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The Eternal Fatherly

J. R. R. Tolkien & the Marks of Christian Heroism

by *Leon J. Podles*

J. R. R. Tolkien's hold on the imagination has been surpassed by few writers in the twentieth century. His books have sold tens of millions of copies, and the website for *The Lord of the Rings* has had 30 million hits per month (at one point it was getting one million hits per hour). British readers have voted *The Lord of the Rings* as the best book of the twentieth century and, according to members of the Folio Society, the best English book ever.

I discovered Tolkien when I was sixteen. I was also discovering Chestertonian Catholicism, the nineteenth-century artist, designer, and writer William Morris, and Icelandic sagas (which Morris translated), and I found in Tolkien a kindred soul. But Tolkien's enormous popularity is based upon an appeal to concerns broader than mine at that age: concerns about what it is to be a man and hero, about what love is between mortal creatures, about the meaning of life lived under the shadow of inevitable death.

Tolkien probes these concerns because his own life, like the twentieth century itself, was lived under the shadow of war and mass death. He knows that salvation comes by grace alone, through a heroism very much like that of Christ.

Tolkien's imagination is both Christian and masculine. The heroic manhood that he portrays in *The Lord of the Rings* shares key aspects with Christ's heroic mission: bravery, pity, mercy, love, self-sacrifice, and suffering. All of these can be found in Tolkien's heroic tale, *The Lord of the Rings*, and are key to understanding both its broad appeal and its richness as a work of the Christian imagination.

Heroic Manhood

The Lord of the Rings is in the tradition of heroic fantasies like *The Odyssey*. Every boy's life is a quest to become a man. Boys are raised on stories of boys who leave home, face challenges and danger and death, and return transformed into men. The boy must distance himself from the person to whom he is closest and whom he loves most—his mother—because she cannot provide him the model of what he is supposed to become.

He must leave the world of childhood, in which he is cared for and protected, so that he can enter the adult male world, in which he learns to care for and protect others. The quest theme is universal because all cultures tell their boys stories about the quest to become a man. The hero, the one who has achieved this quest and become a man, is the central literary figure of each culture. Even though most of the males Tolkien writes about are Hobbits, they have the same problems of growing up that human males have.

Tolkien achieved manhood during the Great War. He lost close friends to death. He saw the reality of battle and the special horror of industrialized mass death, which poisoned the earth and left tens of thousands of bodies rotting on the battlefield.

His intellectual interests were the masculine Anglo-Saxon and Icelandic literatures. The style of these literatures is laconic, and their subject matter is battle and struggle in the face of inevitable death.

In contrast to the effeminate, homosexual atmosphere of the English university (think of Sebastian in Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*), he and C. S. Lewis and other Inklings drank beer, wore tweeds, and took strenuous country walks, so that even their civilian life was markedly masculine.

Becoming a man and a hero (who exemplifies masculinity) is not simple; the task is fraught not only with dangers but also with paradoxes. Masculine strength can be used for good and evil; the willingness to face death can lead to a love of death; nihilism is the pit awaiting the man who is most willing to accept the challenges of masculinity. The hero is both divine and demonic. Achilles is a blazing, devouring fire; Beowulf is like his adversary, Grendel. Like all realities of Middle-earth, masculinity and heroism are self-destructive. Middle-earth cannot save itself.

War & Male Friendship

Traditional military heroes are present in *The Lord of the Rings*. Aragorn is the king in disguise, who eventually leads his army into battle, but only as a diversionary tactic. However great heroism is, however worthy of praise the warrior who seeks to protect his people may be, military heroism is at best inadequate and at worst dangerous to the

people it seeks to protect. The riders of Rohan ride upon their foes with the cry of “Death!” But they cannot defeat the Ringwraiths, nor can the host led by Aragorn defeat Sauron. Boromir seeks the Ring to protect his people, but it enchants him and converts him into a monster. He redeems himself by giving his life trying to protect the other Hobbits, the supreme act of true friendship.

The closest friendships in *The Lord of the Rings* are between males (of different species: Men, Hobbits, Dwarves, and Elves). Male friendship is the emotional center of the book. Bilbo remains a bachelor and makes his nephew Frodo his heir. In Germanic literature, the uncle-nephew relationship is closer than the father-son relationship. The fellowship has various male relationships: the master-servant relationship of Frodo and Sam, the teenagers’ camaraderie of Pippin and Merry, the friendship of opposites of Legolas and Gimli, the leadership of Aragorn, the failed leadership of Boromir.

Sam, who himself attains heroic stature by the end of *The Lord of the Rings*, is modeled after the English soldiers and batmen (officers’ servants) whom Tolkien encountered in the Great War. The comradeship of soldiers in suffering is intense and physical. In war, men feel a closeness to their comrades, who are willing to die for one another and with whom their blood may mingle, a love that surpasses the love of women. The scene in which Sam rescues Frodo from tortures by Orcs shows the intensity and closeness of this relationship. Sam discovers Frodo, who has been captured by the Orcs.

[Frodo] was naked, lying as if in a swoon on a heap of filthy rags. . . .

“Frodo! Mr. Frodo, my dear!” cried Sam, tears almost blinding him. “It’s Sam, I’ve come!” He half lifted his master and hugged him to his breast.

[Frodo] lay back in Sam’s gentle arms, closing his eyes, like a child at rest when night-fears are driven away by some loved voice or hand. Sam felt that he could sit like that in endless happiness. . . .

For men, loving union is attainable only through shared suffering.

Bravery & Mercy

While *The Hobbit* is more lighthearted than *The Lord of the Rings*, it foreshadows many themes of the more serious work. Bilbo Baggins is firmly planted in his life in the safe, pleasant Shire, but he takes the challenge of adventure and seeks out the dragon and his gold. He encounters challenges that soldiers in the Great War also faced. Bilbo is willing to fight, but he engages in an inner battle that is even more important. Conquering one’s fear is more difficult than external fighting. When Bilbo descends into the dragon’s cave, he hears the dragon.

It was at this point that Bilbo stopped. Going on from there was the bravest thing he ever did. The tremendous things that happened afterwards were as nothing compared to it. He fought the real battle in the tunnel alone, before he ever saw the vast danger that lay in wait.

Bilbo and his companions also have an unpleasant encounter with Orcs, of whom Tolkien says:

It is not unlikely that they invented some of the machines that have since troubled the world, especially the ingenious devices for killing large numbers of people at once, for wheels and engines and explosions always delighted them. . . .

Tolkien had encountered such machines on the Western Front.

Bilbo faces his most important challenge (whose significance is not clarified until the end of *The Lord of the Rings*) when he is separated from his friends in the caverns of the Misty Mountains and accidentally (but are there any accidents?) finds the Ring of Power, which its previous possessor, Gollum, had lost. Bilbo discovers that the Ring makes him invisible, and he uses his invisibility to escape from Gollum—who is trying to get the Ring back—but Gollum blocks the way out of the goblin-infested caverns.

Bilbo almost stopped breathing, and went stiff himself. He was desperate. He must get away, out of this horrible darkness, while he had any strength left. He must fight. He must stab the foul thing, put its eyes out, kill it. It meant to kill him. No, not a fair fight. He was invisible now. Gollum had no sword. Gollum had not actually threatened to kill him, or tried to yet. And he was miserable, alone, lost. A sudden understanding, a pity mixed with horror, welled up in Bilbo's heart: a glimpse of endless unmarked days without light or hope of betterment, hard stone, cold fish, sneaking and whispering. All these thoughts passed in a flash of a second. He trembled. And then quite suddenly in another flash, as if lifted by a new strength and resolve, he leaped.

Bilbo's possession of the Ring begins with pity. While his manly bravery was essential, it is this pity that ultimately saves him and others.

Merciful Love

In *The Lord of the Rings*, Frodo becomes the true hero, but his heroism is not one of military valor. He is like a sacrificial priest, and one who must become part of the sacrifice. He crosses the dead lands, which are like the poisoned battlefields of the First World War. He disguises himself and slowly strips himself of all possessions—his sword,

even the food that he would need to return. When he has Gollum at his mercy, he does not kill him, remembering Gandalf's words about pity and mercy.

"What a pity Bilbo did not stab the vile creature, when he had a chance!"

"Pity! It was Pity that stayed his hand, and Mercy: not to strike without need."

"I do not feel any pity for Gollum. . . . He deserves death."

"Deserves death! I daresay he does. Many that live deserve death. And some that die deserve life. Can you give that to them? Then be not too eager to deal out death in the name of justice, fearing for your own safety. Even the wise cannot see all ends."

Even after Gollum has betrayed and attacked them, Frodo's servant Sam still will not kill him:

His mind was hot with wrath and the memory of evil. It would be just to slay this treacherous, murderous creature, just and many times deserved; and it also seemed the only safe thing to do. But deep in his heart there was something that restrained him: he could not strike this thing lying in the dust, forlorn, ruinous, utterly wretched. He himself, though only for a little while, had borne the Ring, and now dimly he guessed the agony of Gollum's shriveled mind and body, enslaved to that Ring, unable to find peace or relief ever in life again.

At the end, Frodo fails, yet is saved. He does not throw the Ring into the fire; he puts it on and claims it. Gollum wrestles with him and bites off Frodo's ring finger, and then falls into the fire, destroying both himself and the Ring. A power beyond that of the characters rules Middle-earth and brings about salvation despite the inadequacies and failures of the characters. Those who are saved rather than destroyed by this power act out of pity, the love that responds to suffering.

The Wounded Hero

The hero can pity those who suffered, because he, too, has suffered. The hero, like every male who has truly become a man, is wounded. Every man, as Robert Bly pointed out in *Iron John*, bears the scars, often quite literally, that he got in becoming a man. Tolkien and Lewis felt an attraction to Northernness because the Norse gods themselves were wounded and mortal; they, like men, would die in the fight against evil, but they nonetheless fought to the very end. Tyr, like Beren, was one-handed; he lost one hand when he bound Fenris the wolf. Arthur is wounded and can seek healing only in Avalon.

The soldier who saves his country leaves a boy and comes back, as Paul Fussell points out

in *The Great War and Modern Memory*, a trained killer, who has seen gore and death, and bears the wounds in his body and mind to the grave. My own father died with the shrapnel he had gotten in the Pacific during World War II.

Frodo is wounded—by the poisoned knife of the Ringwraith, by Shelob, and most of all by bearing the Ring, which in the end overcomes him. He returns to the Shire, but he realizes that he cannot go home again; he has changed too much. He explains:

“I have been too deeply hurt, Sam. I tried to save the Shire, and it has been saved, but not for me. It must often be so, Sam, when things are in danger: some one has to give them up, lose them, so that others may keep them.”

Self-sacrificial love has a transcendent glory, but it can exist only in a world that has suffering and death.

Song of the Crucified

The love that can be found only through suffering was present in the song that was sung at creation (as recounted in *The Silmarillion*). When spirits sang the song that was to take shape as Middle-earth, their work was marred by the disharmony of the rebel spirits. Ilúvatar then sang a theme “deep and wide and beautiful, but slow and blended with an immeasurable sorrow, from which its beauty chiefly came.”

The rebel spirit Melkor sang a song “loud and vain and endlessly repeated,” which tried “to drown the other music by the violence of its voice, but it seemed its most triumphant notes were taken up by the other and woven into its own solemn pattern.” At last Ilúvatar rose, “and in one chord, deeper than the Abyss, higher than the Firmament, piercing as the light of the eye of Ilúvatar, the music ceased.” Ilúvatar had sung his final Word, and there was nothing more to be added to it.

Tolkien thought that in the fictions created by man one could catch a faint, far-off gleam of the *evangelium*, the Good News. The special characteristic of the fairy story is the *eucatastrophe*, the unexpected deliverance and happy ending. In this unexpected deliverance, greater than anything that could have been hoped for, a hint, a foreshadowing, a taste of the final and complete deliverance is experienced. In the real world, the Incarnation was the *eucatastrophe* of creation, and the Resurrection the *eucatastrophe* of the Lord’s life.

Eucatastrophe, both in fiction and in real life, is possible only because *dyscatastrophe* is also possible. Resurrection is possible only in a world of death. The Greek gods are ultimately frivolous, because they are immortal. Men and heroes are serious, because they must face death. The Norse gods and the incarnate true God are ultimately serious,

because they, like men, can fail and die. Even in Norse mythology, there is a promise of new heavens and new earth; in the Christian story, only through failure and death can the Kingdom of God be brought about. There is no other way; God has no other message, no other Word than his crucified Son; with this chord the music of creation is fulfilled and ends: *Tetelestai*—"It is finished."

A Glorious Story

Frodo has been called by some a modern hero, but it would be better to call him a Northern or, even better, a Christian hero. He follows the pattern of the life of the hero: He confronts a danger and death, and nearly dies, to protect the peoples of Middle-earth. He returns, but, scarred and wounded, he has to give up something that others may continue to enjoy it. He can find no consolation in ordinary life and leaves Middle-earth forever.

He is a Christian hero because he shows the glory and inadequacy of heroism and indeed of all human effort. We do our best—and then we fail. Success comes from without, like a lightning bolt. The fire falls upon the sacrifice that has been prepared, and the preparation is pity, the love that realizes the sadness of all life doomed to death.

Yet even in the failure turned to success, the hero finds true glory. He is part of a story; his life and suffering have meaning. As Sam and Frodo await death after the Ring has been destroyed, Sam wonders whether anyone will ever know of their deeds.

"What a tale we have been in, Mr. Frodo, haven't we?" he said. "I wish I could hear it told! Do you think they'll say: 'Now comes the story of Nine-Fingered Frodo and the Ring of Doom?'"

After their rescue and recovery, at the ceremony to honor them, Sam and Frodo hear the minstrel say, "I will now sing to you of Frodo of the Nine Fingers and the Ring of Doom."

The vast appeal of *The Lord of the Rings* stems from Tolkien's ability to tell a story that can convince us that we, too, are part of a story, and a story that is even more wonderful than the one we have read in *The Lord of the Rings*, although it has some of the same qualities. Boys and adolescents find in *The Lord of the Rings* the excitement of adventure and of the challenge of becoming a man. They and other readers find in it the mysteries of friendship lived in the face of death, and of the self-sacrifice that is necessary that others may live.

The Wine of Blessedness

They also find in it something both terrible and comforting: that the One who is telling the story in which we live knows our sufferings and our grief and the sadness of death, that somehow they have been there since before the beginning of the world, but that they are not the last word. Even greater than the bitterness of our failures and our death and our descent into nothingness is the rescue that awaits us, swift, unexpected, bringing joy more poignant than grief, a joy made possible only by the existence of sadness, a good brought about by the evil, but which overcomes evil with the love whose name is pity.

The Lord of the Rings breathes mercy throughout. Tolkien faces the reality of conflict and death, but does not see them as the last word. Courage in battle is great, but even greater and stronger are pity and mercy. The Christian hero strives against evil, and the evil that he must ultimately conquer is within him; and he cannot do that by himself. To strive, knowing that apart from grace, victory is impossible, is the final heroism.

Grace works through mercy, and uses mercy to achieve its ends. Mercy is love as it exists in a world of death. Tolkien seeks to justify the ways of God to man, especially the way that man finds hardest, the gift of death. Without death, man could not achieve the greatest love, that of self-sacrifice, to die for another, as God himself chose to do. God allowed death in the world so that he, too, could die and give his life to and for his creatures.

Beyond this acceptance of the bitterest facts of life is something that can be attained only by tasting them to the full. Sam addresses Gandalf: "I thought you were dead! But then I thought I was dead myself. Is everything sad going to come untrue?" No, but beyond sadness is something that can come only after sadness: "Their joy was like swords, and they passed in thought out to regions where pain and delight flow together and tears are the very wine of blessedness."

The hero descends into death and is wounded forever, but his very wounds are his glory, a testimony to a merciful love that goes through and beyond death. The Lamb is victorious, and his victory is that he now stands forever as one slain.

For a further discussion of the theme of Christian heroism, see "Christ: God, Man & Hero," by [Leon J. Podles](#).

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