

Laws Smith

Tutorial

Dr. Howell

18 March 2016

### Tolkien: Reinterpreting Immortality Through Myth

No one can escape Death. It takes all, disregarding age, religion or ethnicity. The ancient *Epic of Gilgamesh* demonstrates the trans-cultural desire for immortality spanning the course of human history. Legends of places such as the Fountain of Youth instigate searches and journeys that disappointingly end in death. The acquisition of immortality appears to only exist in myth or story, reserved for the god-like heroes who are too great for the world of mortals. These legendary figures are respected in literature as beyond human.

J.R.R. Tolkien appears to treat his Elves in a similar manner: lacking nothing, the Elves of the Tolkien universe outperform Man in every aspect. It would appear that Tolkien designed his Elves as examples of the purest human form. However, Tolkien's letters seem to clash with such a premise. They challenge the reverence for the Elven race established in his works. Given these inconsistencies, what then is Tolkien's purpose? Though he seems to promote the superiority of immortal Elves, Tolkien's works and thoughts highlight the curse associated with continued existence and the blessings to be found in a mortal life. Furthermore, the paradox between the glorification of the Elven race and the pain associated with their immortality exists because of Tolkien's desire to display truth indirectly in the form of myth—the only means by which he believes deeper significance can be conveyed to his readers. To defend this argument, this paper will examine the initial convictions about immortality gleaned by a simple reading of his works, followed by the counter proposals laid out by Tolkien's reflections. Proceeding from

this exploration and defense, the paper will turn to Tolkien's purpose for conveying his ideas in this method of myth.

### Apparent Elven Superiority

Tolkien's works seem to praise immortality, or at least promote a deep respect and awe for the race granted the gift of immortality. In his most famous work, *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien narrates the journeys of many heroes from diverse races through the fictitious land of Middle Earth. The primary story is a quest to destroy the Ring of Power in an effort to rescue the characters of Middle Earth from the tyranny of evil. The hobbit Sam,<sup>1</sup> an honest, devoted assistant to the main character and ring-bearer, confesses a love and awe for the legendary Elven folk and a hope to meet one of their race (*Fellowship* 44). In a prequel to the trilogy, Bilbo, another hobbit sheltered from the world outside the Shire,<sup>2</sup> admits both his curiosity and his fear concerning the race of Elves (*Hobbit* 47). In *The Silmarillion* (Tolkien's posthumously published work regarding primarily the creation of Arda and the first two ages of Middle Earth focusing significantly on the Elves),<sup>3</sup> Tolkien compares the two races: "Immortal were the Elves, and their wisdom waxed from age to age, and no sickness nor pestilence brought death to them...But men were more frail, more easily slain by weapon or mischance, and less easily healed; subject to sickness and many ills; and they grew old and died" (121). In the light of Elves, Tolkien's Men appear weak and unimpressive.

Tolkien's presentation of the superiority of Elven abilities is intended. In personal reflections following the publication of his primary works, he admits his design of Elven

---

<sup>1</sup>Hobbit: A similar race to man, except smaller in stature while having a slightly longer lifespan. Characterized by an uneventful, playful lifestyle.

<sup>2</sup>The Shire: The enclosed community of the Hobbits. Rarely frequented by outside races.

<sup>3</sup>Arda: The entire world on which Middle Earth is a continent.

qualities as the improvement of “the artistic, aesthetic, and purely scientific aspects of the Humane nature” (*Letters* 236). The Elves are what they appear to be to both the reader and other races in Tolkien’s universe: the highest manifestation of human physical ability, namely beauty, strength and intelligence. Through the Elves, Tolkien seeks to ignite the human yearning for “greater beauty and longer life, and nobility” (*Letters* 176). Ultimately, Tolkien intends his readers to view the Elves as the fulfillment of human desires, having “certain freedoms and powers we should like to have” (*Letters* 189). From this view one would conclude that Elves seem to resemble ancient demigods: the embodiment and completion of perfect human nature.

#### Problems with Elven Immortality

However, Verlyn Flieger, an author who has studied Tolkien’s views regarding relationships to time, acknowledges an alternate interpretation of the Elven gift of immortality. She points out the common fault that captures many who fall to the charm of the Elves, of “valuing immortality above mortality and Elves above Men” (112). Though Tolkien created the Elven folk as the embodiment of human desire and enhancement of their abilities, he limits his own admiration for the race and does not worship them as the ancients worshiped demigods.

Despite the apparent glorification of immortal nature of the Elves, it is in this “gift of immortality” that we find the faults of the Elven race. Richard Purtill, looking at Tolkien’s works considering moral and religious implications, contrasts the problems of the Elves and Men. Instead of the human problem of “death and the desire for immortality”, the Elves struggle with “immortality and the desire for death” (11). Having immortality in a fluctuating world causes one to develop a hostile attitude to change and a desire for permanence. As Frodo, the hero of *The Lord of the Rings*, goes into the mystical forest of Lothlórien,<sup>4</sup> he describes the change as

---

<sup>4</sup>Lothlórien: One of the two “Elven-lands” in Middle Earth known for its beauty.

having “stepped over a bridge of time into a corner of the Elder Days, and was now walking in a world that was no more” (*Fellowship* 340). Though Frodo enters stricken with grief at the loss of his comrade Gandalf,<sup>5</sup> within the forest his emotion is replaced by the recognition of a deeper and more painful sentiment that overshadows his own loss: a constant longing for the days of former bliss. As Tolkien expresses,

In Elvish sentiment the *future* was not one of hope or desire, but a decay and retrogression from former bliss and power. Though inevitably it lay *ahead*, as of one on a journey, “looking forward” did not imply anticipation of delight ... Their position, as of latter day sentiment, was one of exile driven forward (against their will) who were in mind or actual posture ever looking backward (Question of Time 70).

This attitude of resisting future with an obsession of the past inevitably leads to a mindset of fearing the change associated with the future, and tends towards a disposition of “a fainéant melancholy, burdened with Memory” resulting in depression and sadness (*Letters* 236, 267). In years of pain and suffering, the Elves grew even more nostalgic for past years. Though the land was dying and a purer life existed in the West,<sup>6</sup> many remained because they “wanted to have their cake and eat it: to live in the mortal historical Middle-earth because they had become fond of it ... and so tried to stop its change and history, stop its growth” (*Letters* 197). This desire for permanence and fear of change marks the first flaw of Elven immortality painted by Tolkien.

The second problem that the Elves face is their explicit desire for death. Given a permanence in a world filled with change, the Elves find continued existence wearisome. Unlike Men, they struggle “rather with the griefs and burdens of deathlessness in time and change, than with death” (*Letters* 146). While Men strive to make their existence significant in the course of

---

<sup>5</sup>Gandalf: The dear wizard and deepest friend to the Hobbits, had just recently been “slain.” (Gandalf comes back in a resurrected form in the next book, *The Two Towers*).

<sup>6</sup>West: Following the close of the First Age of Middle Earth, the Elves were given the opportunity to journey to the West (the undying lands) where they could live apart from evil and destruction. Though a number accepted this offer, many decided to stay in Middle Earth.

history, the Elves seek significance *in* their existence. The Elven life is “sufficiently longeval to be called by Man ‘immortal’. But they were not unageing or unwearying” and thus the inability to leave their current state becomes a curse instead of a blessing (*Letters* 325). Instead of the happiness men associate with immortality, the Elves find suffering. This in part comes from the scope of their immortality. The creator Ilúvatar’s command and purpose for the Elves is,<sup>7</sup>

to endure with and within the created world, while its story lasts. When ‘killed’, by the injury or destruction of their incarnate form, they do not escape from time, but remain in the world, either discarnate, or being re-born. This becomes a great burden as the ages lengthen, especially in a world in which there is malice and destruction (*Letters* 236).

The Elven immortality is tied to the world. Though they can leave the land Middle Earth, they remain unable to escape the world of Arda. A race with sin in a world of sin without a means of escape produces a suffering in the Elves that Tolkien can only begin to express:<sup>8</sup> “love of the Earth and all the world is more single and more poignant therefore, and as the years lengthen ever more sorrowful” (*Silmarillion* 38). The continued existence in this suffering leads to a desire for an end. However, Elves cannot escape this suffering “unless they are slain or waste in grief (and to both these seeming deaths they are subject); neither does age subdue their strength, unless one grow weary of ten thousand centuries” (*Silmarillion* 38). With the introduction of Man and his shortened life span,<sup>9</sup> the events of Middle Earth follow a much quicker lifestyle, only adding to the stress and aging of the undying Elves. It is the *gift* of death, “mortality,

---

<sup>7</sup>Ilúvatar: Ilúvatar is Tolkien’s God-like character. He reigns over the Ainur (Tolkien’s angelic characters) and is the author of the music which leads to the creation of Arda. Like God, Ilúvatar exists over evil but allows the evil intentions of Melkor (Tolkien’s Satan-like figure) to remain unhindered to further demonstrate his own glory.

<sup>8</sup>The “Fall” of the Elves comes with one viewing himself as better than the Valar (gods of Middle Earth) leading to pride and slaying of Elven kin. As punishment, they are forced to leave the West in a similar manner to the Garden of Eden. Likewise, Middle Earth was terrorized by Melkor (Tolkien’s Satan) and therefore the land itself was dying.

<sup>9</sup>Men: The Elves are referred to as the “Firstborn of Ilúvatar”, meaning they were created first. Following an interval, the “Secondborn of Ilúvatar”, namely Men, were created. For the most part Men existed separately from the Elves but a few of the noble Men served under or even alongside the other race.

freedom from the circles of the world” given to Man that becomes “a grief and an envy to the immortal Elves” (*Letters* 147). Though given abilities Men can only dream of, the Elven race finds suffering in prolonged life, leading to a disdain for change and ultimately a desire for death.

### Benefits of Mortality

Given the detriments of immortality, mortality should be received as a gift rather than a punishment. Man’s mortality is often referred to as the “Doom of Man” in Tolkien’s works. Though the modern use of the term *doom* has adopted a negative connotation veering towards an idea of destruction or evil, Tolkien’s use suggests his contemporary association of permanence coming from etymological roots of “to place, or to set” (Oxford English Dictionary). Therefore, when many see the “Doom of Man” as a punishment of death, its true meaning is “the gift of death, which comes to them from Ilúvatar” (*Silmarillion* 322). The “Doom of Mortality” given to Man becomes a gift that the Elves, doomed to immortality, see in its true nature. In death, the mortal race receives the ability of escape and regrowth.

The first of these, escape, proves to be the greatest envy of immortal beings. Unlike the Elven race, Men can “escape, and leave the world, and are not bound to it, in hope or in weariness” (*Silmarillion* 326-327). In a world filled with suffering and decay, inhabited by fallen creatures with discordant desires to the harmony established by the creator,<sup>10</sup> a desire for an end will arise. Therefore, “when they [are] weary at last of the world,” their escape through death comes as a blessing (*Silmarillion* 338). As impermanent residents, Men are named “Guests, or the Strangers. Death is their fate, the gift of Ilúvatar, which as Time wears even the Powers shall envy” (*Silmarillion* 38). The ability to escape, the chance to leave the world, defines the gift which the Elves so deeply desire.

---

<sup>10</sup>The falling of the Elves was mentioned before. The “Fall” of Men is not referenced explicitly, however it is thought to have occurred at some point in the East before Men join the story of the Elves.

The second gift, regrowth, is one that cannot be experienced by one individual alone but rather by the entire race as a whole. With the gift of death comes the possibility of renewal. Flieger, looking at the two races' responses to time and especially the adverse temperament to change found in the Elves, surmises, "for to be capable of living is also to be capable of dying, and without death there can be no rebirth. Elves preserve. Men grow and die and grow again" (112). Unlike the Elves who have grown stubborn to change and resent the ever changing patterns of the world, Mankind is designed to begin anew. This ability is seen in a dialogue where Gimli, the main Dwarf, laments that Men constantly "fail of their promise" (*Return of the King* 855). His words are true: the evil of rebellion, founded by Melkor,<sup>11</sup> has affected all of creation, especially the hearts of Men which are easily led astray. However, Legolas, the Elf friend of Gimli, answers, "yet seldom do they fail of their seed ... And that will lie in the dust and rot to spring up again in times and places unlooked-for. The deeds of Men will outlast us, Gimli" (*Return of the King* 855). Legolas has understood the gift of Men that gives rise to their dominion in the Third Age and their establishment of power in the Fourth. It is the rebirth of Men, not the permanent existence of Elves, which leads Men to inherit Middle Earth.

Man's gift, however, does not end in death. He is not a neglected creature, doomed to perish and fade from existence. Instead Man is promised to "join in the Second Music of the Ainur;<sup>12</sup> whereas Ilúvatar has not revealed what he purposes for the Elves after the World's end" (*Silmarillion* 39). It is in the promise of Ilúvatar, the omniscient, omnipotent creator, that the gift of mortality is fulfilled. In death, the race of Man is removed from a world of sin to a perfect,

---

<sup>11</sup>Melkor was one of the highest of the Ainur (Tolkien's angelic characters) who strove to create his own music which clashed with that of Ilúvatar (Tolkien's God) and resembles the fall of Lucifer. He then sought to destroy Ilúvatar creation and brought evil into Middle Earth.

<sup>12</sup>Tolkien's creation story happens through music. The second music (recreation) has not been revealed, yet is a hope for those suffering in the evil which marred the first.

harmonious re-creation, a freedom not specifically promised to the Elves. However, Ilúvatar's gift also extends to the activities of Man during his mortal life. Knowing that Men would fall to temptation and evil, Ilúvatar asserts his will and order into their lives, promising, "these too in their time shall find that all that they do redounds at the end only to the glory of my work" (*Silmarillion* 38). Despite his shortened life-span, Man can still inhabit the world of Arda with a contentment, trusting in the plan and purpose for his life and hope following their death. Gandalf, the friendly Wizard, echoes this hope for the seemingly insignificant, claiming that "help oft shall come from the hands of the weak when the Wise falter" (*Silmarillion* 374). Man's physical weakness is an avenue for greater glorification of his creator. Therefore, their lives, though short, can be filled with a greater purpose than is promised to the Elven race. For, with eternal existence and a resistance to change, the Elves cannot be molded by the higher powers that be, and therefore must continue to exist in their virtue or folly.

Along with the promise of divine guidance in the lives of mortal Men, comes the assurance of divine blessing in both Man's life and death. Ilúvatar, in his wisdom, "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" (*Silmarillion* 38). Accounting for Man's instincts beyond the realm of Middle Earth, Ilúvatar grants not only a means of escape, death, but an improvement in their lives while in existence. Curiously, virtue is not promised to Elves; it is specific to the race of Men. This gift of virtue shines in the lives of mortals through tales of men such as Beren and Túrin.<sup>13</sup> As mortals, they risk and ultimately sacrifice their finite lives to accomplish deeds of which the Elven race proves incapable. The immortality of Elves constricts their virtue as they seek to retain their existence rather than sacrifice their lives for a greater good. Finally, the

---

<sup>13</sup>Beren and Túrin are two men of the *Silmarillion* famous for heroic deeds of self-sacrifice for the welfare of all of Middle Earth.

ultimate hope is found in the promise of life after death given to mortals. Though “mortality is not explained mythically: it is a mystery of God of which no more is known than that ‘what God has purposed for Men is hidden’: a grief and an envy to the immortal Elves” (*Letters* 147). The gift of mortality to Men, though seeming to hinder their aspirations of continued existence, functions as the attribute which allows for greater glorification of a weaker race.

#### Importance of Tolkien’s Use of Myth

After an inspection of Tolkien’s personal reflections and a closer analysis of his works, Tolkien’s purpose for the race of Elves becomes more clear: to demonstrate the embodiment of the human desire for immortality, yet show the hidden pains of an immortal life in a fallen world. However, we are still left questioning the reasoning behind the apparent contrast between Tolkien’s initial portrayal of Elves and the lesson he intends to impart. This discrepancy comes from Tolkien’s formation of writing through the form of myth. In myth, the importance rests on the formation of an idea—often a life lesson—over the actual narrative.

Tolkien has clear, distinct guidelines for the presentation and purpose of a myth which he conveys in his essay “On Fairy-Stories”. One of the key factors in creating a complete myth is the incorporation of “the inner consistency of reality” (“Fairy-Stories” 47). Tolkien explains the importance of this in terms of *primary* and *secondary worlds*. The *primary world*, the world of the author and intended audience, is filled with hopes and desires. The *secondary world*, the created world of Faërie, is to be entered by the mind of the reader and governed by relatable laws of nature which are “derived from Reality, or are flowing into it” (“Fairy-Stories” 37, 70-71). The author must create in his audience the “willing suspension of disbelief” that the reader assumes when entering into the *secondary world*; it must be believable enough to capture the attention of the reader and usher in the ‘inner consistency of reality’ without losing the

imagination of the reader to reality (“Fairy-Stories” 37). If the *secondary world* differs too much from the reality in the *primary world* (the real world), then the reader completely dismisses the possibility of the state and cannot be influenced by the development of primary desires. William Stoddard, a Tolkien scholar who explores the acquisition of immortality through story, asserts that “one of the functions of fantasy, or faerie stories, is to envision the gratification of desires that cannot be fulfilled in the primary world.” The author can use the different constructions of the *secondary world* to highlight completed ideas that are restricted in the *primary world*. This ability to expound on desires with significant influence is best found in myth. Joseph Campbell, a leading expert in the study of myth, describes the power that myth has as “the realization of the possibility of your perfection, the fullness of your strength, and the bringing of solar light into the world” (183). Myth functions as more than a story; it is an influence, a guide. It connects the abstract truths in fantasy to the concrete applications in reality. The purpose of the land of Faërie is to capture the attention of the audience, project universal truths in a new light, and develop ideas past the limits found in the *primary world*.

Given Tolkien’s deep respect for myth, one should not be surprised that he himself chooses to form his stories in a similar manner; conveying truth indirectly. Richard Purtill, examining Tolkien and myth, explains “we should be aware by now that Tolkien is a writer who achieves many of his most important effects by indirection, and what is most important to him is often not stated but underlies the whole story” (176). Another author, Brad Birzer, looking at Tolkien’s specific writing style in his work, *Sanctifying Myth*, captures Tolkien’s fear “that in making his meaning too explicit an author risks destroying the art and deeper significance of his work” (41). For Tolkien, the activity of the mind when reading a story is very important. The reader must form his own conclusions which remain unspoiled by the writer’s explicit

interaction. Not only does Tolkien have a deep, profound interest regarding this type of writing, myth, but Tolkien also acknowledges its importance to his nature, “which expresses itself about things deepest felt in tales and myths” (*Letters* 420-421). Tolkien culminates with the lofty assertion that “it was the only way that certain transcendent truths could be expressed in intelligible form” (Birzer x). For Tolkien, myth had deep, significant impact that other stories could not reach. He viewed his myth as his strongest and most durable contribution to mankind. “Myth, Tolkien thought, can convey the sort of profound truth that was intransigent to description or analysis in terms of facts and figures, and is therefore a more powerful weapon for cultural renewal than is modern rationalist science and technology” (Birzer xxi).

A primary objective of myth is to convey some sort of truth. One of these truths that Tolkien seeks to understand and explain is “the oldest and deepest desire, the Great Escape: the Escape from Death” (“Fairy-Stories” 68). An extension of this idea is the human “tendency in all of us to cling to the familiar and try to extend things in our life beyond their natural span” (Purtill 178). Following near-death experiences in the trenches of World War I, Tolkien further developed a profound reverence for mortality. This interest in death and human regard towards mortality leads his self-diagnosed theme in his works: “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” (*Letters* 246). In Tolkien’s manner of indirection, he uses the Elves, the embodiment of primary desires in a *secondary world*, to approach the issue of death and mortality. He asserts that the view of the *Silmarillion* “is peculiar, and differs from all similar things that I know in not being anthropocentric. Its centre of view and interest is not Men but ‘Elves’” (*Letters* 147). Providing a story from the perspective of an immortal race, Tolkien can demonstrate the fulfilment of a

primary desire in ways unimaginable except in a *secondary world* and expound on the effects from the fulfillment of the specific desire.

#### Applications from Tolkien's Myth

Though Tolkien's purpose for using the form of a myth is made clear, his intended lesson is slightly more ambiguous. Tolkien describes his portrayal of Elves and Men as different "experiments", each of which has its own natural trend, and weakness" (*Letters* 236). He appears to have had no end goal in mind when beginning but rather a curiosity concerning desires of immortality which he sought to flesh out through the portrayal of the two races. Furthermore, he reflects "it is only in reading the work myself (with criticisms in mind) that I become aware of the dominance of the theme of Death" (*Letters* 267). His strong inclusion of the themes of mortality comes merely as a byproduct of his experiment involving the two races. Though Tolkien clearly perceived *some* lesson to be imparted by the means of his myth-structured stories, it appears that his stimulus for the undertaking did not come from a *specific* truth he desired to impart through his work. Tolkien strongly disliked the idea of allegory: that one's writings reflect a certain and solitary truth. His contempt for the works of his friend and colleague, C.S. Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia* reflects this opinion. When questioned, he emphatically asserts "there is *no* 'symbolism' or conscious allegory in my story", considering the idea extremely absurd (*Letters* 262). Tolkien's characters and heroes are not life models as "nothing would be further from Tolkien's intention than for any of his readers to give primary or even intermediate belief to Tolkien's imagined world and characters", on the contrary they are simply characters, locked in a *secondary world*, fulfilling primary beliefs (Purtill 20). His strong dislike of allegory comes from his love of myth; the ability to express insights and expound on

desires in ways impossible in the *primary world*. For this reason, Tolkien dissuades forced interpretation as it might hinder the emergence of some deeper, greater truth.

This being said, Tolkien admits that the absence of allegory “does not, of course, say there is no applicability” (*Letters* 262). In fact, the ability to influence the reader marks one of Tolkien’s criteria for myth. What application then does Tolkien seek to promote through his Elven race? One avenue considers Tolkien’s works and criticisms of the Elves as a warning against a retrospective fascination and a fear of change that he seemed to possess himself. Tolkien had cultivated a deep respect and love for ancient and classical texts and his love of myth has already been demonstrated. Furthermore, “Tolkien’s disdain for machines reveals itself throughout the Middle-Earth works” (Birzer 111). He despises the machines of Isengard and Morder and praises the natural beauty of Rivendell,<sup>14</sup> Lothlórien, and the Shire’s agrarian society. In a time marked by progress and change, Tolkien expresses his apprehensions of the future, claiming that modern saints are those who contend against contemporary social and political ideas, never polluting their character with the untested fantasies of humanity (Birzer 116). In Tolkien’s criticism of immortality can be found a self-examination of his own dependence and love of the past with a fear for the future. The sufferings of the Elves show the dangers of those who live in books and legends without accepting the responsibly of the future. Tolkien’s warning challenges his readers to regard the future with a hope instead of an adverse disposition to change.

---

<sup>14</sup>Isengard: The estate of the wizard Saruman, who is known for his interest in machinery and magic that leads him to ally with the enemy and turn Isengard into a place of destruction and evil.

Rivendell: The second of the Elven Lands in Middle Earth (the other being the forest of Lothlórien). Rivendell is known for its beauty by the natural waters that flow through and around its artistically designed structures.

While the Elves' fear of change demonstrates Tolkien's interest in and respect for the future, the endless immortality highlights his caution. He encourages man to look to the future in hope, but he also challenges him to remain mindful of the past. To demonstrate the importance of the past, "Tolkien shows the past with all the beauty and all the poignancy he can invest it with, to make the regret for its loss as deep as possible, so that we understand fully what price we are paying for our new growth" (Stoddard). Not all change is improvement. He regards modern technology as an "improved means to deteriorated ends" ("Fairy-Stories" 65). Contemporary science, as Tolkien views it, fuels man's desire for immortality, false immortality. Tolkien describes this as the "the hideous peril of confusing true '*immortality*' with limitless serial longevity" (*Letters* 267). Tolkien fears the power that modern technology has to bring mankind into a life of extended sin and unhappiness. His works exist to convey the idea that "as the *quantity* of life increases, the *quality* decreases, 'until at last every minute is a weariness'" (Purtill 177). It is from this fear that Tolkien forms the race of Elves as having "certain aspects of Men and their talents and desires ... they have certain freedoms and powers we should like to have, and the beauty and peril and sorrow of the possession of these things is exhibited in them" (*Letters* 189). Tolkien took the common desires of earthly immortality and superiority to their logical conclusions in the Elves to demonstrate the pain and suffering that extended permanence in a fallen world creates.

From this demonstration of the dangers of false immortality Tolkien seeks to promote the ancient understanding and acceptance of mortality: "the Greek ideal of the golden mean, of 'nothing in excess', and the Old Testament idea of 'three score and ten' as a proper human life span. In fact, the familiar quotation goes on to say "and if a Man lives on beyond this by reason of strength his life grows weary" (Purtill 177). Purtill recounts the ancient understanding which

acknowledges the degradation of life because of sin. Death is God's gift of an end so that his "Spirit will not contend with humans forever" (New International Version, Gen. 6:3). This view of death as an escape from man's fallen nature, however, is not only found in Christian circles. Arthur Schopenhauer, in a philosophical examination of death in relation to the inner nature of man, comments, "to desire immortality for the individual is really the same as wanting to perpetuate an error for ever; for at bottom every individuality is really only a special error, a false step" (491). Furthermore, the immortal "would become a prey to boredom, and insofar as this was prevented, they would fall into misery, vexation, and suffering" (Schopenhauer 492). The human creature in his earthly form is not designed for immortality; the conflicting desires produced by sin cannot find lasting enjoyment. In short Tolkien's Elven characters display the "burden of that kind of immortality, or rather endless serial living" that so many deeply desire ("Fairy-Stories" 68).

Tolkien's disapproval of earthly immortality, though, does not condemn Christian eternal immortality. As a devout Catholic who acted as one of the primary influencers for C.S. Lewis' conversion, Tolkien's strict sense of theology does not clash with the ideas presented in his works. His Elves, as it were, demonstrate the dangers of neglecting our earthly mortality in hopes of eternal immortality:

His Elves do not grow old, they do not die, they keep their strength and beauty. And they illustrate by their very preservation the danger to faith in a fallen world of clinging to the present, which inevitably becomes living in the past. Over against this, his Men-and his Hobbits-illustrate, with the consequent pain and loss of all that seems most precious, the absolute necessity of letting go, of trusting in the unknown future, of having faith in God (Flieger 114).

In the Elves, Tolkien expresses the human sin of rejecting the purpose of God in a desire to continue in our own sin and selfishness. The human race tends to neglect his created purpose—to glorify God—and instead seeks to prolong his own dominion on the earth. However, by means

of contrasting the fantastical race of Elves, Tolkien presents not only human finitude and eventual necessity to surrender the gift of life, but also a greater hope in the power of a higher authority. By the suffering of the Elves, Tolkien demonstrates the gift of death:

In the immortality of the elves, and the sadness and melancholic wisdom that immortality evokes in them, we receive an inkling that man's mortality is a gift of God, a gift that ends his exile in mortal life's "vale of tears" and enables him, in death, to achieve a mystical union with the Divine beyond the reach of Time (Birzer xii).

With death comes all that is promised to Men in the *Silmarillion*: escape, rebirth, and growth.

Tolkien promises the inclusion of Man in the Second Music for “underlying Tolkien’s writings on the subject is a firm belief that there *is* something after death and that we can trust in the wisdom and goodness of God to ensure that whatever comes after death will be not only just but generous” (Purtill 179). With this knowledge, we can see the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the garden of Eden—more specifically from the Tree of Life that would allow them to live in their sinful state forever—as a gift, a protection from the “endless serial longevity” that governs the lives of Elves. Instead, the gift of mortality given to the first parents can be enjoyed with the promise of a greater immortality in a perfect, unfallen state.

### Conclusion

Tolkien’s works have often been misinterpreted. They are not reflections of ancient mythology filled with magic and fantasy combined with positive ideals of heroism and courage. Neither do they function as specific allegory to his Christian faith. Tolkien’s purpose through his books is much more elevated. He seeks to enter into the best suited form of writing, the realm of myth, where he can draw the reader into a *secondary world* of fantasy, in which the reader can experience the unfolding of primary desires. In specific regards to immortality, Tolkien uses the *secondary world* of Middle Earth to expound on the primary desire of eternal life. In using the race of Elves, Tolkien demonstrates the end to which this desire leads: a life of wearisome

continued existence. The immortality of the Elves is not to be envied. However, Tolkien does not present this conclusion directly. Instead he draws the reader into a myth where the truth is laid out indirectly and then formed fully in the mind of the reader. Jesus taught his disciples in a similar manner: presenting a parable upon which reflection would lead to understanding. Completed understanding comes internally—stimulated by the subconscious and formed by one's own reasoning. Tolkien masters this art in his manner of myth. From its harmonious creation to its tear-filled farewell, the stories of the world of Arda guide the passions and decisions of its audience. In dealing with the common, ageless desire for immortality, Tolkien does not present a cure for mortality, as many of the ancient myths sought. Instead, through the power of myth, he indirectly guides the desires of the readers away from a false immortality. He uncovers the pure desire: a desire for eternal existence in a separate world devoid of evil and destruction, glorifying one's Creator.

## Selected Bibliography

Aramphongphan, Paisid. "Transcending Death: Mortality and Immortality in Fantasy Literature."

*Transcending Death: Mortality and Immortality in Fantasy Literature*. The Victorian Web, 18 May 2004. Web. 17 Oct. 2015.

Beye, Charles Rowan. *Ancient Epic Poetry: Homer, Apollonius, Virgil: With a Chapter on the Gilgamesh Poems*. Wauconda, Ill.: Bolchazy-Carducci, 2006. 279-302. Print.

Birzer, Bradley J. *J.R.R. Tolkien's Sanctifying Myth*. Wilmington, Delaware: ISI, 2003. Print.

Campbell, Joseph, and Bill D. Moyers. *The Power of Myth*. Ed. Betty S. Flowers. New York: Anchor, 1991. Print.

"Doom." *Oxford English Dictionary*. 6<sup>th</sup> Edition. 2007. Print.

Flieger, Verlyn. *A Question of Time: J.R.R. Tolkien's Road to Faërie*. Kent, Ohio: Kent State UP, 1997. Print.

*Holy Bible, New International Version*. Biblica, Inc. 2011. Web. Jan 22. 2016.

Gardner, John. *Gilgamesh: Translated from the Sîn-leqi-unninnī Version*. New York: Vintage, 1985. Print.

Gorman, Daniel Jr. "Revisiting Joseph Campbell's The Power of Myth." *Intermountain West Journal of Religious Studies* 5, no. 1 (2014). Web. 18 Jan. 2016.

Lewis, C. S. *An Experiment in Criticism*. Cambridge: University Press, 1961. Print.

---. *Mere Christianity*. Macmillan Paperbacks ed. New York: Macmillan Pub., 1960. Print.

Lindsey, Art. "C.S. Lewis on Life and Immortality." *C.S. Lewis Institute*. 2003. Web. 18 Oct. 2015.

Mathie, Anna. *Tolkien and the Gift of Mortality*. First Things. 2014. Web. 18 Jan. 2016.

Purtill, Richard L. *J.R.R. Tolkien: Myth, Morality, and Religion*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984. Print.

Schopenhauer, Arthur. "On Death and Its Relation to the Indestructibility of Our Inner Nature." *The World as Will and Representation*. New York: Dover Publications, 1966. 463-509. Print.

Stockslager, Tess. "Some Spirit Was Pursuing All of Us." *Literary Perspectives on Death*. 2006. Liberty.edu. Web. 13 September 2015.

Stoddard, William. "Simbelmynë: Mortality and Memory in Middle-Earth." Franson Publications, 2004. Web. 2 November 2015.

Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Fellowship of the Ring*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003. Print.

---. *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*. Edited by Humphrey Carpenter. 2nd edition. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000. Print.

---. *The Return of the King*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003. Print.

---. *The Silmarillion*. New York: Ballantine, 1979. Print.

---. *The Two Towers*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003. Print.

---. *Tree and Leaf: Including the Poem Mythopoeia and The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth*. New ed. London: HarperCollinsPublishers, 2001. Print.