aragorn's heroism, while unobtainable, is informed by the more basic virtue of his *estel* and his acceptance of death. This is Tolkien's solution to the conflicting themes of death and immortality. Men cannot and should not attempt or wish for immortality. Instead, Tolkien urges us to focus on moments of humility and

acceptance, viewing death as a vehicle for hope to assuage our fear of the unknown. While

Tolkien believed in the eucatastrophe of the second coming of Christ, it remained a hope beyond

the fallen world he lived in. For those of us who remain here, Tolkien has left us a world which,

while not externally Catholic, is built on the hope at the heart of Catholicism, a hope beyond

death, which, through his works, readers may experience while glimpsing joy beyond the circles

of the world.

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