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“What punishments of God are not gifts?” The meaning of suffering in Tolkien’s life and work

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Abstract:

J. R. R. Tolkien, as somebody who experienced a difficult early life as an orphan and then as a World War I soldier, endured enough trauma and suffering in his life for it to become a significant element in almost all of his fictional works. This paper explores Tolkien’s understanding of the effects of suffering in human life, which was shaped by his religious belief. He presents pain as an inevitable and essential part of the nature of the Fallen World; yet while it may seem at first as a form of punishment, if treated appropriately, it turns into a powerful means of achieving personal or societal salvation.

Looking at the list of books Tolkien wrote might lead one to an observation that almost all of them depict some kind of pain and suffering, save maybe for his most childish, light-hearted stories, such as *The Father Christmas Letters*, *Mr. Bliss*, or *Roverandom* (though after careful inspection, some minor occurrences of suffering would surely be found in them also). And this is true not only of his fiction: the works with which he was academically occupied as a translator feature pain as a significant story element too. It may be argued that there can hardly be found any story in the world of adult literature that does not mention any, not even the slightest suffering, for that is present everywhere where there are people – real as well as literary.

Moreover, it is no surprise when an author who led such an uneasy life as Tolkien’s decides to reflect on his life experiences in his books. But in Tolkien’s case, it is not so simple. In addition to writing being a way of confronting and coping with his own suffering, he meditated on pain as an essential part of the complex concept of the Fallen World, which, as he

often stated in his letters, was the chief philosophical concern behind his writing.

In this paper, I look at how his understanding of pain was shaped by his own physical as well as spiritual suffering and faith. This is discussed in the first part of this paper which also provides examples of suffering from Tolkien's stories that mirror his own. Then in the second part, I explain his view of suffering as a means of salvation. The last part provides some concluding remarks.

Tolkien, the man who suffered

In order to understand why Tolkien placed so much emphasis on suffering, we will first review how much of it he went through in his life. Ronald Tolkien indeed had quite a troublesome life from its very beginning. Born in Bloemfontein, South Africa, to which his parents had moved to because of his father Arthur's job, the boy suffered in terms of health in the local climate. So his mother Mabel decided to move with him and her other son back to the cooler Birmingham where she was originally from. Arthur was supposed to join them later; unfortunately, he contracted an illness which he did not survive. So the first big blow, his father's death, came when Ronald was only four years old.

Afterwards, Mabel sought consolation in faith and converted to Catholicism along with her sons, which met with the strong disapproval of her Anglican family who cut off their financial support. Nor did her conversion meet with the understanding of her dead husband's Baptist family, so all the income she was left with was the moderate dividend she inherited after Arthur's death. Nonetheless, she did not give up her religion, and she worked hard to ensure her boys a decent enough living in cheap lodgings and with the appropriate education. However, her health started to decline and she died half a year after being diagnosed with diabetes, which at that time was incurable. It was in 1904 and it was the greatest pain Ronald had experienced so far. Tolkien believed that her illness was the result of all her grief and suffering, "hastened by persecution of her faith," (Tolkien, 2006, p. 54) by her family; that in a sense she became a martyr who "killed herself with labour and trouble to ensure [her sons] keeping the faith," (Carpenter, 2002, p. 50). Apparently, this was the point at which Tolkien started associating the concept of pain and its purpose with religion, Catholicism in particular.

Thus Tolkien became fully orphaned at the age of 12, and this condition he later attributed to several important characters in his stories. For example, siblings Boromir and Faramir, and Sam Gamgee, were half-orphans who had lost their mothers, and Aragorn became fatherless at the age of two. In *The Silmarillion* it was Tuor who had lost both parents, and in *The Lord of the Rings* it was Éomer and Éowyn, Gollum, and most importantly, Frodo who became a full orphan at the same age as Tolkien and whose life mirrors the suffering of his

creator caused by the rather cold relations with their remaining families. Both Ronald and Frodo were misunderstood and thought strange by their foster relatives: Frodo because of his father's origin (being of a different hobbit breed) and Ronald because of his religion. The aunt the Tolkien brothers stayed with immediately after their mother's death showed them little affection past ensuring their basic needs and much increased Ronald's sorrow when she burnt all Mabel's letters not even asking his permission.

According to Mabel's last will, the boys were appointed to the guardianship of Father Francis Morgan, a priest of the Birmingham Oratory whom Mabel befriended soon after she had started visiting this church and who supported her not only spiritually but also financially. Upon seeing that the boys were not happy at their aunt's Fr Francis found them new lodgings at Mrs Faulkner's, who also housed another orphan, Edith Brath, a girl three years Ronald's senior with whom the future writer soon fell in love. Ronald was just finishing his studies at King Edward's School, but because his mind was at that time preoccupied with his two new loves – that of Edith and of the Finnish language, which he preferred to his compulsory classical languages Latin and Greek – he failed to win a scholarship to Oxford University, which was actually the only way for him to get a university degree since otherwise, even with Fr Francis's support, he would not be able to afford it. The consequences were not unexpected. Fr Francis could not stand the boy being thus distracted as he tried to ensure him a good life through his education. He ordered the boys and also the girl be moved to different places and forbade Ronald to meet or write to Edith until he reached the age of 21. That meant Ronald could not contact his sweetheart for three more years – a severe punishment for their young love. But Tolkien respected his guardian like a father, understood he was acting in his best interests and himself realized the importance of getting a scholarship, so he suffered the separation impatiently, yet obediently.

Tolkien's experience of forbidden love inspired two of his stories: the tale of Beren and Lúthien, and the love-story of Aragorn and Arwen, which mirrors the former one. Both tell of a man who falls in love with a royal Elven maid (which in itself is against the natural order of the world and thus prohibited by her father unless the man proves worthy by completing some great quest) and the hardship their love undergoes in pursuit of it. In both cases it involves the enforced lengthy separation of the lovers, as in Tolkien's own love-story; yet unlike it, it is supplemented by the physical suffering of the heroes. Most importantly, they show that true love can withstand any perils or tides of fate, just like that of Tolkien and Edith.

The very day Ronald turned 21 he sent a letter to Edith only to find out that she had already become engaged. It must be noted that it was at a time when an unmarried girl of her

age was considered a spinster, and she did not want to remain one when she had no information about Ronald. But as soon as they met in person, she broke off her betrothal and the lovers were reunited, though not without trouble; the three-year separation had left its mark. On top of that, World War I started and Ronald had before him a decision whether to fulfil his civic duty and volunteer for the army or finish his studies. Many of his friends and co-students immediately opted for the first choice, but since he now wished to marry Edith as soon as possible (as soon as she converted to Catholicism, which was another cause of disagreement and sorrow between them) and were he to provide her and their possible future family a comfortable life, he needed to get himself a guarantee of a decent academic job, in order for which he first needed to get his degree.

When that was done, he too joined the army and was sent with the 11th Battalion of the Lancashire Fusiliers to the Battle of the Somme. Another period of suffering began. The horrors of the trenches were reflected in the many battle scenes in his stories, and especially in the description of the Dead Marches. By the end of the war all but one of his closest friends from the King Edward's literary group the T.C.B.S. was dead (Tolkien, 2011b, p. xxii). Tolkien survived probably only because he had contracted so-called trench fever which he never fully recovered from until the fighting ceased. However, the disease left his health, always faltering, even more unsteady. His letters reveal that his writing was often restricted, apart from his academic duties, by his family's or his own health problems. The published selection of his letters (2006) may create the impression that Tolkien was quite a hypochondriac and a whiner always complaining about the many things that thwarted his writing intentions. But it is true that he suffered from severe arthritis from his mid-sixties, making it painful for him to write with a pen, and towards the end of his life this was joined by serious digestive problems, such as an inflamed gall-bladder (letter 311), indigestion, and gastric ulcers which eventually proved fatal (Carpenter, 2002, pp. 340-341).

But returning to his post-WWI experience, it is necessary to mention two more significant sorrows of distinct kinds in his life. One of them was the outbreak of World War II, an event the surviving generation of the first war hoped would never happen. This time Tolkien, too old for active service on the battlefield, suffered on the other side, the relative safety of the home front, experiencing the fear and sorrow of a parent whose two sons were risking their lives instead.

The other sorrow arises from his acquaintance with C. S. Lewis whom he befriended in Oxford in 1926. While Tolkien regarded Lewis as his best friend, that feeling was not reciprocated. Lewis thought him only one of his "second-class" friends (Carpenter, 2006, p.

33), which he might not have at first perceived. Their relationship started to cool after their literary group and circle of friends the Inklings was joined by Charles Williams, whom Lewis admired as a writer. Tolkien was notably jealous of their relationship and thought Williams was starting to have too great an influence in matters of philosophy and literature over his friend. But he was even more aggrieved by Lewis's marriage to an American divorcee, of which he as a Christian strongly disapproved, and the fact that he had to learn about it from a newspaper and had not been invited, nor even told by Lewis in person (White, 2001, p. 145). Nonetheless, he still valued Lewis's friendship and support in writing, and his sudden death felt "like an axe-blow near the roots" (Tolkien, 2006, p. 341). They also influenced each other's theological and philosophical views significantly, the problem of pain including.

The meaning of pain

The English word pain comes from the Latin *poena*, meaning "penalty, retribution" (www.etymonline.com). Indeed, especially in Christianity, pain was traditionally understood as a kind of punishment for a person's sins or the sins of their ancestors. This understanding of pain comes from the Biblical story of Genesis, in which the pain of childbirth and hard work were inflicted as punishment for Adam and Eve's first sin, their disobedience against God. This concept of pain as punishment for one's evil acts appears also in Tolkien's stories; for example, Gollum is expelled from his family for harming them, and Gríma is bullied by Saruman for failing in the task he had given him. In both cases, it is not God or any higher power who inflicts the punishment, but other creatures, which is in accord with Lewis's opinion that most human suffering, around four fifths, is caused by humans (2016, p. 55). Lewis believed that when a soul becomes wicked it uses every possibility to harm, and Tolkien evidently held the same view. Morgoth's, Sauron's and Saruman's desires to enslave other nations and Gollum's lust for killing prove it.

However, pain cannot be viewed only as a punishment or an inevitable consequence of human wickedness. In fact, in Tolkien's stories, it is mainly the innocent characters who suffer the most. They have not done anything evil for which they would deserve to be punished. Why then do the good ones have to suffer? The problem of pain is much more complex and even theologians cannot resolve what the purpose of this undeserved suffering is and why God allows it. Tolkien's stories, but much more his letters, reveal that he seems to follow the ideas of Thomas Aquinas, advocated also by his friend Lewis in his book on pain (whether Tolkien was inspired by Aquinas directly by reading his works or indirectly by Lewis, is now irrelevant).

While Aquinas agrees that pain is a punishment from God, and as such, it is an evil

because it is the nature of pain to be against one's well-being, he admits that the infliction of pain in itself is not evil. It is not true that God would wish us harm or be happy to see us suffer. That would mean he is not a good God but a wicked one. Instead, he allows suffering as a means of restoring justice. The pain is an opportunity for people to realize there is something wrong in their life and remove the pain by removing the evil that causes it and lead a better life. Thus, sorrow is good, moreover a virtuous good, if it denotes the recognition and rejection of evil. Were it not so, it would mean that we either do not recognize the evil or not feel it (Aquinas, 1999, p. 1720). For such is the nature of Fallen Man influenced by the effects of the hereditary sin that, as Lewis (2016) and Neberman (2016) remark, we have grown so comfortable in our current lives that we have forgotten about the goal of our earthly lives, that is to achieve perfect happiness in heaven, and are numb to the real joy of life arising from it, that we need to be wounded by pain, sorrow and discomfort to start disliking our life and turn to good and rediscover the truth. Of course, the punishment should not break a man, but turn him towards the right path and change him. Only when it makes a man's will subscribe to God's is it good (Lewis, 2016). As Tolkien put it:

It is one of the mysteries of pain that it is, for the sufferer, an opportunity for good, a path of ascent however hard, for the essence of a fallen world is that the best [elsewhere worded as the truly great and splendid] 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, entailing great mortification. (Tolkien, 2006, p. 126, 51)

The healing of broken human nature can come only through suffering (Tolkien, 2002) and in the joy that can only come after pain we gain a sudden piercing glimpse of the true joy of heart's mending (Garth, 2013). It is only through suffering that we can attain the happiness of God's kingdom. McIntosh (2009, p. 339) accentuates that it is exactly the idea "of the necessity of sorrow for the possibility of a certain kind of joy that lies at the heart of Tolkien's concept of eucatastrophe, 'the joy of the happy ending' or 'sudden joyous 'turn'' which "does not deny the existence of dyscatastrophe, of sorrow and failure," inasmuch as "the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance".

This brings us to Stephen Colbert's quote from the title of this paper: "What punishments of God are not gifts?" He, like Tolkien, did not have a very happy childhood, but he found the strength to cope with his suffering in the writer's understanding of pain. Saying

this, Stephen believed he was directly quoting Tolkien, but the exact wording is as follows: “A divine ‘punishment’ is also a divine ‘gift’, if accepted, since its object is ultimate blessing, and the supreme inventiveness of the Creator will make ‘punishments’ (that is changes of design) produce a good not otherwise to be attained,” (Tolkien, 2006, p. 286). So, it is that the pain is actually a gift for us through which we can be ennobled. It will, in the end, serve a good purpose, for God can turn even evil to good uses, although we may not perceive it thus while it is present.

In this Tolkien takes a very Platonic approach. Like the philosopher, Tolkien believes that we can understand the meaning of suffering, whether it was for good or bad, whether it was useful for something, only retrospectively when we distance ourselves from it, not while we experience it (Walsh, 2015). Tolkien (2006, p. 76) wrote: “All things and deeds have a value in themselves, apart from their ‘causes’ and ‘effects’. No man can estimate what is really happening at the present *sub specie aeternitatis*.” We just have to bear it patiently and when it passes we can look back at the suffering and consider it in the context of our whole life, for often some unexpected good may sprout from the pain. Foremost it is a means of redemption, but sometimes the good arising from it can be more practical, like when the suffering Tolkien experienced during WWI led to the creation of his mythology. Or if nothing else, it can at least encourage the improvement of others by provoking in them fear or compassion, and pity that induces obedience, mercy and charity, and an overall increase in virtuousness.

And what about the undeserved suffering of the innocent like Aragorn or Frodo? The purpose of their pain is obviously different. It is not an amendment for their own sins, but if accepted it provides an opportunity to complement the suffering of God himself in the person of Jesus Christ, who too suffered on the cross undeservedly, and thus participate in the redemption of the whole world. Many Tolkienists (Pearce, Marcos, Caldecott, Kreeft, just to name some) recognize Frodo to be a Christ figure who carries the burden of the whole world and through whose suffering evil is overcome. In Tolkien’s mythology, he embodies the humble Christian who with the Apostle Paul in his own life takes on the afflictions of Christ for the sake of the whole community, the whole of God’s creation (Colossians 1:24). As Marcos (2012, p. 68) puts it, he becomes the bridge over which others may cross to safety. The idea Tolkien elaborated in this is captured in George MacDonald’s exclamation, which Lewis (2016, p. 5) chose as an opening quote for his *The Problem of Pain*: “The Son of God suffered unto the death, not that men might not suffer, but that their sufferings might be like His.”

In short, Tolkien believed that the suffering of the innocent is not unjust, but it serves some higher purpose. We simply have to trust that God has his own plans in which even the evil of current pain will fulfil an ultimately good cause. So when we are faced with some

seemingly undeserved suffering, we can do two things: either complain and give up, or be humble and empty ourselves and await the reward. Once we have chosen to suffer for a higher cause, we should never abandon it because of the suffering. Yet that is not easy. It requires a strong will to endure; not to let the pain break oneself but stick to the quest with hope despite the pains. Only then can we achieve victory and save ourselves or others. Thus, Tolkien (2006, p. 233) explains, every event in the life of individuals can affect the development of the individual as well as the fates of others, or the history of the whole world.

Sometimes it can happen that a person is put in such circumstances that prevent them from attaining this noble goal regardless of their efforts. Tolkien called these abnormal situations “sacrificial”; they are “positions in which the ‘good’ of the world depends on the behaviour of an individual in circumstances which demand of him suffering and endurance far beyond the normal – even, it may happen (or seem, humanly speaking), demand a strength of body and mind which he does not possess: he is in a sense doomed to failure, doomed to fall to temptation or be broken by pressure against his ‘will’: that is against any choice he could make or would make unfettered, not under the duress,” (ibid.). This was the situation Frodo got into at the end of his quest; he became so ensnared in the Ring’s power that he could not give it up when the time came. Ultimately, he failed. But it was right because of his previous humble suffering and pity he showed to Gollum that he was redeemed and restored to sanity, and thus eventually celebrated as a hero. Tolkien wrote: “Frodo deserved all honour because he spent every drop of his power of will and body, and that was just sufficient to bring him to the destined point, and no further,” (ibid. p. 253). Sometimes God can test and tempt us, like the biblical Job, seemingly too hard and even allow us to fail and submit to temptation in a crucial moment, so that He could exercise His mercy and pardon the failure on account of some other, even apparently unconnected, good we did.

But in order to not present God as some spoiled princeling who takes pleasure in tempting others so that he can appear merciful later, in contrast with these sacrificial situations Tolkien poses verses from Corinthians 1 (10:12-13), which say that “God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it.” He allows us to be tempted and fail, but at the same time, He gives us as much strength as we need to complete as much of the quest as He appointed us, which may not be as much as we think it is. What should help us bear the temptation and suffering is the knowledge that it is being undergone for some higher good cause and we will be rewarded for it. So according to Tolkien “[t]he Christian has still to work, with mind as well as body, to suffer, hope, and die; but he may now perceive that all his bents and

faculties have a purpose, which can be redeemed,” (Tolkien, 2001, p. 73).

As Kreeft (2005, p. 142) observes, Tolkien’s philosophy is a philosophy of Hope. A hope that no evil lasts forever and that if we keep trusting and stick to our cause, the suffering will be rewarded in the end. This hope is also presented in Tolkien’s natural imagery in Mordor. The land was slowly dying, but not dead yet. There were still places where living things like thorny bushes, scrubby trees, grass tussocks, mosses and tangled brambles can be found (Tolkien, 2011b, p. 921). Life here struggled on despite the suffering, and became an embodiment of the very hope for a better future. Likewise, we should never lose hope in the good cause, no matter how unlikely victory seems, or how great a suffering we must endure, because the lower the chances of success are, the more precious and enjoyable it is then. With pain itself it is similar – the longer it lasts and the more improbable it seems that we could get rid of it, the more we appreciate when it ends. This is the joy of life we have forgotten about and need to restore and which Lewis and Neberman wrote about.

Unfortunately, not always can the “victors”, those who succeeded in accomplishing their quest despite their suffering, enjoy their “victory” and reward on this earth in the terms they envisaged. As a matter of fact, Tolkien thought that this never happens. And then the victory feels less satisfactory; moreover, it can be a source of new sorrow (Tolkien, 2006, p. 235). But Christians believe that even if not in this life, all our sufferings and sacrifices will doubtlessly be rewarded in the afterlife. Thus death, otherwise feared and perceived as something evil and painful – a punishment, is by a considerable number of Christians, and particularly by Tolkien, viewed as a gift or reward and the only certain respite from a life full of suffering (see Manni, at <http://www.lovatti.eu/fr/etp.htm>). It is like an escape from prison, a real version of the escapism provided by fairy stories (see Tolkien, 2001, pp. 60-61). However, only few can go straight to heaven; most souls first must be cleansed from the effects of their sins in the purgatory.

Tolkien explored this concept in his allegorical story *Leaf by Niggle*. Here we meet Niggle, an aspiring artist, in the last stage of his life when he is preparing for a certain last journey he must undertake, this being a metaphor for death. He is then placed in an institution, a workhouse infirmary, which is an allegory for purgatory and where he must work menially. He suffers physically because of the hard work which breaks him, but also psychologically because of his memories and the conflict between his desires and his duties. To the great discomfort of his artistic soul, he has to paint bare boards all one plain colour (Tolkien, 2001, p. 103) and perform monotonous, unenjoyable work. But it is right through this subordination of his will to some higher power, the representation of God’s will, in the hardship that he learns

discipline and rediscovers the joy of doing one's job well and efficiently for the benefit of others, even without getting recognition for it. He is humbled by it and thus spiritually healed. Eventually, he is redeemed on account of both his suffering in the workhouse and during his former life. As for this, it was the sacrifice he performed for his neighbour Parish (for example in neglecting his painting in order to attend to his needs, or using his canvas to water-proof Parish's house) which contributed the most to the shortening of his stay in the workhouse-purgatory, even though he, while alive, considered it a nuisance, a distraction from his real work (painting) and a pain. Jane Chance (2001, p. 95) asserts that as Niggle matures through his suffering he comes to resemble the third class of the Elect from the *Ancrene Wisse* (the translation of which Tolkien collaborated upon) who find joy in suffering. Actually, according to the medieval work, heavenly happiness can come to only through suffering; or put metaphorically, by climbing the ladder of Penance with the sides consisting of dishonour and hardship and rungs of all the human virtues.

Conclusion

In summary, suffering, in Tolkien's understanding, is a divine gift. Even if inflicted as a punishment for sins, its purpose is to make us aware that something in our lives is not in concord with God's plan. It provides an opportunity to reflect on our former behaviour and change for the better. It is also a means of humiliation and sacrifice through which we can cultivate our virtues. But ultimately, it is a method for the healing of the broken nature of Fallen Man. On the other hand, the undeserved suffering of the innocent represents an even greater blessing as it makes them direct participants in the redemption of the whole world.

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