

# ***Eucatastrophic: Tales of Redemption in The Lord of the Rings***

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J.R.R. Tolkien's epic trilogy, *The Lord of The Rings*, has fascinated readers for decades. Steeped in mythology, fantasy, and allusion, Tolkien's masterpiece was influenced in large part by heroic medieval poetry and Catholic theology. The "eucatastrophe," a term Tolkien coined for the "happy ending" moment in a redemption story, synthesized these two sources of inspiration into one cohesive concept that Tolkien used as a foundation for his work. In this essay, I explore how Tolkien defined the eucatastrophe and how he applied the concept to the structure of *The Lord of the Rings*.

Since its publication in 1955, *The Lord of the Rings* has captivated and enthralled readers and sold more than 150 million copies, making it the third best-selling novel of all time.<sup>1</sup> Set in the powerfully imagined world of Middle Earth, J.R.R. Tolkien's epic novel was a seminal work, almost single-handedly introducing the modern world to the elves, hobbits, orcs, and "escapist fantasy" that are today so utterly ingrained in popular imagination.

But while *The Lord of the Rings* did mark the creation of a new genre of literature—"fantasy"—that has since exploded in popularity, Tolkien himself noted that his creation was by no means wholly original, having come from a long tradition of fantastic stories involving the supernatural:

The definition of a fairy-story—what it is, or what it should be—does not, then, depend on any definition or historical account of elf or fairy, but upon the nature of *Faërie*: the Perilous Realm itself, and the air that blows in that country...Oberon, Mab, and Pigwiggan may be diminutive elves or fairies, as Arthur, Guinevere, and Lancelot are not; but the good and evil story of Arthur's court is a "fairy-story" rather than this tale of Oberon.<sup>2</sup>

This concept of a "fairy story," along with the novel Tolkien wrote to epitomize it, are influenced by myriad sources ranging from Norse mythology to world war. His two most important sources of inspiration, however, came from his Catholic faith and his love for medieval poetry. These passions were readily apparent in Tolkien's non-fiction writings, especially his lectures and criticism. In 1939, he gave what would become one of his most famous lectures at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland, titled "On Fairy-Stories." Written as he was developing the mythology and story of Middle-earth, the lecture explored the concepts and philosophies fundamental to Tolkien's worldview and theory of storytelling.

The ideas articulated in "On Fairy-Stories" guided both the creation and execution of Tolkien's greatest work of fiction. Central to these ideas is the inherently religious

concept of the "eucatastrophe," Tolkien's invented term for the "sudden joyous 'turn'" at the end of a story; the "happy ending."<sup>3</sup> The term, which is heavily laden with Catholic imagery, is at the core of everything he wrote.

Webster's dictionary defines catastrophe as "the final event in a drama, romance, etc." or as "an event overturning the order or system of things."<sup>4</sup> Tolkien's coined word goes further, adding the Greek prefix *εὖ* [*eu*], meaning "good" or "well." But "good catastrophe" is an inadequate expression of the complexity in the term *eucatastrophe*, which Tolkien purposely intended to evoke the *εὐχαριστία*, the Eucharist—the pinnacle event of the Incarnation, the event which Tolkien considered the "greatest and most complete conceivable eucatastrophe...of Man's history."<sup>5</sup>

The primacy of place of the Eucharist as the "source and summit" of Christian life is a tradition dating back centuries; St. Thomas describes it in his *Summa Theologica* as "the perfection of the spiritual life and the end to which all the sacraments tend."<sup>6</sup> In a similar way, the eucatastrophe is for Tolkien the perfection and the end of narrative fiction—so important that Tolkien asserts that "all complete fairy-stories must have it."<sup>7</sup> Without his passion and resurrection, Christ's incarnation would have accomplished nothing. In a similar way, without the eucatastrophe—the moment of crisis and failure that gives way to redemption—the fairy-story is devoid of meaning and significance.

As developed in Tolkien's works, the eucatastrophe has several essential elements: temptation, testing, failure, and redemption. While a redemption that comes from failure is the catastrophic turning point that gives the eucatastrophe its name, such redemption is not possible without a trial of temptation preceding it. This pattern is readily apparent in the most important of influences on Tolkien's conception of the eucatastrophe, the Gospels, which he called the "eucatastrophe of Man's history."<sup>8</sup> Perhaps the most famous redemption story in history, the story of Jesus is the foundation of the concepts that Tolkien would identify in medieval poetry and then later adapt to his own work, and

provides an excellent example for an introductory understanding of eucatastrophe.

The conception of the eucatastrophe did not spring exclusively from the Bible. Although redemption stories are universal, the specific pattern that Tolkien identified and called eucatastrophic—the cycle of temptation, testing, failure, and redemption—came more from Christian-influenced writing than from Christian scriptures. Specifically, Tolkien's elements of the eucatastrophe can be found in what he considered one of the best fantasy stories ever written, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.<sup>9</sup> The epic story of an honorable knight whose staunch resistance to temptation crumbles when faced with a threat to his own life, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* offers perhaps the best example of temptation, failure, and redemption—in short, the eucatastrophic cycle—in all of medieval literature. Together with *Pearl*, a poem by the same author as *Sir Gawain* about a captivating, talismanic object of temptation that inspired Tolkien's Ring, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* laid the foundation for Tolkien's use of the eucatastrophe in *The Lord of the Rings*, setting the pattern that his characters would follow.

In *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien executed to perfection the concept of a redemptive eucatastrophe that he developed from his reading of the Gospels and medieval literature, and the epic's One Ring is the fulcrum on which the entire story depends. Its role in *The Lord of the Rings* is far greater than that of the magical girdle in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* or even the pearl of *Pearl*. The Girdle and the Pearl exist to test single characters for whom they hold special significance, but the Ring is a *satanas* to all who encounter it. An intrinsically evil object, it paradoxically acts as a vehicle for grace for those who endure its tests by offering them a chance at redemption.

Almost every act of eucatastrophe in *The Lord of the Rings* depends wholly or in part on the influence of the One Ring. Like the fruit of the Garden of Eden, the Ring is an irresistible temptation and the architect of many a Fall: Sméagol, Boromir, and Frodo are among those unable to resist its evil. But as a Catholic, J.R.R. Tolkien is intimately familiar with the concept of the *felix culpa*,<sup>10</sup> in consequence, some good always arises out of the evil caused by the Ring's temptation of a character, usually in the form of a personal redemption.<sup>11</sup> Before the Ring even takes physical form, the concepts it represents—sin, pride, temptation—are already at work corrupting the mind of Sauron, whose creation of the Ring gives such abstractions a physical manifestation in Middle-earth.

When Satan introduces sin into the Garden of Eden, he enables the sacrifice of Christ to break its power and thereby redeem the world. By introducing sin to mortals through the granting of rings to the races of men and dwarves, Sauron enables the sacrifice and eucatastrophic redemption of Frodo three thousand years later. In his arrogance, Sauron creates the agent of his own ultimate

defeat; without the Ring, Frodo never would have been able to destroy Sauron in the fires of Mount Doom. Similarly, without Satan's introduction of sin into the world, Christ's sacrifice—the eucatastrophic act that destroyed death and one day will end Satan's power altogether—would never have occurred.<sup>12</sup>

The end of the Second Age marks a new chapter in the history of the Ring. In the Third Age, the period encompassing almost all of *The Lord of the Rings*, the Ring enters into a predictable pattern with those it encounters. Characters that come into close contact with the Ring are tempted, pass or fail the test, and then endure a personal sacrifice that enables them to undergo Tolkien's process of eucatastrophic redemption. These temptations begin so small as to seem insignificant—Bilbo's parting with the Ring after the long-expected party, for example—and gradually escalate through the trilogy to the greatest and most important eucatastrophe in all of Tolkien's fiction, the confrontation on Mount Doom. Three small eucatastrophes—the fall of Boromir, Gollum's murder of his cousin, and Frodo's failure on Mount Doom—together form the great eucatastrophic arc of *The Lord of the Rings*.

While such examples of eucatastrophe are important, the greatest moment of redemption is saved for the climax of the novel. *The Lord of the Rings* is a fairy-story, and as such it must have a "sudden turn" at the end of all things. Thus comes the final appearance of Gollum, the longest-lived of the Ring-bearers and the last character—excepting Frodo—whose experience with it remains unresolved. His sins are incredibly dark; whereas Boromir tried in vain to take the Ring with violence, Gollum successfully murders his cousin Déagol, whom he strangles "because the gold looked so bright and beautiful."<sup>13</sup> With this murder, Middle-earth—until now apparently a utopic land of comity between elves and mortals united in alliance against Sauron—finally knows sin. When Sauron's exile to Middle-earth brought the Ring (and thus sin) to its shores for the first time, the men who resided there had never had contact with evil; thus, pure and innocent like Adam and Eve, they were as helpless before its seductive power as the first humans were before the serpent's. The nine men who received Rings from Sauron never suspected how thoroughly power could corrupt them. Gollum, by contrast, is born into a world in which sin—through the Ring—has already been introduced and is now permeating everything.

The Ring has twisted Gollum's mind for thousands of years, leaving Frodo to wonder if any part of his soul can be saved when he so clearly "deserves death."<sup>14</sup> As Gandalf notes, however, "even the very wise cannot see all ends;" while Gandalf has "not much hope that Gollum can be cured before he dies," he does believe there is a chance. Gollum has "some part to play yet."<sup>15</sup> That role comes on the slopes of Mount Doom, where Gollum ambushes Frodo and Sam as they struggle on toward the end of their journey:

“Wicked masster!” it hissed. “Wicked masster cheats us; cheats Sméagol, *Gollum*. He musn’t go that way. He musn’t hurt Preciouss. Give it to Sméagol, yess, give it to us! Give it to uss!”<sup>16</sup>

Gollum’s berserk desire for the Ring has long since trumped his short-lived loyalty to Frodo. The intrepid hobbit, strained and exhausted from long months of bearing a Ring intent on wearing down his resistance, finally breaks in the face of this imminent threat to the object he himself now finds precious:

Then suddenly, as before under the eaves of Emyr Muil, Sam saw these two rivals with other vision. A crouching shape, scarcely more than the shadow of a living thing, a creature now wholly ruined and defeated, yet filled with a hideous lust and rage; and before it stood stern, untouchable now by pity, a figure robed in white, but at its breast it held a wheel of fire. Out of the fire there spoke a commanding voice.

“Begone, and trouble me no more! If you touch me ever again, you shall be cast yourself into the Fire of Doom.”<sup>17</sup>

Though he does not yet know it, Frodo has now crossed the Rubicon. All previous uses of the Ring by Frodo exploited only its trifling power of invisibility, but here he has used its power of Command; when Gollum next touches Frodo, he is indeed cast into the fire of the mountain. By using the Ring to force Gollum away from him and to threaten him with death if he disobeys, Frodo has given in to the temptation of power and allowed it to gain a foothold in his mind that it will not relinquish. Standing atop the Crack of Doom so near the goal of his quest, Frodo cannot bring himself to give up the power that he has arrogated by accessing the Command of the Ring:

“I have come,” he said. “But I do not choose now to do what I came to do. I will not do this deed. The Ring is mine! And suddenly, as he set it on his finger, he vanished from Sam’s sight.”<sup>18</sup>

Frodo has failed. For Middle-earth, this is a catastrophe, as Sauron becomes aware that another has claimed the power of the Ring in the very heart of his realm and sends the Ringwraiths reeling back to retake the power from its fragile new owner. An ending of *dyscatastrophe*, of sorrow and despair, seems more than a mere possibility now—either a new Dark Lord will arise in the figure of Frodo, or the Nazgûl will return it to their master and evil will triumph.

As bleak as the scene seems, this moment of *dyscatastrophe* is “necessary to the joy of deliverance”; according to Tolkien, eucatastrophe “denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat,” and

thus requires that such a defeat be plausible.<sup>19</sup> His description of what follows the *dyscatastrophe* in a fairy-story explains the sudden appearance of Gollum as Frodo takes the Ring for his own, unable to destroy it:

It is the mark of a good fairy-story, of the higher or more complete kind, that however wild its events, however fantastic or terrible the adventures, it can give to child or man that hears it, when the “turn” comes, a catch of the breath, a beat and lifting of the heart, near to (or accompanied by) tears, as keen as that given by any form of literary art, and having a peculiar quality.<sup>20</sup>

Gollum’s entrance is indeed accompanied by tears—“Don’t kill us!” he wept” in fear of Sam’s wrath at his attack on Frodo.<sup>21</sup> But more importantly, it is a *turn* in the story at the moment of failure. Sam cannot bring himself to hurt his master, even after Frodo turns to evil. Frodo has certainly lost the will to stop himself. For Sauron to stop Frodo’s ascension would be a victory for the forces of evil, not good. The hopes and fortunes of all the free peoples of Middle-earth therefore rest on the avaricious drive of Gollum, the creature who cannot let the Ring go, no matter the cost to himself. Heedless of the folly of attacking a master of the Ring—one who has in fact Commanded him to withdraw—Gollum throws himself at the now invisible Frodo in a final attempt to regain his Precious:

Gollum on the edge of the abyss was fighting like a mad thing with an unseen foe. To and fro he swayed, now so near the brink that almost he tumbled in, now dragging back, falling to the ground, rising, and falling again... Suddenly Sam saw Gollum’s long hands draw upwards to his mouth; his white fangs gleamed, and then snapped as they bit. Frodo gave a cry, and there he was, fallen upon his knees at the chasm’s edge. But Gollum, dancing like a mad thing, held aloft the ring, a finger still thrust within its circle.<sup>22</sup>

Gollum does not stop Frodo out of altruism. His is not an effort to redeem himself like Boromir’s defense of the hobbits after his own temptation. But whether because of divine providence or sheer luck, Gollum sacrifices his life to save not just two hobbits, but the entire world:

“Precious, precious, precious!” Gollum cried. “My Precious! O my Precious!” And with that, even as his eyes were lifted up to gloat on his prize, he stepped too far, toppled, wavered for a moment on the brink, and then with a shriek he fell. Out of the depths came his last wail *Precious*, and he was gone.<sup>23</sup>

With Gollum’s fall into the fire—an event that occurs only because of the Command of Frodo and for which he

can therefore claim some credit—the Quest is complete and evil vanquished. By sacrificing his life to destroy the Ring, however unwittingly, Gollum also accomplishes a double redemption of himself and of Frodo. No matter how dark his crimes may have been over the thousands of years he spent in the thrall of the Ring, there always remains the possibility of absolution. The payment of his own life for the destruction of the embodiment of sin constitutes a priceless penance, worthy of forgiveness and redemption: “But for him, Sam, I could not have destroyed the Ring,” Frodo reminds his companion. “The Quest would have been in vain, even at the bitter end. So let us forgive him!”<sup>24</sup>

For Frodo’s part, his strength of character through the long quest is not wholly outweighed by a moment of weakness at the end. That Frodo has failed is indisputable—faced with the prospect of destroying the Ring, and likely his own life with it, Frodo experiences the same helplessness as Gawain. He loves his life and cannot bear to part with it, and so fails to complete the quest on which he has toiled for so long. Although he will bear a physical reminder of his failure for the rest of his life—a missing finger that recalls the nick in Gawain’s neck—it is for his courage rather than his weakness that the Ring-bearer will be remembered by Middle-earth. Nevertheless, Frodo’s eucatastrophic redemption is not yet complete—while he has confessed his sin (“But for him, Sam, I could not have destroyed the Ring”), he has done insufficient penance for the crime of claiming the Ring as his own. Like Boromir and Gollum, both Frodo and Bilbo must make the ultimate sacrifice in expiation of their use of the Ring. Unlike Boromir and Gollum, the hobbits’ rejection of violence means their sacrifice need not be so literal.

Instead, Frodo and Bilbo will leave Middle-earth. They must die in a metaphorical sense, passing “into the West.”

Then Bilbo woke up and opened his eyes. “Hullo, Frodo!” he said. “Well, I have passed the Old Took today! So that’s settled. And now I think I am quite ready to go on another journey. Are you coming?”

“Yes, I am coming,” said Frodo. “The Ring-bearers should go together.”<sup>25</sup>

The Third Age has ended, and there is no room for those caught up in the great stain of that era’s original sin to remain in Middle-earth. Even Sam, whose use of the Ring was selfless and restricted to invisibility and the interpretation of tongues, will one day have to leave as well.<sup>26</sup>

Like Christ, the author of what Tolkien calls the “greatest and most complete conceivable eucatastrophe,”<sup>27</sup> Frodo must “die” for the sin of the whole world—as he explains to Sam upon leaving Middle-earth, “when things are in danger, some one has to give them up, lose them, so that others may live.”<sup>28</sup> Similarly, Jesus loses his life so that others may keep theirs. He dies—a seeming failure, by any reasonable criterion—to enable the destruction of death and sin through his Resurrection, the “eucatastrophe of the story of the Incarnation.”<sup>29</sup> Frodo loses his finger because of his failure but lives on to pass into the West in his own Resurrection, taking with him the last vestiges of the sin of the Ring whose power he has destroyed.

With this final parallel, Tolkien has achieved his goal in writing a fairy-story—to do homage to the Gospels, the fairy-story “of a larger kind which embraces all the essence of fairy-stories.”<sup>30</sup> Having identified the pattern of the eucatastrophe—first in the events of the Gospels and then in medieval fairy-stories such as *Sir Gawain*—Tolkien developed both fairy-story and eucatastrophe from mere concepts to perfect execution in *The Lord of the Rings*. While not an allegory, Tolkien’s epic does let a single element—the redemptive eucatastrophe—define his story without overwhelming it.

## REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> Vit Wagner, *The Toronto Star*, April 16, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, “On Fairy-Stories” in *The Tolkien Reader*, [edited by Peter S. Beagle] (New York: Ballantine Books, 1996), 38, 36.

<sup>3</sup> Tolkien, “On Fairy-Stories,” *The Tolkien Reader*, 86.

<sup>4</sup> *Webster’s New International Dictionary of the English Language, Unabridged*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, s.v. “Catastrophe.”

<sup>5</sup> Tolkien, “On Fairy-Stories,” *The Tolkien Reader*, 88. The Incarnation is the technical term for God made flesh (the event of Jesus’ birth).

<sup>6</sup> *Lumen Gentium* 4. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica, Second and Revised Edition*, (Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 1920), III, 73, 3c. Available online at <http://www.newadvent.org/summa>.

<sup>7</sup> Tolkien, “On Fairy-Stories,” 85.

<sup>8</sup> Tolkien, “On Fairy-Stories,” 24.

<sup>9</sup> Tolkien’s opinion that *Sir Gawain* is a quintessential example of the eucatastrophic “fairy-story” can be found in Tolkien, “On Fairy-Stories,” *The Tolkien Reader*, 39.

<sup>10</sup> The “Fortunate Fall” or “Happy Fault” is an ancient Catholic trope dating to St. Augustine (*Augustine Enchiridion* vii). Used to explain why God permitted evil to enter the Garden of Eden and cause the Fall of Man, the *felix culpa* is the *sine qua non* of the Incarnation. St. Thomas Aquinas expanded this idea to apply to all evil in the world, averring that the *felix culpa* is evidence that God permits evil to exist so that greater good can arise from it. (Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* III.1.3, reply to objection 3).

<sup>11</sup> Except in the case of Sauron, who, as the forger of the Ring and the author of its evil, is irredeemable. Even this is not an exception *per se*; Sauron is master of the Ring, not a victim of its temptation.

<sup>12</sup> That Christ's death ended the power of the devil and will ultimately destroy him is an idea found in Hebrews 2:14–15 and explored in *Summa Theologica*, Part III, Question 50.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>14</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2002), 59.

<sup>15</sup> Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 59. There must be *some* chance for Gollum to be saved because no soul is irredeemable for Tolkien. See, e.g., the thief to the left of Christ on the Cross.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 943.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 944.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 945.

<sup>19</sup> Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories," *The Tolkien Reader*, 86.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>21</sup> Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 944.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 946.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 947.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 947.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 1029.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories," *The Tolkien Reader*, 88.

<sup>28</sup> Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 1029.

<sup>29</sup> Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories," *The Tolkien Reader*, 88–89.

<sup>30</sup> Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories," 88.