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# Introduction

The insight offered by examining Tolkien’s posthumous texts detailing events prior to those of *The Lord of the Rings* is valuable since it serves to deepen our understanding of both the *magnum opus* and his legendarium[[1]](#footnote-1) and authorship as a whole. Though *The Lord of the Rings* is indubitably the most famous of Tolkien’s writings, *The Silmarillion* is closely linked to it and functions as the founding building block of Middle-Earth. The complexity of *The Silmarillion* has several layers; on a textual level the narratological style is vastly different to that of both *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings.* The history of its origin and publication is somewhat cryptic, not least when appreciating the elapsed time between the first notes and the actual posthumous publication in 1977. While the fantasy genre as a whole has enjoyed little academic attention until recently, the popularity of *The Lord of the Rings* among readers has generated a scholarly interest. However, the body of academic attention and scrutiny has focused primarily on *The Lord of the Rings* which is understandable but only helps to illuminate part of the grander whole. As will be stressed, *The Lord of the Rings* is naturally a dominant force, not least because it, together with *The Hobbit*, is the only book entirely finished by Tolkien himself. Nonetheless, the texts finished in his lifetime are only a relatively small part of the legendarium. This is part of the reason for this paper’s focus on *The Silmarillion*, *Unfinished Tales of Númenor and Middle-earth* and *The Children of Húrin*. Despite these texts being subject of the investigation, avoiding references to *The Lord of the Rings* is impossible because of the textual interconnectedness. One cannot comprehend the whole by isolating the individual texts. Despite these factors, the primary focus is nevertheless placed on these three texts because their construction, function and mythological character make them distinctly different from *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*. Additionally, this means that familiarity with *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* is presupposed before reading this paper, and only select aspects and notions in *The Silmarillion* will be explained in detail where necessary so as to spend as little time as possible summarizing the primary texts.  
This paper can overall be described as an attempt to provide insight into a few themes in Tolkien’s texts and thereby contribute to existing scholarship. These themes concern fate, free will, morality and mythology. Throughout the paper, the emphasis is on being close to the text. The texts are numerous and not a single work. We do not employ a strict biographical reading, not because it cannot be rewarding, but because it can be problematic to claim to know what went on inside the head of a man born 122 years ago. However, we do, with the assistance of already existing literature, argue that both the character and thematic content of Tolkien’s works can to a certain degree be explained by looking in the direction of the author. The paper thus also heavily engages in a discussion with existing scholarship, whereby we both critique and employ observations by other authors. This can most readily be described as a dialogue with the available literature. The main thrust of the paper is both thematically and stylistically oriented. By this we mean that we wish to tackle the themes mentioned above, while also connecting them to the author. Furthermore, we wish to examine the stylistic choices Tolkien made, and what the functions of those choices are. This concerns itself with the mythological character of his works. We have deliberately decided to exclude the 12-volume series by Christopher Tolkien called *The History of Middle-Earth*, as these books deal with discarded, unfinished and unused versions and scraps of texts. In this paper, Christopher’s work on the revision and evolution of the texts is not relevant, because those provided in *The Silmarillion* are by himself stated to be authoritative.

The first two chapters are an introduction to Tolkien’s authorship. As the relationship between the texts published before and after his death is somewhat complicated, this warrants an explanation. In order to fully grasp the inner workings of Tolkien’s works, one needs to understand both the publication history and his own view on the published material. Furthermore, we paint an image of the whole of Tolkien’s legendarium, so as to provide clarity. These two chapters are intended to leave the reader with an idea of the importance of Tolkien’s posthumous works in the bigger picture as well as how Tolkien’s texts relate to each other.   
The chapter “Reader’s Guide to Tolkien” features a brief overview over the texts that are either examined or mentioned in this paper. Because of the complicated publication history, a suggested reading order is also provided.  
In “An Introduction to Tolkien Scholarship”, an overview of Tolkien criticism is provided. This is both done historically, but also thematically and methodologically. While some works and authors mentioned in this chapter will be drawn upon later, the aim of the chapter is also to provide an overview of the variety and evolution of the field. In particular, the branch of scholarship spearheaded by Tom Shippey will be drawn upon later. Additionally, the chapter also introduces the mythological aspect of Tolkien research, as this plays an important part not only in the field as a whole, but also in this paper.  
“Tolkien’s Legendarium as Literature” contains a discussion of the validity of Tolkien’s writings. Burton Raffel in his “*The Lord of the Rings* as literature” makes the argument that while Tolkien writes well, what he writes cannot be considered literature. This section of the paper details Raffel’s arguments and discusses its merits. The section will employ several quotations and explores how the essay’s point relates to *The Silmarillion*. The essay was written several years before the publication of *The Silmarillion*, which means that certain aspects may be slightly outdated but the critique is still relevant because the usefulness and relevance of the fantasy genre has been questioned often. It is only recently that the genre has enjoyed increased academic attention, and fully comprehending the legendarium requires an understanding of the differences between the individual works. “Tolkien’s Legendarium as Literature” builds the basis for the two later chapters of the paper, “Conveying Information” and “Mythological Considerations”.   
“On Fairy-Stories” is an overview over Tolkien’s essay by the same name. The essay itself concerns itself with Tolkien’s view on the genre of “fairy-stories”, and thus functions like a manifesto. This chapter serves to both examine Tolkien’s view on the genre, but also to explain key terms that are crucial to understanding Tolkien’s works. These terms will be used throughout the paper.  
The chapter “Conveying Information” is where the paper begins examining Tolkien’s stylistic choices and the functions of these. By using examples from *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Silmarillion* and *Unfinished Tales of Númenor and Middle-Earth* it is shown how different Tolkien’s posthumous works were in the way of relaying information to the reader. The chapter also explains how references in *The Lord of the Rings* were expanded upon in the posthumous works. This leads on to an examination of “depth” in Tolkien’s works and how this is achieved and to what purpose. This discussion is important because it plays a big role stylistically in the posthumous works and because it is connected to the mythological character of his works.  
This is expanded upon in the next chapter called “Mythological Considerations”. The chapter focuses on the effect of the style of *The Silmarillion* and how mythologies typically function. This section also serves as a bridge to the two very analytical chapters “Fate and Free Will”, “Tolkien and Morality” and “Túrin Turambar and Morality”. Furthermore, this chapter places Tolkien in a context of other authors who sought to create mythologies, while it also shows how Tolkien’s work can be classified as modernist, thus placing it in a literary movement.   
“Fate and Free Will” is the first of the more classic analytical chapters. It focuses on the system of “powers” that govern the lives of the characters within Middle-Earth. It also examines the notions of foresight and prophecy. Drawing on authors such as Tom Shippey and Verlyn Flieger, the chapter examines the complexity in the relationship between free will and fate, and why Tolkien described it so.   
The following chapter, “Tolkien and Morality”, explores morality in *The Silmarillion*, focusing on specific stories and characters. Famous characters such as Túrin and Fëanor will be used as examples which serve to illuminate how the concept of morality is handled within Tolkien’s universe. Furthermore, the notion is evil is explored as well, since it is closely related to being a moral entity with a moral compass. Multiple times *Letters* will be used, offering insight into Tolkien’s own thoughts on the issue of morality. It is a major theme in *The Silmarillion*; indeed, in all his writings, and therefore a theme that must be explored.   
“On Change on Elves and Men” explores the complex relationship between the two races, and how they react to change. The elves are “the Children”, and while their moral alignment is the same, the roles they fulfill and their function within *The Silmarillion* are different.  
The final chapter, “Tolkien’s Legendarium in a Biographical Context”, details how one could benefit from reading Tolkien’s text biographically. As described earlier in this introduction, a biographical reading is not without its problems, especially considering Tolkien’s own attitude towards it. Furthermore, as has been stressed, the primary focus of this paper is not a biographical reading but we may nevertheless note what could be gained from employing such an approach, as there are some observations to be made.

# Authorship

Tolkien’s authorship warrants research and requires explanation, preeminently in an instance where neither *The Lord of The Rings* nor *The Hobbit* are the chief focus. This paper deals with Tolkien’s authorship but with his *magnum opus* in the background. *The Silmarillion*, *The Children of Húrin* and *Unfinished Tales* are all, for the most part, written by Tolkien himself (in addition to numerous other books), but it was his son, Christopher Tolkien, who edited and published the books after his father’s death. A paper dealing with an authorship but focusing on books not actually entirely finished by the author himself requires some clarification. The release of works posthumously is not uncommon, but the amount of work Christopher Tolkien has put into the universe his father created is immense. Christopher Tolkien was furthermore appointed by J.R.R. Tolkien to be his literary executor. It is almost impossible to tell where Christopher’s work starts and the work of his father ends; nevertheless it is indisputable that Christopher’s work primarily consisted of connecting already-existing dots, and edit written material into something readable. Nearly all existing books are heavily edited by a publisher before release and in this way the three above mentioned books are no different than regular books and still part of Tolkien’s authorship. Naturally, *The Silmarillion* is the predominant force and the history of the publication of this book is intricate. Early contributions and ideas to what would later become *The Silmarillion* were emerging long before *The Lord of the Rings* was even entertained as a thought. After the almost surprising success of *The Hobbit* in 1937 Tolkien was asked to write a sequel by his publisher Allen & Unwin, and though *The Lord of The Rings* was accepted and published, Tolkien wanted to publish it together with *The Silmarillion* but the idea was rejected (Drout, 2007, 609). The early version of *The Silmarillion* was deemed too complicated, which to well-read Tolkien enthusiasts may seem unsurprising; the difference in tone and character between e.g. *The Hobbit* and *The Silmarillion* cannot be overstated and clearly Tolkien’s own approach to his hobbit tales and the mythology for Middle-earth is vastly different in nature. Where *The Hobbit* is a children’s book, *The Silmarillion* was never conceived as such. In fact, *The Silmarillion* consists of several more or less independent narratives dealing with the earlier ages of Middle-earth (*The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* are set in the Third Age) and is not a work easily comparable with his well-known writings. Tolkien himself was caught up in the details surrounding *The Silmarillion*, and veritably the publication of *The Lord of The Rings* complicated matters somewhat since he had to adapt *The Silmarillion* to *The Lord of the Rings* instead of the other way around, as was originally intended:

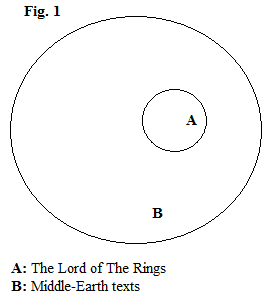
[…] my father’s insistence that *The Silmarillion* and *The Lord of The Rings* should be published ‘in conjunction or in connexion’ ‘as one long Saga of the Jewels and the Rings’. (Tolkien, 2002, xi)

In Tolkien’s later years he was overwhelmed by the work (Drout, 2007, 609) and it was up to Christopher Tolkien to finish it. Christopher’s task was primarily to systematize a large number of manuscripts and more or less loose writings and compile them into what we now recognize as *The Silmarillion*. The fact that it is a compendium becomes evident when looking at the contents of the book; it consists of *the Ainulindalë, the Valaquenta, the Quenta Silmarillion*, *the Akallabêth* and *Of The Rings of Power and The Third Age*, all of which are independent contributions but nevertheless constitute the whole. Christopher himself writes in the Foreword to *The Silmarillion*:

Moreover, my father came to conceive *The Silmarillion* as a compilation, a compendious narrative, made long afterwards from sources of great diversity (poems, and annals, and oral tales) that survived in agelong tradition; and this conception has indeed its parallel in the actual history of the book […] (Tolkien, 2002, viii)

This is a major difference between the books; *The Silmarillion* consists of independent accounts of the early days of Middle-earth, while *The Lord of the Rings* is a classic-style narrative.  
This is why the books published posthumously are still very much part of Tolkien’s authorship: the writings were there, and even though it was up to Christopher to fill in the gaps where necessary (so to speak), the notions, ideas, writings, style and everything else that embodies the finished books are Tolkien’s own. Furthermore, another significant aspect of Tolkien’s authorship is the fact that much of the literature published posthumously is a fundamental part of his legendarium; one would not recognize Middle-earth in such depth as we do now without the posthumously released material. Other authors’ books released posthumously are oftentimes not related to their previous work; that is, the texts are not interconnected. Ernest Hemmingway had stand-alone material published posthumously, while other authors have fellow writers finish their work for them based on extensive notes and perhaps even conversations. An example of this is *The Wheel of Time* series which Robert Jordan (1948-2007) never managed to finish himself. Brandon Sanderson, author of the popular *Mistborn* trilogy, finished Jordan’s series and wrote the three last books in the fourteen volume series. What one must appreciate is that Tolkien’s entire authorship dealt with the same universe, unlike that of other authors, and can therefore be considered an interlinked and coherent unit even if multiple of the texts are published posthumously. It is due to the fact that Tolkien’s books can be considered one unit that we may explore them and subject them to the scrutiny and attention of this paper.

# Posthumous texts

The discussion of the posthumous Tolkien texts is unavoidable as well as relevant. There are a handful of issues one must address when working with these texts and this chapter shall attempt to outline them and why the posthumous texts are important to Middle-Earth. Almost all of Tolkien’s texts are seen in relation to *The Lord of the Rings*; however, *The Lord of the Rings* is a relatively small part of the grander whole. The story was finished in great part because Tolkien’s publisher wanted a sequel to *The Hobbit*, otherwise it is plausible that it would never have been finished at all. Had it been completed it would have been in close connection with (or to) *The Silmarillion* and readers will undoubtedly obtain a more detailed understanding of the setting by reading stories from the First and Second Ages. *The Lord of the Rings* has, in great part because of the behemoth that is the film trilogy, become the defining towering presence representative of all things Middle-Earth. One might illustrate how this perception is rather unfair as seen on Fig. 1:  
Naturally this is but a simple representation, yet the point nevertheless stands: *The Lord of the Rings* is part of the whole but does not constitute the whole. One might draw an exemplifying parallel to the authorship of Fyodor Dostoevsky, who did not write fantasy, but does have a *magnum opus* in form of *The Brothers Karamazov* (or *The Karamazov Brothers*, depending on which translation one has) which is significantly better understood if the reader is familiar with texts such as *Notes From The Underground* and *Crime and Punishment*. The difference here, of course, is that almost all Tolkien’s texts are closely connected and part of the same secondary world. In Dostoevsky’s case, the authorship and great work is simply better understood with extensive background knowledge and familiarity with the main texts. In the revised edition of *Splintered Light*, Verlyn Flieger acknowledges that this point cannot be overstated:

The importance of this cannot be emphasized too strongly. To read *The Lord of The Rings*—or, even better, to reread it—in the light of *The Silmarillion* is to be newly aware of an immensely greater perspective, a suddenly increased depth of field. Obscure references take on their proper meaning, shadowy figures leap into prominence. *The Lord of The Rings* clearly now has what Tolkien planned for it to have all along […] (Flieger, 2002, xvi).

The significance of posthumously published texts is stressed in Tolkien’s case exactly because *The Lord of the Rings* was published, read and understood as an independent work. For over twenty years it was appreciated as a stand-alone trilogy more or less loosely[[2]](#footnote-2) connected to *The Hobbit*, and, as Flieger additionally puts it:

Critics lauding the richness of Tolkien’s world and the detail and dense texture of its background did not altogether appreciate that what they had was only one enlarged corner of a vast canvas, a corner meaningful in itself but with much greater meaning as part of the whole and an extension of it. (Flieger, 2002, xvi).

Tolkien himself was worried about the readability of his works and in several letters expresses concern regarding its quality. It is quite evident that Tolkien felt that *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion* were closely connected and must be read in conjunction. In *Letters* he offers a fascinating insight into the process of getting his works published, and concerning the issue at hand he wrote to Unwin in 1950:

It [*The Silmarillion*] has captured *The Lord of The Rings*, so that that has become simply its continuation and completion, requiring the *Silmarillion* to be fully intelligible […]. Ridiculous and tiresome as you may think me, I want to publish them both – *The Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings* – in conjunction or in connexion. (*Letters*[[3]](#footnote-3), 1981, 137).

In addition to fearing for the overall comprehension and appreciation of *The Lord of the Rings* as a work closely related to earlier ages in Middle-Earth, Tolkien was fearful that *The Silmarillion* would never be published if not in connection with *The Lord of the Rings*. It is clear that Tolkien felt strongly about *The Silmarillion* and the twenty-three year gap between the publication of *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion* somewhat confirms that his fears were justified. It seems a peculiar coincidence that the popularity of *The Lord of the Rings* inadvertently “created a ready-made readership for *The Silmarillion* when it finally appeared in 1977” (Flieger, 2002, xvi). Flieger makes an interesting point and it is no doubt a valid concern that *The Silmarillion* would have been too complex and perhaps lacking in what we may call ‘direct entertainment value’, not in the least when compared to *The Hobbit*. The flipside of the coin, regarding *The Silmarillion*, is that readers associated a certain type of story with Tolkien’s books. When readers tackled *The Silmarillion* reactions were varied, but many did indeed feel bored or confused. Instead of an adventure narrative featuring lovable hobbits, readers were suddenly presented with the creation of Middle-Earth; its gods, their names and a wide variety of other information that not everyone could appreciate or connect to the Third Age which they had come to know. Reviews were mixed; *The New York Review of Books*, November 14th 1977, predicted that there might be “far more purchases of the new volume than ever read it through”, and speculated on the consequences had *The Silmarillion* been published before *The Lord of the Rings*: “it might well have laid a blight on the entire series” (Flieger, 2002, xvii).

# Reader’s Guide to Tolkien

It seems a strange thing to need a reader’s guide; often the order in which books from an author are read is either simply chronological or irrelevant, since the books might not be interconnected. For instance, most Stephen King books are not directly linked and therefore can be read in the order one wishes. With Tolkien, however, one may benefit from a suggested reader’s guide since there is a disparity between publication of the books, and the order in which the stories take place and could/should be read in. A reader might get confused and overwhelmed, and when we, for example, appreciate the fact that *The Silmarillion* includes part of the story of Túrin Turambar and then the (more or less) full version is later published in the stand-alone *The Children of Húrin*, one can then see how things get complicated. Thankfully the order in which the Tolkien books are published is, more or less, a fine order to read the books in if one is interested in simply the stories. The objective of this minor guide is to present, in short, what the books contain and how they relate to one another. This is a brief introduction but nevertheless useful and no doubt a necessary list for anyone not intimately familiar with Tolkien’s writings.

* *The Hobbit* (1937) is a linear narrative and a light-hearted story; it is Tolkien’s first finished book and, unlike his other works, does not include a wealth of background information and lore. Published as a children’s book.
* *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-55) is the three volume sequel to *The Hobbit*, and also a classic linear narrative. Unlike *The Hobbit*, this book contains a significant amount of additional information and a large number of references and allusions a reader will not fully understand or appreciate without having read *The Silmarillion*.
* *The Silmarillion* (1977) was published posthumously by Tolkien’s son, Christopher, and contains details on cosmology and the creation of Arda. Unlike the previously mentioned books, this book is written as a compendium with no overarching plot. Most of the book was written while Tolkien was still alive. It is impossible to tell how much exactly Christopher had to finish himself, and how exactly he did finish it; how much he wrote, whether he altered any endings etc. It is dense in information and unprepared readers might find it overwhelming.
* *Unfinished Tales of Númenor and Middle-earth* (1980) consists of texts more or less entirely unedited (unlike *The Silmarillion*), and offers further insight into the creation of Middle-Earth. The texts are not interconnected and some of the entries are unfinished.
* *The Children of Húrin* (2007) is a wildcard, though an interesting one. It was published as a book in 2007 and is the revised version of the tragic tale of Túrin Turambar originally part of *The Silmarillion*. It is, like *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, a linear narrative, though vastly different in style and theme. It is a grim story which reads, and is constructed, more like a myth than previous works. One can make the argument that this book should ideally be read before *Unfinished Tales*, as shall be seen in a moment.
* *The History of Middle-earth* (1983-1996). This twelve volume series is a collection and analysis of all Tolkien’s writings. It was compiled by Christopher Tolkien and offers insight into the development and evolution of Middle-Earth, including everything from early drafts, to mythology, languages, people and more. This series is more a reference work or, as the name reveals, history; they are not books one reads cover-to-cover, but rather books in which a reader can find information about the development of specific stories.

The above list is, as mentioned, the order of publication and not a poor or unacceptable starting point. However, a reader may wish to tackle the authorship in a chronological order and, so to speak, move up through the Ages, starting with the mythical First Age. The following list is not suggested for anyone unfamiliar with Tolkien, but useful for re-readings.

* *The Silmarillion*
* *The Children of Húrin*
* *Unfinished Tales*
* *The Hobbit*
* *The Lord of the Rings*
* *The History of Middle-earth*

This guide is intentionally short as the primary focus of this paper lies elsewhere; as noted, though, a short guide proves useful and one needs only glance at Tolkien’s legendarium quickly before realizing that it is complicated and may be approached from a number of different starting points. It also relates back to Figure 1, since this guide shows well that Tolkien was concerned with the creation and history of Middle-Earth and the intricacies of his authorship spans significantly further than merely *The Lord of the Rings*.

# An Introduction to Tolkien Scholarship

The aim of this chapter is to provide a broad and concise overview of what is called “Tolkien Scholarship.” As pointed out in the introduction, much of what has been written about Tolkien’s works has had *The Lord of the Rings* as the subject of examination. Because of the nature of the relationship between Tolkien’s texts, one cannot examine his posthumous works without also looking in the direction of what has already been written both about the posthumous texts themselves, but also about the texts published in his lifetime. Some of the trends or readings mentioned in this chapter will be drawn upon later, while others are included merely to underline both the evolution of Tolkien Scholarship and the variety of approaches and conclusions.

Creating an overview of dominant trends or currents in the body of Tolkien scholarship can be done in several ways. Options include a chronological, methodological or thematic approach, and these will be examined below. The entry “Tolkien Scholarship: An Overview” by Brian Rosebury in the *J. R. R. Tolkien Encyclopedia: Scholarship and Critical Assessment* identifies four “phases” in a chronological approach while also mentioning Tolkien literature from a methodological standpoint. The first phase does not consist of scholarship per se, but rather reviews and reactions to said reviews. These “[…] set the agenda for much subsequent controversy” according to Rosebury (Drout, 2007, 653). When released, *The Lord of the Rings* was met with much criticism (in the ordinary sense of the word), while defenses have also been numerous. However, with the popularity of Tolkien’s writings today (most recently helped by the success of the screen adaptations), the significance of Tolkien in a cultural perspective can, as Rosebury puts it, “[…] now hardly be denied, even if his literary value is still doubted” (Drout, 2007, 653). The second phase in this chronological overview consisted of Tolkien’s works being subjected to twentieth century literary criticism. The third phase was prompted by esteemed Tolkien scholar Tom Shippey’s *The Road to Middle-Earth* which approached Tolkien by considering his own philological background. Likewise, the publication of Humphrey Carpenter’s biography of Tolkien provided an understanding of Tolkien’s life along with the publication of his letters. These approaches were atypical, as the death of the author was a dominant ideology in literary studies at the time (Drout, 2007, 653). According to Rosebury, this phase resulted in “[…] an adequately informed understanding” of Tolkien (Drout, 2007, 653). The fourth and final phase in Rosebury’s overview is hard to characterize as it is very diverse. It is different from the other phases by virtue of its size and variety of topics. This phase should perhaps be viewed in the context of the renewed popularity of Tolkien’s works which was partly affected by Peter Jackson’s movie adaptations.

Rosebury also offers a methodological categorization of Tolkien scholarship. As noted above, one approach centered on understanding Tolkien’s works from a biographical standpoint. Some have tried to fit Tolkien into various literary groupings by labelling him a romantic, an Inkling[[4]](#footnote-4), a war writer or a catholic (Drout, 2007, 653). The modernist approach, briefly mentioned above, sought to deal with the works independently of their author. This method, Rosebury notes, finds some backing in Tolkien’s own opinions of allegory and his “[…] dismissal of biographical criticism” (Drout, 2007, 653). A postmodernist approach has yielded psychoanalytical readings (by looking at archetypes in Tolkien’s works) and feminist readings which explored the representation of females and gender roles.

A broad overview of Tolkien scholarship will reveal that few works have dealt exclusively with *The Silmarillion*. This is hardly surprising partly because of the (somewhat) limited academic interest in Tolkien overall, and partly because the work is significantly less accessible than Tolkien’s more popular works like *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. The work itself lacks a linear narrative structure, and the presentation is far different from the two works just mentioned. Tom Shippey’s *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century* and *The Road to Middle-Earth* stand out as two important works in Tolkien scholarship. Shippey’s reading stresses the importance of understanding Tolkien’s works in terms of his background in philology. However, as can be learned by glancing at this paper’s bibliography, there are scholarly works which examine *The Silmarillion* and the other texts that are the focus of this paper. But generally, *The Lord of the Rings* is extensively investigated in these works as well.

Tolkien is often read as a war writer whereby his works are subjected to a biographical reading focusing on his war experiences. Biographical readings are always risky, and Tolkien himself denied that *The Lord of the Rings* was supposed to be an allegory of World War II. Of course, it would be difficult to deny that any piece of writing is, in one way or another, reflecting the circumstances under which it was written. John Garth’s *Tolkien and the Great War* is one work dealing with Tolkien as a war writer. As stated in his preface, the book grew out of the observation that Tolkien began constructing his mythology during World War I. This preface also functions as a statement of intent or belief, as Garth declares that he believes “[…] the Great War played an essential role in the shaping of Middle-Earth” (Garth, 2003, xv). However, Tolkien himself was rather ambiguous about the extent to which war influenced his writings. In his letters, he acknowledges that the “[…] darkness of the present days has had some effect on it. Though it is not an ‘allegory’” (*Letters*, 1981, 41). Given this ambiguity, it is no surprise that studying Tolkien’s writings from a war writer perspective has been a predominant trend in Tolkien scholarship.

Tom Shippey is considered somewhat a giant or towering presence in the field of Tolkien scholarship. Interestingly enough, Shippey was educated at King Edward’s School like Tolkien, and both occupied the same position at the University of Leeds. Finally, Shippey was fortunate enough to meet Tolkien in person. Shippey’s work on Tolkien is, as mentioned above, centered on the philological background of Tolkien. Furthermore, Shippey’s motivation is somewhat grounded in the belief he expresses in the preface to the third edition of *The Road to Middle-Earth*, which is that Tolkien would not have been pleased by some of what was said about his writings. Shippey also believes that someone with a similar background is in a better position to further an understanding of Tolkien’s works (Shippey, 2005, xviii). However, Shippey’s understanding of Tolkien’s works is not a constant, as seen by the need for a revised edition of *The Road to Middle-Earth*. While his books deal with Tolkien’s writings seen through his philological background, Shippey also thinks of Tolkien as a “traumatized” post-war writer and groups him with authors such as George Orwell, Ursula K. Le Guin, Kurt Vonnegut and T.H. White.

Related to Shippey’s approach is the approach which views Tolkien as a medievalist. This branch of Tolkien scholarship takes its beginning in Tolkien’s own admission that he wanted to create a mythology for England. Even the meaning of this “mythology for England” has been heavily debated. There have been many attempts at tracing the origins of elements in his writings, and whether they are from Norse, Finnish or Greek mythology. For example, the names of the dwarves in *The Hobbit* were taken from *The Elder Edda* and *The Prose Edda*. Even Gandalf’s name was taken from these sources, and similarities between Gandalf and Odin of Norse mythology seem obvious. Not only focusing on the fictional elements in the sources from which Tolkien drew inspiration, this branch of Tolkien scholarship has also examined how his style and form was archaic or medieval. Quite a few of Tolkien’s texts are presented as summaries of lost histories and texts. This is an obvious parallel to the works Tolkien worked with on a daily basis.  
In addition to Tolkien’s form and subject matter owing much to the medieval texts with which he worked, his maps should also be mentioned. According to Janet Brennan Croft, Tolkien’s maps (redrawn by his son Christopher) use perspective and contour lines to make them consistent with medieval maps dating back to the 1500s (Croft, 2004, 108). This adherence to medieval cartography convention is yet another example of the archaic “feel” of Tolkien’s works, which will be described in depth later on.  
Concerning Tolkien’s fascination with mythology we may look to Dmitra Fimi’s *Tolkien, Race and Cultural History* in which she comments on the following statement by Tolkien:

I was from early days grieved by the poverty of my own beloved country: it had no stories of its own […], not of the quality that I sought, and found (as an ingredient) in legends of other lands. There was Greek, and Celtic, and Romance, and Germanic, Scandinavian, and Finnish (which greatly affected me); but nothing English […] (Fimi, 2009, 50)

It is noted how Tolkien felt that something distinctive was missing from English culture and it may be supposed that it was a dream for Tolkien to create something for England which it could call its own. Interestingly enough, according to Carpenter’s biography, Tolkien regarded himself as a “discoverer of legend” rather than an “inventor of stories” (Carpenter, 1992, 75) which fits well with the overall narratological style of more or less all his writings. *The Hobbit*, which is an account of a hobbits’ tale by a hobbit himself; *The Lord of the Rings* or the “Red book of Westmarch”, which is also written as an account of events by prominent figures who were actually present; *The Silmarillion* which is a compilation of tales and legends often passed through the ages by the inhabitants of Middle-Earth and not simply invented by Tolkien. Several stories make use of *viva voce* accounts, and translations from Elvish to the common tongue. *The Silmarillion* is a particularly valuable example because there is no overarching plot and the book consists of several independent sections.  
It is beyond doubt that Tolkien did not create a mythology for England. The reasons why it was not possible are numerous, but suffice to say that Tolkien would eventually content himself with creating a mythology for Middle-Earth. The major issue was that it is impossible to mimic what the Finnish Lönnrot did when he compiled what is now the *Kalevala.* Lönnrot spent years gathering folktales and legends, and they eventually evolved into what we now recognize as Finnish mythology. When asking the question: ‘Did Tolkien create a mythology for England?’ the answer is a clear no. However, when asking, ‘Did Tolkien create a working mythology for Middle-Earth?’, then the answer is yes.   
The branch of scholarship focusing on his mythology for England offers background knowledge into the process behind much of Tolkien’s writing, but no strong argument can be made for how Tolkien’s mythology was consistently supposed to be supremely English. The whole issue is rooted in a cultural reading of Tolkien’s authorship which is valid but not the dominant focus of this paper.

A chronological overview of Tolkien scholarship reveals a central problem. *The Lord of the Rings* is only a small portion of Tolkien’s writings set in the same secondary world (or universe, to use a popular term). Tolkien’s other writings are equally significant as they all add something to the depth of his secondary world. *The Silmarillion*, for example, was published 23 years after *The Lord of the Rings*. This naturally gives us reason to consider that Tolkien scholarship preceding the publishing of these posthumous texts can only illuminate so much. As Verlyn Flieger notes, we have to keep this in mind when reading some criticism, because the authors only had “[…] one enlarged corner of a vast canvas, a corner meaningful in itself but with much greater meaning as part of the whole and an extension of it” (Flieger, 2002, xvi). And even then, there is also the debate of to what extent *The Silmarillion* as edited by Christopher Tolkien represents Tolkien’s vision.

The concept of class and societal structure has also been examined in Tolkien scholarship. Tolkien’s legendarium features kings as the highest authority, with ancestry and bloodlines playing a big role. For example, the relationship between Frodo and Sam is often quoted as one between master and servant. Sam, Frodo’s gardener, has been read as an example of a “batman” (a kind of personal servant or squire) from World War I at first, but the changes in their relationship mirror the co-dependence between classes in time of war (Drout, 2007, 104).  
Marxist readings of Tolkien should also be mentioned in this paragraph. *The Lord of The Rings* has been read as right wing literature with Mordor representing Communism, which Tolkien himself denied both specifically in regard to this reading and in general opposition to allegorical readings (Drout, 2007, 410). The work itself has also been called a commodity which could only exist because of capitalism (Drout, 2007, 410).

Reading Tolkien’s works as environmentalist in outlook has also been popular. Walking trees, the scouring of the Shire and the many pastoral descriptions are common features in this type of criticism. The foreword to the second edition in which Tolkien talks of the effects of industry on the countryside during his childhood is often quoted (Drout, 2007, 166). These readings sometimes focus on the connection between Tolkien’s formative years spent in Sarehole, Birmingham, and his depictions of the Shire both as a rural sort of paradise, and its scouring at the end of *The Lord of the Rings*.

Gender readings of Tolkien’s works provide different results. Some have argued that female characters are bound in their stereotypical roles, while others have noted strong female characters that break these stereotypes and take on more active roles. In another vein, readings have surfaced that regard Frodo and Sam’s relationship as a homoerotic one, with the latter’s struggle with the female spider Shelob symbolizing a fight between the sexes, culminating in Sam’s “penetration” of Shelob with an elven dagger. The merit of this reading can be discussed, and it seems to be open to comedic mockery. A general consensus of Tolkien’s portrayal of gender roles can be difficult to arrive at, because (as noted above) his works seem to feature both stereotypical gender roles and characters that break these stereotypes.

A polemic reading of Tolkien’s works have surfaced dealing with race and ethnicity. Tolkien describes the evil orcs as dark-skinned. This has led to charges of racism against Tolkien. Another example is the race of Númenóreans (a race of men who live longer and are generally “better”) which could draw parallels to the idea of an übermensch. However, it seems unfair to accuse Tolkien’s portrayal of orcs to be racist, because as shown in *The History of Middle-Earth*, he never quite resolved the origin of orcs. Some versions of his texts show they are descended from Elves, but tortured and broken by Morgoth (chief villain in his early writings), but other texts stray from this. In any case, whether the Orcs are genetically evil and unable to redeem themselves or not is never resolved.   
Additionally, a frequently drawn parallel is drawn between the Dwarves and the Jews, as the dwarves are portrayed (in *The Hobbit* especially, and partly in *The Lord of the Rings*) as a wandering people ousted from their original homeland.

In conclusion, there are many branches and leaves on the tree that constitutes the body of Tolkien Scholarship. Some are obscure, while others are widely accepted. Especially the academic work dealing with Tolkien’s use of mythology and his works seen in relation to his life (particularly his war experiences) are something that will be drawn upon. Also the early wave of Tolkien critique (on the literary merit of his works) will be examined in the next chapter.

# Tolkien’s Legendarium as Literature

This headline in itself may seem surprising, but the fact is that Tolkien’s work has been criticized by many, and for different reasons. While the stories themselves have been attacked for being either silly or unworthy of the attention they have been given, some of the critique is more eloquent and perhaps even warranted. Tolkien was an academic and philologist first and foremost; his Middle-Earth was created because of an inner need to explore (or discover) a place he felt already existed, and it seems evident that much of the writing was done out of an appreciation of the whole, rather than of a need to finish a publishable trilogy and make money; an approach to writing one may call populist (‘populist’ as simply descriptive without judgment being passed). This is most clearly evidenced by the mere existence of *The Silmarillion*, and citations from this paper show the battle he fought to get the book published because he *felt* it was important to his creation as a whole, not in the least because he, according to himself, was a discoverer of legend, rather than an inventor of story, as per the above citation. That being said, however, the success of *The Lord of the Rings* warrants the perhaps rather abstract question: is it literature? When can something be classified as being literature? This section of the paper is primarily based on the work by Burton Raffel who wrote “The Lord of The Rings as Literature”, which is an entry in the essay collection *Tolkien and The Critics* from 1968. This section will include several citations of varying lengths and the ideas presented by Raffel will be discussed. Raffel, in short, appreciates Tolkien’s writings but contends that it is not literature:

My position is this: *The Lord of the Rings* is a magnificent performance, full of charm, excitement, and affection, but it is not – at least as I am here using the term -- literature. (Ed. Iscaas & Zimbardo, 1968, 218).

Raffel goes to great lengths when stressing that he is not critical of the work itself; in fact he appears rather enthusiastic about *The Lord of the Rings*. However, he is critical of certain aspects of Tolkien’s writings, specifically his prose, and is of the opinion that what constitutes literature is not present here. “[…] making stories, even wonderful stories, is not the same thing as making literature” (Ed. Iscaas & Zimbardo, 1968, 219).

The following three elements are what constitute literature for Raffel:

* Style
* Characterization
* Incident

The approach is fairly straight-forward: style is subdivided into prose and poetry and concerns itself with how a language is used. This is where Raffel spends most of his energy. Characterization deals with the way human traits are portrayed in a work, and incident covers how events in a book are organized and presented.   
As noted, much Tolkien criticism is largely concerned with language usage. No doubt many critics are skeptical of the work itself, but that often appears to be simple mistrustfulness of the fantasy genre. It is no secret that fantasy has enjoyed little academic attention and has often, by both popular and academic critics, been deemed unworthy and dismissed as children’s stories. The issue at hand, though, is Tolkien’s writings, and Raffel asserts that while Tolkien writes well, that is, his writing fulfills its prime purpose, it is still limited. Tolkien’s descriptions are called ‘brilliantly adequate’: again it is being stressed that the words serve their purpose, but do not achieve a higher level which would place *The Lord of the Rings* in the same category as *The Illiad* or *The Odyssey*. An example is presented from *The Fellowship of the Ring* in which Tolkien writes, “He [Bilbo] jumped over a low place in the hedge at the bottom, and took to the meadows, passing into the night like a rustle of wind in the grass (Tolkien, 1954, 44). Raffel comments on this passage:

Bilbo is to disappear quickly, the language is apt. But is it anything more than that? There is, first of all, virtually no sense of impression of the hedge; it is generalized, as is the “low place” through which Bilbo jumps. [referring back to the above quote]: is to write something perilously close to stereotyped prose (Ed. Iscaas & Zimbardo, 1968, 218).

Overall, Raffel takes issue with ‘stereotyped’ or ‘generalized’ prose. He comments that Tolkien’s use of the word “refreshed” is entirely generalized, meaning that it has lost depth. The strength of Tolkien lies in the creation of wonderfully realized worlds, with strong characters, powerfully evoked emotions and complex situations that challenge both readers and characters. Readers remember situations from the stories; deeds and events. Few passages are quoted word by word, unlike for instance Shakespeare, but instead much is remembered.

Graciously Raffel offers an example of what he considers good prose. It is an excerpt from D. H. Lawrence’s *The Rainbow* from 1915:

Christmas passed, the wet, drenched, cold days of January recurred monotonously, with now and then a brilliance of blue flashing in, when Brangwen went out into a morning like crystal, when every sound rang again, and the birds were many and sudden and brusque in the hedges. Then an elation came over him in spite of everything, whether his wife were strange or sad, or whether he craved for her to be with him, it did not matter, the air rang with clear noises, the sky was like crystal, like a bell, and the earth was hard. Then he worked and was happy, his eyes shining, his cheeks flushed. And the zest of life was strong in him. (Ed. Iscaas & Zimbardo, 1968, 223).

The subjectivity of the statement that the above is more beautiful than what Tolkien offers is a factor, naturally, but the point Raffel makes is that the above is more *felt* by the reader. Pinpointing exactly where the difference lies seems difficult, but, “Lawrence sees complexities, complications, subtleties, which Tolkien does not admit. It would destroy *The Lord of the Rings* if Tolkien wrote as D. H. Lawrence did, and vice versa” (Ed. Iscaas & Zimbardo, 1968, 223). We can deduct from what Raffel writes that there is predictability to Tolkien’s writing which hurts it. It is too simple and descriptive in nature and there are few surprises and few unexpected emotions. One example used is the description of the situation when Gandalf informs Frodo that the Enemy knows of the Ring:

A heavy silence fell in the room. Frodo could hear his heart beating. Even outside everything seemed still. No sound of Sam’s shears could now be heard. (Tolkien, 1991, 88)

It is noted that outside of context, this is lesser-quality writing and simplistic; readers continue with the story rapidly, wanting more information and wanting to know what happens next. Raffel comments that, “’hear his heart beating’, is not, as language, very communicative” (Ed. Iscaas & Zimbardo, 1968, 224). This stresses how *The Lord of the Rings* is story-driven and one rarely pauses to appreciate the details of the language. This does not mean that the language is *bad*; the point simply is that it serves a different purpose in Tolkien’s writings than it does in what Raffel would call ‘literature’. In the next example Raffel offers some deeper insight into the operative words. The citation is from the hobbits’ arrival at The Prancing Pony Inn:

Off he went at last, and left them feeling rather breathless. He seemed capable of an endless stream of talk, however busy he might be. They found themselves in a small and cosy room. There was a bit of bright fire burning on the hearth, and in front of it were some low and comfortable chairs. There was a round table, already spread with a white cloth, and on it was a large hand-bell. But Nob, the hobbit servant, came bustling in long before they thought of ringing. He brought candles and a tray full of plates. (Tolkien, 1991, 209)

Raffel points out the operative words: *small and cosy, bit of bright fire, low and comfortable, white cloth, bustling*. (Ed. Iscaas & Zimbardo, 1968, 224). In the story Tolkien needs to be descriptive in this way, but a room being ‘small and cosy’, and a chair being ‘low and comfortable’ tells a reader what he is to feel about the room and the chairs, not anything of real value about neither the room nor the chair themselves. It may be discussed whether this way of writing was intentional or simply a limitation on Tolkien’s abilities, but either way it does serve its purpose in the narrative. To Raffel, however, that still excludes it from being literature. He offers an excerpt from Thomas Wolfe’s 1929 novel *Look Homeward Angel* as a counter-example:

She replaced the disreputable furniture of the house by new shiny Grand Rapids chairs and tables. There was a varnished bookcase, forever locked, stored with stiff sets of unread books – *The Harvard Classics*, and a cheap encyclopaedia. (Ed. Isaacs & Zimbardo, 1968, 225)

The major difference, according to Raffel, lies in readers being afforded the privilege of experiencing the chairs and tables for themselves; the descriptions are not as forced. One thing is peculiar, however: Raffel, while acknowledging that by his own standards Wolfe writes literature while Tolkien does not, would rather read Tolkien:

Wolfe is not I think as durable a writer as Tolkien; I would far rather read *The Lord of the Rings* than *Look Homeward Angel*, and nothing could persuade me to reread the others of Wolfe’s repetitious, sprawling, adolescent novels. But for all that Wolfe’s style belongs to literature while Tolkien’s does not. (Ed. Isaacs & Zimbardo, 1968, 225)

So it becomes a question of style and how language is employed. It appears a paradox that Tolkien is most often praised for his languages, his beautiful names and words (all closely connected to his background as a philologist), but it is his language usage that disqualifies his work from being literature. The argument, it appears, is that using language for the sole purpose of conveying information in the most basic of ways – to paint a picture, as it were – is what excludes one kind of writing from another; in other words, what makes something literature or not. The whole struggle becomes more complex, however, as Tolkien’s own view is presented. The following is taken from *Tree and Leaf*, a 1938 Tolkien lecture on literature but is part of Raffel’s essay:

Should the story say ‘he ate bread’, the dramatic producer or painter can only show ‘a piece of bread’ according to his taste or fancy, but the hearer of the story will think of bread in general and picture it in some form of his own. If a story says ‘he climbed a hill and saw a river in the valley below’, the illustrator may catch, or nearly catch, his own vision of such a scene; but every hearer of the words will have his own picture, and it will be made out of all the hills and rivers and dales he has ever seen, but especially out of The Hill, The River, The Valley which were for him the first embodiment of the word. (Ed. Iscaas & Zimbardo, 1968, 226)

It is evident that Tolkien wants the reader to paint his own picture using his own experiences, and that all readers will have different experiences. All frames of references are by their very nature divergent and Tolkien intentionally choses to have the reader use his own mental images. This, though, is laziness, according or Raffel: ‘”He climbed a hill and saw a river in the valley below” does not, I suggest, evoke any kind of scene at all’ (Ed. Iscaas & Zimbardo, 1968, 226). Again Raffel points out that the sole function of this literary device is to get the page-turner effect; read on and discover what happens next! It seems harsh to praise a work for its creativity and depth, but exclude it from being literature because of a conscious writing style. Would one make the argument that *The Lord of the Rings* is not part of the literary canon? It depends on perspective and who is asked. Literary conservatives might question the merit of *The Lord of the Rings*, while to others its status as high art is a given. This is a slightly different discussion; the issue at hand is with Tolkien’s prose, and the argument that Tolkien’s strength lies elsewhere than his wonderfully resonant written passages is not inconceivable. The following passage is of great interest, because here Raffel offers a passage which is part of literature, but is bad literature and bad style. The excerpt is from James T. Farrell’s 1934 *Studs Lonigan*:

He watched a tomcat slink along the fence ledge; he stared at the spot he had newly boarded so that his old man wouldn’t yelp about loose boards; he looked about at the patches in the grass that Martin and his gang had worn down playing their cowboy and Indian games. There was something about the things he watched that seemed to enter Studs as sun entered a field of grass; and as he watched, he felt that the things he saw were part of himself, and he felt as good as if he were warm sunlight; he was all glad to be living, and to be Studs Lonigan. (Ed. Iscaas & Zimbardo, 1968, 227)

Raffel takes extreme issue with this as literature, and remarks that it does not contain the “stately, nicely old-fashioned cadences” of Tolkien, nor the “extraordinary, detailed luminescence” of D. H. Lawrence; not even the “whipped –up intensity” of Thomas Wolfe. The arguments are rather vague and there does remain some uncertainty as to what exactly Raffel takes issue with; subjectivity and personal preference appears to be in the forefront since there are no established guiding rules. The guideless for when something qualifies as literature are equivocal, or at best somewhat fuzzy. Much criticism of Tolkien is aimed at his descriptions and the overlong portraitures of, for instance, the forests and trees. Even that taken into account, Raffel takes issue with Tolkien’s generalization of terms such as the aforementioned hill, river, valley et.al. Still we must reiterate the crucial point that criticism of Tolkien’s prose is not unwarranted and that his strength lies not with wonderful dialogue or profound style, but rather with meaningful situations and adventures in a detailed context that is wholly realized. It would be interesting to read an updated version of the essay after Raffel has read *The Silmarillion* and taken into account the vastly different styles of that book compared to *The Lord of the Rings*. It remains doubtful whether he would classify it as literature, but surely the arguments would have to change drastically.

While style and prose is what Raffel primarily takes issue with, there are some comments concerning characterization as well. The whole section, while not irrelevant, does appear to be less vital when determining whether a piece of writing can be classified as being literature. In other words, poor prose, style and poetry is a severe transgression, while poor characterization is slightly more excusable. Raffel’s approach to characterization is the following:

What we are entitled to ask of characterization is that it portray for us, meaningfully, significant aspects of human reality. (Ed. Iscaas & Zimbardo, 1968, 232)

Though determining exactly which aspects of human reality are meaningful is difficult, Raffel’s approach to characterization does seem more accessible and sensible than the vague style and prose element. When analyzing parts of *The Silmarillion* later in the paper, moral virtues will be explored; in his characterization of Bilbo, Raffel mentions traits that are important to Bilbo as a character: “Bilbo is full of vitality, courageous, generous, honest.” (Ed. Isaacs & Zimbardo, 1968, 232). Naturally an examination of Bilbo becomes somewhat easier due to the fact that an entire book is dedicated to his main adventure. Gandalf is a chief character in both *The Hobbit* as well as *The Lord of the Rings* (and with passing mention in *The Silmarillion,* though under a different name), which makes unlocking him relatively straight-forward as well. Bilbo has moments of laziness (especially first in *The Hobbit*), truthfulness and, which is supremely vital: a defining moment of mercy, where he chooses to not slay Gollum. Bilbo’s strength of character is evidenced by the fact that he is the first known individual to freely give up the Ring. The Ring never quite lost its entire grip on him, but nevertheless his resilience is remarkable. The question remains, though, how Bilbo teaches a reader about human behavior. According to Raffel, there are multiple aspects:

We are made to feel that small things can be very good things; that generosity is heartwarming in both the giving and the receiving, and is furthermore not very difficult to accomplish if only the heart is willing; that one can be courageous even if afraid, bold even if uncertain, decent even if provoked. These are surely significant aspects of human reality […] (Ed. Iscaas & Zimbardo, 1968, 234)

Bilbo is a character who grows because circumstances force him to, and he adapts well. Of course the tone and character of *The Hobbit* is dramatically different to that of *The Lord of the Rings*, which means that some of these elements perhaps become easier to identify. *The Hobbit* is, after all, primarily a children’s book.   
Returning to the issue of literary merit, Raffel seems to take no issue with the above characterization. The description of Bilbo is apt, and while it remains subjective, one would be hard pressed to find major faults with it. Where Raffel becomes skeptical is when we consider how meaningfully (as per the above citation) Tolkien teaches us about human existence and our own reality. It seems that the characters of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* are adequate, but no more than that. Frodo is the exception: “It is in Frodo, and in Frodo only, that I think Tolkien achieves something of what one can call the characterization of literature” (Ed. Iscaas & Zimbardo, 1968, 238). We are returned to the issue of depth of character; the development of characters such as Samwise, Gandalf, Aragorn, the other hobbits, are all predictable. Satisfactory and acceptable, but lacking the depth which is supposedly present is writing that has literary merit. Raffel uses F. Scott Fitzgerald’s 1925 novel *The Great Gatsby* as an example, and stresses that Gatsby, by the end, shows us, “something we did not know, or knew only vaguely or partially: the pathos of Gatsby’s love for Daisy, and the bitterness of “society’s” use of him”. In the same breath he relates to Tolkien who, “demonstrated to us, again, that Friendship is a Good Thing”. (Ed. Iscaas & Zimbardo, 1968, 239). Whether the life lesson imparted by Gatsby is greater than that of the hobbits will by its very nature remain subjective, especially when considering the readers themselves. Is a ‘lesser’ portrayal of human existence still ‘lesser’ if entirely appreciated and understood by a specific reader, while a ‘higher’ portrayal may be incomprehensible? In other words, does *The Lord of the Rings* lose literary merit because the lessons gained from it are, subjectively speaking, simpler than that of James Joyce’s *Ulysses* or other works typically categorized as high art?

The richness of Frodo’s character is best explored by analyzing the end of *The Lord of the Rings*, because Frodo, as the classic anti-hero, not only imparts the lesson that anyone – regardless of size - can complete a given task, but primarily because Frodo himself actually lived through it. “We have at this point […] seen him pass from unknowing hobbit to something larger and wiser and sadder” (Ed. Iscaas & Zimbardo, 1968, 240). It is a powerful lesson that even if the hero wins and life returns to normal, the life of the hero may be forfeit, as Frodo’s is; he leaves for the Grey Havens and Sam remains in the Shire, even though they were bound together for so long. Frodo changes dramatically and his experiences, growth and what a reader can take away from Frodo’s journey makes this characterization, according to Raffel, worthwhile and entirely rewarding.   
The last remaining area for discussion is incident, which, according to Raffel himself, is both one constituting element of literature, and also Tolkien’s biggest strength. The story is well-constructed and, “[…] a genuine epic, with all the vast sweep and complex dovetailing necessary to sustain a large and powerful tale” (Ed. Iscaas & Zimbardo, 1968, 240). Little more needs to be said here since Raffel fully acknowledges Tolkien’s forte, and since his focus shifts to an inspection of dialogue between the hobbits of Farmer Maggot.

Raffel’s critique of Tolkien is interesting, in part because, even if he is critical, he is also extremely enthusiastic about several aspects of Tolkien’s writings. Raffel’s view of what constitutes literature is narrow, but deliberately so; the choice of excluding what any decent author needs – imagination – was also on purpose, but, as he remarks by the end of his essay:

I have meant this paper as a corrective, as a curb on some of the irresponsible adulation currently being extended to Tolkien. He deserves high praise, even adulation, but there is little sense if praising Milton as a writer on domestic science, Wordsworth as a botanist, or T. S. Eliot as a teacher of Sanskrit. (Ed. Iscaas & Zimbardo, 1968, 246)

Which leaves us with the question: can Tolkien’s work be considered literature? And would Raffel’s essay have been any different, had *The Silmarillion* existed by the time of its conception? Raffel takes great issue with style and prose, and the style of *The Silmarillion* is drastically different. Excluding *The Lord of the Rings* from being literature based on a severely narrow view of what literature is seems unjustified, especially when even a critical essayist finds so much to praise in the novels. However, as noted multiple times, much criticism of Tolkien is entirely warranted, but one can appreciate the distance there is between being critical of aspects of a work, and of completely excluding it from a category of art in which is does belong. Is it fair to regard Tolkien as pop culture and not literature? Perhaps, but it merely returns us to the point of view issue: is the critic an enthusiast or a literary conservative? Whether good or bad, anyone reading Tolkien would say that it is an experience. Especially *The Lord of the Rings* seems to have had a particular impact on its readers, and that begs the question: must a work be as complex and require the cognitive investment of James Joyce’s *Ulysses*? We have established that a work, any work, needs depth and character progression. Genre fiction typically dramatizes important ideas through different examples in order to tell a good story and deal with intricate issues. One can appreciate the words from the 2005 film *V for Vendetta*, in which a character says, “Artists use lies to tell the truth”. This is wonderfully true of genre fiction, and whether a given work satisfies a critic’s subjective standard for when it is considered literature is less important, since different works serve different purposes and are constructed in a variety of ways. An attempt at streamlining what constitutes literature seems arbitrary, especially when there are no set standards or guidelines, but only comparisons to what is subjectively superior literature.

Concerning different works having different purposes and motives, we may look to Tolkien himself when trying to figure out the purpose of *The Lord of the Rings*. There can be a variety of motives for a writer to begin a story; perhaps he was commissioned to write a novel, as happens with e.g. the *Star Wars* universe. A writer may want to discover meaning, discover himself, explore human behavior, or a writer may simply want to make a living. Tolkien wrote because he felt an inner need to discover the, even for him, unknown world of Middle-Earth. Though it is not the focus of this paper, some theorize that writing was a way for Tolkien to deal with his war experiences[[5]](#footnote-5). However, in the foreword to *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Tolkien himself addresses the issue:

The prime motive was the desire of a tale-teller to try his hand at a really long story that would hold the attention of readers, amuse them, delight them, and at times maybe excite them or deeply move them. (Tolkien, 1991, 10).

This seems a natural response given the fact that *The Hobbit* was his longest completed work up until that point. It is rather interesting when an author comments on his own writing and motivation, not least because it sparks the discussion of whether an author has any control over (or say in) how a reader can, or should, interpret a work.   
Lastly we again must reflect on how *The Silmarillion* would have fared under the critical gaze of Raffel. As already noted their style and construction are severely different and that goes to show that Tolkien, while not the best writer of dialogue or with the best style, was nevertheless able to employ a variety of writing styles and change his approach based on what he wanted to achieve with a given work. Furthermore, one may argue that prose of lesser quality is less important if the *effect* of the work is excellent. The discussion of whether Tolkien is part of the literary canon seems inconsequential because few (if any) solid arguments placing him outside of it can be made, so long as the canon is defined as the body of art, including literature, that shapes and defines Western culture. Several times we have reiterated the point that the literary merit of a work oftentimes depends on who you ask. Any Tolkien enthusiast would naturally name *The Lord of the Rings*, and the rest of Tolkien’s writings, as literature worthy of attention. The other camp consists of Tolkien skeptics who, presumably, are also skeptics of the fantasy genre. It is undeniable that the fantasy genre has much pulp-literature in it, but it is not a limitation of the genre, but of an author, if a given work is of a quality that excludes it from being canon or even classified as being literature. It seems that popular appeal may damage a work’s literary standing, and literary elitists are instantly suspicious if a book sells too well. Tolkien wrote within a genre which literary conservatives would not deem worthy of even brief consideration and that no doubt hurt the reception of his work. Be that as it may, it appears evident that while style and prose may be discussed, the effect and functionality of Tolkien’s work, including *The Silmarillion*, is hard to criticize since it is a work of immeasurable detail and complexity.   
Lastly we must briefly direct our attention to the British bookshop chain, Waterstone, who in 1996 asked readers which five books they deemed the greatest of the century. In their 105 branches, *The Lord of the Rings* was consistently at the top of the list. Only in Wales did *The Lord of the Rings* fall short. As Shippey notes, “The result was greeted with horror among professional critics and journalists […]” (Shippey, 2001, xxi) which speaks volumes about the disparity between what is popular and what is accepted by the literary elite. Interestingly, The Folio Society decided to try the same exercise with their readers after the result of the Waterstone polls, and then thousand readers again voted for *The Lord of the Rings*, firmly placing it at the top of the poll. Tolkien’s trilogy has consistently been at the top of more or less every poll which is a true testament to its strength and evidence of the feelings it must evoke in all readers, from young adults and upwards. Shippey critically remarks that those who ‘know’ literature merely know what they are supposed to know and therefore dismiss *The Lord of the Rings*: “In Jeffrey’s usage, *literati* must mean ‘those who know about literature’. And those who know, of course, know what they are supposed to know.” (Shippey, 2001, xxi). It relates back to the classic understanding of literature which firmly places genre fiction at the bottom of what may contain literary merit. It is hard to deny the literary towering presence of Tolkien, however, regardless of whether likes or dislikes his work. We say towering presence, as he is very often cited as the father of modern fantasy.

# On Fairy-Stories

This section will provide an overview and explanation of Tolkien’s essay “On Fairy-Stories” in which he discusses the genre of “fairy-stories” as literature. Originally presented as a lecture at the University of St. Andrews in 1939, Tolkien revised the lecture for publication as an essay in 1947. The examination below will be of the revised version. Before we start such an examination, however, we should first specify what we wish to take with us from such an examination. The essay is, in part, a defense on the literary form Tolkien chose to write in. Paul Edmund Thomas is therefore quite right in his statement: “The essay’s value does not depend on whether it was convincing to us. The essay is valuable because it was convincing to Tolkien” (Drout, 2007, 482). We therefore seek to take with us Tolkien’s reflections on the genre, as they were as close to anything we have about Tolkien’s view on his fiction. “On Fairy-Stories” and the terms Tolkien coined within it therefore serve as a lens through which to view his fiction. Especially his terminology about primary and secondary worlds is valuable, and these terms will be used throughout this paper.

“On Fairy-Stories” begins with Tolkien spelling out his goal. To find out what fairy stories are, what their origins are and just what comprises their value or purpose. Disagreeing with the Oxford English Dictionary, Tolkien seeks to specify what “fairy” refers to. According to Tolkien, it refers to “Fäerie” or the perilous realm, which has inhabitants such as trolls, dwarves and other fantastical beings. There is a certain “feel” to this realm or area of fiction. There is a certain “[…] air that blows in that country” (Tolkien, 1983, 114). A fairy-story can be used for purposes like satire, adventure or morality. If used for satire, however, the magic in this world is the one thing that must not be made fun of. Tolkien’s view of fairy-stories (or what is called fantasy today) is that it should be taken seriously. This view is repeated throughout the entire essay.  
Interestingly enough, Tolkien specifically states that a fairy story cannot use a framing device such as a dream, as it would mean the fairy story was not real. In other words, the fairy story and the world in which it is set must be believable and cannot be revealed to be fake or an illusion. He points to *Alice in Wonderland* and declares it not to be a fairy story because of its dream frame (Tolkien, 1983, 117). Furthermore, Tolkien expresses his belief that people should not desire to locate the sources that inspired fairy stories. He employs a soup metaphor, stating that people should not seek to identify the ingredients in the cauldron of story. Given this very direct statement, it seems ironic that, as mentioned in the chapter on Tolkien scholarship, there are many studies of Tolkien’s literary influences and inspirations. The inspirations have all been “[…] put into the Cauldron, where so many potent things lie simmering agelong on the fire […] (Tolkien, 1983, 127). The importance of these elements is the effect they produce in a new story (Tolkien, 1983, 128). In other words, Tolkien takes issue with the common practice of locating inspiration in stories in the form of sources. That is not important, as all tales will undoubtedly stand on the shoulders of other tales, so to speak. There are certain motifs that are recycled in all stories. What is important is the story they comprise and the effect it produces; this relates back to the section about Tolkien’s works as literature and the point about the effect of a work being more significant than the stylistic approach.

For Tolkien, art is the result of so-called “sub-creation”. An author can create a “Secondary World” in which the reader can have “secondary belief”. The “Primary World” is the world in which we live. The Secondary world, however, can feature things such as a green sun, which is then credible or believable depending on the author’s skill. Such a skill Tolkien praises as the utmost in narrative skill: “[…] storymaking in its primary and most potent mode” (Tolkien, 1983, 140). For example, Tolkien rates fairy stories higher than the genre of drama, commenting that the author of *Macbeth* (Shakespeare) ought to try his hand at fairy stories if he had the skill.

On the subject of the use of fairy stories, Tolkien claims the genre provides recovery, escape and consolation. Recovery deals with “[…] a regaining of a clear view” (Tolkien, 1983, 146). Reading a fairy story can provide the reader with a new perspective on things. He describes this process as a cleaning of windows, so things can be seen clearly (Tolkien, 1983, 146).   
Fairy stories also offer escape. Tolkien pauses here to state that he disagrees with the term “escapist literature”, which describes literature not worthy of literary criticism. His view is that the escapee is heroic, comparing him to a man who wants to escape prison. The metaphor is taken further, as Tolkien describes fairy stories as a way for the imprisoned man to think of things other than jailers and prison walls (Tolkien, 1983, 148). Tolkien finally links this escape with the escape from death, which he calls the oldest and deepest desire.   
Finally, consolation comes in the form of a happy ending. This Tolkien terms a “eucatastrophe”, a sudden joyous turn of events (Tolkien, 1983, 153). This can be contrasted with the “dyscatastrophe” which is the opposite. The eucatastrophe, however, provides a sudden joy, which to Tolkien is a special feeling, the opposite of grief (Tolkien, 1983, 153).

Paul Edmund Thomas provides some commentary in *The J.R.R. Tolkien Encyclopedia*, where he provides some insight of the nature of “On Fairy-Stories”while referencing Tolkien’s biographer Humphrey Carpenter:

While the essay is many things – from a definition of fairy stories, to an attack on folklore studies, to a theory of language, to a personal statement of the roles of the Christian storyteller – most scholars have also seen the essay as Tolkien’s artistic manifesto for writing the kind of fiction that interested him most. Humphrey Carpenter reads the end of the essay as Tolkien’s assertion “that there is no higher function for man than the ‘sub-creation’ of a Secondary World such as he was already making in *The Lord of the Rings*”[[6]](#footnote-6) (Drout, 2007, 482)

We partly see it noted here in the quote above why “On Fairy-Stories” is often cited when examining any of Tolkien’s works. It very much works as a manifesto and a defense for the kind of fiction Tolkien was writing. But as was quoted in the beginning of this chapter, the value lies in the fact that it was convincing to Tolkien, not whether or not it is convincing to us.   
Much more could be said about “On Fairy-stories”, but as noted at the beginning, the prime function of this section is to find out which elements are useful. What we can take with us from “On Fairy-stories” are notions such as Primary and Secondary World, eucatastrophe and dyscatastrophe. The essay offers valuable insight into the mind of the author whose work is being examined, and his background as an academic creates an interesting situation in which the author himself has reflected deeply on the usefulness, validity and applicability of his own writings. “On Fairy-stories”is also an often referred to defense of the fantasy genre as a whole, since it has not enjoyed widespread academic attention or acceptance as a valid genre. Indeed, even today, while genre fiction is much more accepted, many still oppose the view that it is anything but lesser literature unworthy of the attention it is being given. Be that as it may, the essay is a must-read for any Tolkien scholar if only to provide an understanding of the views held by the author in question, even if a biographical (or otherwise) reading is not the primary objective.

# Conveying Information

This chapter takes its beginning in a lecture by Michael D. C. Drout who at Carnigie Mellon University gave a lecture called “The Lord of the Rings: How to Read J. R. R. Tolkien”. The lecture is available on Youtube[[7]](#footnote-7) and the references made are to the exact points in the Youtube clip that are relevant.

One noteworthy literary device Tolkien employs to great success in his writing is what Drout calls the least knowledgeable character point of view. The least knowledgeable character phenomenon was pointed out by Michael D. C. Drout who talks about the intricacies of the trilogy. Though it focuses on *The Lord of the Rings*, much of it is still applicable to *The Silmarillion* and other works. The least knowledgeable character phenomenon is relatively simple: instead of having characters explain situations/lore/events to the reader directly, Tolkien almost always has a character with little knowledge engage in conversation with a character that has more knowledge. The most obvious example comes in form of Gandalf, the wise wizard who the others follow because of his vast knowledge. Gandalf often engages in conversations with the hobbits, who, generally speaking, do not know a lot of things concerning anything outside of the Shire. This classic mentor character is often found in fantasy literature, especially classic high fantasy which is inspired (or even based on) *The Lord of the Rings*. Drout points out that the only times a knowledgeable character speaks is when the other (less knowledgeable) character(s) are asleep, unconscious or otherwise not present. We must stress that even when a character such as Gandalf or Aragorn, who are knowledgeable characters, speak, even they do not know everything. Often the characters will know more than the readers do; this is particularly true of the history of Middle-Earth. *The Lord of the Rings* is interesting because there are so many vague and obscure references to events and important characters from *The Silmarillion*, but a reader will not fully understand them unless he is intimately familiar with *The Silmarillion*. Several characters of *The Lord of the Rings* are deeply familiar with lore and this puts the reader in an interesting position. In the case of *The Lord of the Rings*, the reader knows (more or less) the same as the hobbits and consequently learn information at the exact same time as the least knowledgeable character does. The narratological style of *The Silmarillion* is somewhat different and the stories often constructed in a way different to that of *The Lord of the Rings*.   
Drout notes how this counteracts what he humorously calls ‘Chapter 2: The Treaties of Tedium’ (Drout, 14:14); he argues that often fantasy literature will have an engaging chapter one in which a battle is fought, and perhaps the mysterious main antagonist is shown. This is then often followed by a less-interesting chapter in which the following is presented: physics, geography, geology, mythology, religion, history, social structure, technology and customs! (Drout, 14:35) In short, everything one needs to know about the secondary world in order to understand the context in which the plot happens. This information overload does the narrative no favors, and Drout argues that Tolkien’s approach is more elegant and eases the reader into the unknown secondary world. As shown early in this paper, *The Lord of the Rings* is merely part of the legendarium and does not constitute the whole; the fact that other works exist permits an air of mystery. To use a common example, one always has the feeling that there is a living, active world around the next corner in Middle-Earth. Part of the reason for this phenomenon is in great part because the characters often know more than the reader, and the feeling of not knowing a lot is only amplified when the least knowledgeable character has a conversation with a knowledgeable character; it is accentuated how little we know, and a reader becomes enthralled. There is a need to know why this is the Third Age; what the Ring lore contains; what and where “the West” is, etc. The vastness of Middle-Earth, and the fact that much is explained while some things are deliberately kept mysterious is incredibly powerful.

The style of *The Silmarillion* mirrors that of old mythologies and is therefore different to that of *The Lord of the Rings*; information is conveyed from the point of an omniscient narrator and the only major similarity is the fact that both *The Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings* are meant to be texts written by characters from Middle-Earth. That being said, *The Silmarillion* having the age it has (from a Middle-Earth perspective) means that the sources are somewhat unreliable, and several of the texts seem/are unfinished or lacking in detail. This is often entirely intentional, not least because *The Silmarillion* was never meant to be a single narrative like *The Lord of The Rings*. This is relatively often referenced to when Tolkien at the end of a narrative writes phrases such as “No more is known of their fate”, or “Little else is remembered of the events”. Other times Tolkien is purposefully vague when writing about how much time an event exactly took, or how long a given people stayed in one spot. At the end of *Of the Coming of the Elves* chapter in *The Silmarillion*, it is written of the Teleri (one faction of Elves) that they, “dwelt a while beyond the River Gelion” (Tolkien, 2002, 53). So while there sometimes is an overabundance of information, other times a reader is left somewhat unsure of specifics.   
One important element to note is the fact that *The Silmarillion* would have been a compilation of stories regardless of whether Tolkien had finished it in his own lifetime or not. It was never meant to be a standard narrative. The issues arise, of course, when we consider that Tolkien revised his work more than most authors; he would revisit stories countless times and change all manner of details. The best evidence for this is presented in the first three volumes of *The History of Middle-earth*, which gives an account of what Christopher calls the ‘three phases’ of his father’s writing of *The Fellowship of the Ring*. In short,the book was begun anew three times before Tolkien settled on an approach he was satisfied with, and this habit of being extremely critical of his own work is apparent in all his texts. Be that as it may, *The Silmarillion* remains fundamentally different from *The Lord of the Rings*, not least concerning how information is conveyed.   
  
Tolkien’s posthumous texts, *The Silmarillion*, *Unfinished Tales of Númenor and Middle-Earth* and *The Children of Húrin*, were not intended to fit a linear narrative. This is a given as the former is a children’s book. In the case of *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien stated himself that it was conceived as an attempt to try his hand at a lengthier text in the form of a novel. It was also commissioned, so to speak, by his publisher Allen & Unwin who wanted a sequel to *The Hobbit*. But the posthumous texts that make up the focus of this paper were the works of his heart. Infused in the two works published in his lifetime there exists a sense of history and age. In *The Hobbit* the reader’s interest is piqued when Bilbo and the dwarves discover ancient weapons in the hoard of some trolls, and this interest is further stirred when they are informed by Elrond that they were forged in a city called Gondolin. In *The Silmarillion*, this city is frequently mentioned, and some stories even take place there. But in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, it only appears as a passing mention. This should not be mistaken as an accident or oversight on Tolkien’s part. In fact, it was very deliberate. Tolkien himself wrote about the value of having a sense of old history and tradition in the kind of fiction he wrote. Therefore, there are a number of references to an older history (which are then spelled out in *The Silmarillion*) in the works published in his lifetime. For example, Aragorn mentions the “cats of Queen Beruthiel”. The reader receives no further information about who that character was, but it serves to give the impression that the characters are part of an immense universe with a rich and diverse history.  
  
Tolkien’s posthumous works, on the other hand, specifically deal with the events, characters and history that the reader is given a peek of in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. He therefore faced a challenge in providing that sense of depth, if these works were to include everything from the creation of the world up until the events in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. In one of his letters, Tolkien explains his dilemma in adapting his texts (which would eventually become *The Silmarillion*) to be readable:

I am afraid all the same will need a lot of work, and I work so slowly. The legends have to be worked over (they were written at different times, some many years ago) and made consistent; and they have to be integrated with The L.R.; and they have to be given some progressive shape. No simple device, like a journey and a quest, is available. I am doubtful myself about the undertaking. Part of the attraction of The L.R. is, I think, due to the glimpses of a large history in the background: an attraction like that of viewing far off an unvisited island, or seeing the towers of a distant city gleaming in a sunlit mist. To go there is to destroy the magic, unless new unattainable vistas are again revealed. (*Letters*, 333)

He further points out there are no hobbits present in these stories, which may not seem a grand issue, but as has been argued by Tom Shippey, the hobbits serve a vital function as mediators of story. They are on the reader’s level, while grander figures such as Aragorn are larger than life. *The Silmarillion*, on the other hand, functions on a different level of style, where all characters are grand and in no way every-day-ordinary.  
To return to the quote above, Tom Shippey argues that Tolkien solved this dilemma via the way he conveys information in these tales. The dilemma, as described above, was the difficulty in achieving depth when the stories had nothing to refer back to (Shippey, 2005, 261). Shippey argues that Tolkien solution came in the form of presentation. As Christopher Tolkien states in his foreword to *The Silmarillion*

[…] my father came to conceive *The Silmarillion* as a compilation, a compendious narrative, made long afterwards from sources of great diversity (poems, and annals and oral tales) that had survived in agelong tradition[…] (Tolkien, 2002, viii)

Tolkien’s idea, then, was to portray these texts as compiled by someone, and merely translated by Tolkien. As Shippey notes, *The Silmarillion* contains references to works of art not available to us. Shippey calls that someone an “imagined compiler” (Shippey, 2001, 236). This means that there is kept some degree of “unattainable vistas”, as there are references to fictional works. So, even though the narratives stretch from the creation of the world up until *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien maintains glimpses of that large history by withholding information. We are not given all the information. To provide some examples, this literary device is also seen in *Unfinished Tales of Númenor and Middle-Earth*. The chapter called “Disaster of the Gladden Fields” contains a section which deals with its sources. In this chapter, the reader comes across phrases such as:

The story of the last hours of Isildur and his death was due to surmise: but well-founded. The legend in its full form was not composed until the reign of Elessar in the Fourth Age, when other evidence was discovered (Tolkien, 1998, 357)

This could readily be a discussion one would find among historians. What do we know and how do we know it? But as the “sources” are purely fictional this is intended to withhold information and provide a sense of mystery. This worked so successfully in *The Lord of the Rings*, and the example above is an attempt by Tolkien to conjure the same effect. The chapter closes with a discussion of why Isildur’s body was never found, when certain other artifacts from his person were later recovered. Tolkien provides no answers to this, so as to make the reader wonder what had transpired. We may then conclude that Tolkien employed a technique where not everything is laid bare, but he withholds information by way of presentation thereby limiting what the reader knows, in order to maintain “unattainable vistas”.

# Mythological Considerations

*The Silmarillion* is often referred to as being a mythic work, but what exactly does that description entail? Logically, Tolkien’s writings, by virtue of being labelled ‘mythic’ alongside of mythologies such as *The Iliad, Metamorphoses*, *The Odyssey* and others, must possess qualities which warrant the description. However, it is indisputable that Tolkien’s mythology is in an entirely different category since his mythology is a mythology for Middle-Earth specifically.  
As described earlier, Tolkien lamented England’s lack of mythology in the same vein as Scandinavia and especially Finland (as seen in the *Kalevala*). He was greatly inspired by Elias Lönnrot’s *Kalevala*, which was a collection of Finnish folktales, songs and poems which Lönnrot then edited together and added his own passages to provide the glue to hold together the original elements. As pointed out by Dmitra Fimi, Tolkien’s fiction can be seen in a tradition of collecting and production, but Tolkien’s results were different, as he was producing almost everything himself. All he had was the name “Ëarendel” (which would become Ëarendil, a notable character in *The Silmarillion*) and the fairies (Fimi, 2009, 53-55). It would seem appropriate to further comment on this tradition of collecting and production to further illuminate Tolkien’s relation to it. Fimi names the authors James MacPherson and Iolo Morganwg. The first published what appeared to be translations of old Gaelic manuscripts, while the other fabricated manuscripts. Both have been heavily criticized and discredited (Dmitra, 2009, 52). But other cases of collecting and production are viewed as works carrying national identity, such as the tales of the brothers Grimm (Dmitra, 2009, 52). We may then distance Tolkien from both these categories. He is neither collecting old English tales and adding his own material to bind it together, nor is he making a fabrication. He is, however, writing his own material with a small inspiration or starting point in the name Ëarendel. We do need to distinguish between the fabrications of MacPherson and Morganwg and Tolkien’s fiction. Tolkien did ponder using a frame narrative, where the texts are presented to us as his translations of Bilbo’s book, which would then consist of ancient sources. This would lend the texts some authenticity, but we would argue that there is a difference between fabrication (as done by MacPherson and Morganwg) and Tolkien’s quite overt intention to use a narrative frame for his works.  
So what is the function of myths? Gergely Nagy offers insight in “The Great Chain of Reading”:

We suppose that behind our mythological texts there are *mythologies*, religious-historical systems of belief, and the ability to *invoke* these background systems is one of the qualities of these texts: they can function as the remnant of these disappeared cultural phenomena, offering an insight into practices and beliefs that could hardly be gleaned in any other way. (Ed. Chance, 2003, 239)

The basic function of mythologies is to define a culture and offer insight into a culture’s history. What is meant by ‘religious-historical’ is important: mythologies always offer an aspect of creationism, unlike for instance folklore. This is extremely important to any mythology because it serves to answer the question of ‘where do we come from?’ What a mythology offers now, though, is also the knowledge from the now-distant past and an insight into cultural practices which are now no longer employed. Why this is important when considering Tolkien is simple: offering a history, or mythology, for a secondary world gives depth to the world. As already noted, *The Lord of the Rings* is merely one part of Tolkien’s legendarium; the fact that there is such a meaningful history in the Ages before the events in *The Lord of the Rings* is a potent literary device. All obscure references in the trilogy are meaningful because they are not simply loosely created but have a profoundness to them that is only fully understood by being knowledgeable about *The Silmarillion*. In *The Road to Middle-earth*, Shippey comments that this depth gives:

[…] a sense that the author knew more than he was telling, that behind his immediate story there was a coherent, consistent, deeply fascinating world about which he had no time (then) to speak (Shippey, 2005, 259).

This is naturally closely connected to how information is conveyed in Middle-Earth, and it is an interesting – and useful – literary device to have characters and the narrator know more than the reader. One merely gets an impression that Middle-Earth holds more than what is shown when reading *The Lord of the Rings*, but to fully appreciate Tolkien’s craftsmanship it is rewarding to read the tales from the First and Second Ages. It is not uncommon for an author of fantasy literature to reference to a distant past, but for there to be an actual written-out past in form of a mythic compendium is remarkable. To provide some contrast, we may mention the literary concept of “Chekhov’s gun”. The idea behind the concept is that if a gun is mentioned to be hanging on a wall in chapter one, it should go off in a later chapter. Chekhov’s intention therefore is to eliminate anything that does not add to the story. In his view, everything mentioned should provide meaning, and the mention of a gun on a wall with no follow-up would serve to distract the reader. This notion provides a contrast in approaches to story-telling. While Chekhov wants to rid the story of irrelevant observations, Tolkien very much desires to provide them. However, it should be noted that sometimes Tolkien does in fact “let the gun go off”, so to speak, in his posthumous texts in which there are numerous events and characters referenced in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Author’s do not have to stay in Chekhov’s or Tolkien’s camp. They can do both, but Tolkien very often deliberately violates Chekhov’s principle. But at the same time, Tolkien time and again sought to provide that depth we have discussed above. In this sense, he sometimes violates Chekhov’s principle in order to achieve that depth. He chooses to let the gun remain unfired which provides the sense that the author is withholding information because he has no time, to use Shippey’s wording. But Tolkien did not invent this technique, as he was inspired by older texts. Nagy refers to *Beowulf* in which there are several references to seemingly unimportant matters that remain unresolved:

*Beowulf* [may be a] paradigmatic model for the “techniques of depth” we see in Tolkien. In *Beowulf* we find digressions and episodes inserted into the main story, many of which (by recounting other stories) hardly advance the plot in any apparent way, and there are also ongoing allusions to seemingly equally unrelated matters. […] [B]y links to the main theme, [they] provide contrasts and parallels that continually comment on and clarify the main points. (Ed. Chance, 2003, 240).

*Beowulf* is a classic example and any Tolkien scholar is familiar with Tolkien’s relationship to the epic poem. It is no grand surprise, then, that Tolkien was inspired by the form and function of the poem and in certain areas sought to mimic the parts he felt worked particularly well. As we shall see, in the story of Túrin Turambar, Tolkien again drew his inspiration from a specific story (in this case the tale of Kullervo from the Finnish *Kalevala*; more on this later) and though the overall construction of Tolkien’s own story is different, in certain aspects there is a one-to-one relationship between the story that inspired Tolkien, and Tolkien’s own writings. Returning to *Beowulf*, it is representative of all the fantastic stories Tolkien came to appreciate and their intricate details contributed to his inner need of creating a *full* body of literature; a comprehensive legendarium in which there are no meaningless allusions or references; a work where the past is as significant, realized and actually a finished book that complements the *magnum opus.* Naturally Tolkien could at the time of writing not know that *The Lord of the Rings* would become his prime work, but the point nevertheless stands, and it may be argued that in his own mind *The Silmarillion* was at least as significant as *The Lord of the Rings*. The only fault of *The Silmarillion* was its unfinished state and the difficulties he faced in completing the work without any mistakes or unsatisfactory elements.  
Familiarity with the First and Second Ages is required in order to understand the popular Third Age, and as Nagy asserts, and which refers back to the *Beowulf* situation, “Tolkien “assumes” acquaintance with other stories in the same way as *Beowulf* does”. This means that knowledge of *The Silmarillion* is “assumed” but not a prerequisite for reading *The Lord of the Rings*; it remains an independent narrative.   
Furthermore, Nagy presents an interesting argument where the chief concern is with the *texts* themselves. For Nagy, at the time of writing, “the critical task is to clarify how implied texts and textual relations contribute to the perception of the whole interconnected system of texts” (Ed. Chance, 2003, 241). In short, it is an examination of how the texts function, but we must stress one important aspect before venturing forth: the article was written in 2003 and uses the tale of Túrin Turambar as the primary example*.* This means, of course, that it was written before *The Children of Húrin* was published in 2007, and therefore certain elements are entirely outdated. Be that as it may, other elements of the article are useful, especially the considerations concerning whether a text is meant to create a context, or to retextualize. The premise is simple: in Tolkien’s legendarium, the function of a text is to either create a context for the events of the story, or to – what Nagy calls - ‘retextualize’, that is, “serve as the basis of authentication […] and thematizing exactly the status and use of (background) traditions” (Ed. Chance, 2003, 241).   
When faced with an obscure reference in *The Lord of the Rings*, a reader is faced with a dilemma of comprehension. If a reader is unfamiliar with the story that is being referenced to, naturally understanding the reference is either difficult or entirely impossible. If comprehension may be attained through reading a different story that explains the first allusion, then the story-world is expanded upon by extension, and that creates context. This may seem complicated, by we may exemplify using Nagy’s own example: there are two references to Túrin in *The Lord of the Rings*. The first occurs in the *The Council of Elrond* chapter of *The Fellowship of the Ring* in which Elrond, commenting on Frodo’s willingness to carry the Ring, says that Frodo should be counted among the, “mighty elf-friends of old, Hador, and Húrin, and Túrin, and Beren himself” (Tolkien, 1991, 354). The other reference occurs when Sam tries to pierce Shelob’s spider hide at the end of *The Two Towers*: “[her hide] could not be pierced by any strength of men, not though Elf or Dwarf should forge the steel or the hand of Beren or of Túrin wield it” (Tolkien, 1991, 424). A reader cannot learn anything about the story of Túrin through these references, but their very existence creates a depth and a history. When a reader then reads *The Children of Húrin*, the text may then be understood in a different light because the references are suddenly not obscure or confusing anymore. There are, however, two sides of this coin, both equally important. According to Nagy, a text may gain depth both by having actual texts explain obscure references (as with *The Children of Húrin* and *The Silmarillion* explaining references in *The Lord of the Rings*), or a text may have allusions as a device simply as a means of creating a *feeling* of incomprehension. “Allusions could also serve to create depth by just this feeling of incomprehension […]” (Ed. Chance, 2003, 241). It is an interesting thought, though in the case of Tolkien we argue that the actual presence of a work such as *The Silmarillion* creates a more meaningful context, more depth and offers a deeper understanding of the entire authorship simply by virtue of its existence.   
Returning to the issue of allusions, which naturally play a big part in Tolkien’s authorship, Nagy argues that they may either be *contentless* or *genuine*:

[…] allusions might only be employed to create a sense of depth like that which is accessible for us in *Beowulf*; the context they imply is a *pseudo-context*, created by these very allusions. This might conceivably be their function in the text, and even if the reader does not understand them, the effect of a “yet darker antiquity” is achieved. […] *Genuine* allusions, on the other hand, would be expected to have content and point to an existing context. Depth is just as well created this way, but it is not confined to the readerly “sense of unknown story” (Ed. Chance, 2003, 242).

In the case of Tolkien, most (if not all) references are genuine, as there is always a context for them, with actual content behind. As previously stated, in contemporary fantasy it is not an uncommon literary device to refer to events that a reader cannot actually read about elsewhere, as they simply do not exist in the authors’ body of literature. Their function, as noted above, is to create depth and a sense of antiquity and this is still achievable even without a readily available book detailing the context for the reference. What is noteworthy at this stage is the fact that *The Silmarillion* was written as a compilation of old texts and several stories feel as though an unreliable narrator wrote them, or at least some details are omitted or altogether unavailable. This, too, adds more depth, not least because, “depth is in the relation of the two texts, the way they supplement each other in terms of comprehension” (Ed. Chance, 2003, 242). While initial incomprehension of allusions in *The Lord of the Rings* is dispelled by reading *The Silmarillion,* the vastness and profoundness of the secondary world still seems immense. Concerning allusions, Nagy further adds:

One readerly consequence is that, knowing the content, one sees how the context adds to the meaning of the allusions, or how the allusion, not wholly appropriate, produces further depth on another level by simulating the effects of the transmission of stories over great periods of time and many generations. (Ed. Chance, 2003, 242)

This eloquently underlines the above point about allusions as a powerful literary device, and if they are coupled with archaic language (as is employed in *The Silmarillion*) the sense of distance and depth is increased.   
Concerning Elrond’s mention of Túrin as one of the “mighty elf-friends”, one may wonder how that exactly happened. Túrin was a hero of great martial expertise and did win many battles, but to name him an elf-friend when considering that he killed two elves (Saeros and Beleg) and single-handedly caused the downfall of Nargothrond seems peculiar. Túrin was the cause of several other disasters as well, but we must appreciate the fact that Túrin’s deeds happened several thousand years before *The Council of Elrond*, and as Nagy asserts, “only Túrin’s prowess in arms in the defense of Doriath and Nargothrond, along with his slaying of Glaurung, were remembered” (Ed. Chance, 2003, 243). This is significant because it gives a history *within* the textual world and,

[implies] a transmission where the unfavorable details were dropped and Túrin became assimilated to the stereotype of the “great hero” and the “elf-friend” – something that also happens in preliterate cultures when historical material […] is exploited in a variety of ways” (Ed. Chance, 2003, 254).

Again we are reminded of the influence of old texts in Tolkien’s writings and the memory of Túrin is clearly more positive than was the reality.   
Thus we have a secondary world that functions in great part because of the interconnected texts of Tolkien’s authorship. There are three levels on which the text functions, and each step serves as a building step to the next level and overall creates coherency:

[…] from a philological point of view, the *Silmarillion* text is a precursor of and a context for *The Lord of the Rings*, which makes the allusions philologically genuine in an objective primary world sense. Second, on a readerly/critical level, the relation between the texts is genuine and meaningful, since it both supplies comprehension […] and facilitates interpretation […]. Third, the relation is also functional *within the textual world*, as the lore of the Elder Days contextualizes the whole story and the allusions *for the characters themselves*, for whom the *Silmarillion* tradition is accessible, quite regardless of the reader in the primary world. (Ed. Chance, 2003, 243).

This is immensely interesting and important. The significance of *The Silmarillion* in relation to *The Lord of the Rings* is pointed out and it is stressed how the allusions objectively are genuine. What is useful for a reader, of course, is the fact that *The Silmarillion* is merely a precursor and not actually required reading. The same relationship is present with *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*; they are independent works but complement each other and enrich the reading experience if both are read. Naturally, it will depend heavily on what exactly a reader hopes to gain by reading Tolkien. Is it entertainment then it is unnecessary to familiarize oneself with *The Silmarillion*; if the interest in Middle-Earth goes deeper, the context-creation texts become valuable and appreciated. On the second level, the comprehension attained by a thorough reading of the legendarium ‘supplies comprehension’. This is meaningful exactly because of the numerous allusions and references in Tolkien’s writings from the Third Age. The third level separates the primary world from the secondary world and makes the secondary world a place of its own. The simple function of the third level, here, is to create context on a character-level and work within the secondary world itself. It is a complicated but useful way of creating coherency and depth, not least because the reader is not part of the equation. Naturally this relates back to Tolkien’s inner need; the Elder Days were mapped out and written about because he wanted to, not because potential readers as such needed the information provided. The fullness of the experience of reading *The Lord of the Rings* is not lessened by neglecting to read texts from the Elder Days, and had it been any other way the effect would have been detrimental. Another aspect concerning the reading experiences of the different books is their very length, time-span wise speaking, since this makes them altogether very distinctive works. *The Lord of the Rings* spans a few years at best (if we permit ourselves the luxury of ignoring the multiple years Frodo waited between learning that the Ring must go, until he actually left the Shire), while *The Silmarillion* details the events of several thousand years.   
One further aspect of *The Silmarillion* which is noteworthy is that the texts within the book are both *about* Middle-Earth and *of* Middle-Earth. This creates an interesting situation because the texts in the primary world are stories, but in the secondary world they are part of history. This is naturally a logical part of the whole since *The Silmarillion* operates the way it does, yet the point must be explored. Nagy states:

But the most intriguing detail is not that Tolkien, in texts that create their own textual world, alludes to and uses other texts of his about the same world; it is that these same texts, *just as they are*, are claimed to be not only representations of the textual world but also *texts inside it*, creating a “secondary philological level” of inquiry. (Ed. Chance, 2003, 245).

So the texts exist and function the same way in the primary and the secondary world. They are, indeed, a mythology, and what a reader gains by reading them – knowledge of the history of Middle-Earth – is the same regardless of whether a reader is from the primary world or a hobbit in the secondary one. Why, then, is this important? The answer to that question is twofold: firstly, for a reader, coherence, interconnectivity of texts and depth of the secondary world are the chief focus. Depth is a defining characteristic of Tolkien’s writings and undoubtedly one of his work’s biggest strength. Secondly, for the academic, the issue of ‘depth’ is one of relations; how one text fits in with the whole text corpus and what effect the entirety is meant to convey. This all means that the standpoint of a reader is of great importance and an earlier point must be reiterated: it all depends on what one hopes to gain by reading *The Silmarillion*. One thing is clear, though, and must be stressed: while the texts are different in nature, what links them together are the stories found within them. What this means for *The Silmarillion* as a mythological work is the following: a myth is a re-telling of stories first and foremost, and a story is granted myth-status by a readership and not the genre it presumes to be part of. Nagy phrases it thus:

[…] *no text is myth by genre*. The texts are *mythological*, and together they form a *mythology*, the “*telling* of myths” contained in the background mythological system. They are assigned this status by the user community’s relation to them, their cultural (/religious/political) use as such, and the relation they are supposed to have to their base-text: […] there will always be a base, a source. The texts are just the *telling* of the myth – they are not the *myth itself*. (Ed. Chance, 2003, 252)

This ‘user community’ is in our case both the primary world readership, and the readership within Middle-Earth for whom the texts are history. It is true that *The Silmarillion* was meant to be a mythology from the beginning, but it is a combination of the two relationships’ acknowledgement of its use and validity that enables it to gain status as a working mythology for Middle-Earth.   
Tolkien as a maker of myth is also discussed by Margaret Hiley in the essay “Stolen Language, CosmicModels: Myth and Mythology in Tolkien”. Hiley’s essay revolves around placing Tolkien firmly in the company of other modernist writers such as T.S. Eliot and James Joyce. She argues that myth’s apparent authority, world-formulaic character and its timelessness and universality was what made it appealing for modernists (Hiley, 2004, 841). With the rise of technology and industry and the burden of world war, modernists sought new ways to rationalize the world in which they lived and express how they felt about this rapidly changing world. While new forms of literature and new literary devices were brought to the scene, some, like those named above, turned to myth in search of authority and something universal. As Hiley argues, what people thought they knew about religion and culture had collapsed, and myth provided a way of “[…] artificial reasserting a kind of authority in artistic work […]” (Hiley, 2004, 842). Hiley’s goal in her essay is to provide an examination of how myth functions in Tolkien’s works.   
One of her arguments is that myth functions on two levels in Tolkien’s works. It both functions within the Secondary World and in the Primary World. This is the same point Nagy makes with his notion of a “secondary philological level of inquiry” mentioned above. However, Hiley goes further, noting that Tolkien’s myth functions as history in his Secondary World. It has both a mythological character, but also a historical character. Hiley calls this “overlapping” history, using Elrond as an example (Hiley, 2004. 844). In *The Fellowship of the Ring*, we see an example of a mythological and historical convergence, to use Hiley’s terms (Hiley, 2004, 845). The chapter *The Council of Elrond* features an exchange of words in which Elrond (who is an elven lord several thousand years old) reminisces about events in the First Age (the period in which the majority of *The Silmarillion* is set). The chapter is set in the Third Age, so Elrond’s memory reaches back several thousand years, making him act as a bridge to what would otherwise be time of myth. Because of his memory, however, the events referenced are history.  
Moving on to how the mythological character of Tolkien’s works function in the Primary World, Hiley notes the importance of Tolkien’s phrasings and choice of words in the creation myth in *The Silmarillion*. She compares these to the phrasing in Genesis in the Bible, arguing that this gives Tolkien’s creation story “[…] a strength and authority similar to that of the Creation in the Bible” (Hiley, 2004, 848). So Tolkien deliberately draws on the assumption that his readers are familiar with the style of the Bible, which in turn lends his mythological works authenticity and authority.  
  
This section of the paper has primarily dealt with the Tolkien’s writings as mythology and how the narratological styles of *The Silmarillion* differs from that of *The Lord of the Rings*. They are indeed different, but they also serve different functions in his legendarium. Exactly because they serve different functions it is difficult to tell whether one is superior to the other, or whether one employs an approach that is objectively ‘better’. One thing remains indisputable, however: the legendarium consists of works which complement each other and the overall reading experience is greatly enhanced by reading more than simply the most popular works. That being said, it is an important point that *The Silmarillion* is not crucial or required reading, nor does the enjoyment of *The Lord of the Rings* suffer if *The Silmarillion* is skipped. Indeed, we may argue that because of the arguments of how depth is established and how it functions, one can only gain something by reading more, but never lose anything by not reading the obscure works such as *The Silmarillion* or *Unfinished Tales*.

# Fate and Free Will

This chapter will explore the concepts of fate, doom and free will in Tolkien’s legendarium, while also commenting on the aspects of prophecy and foreknowledge in relation to these concepts. The issue of free will is a big theme in Tolkien’s posthumous works. If we consider Tolkien’s knowledge of mythological texts (such as the Finnish *Kalevala* by Elias Lönnrot and the Scandinavian *Elder Edda* and *Prose Edda* by Snorri Sturluson) along with his Catholic background and the overall mythological character of his texts, it should seem apparent that we ought to find something about cosmic order, fate, free will and the relationships between these concepts. Dmitra Fimi notes that “[t]owards the end of his life Tolkien became increasingly pre-occupied with the ‘spiritual’ themes of his mythology” (Fimi, 2009, 61). As will be explained later in this paper, Tolkien’s texts treat themes and concepts associated with Christian “teachings”, but they are not exclusively so. The question of whether or not predestination is a part of Tolkien’s mythology is an obvious one to ask particularly because of Tolkien’s varied and frequent use of the words “doom” and “fate” in his works, especially the texts published posthumously (*The Silmarillion*, *Unfinished Tales* and *The Children of Húrin*). These texts were arguably closer to his heart (to use Tom Shippey’s wording), as much of what ended up being published posthumously was both written as the first building blocks in his legendarium and were texts he worked on all the way until his death. These posthumous texts were thus written before, during and after the publication of *The Lord of the Rings*. At the same time, the largely unfinished state in which Tolkien left the texts presents us with a problem of coherence. Several things are left unresolved and there can be doubt as to which versions are authoritative. However, in this instance we choose to rely on Christopher Tolkien, who, as Tolkien’s appointed literary executor, compiled the texts in the versions he considered to be authoritative. For a discussion of differences in versions, readers may turn to *The History of Middle-Earth* by Christopher Tolkien, which deals much more with different unfinished versions of Tolkien’s texts.

Through various studies of Tolkien’s works, numerous sources have been identified as inspiration for Tolkien’s fiction. Thus, we can easily note a few places where Tolkien was influenced or inspired by other texts. Saying that Tolkien was influenced or inspired by Old Norse mythology is not conjecture, as we have very literal proof that he was. For instance, several names of dwarves from the *Völuspá* (a poem in the *Elder Edda*), such as “Gandalf”, “Durin” and “Thrain” are reused in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. We therefore know that Tolkien’s familiarity with these texts was not cursory, but rather in-depth. Tolkien even admits his legendarium owes much to the “[…] Norse vision of Ragnarök […]” though it is different from it (*Letters*, 149). This is of course only two examples, but they underline what we already know. It should come as no surprise, then, that Tolkien’s texts are characterized by a relation to these mythological texts. In Norse mythology, ragnarök is a concept which outlines how the end of the world will come to pass. In this mythology, the events are predetermined, as norns weave the skein of every living person thereby determining their fate. That everything is predetermined is also evidenced by the very specificity of the foretelling: the wolf Fenrir will swallow the sun and the ship Naglfar will carry with it the fire giants from Muspelheim. The influence of the apocalypse story in the form of ragnarök is perhaps more directly seen in Tolkien’s idea of the *Dagor Dagorath*, which is an all-consuming battle which will reshape the world. However, this idea is not fully developed, and exists only as a passing reference in *The Silmarillion*, where the human king Ar-Pharazôn and his army were buried for setting foot on the blessed realm, which was forbidden: “[…] there it is said that they lie imprisoned in the Caves of the Forgotten, until the Last Battle and the Day of Doom” (Tolkien, 2002, 334). This idea of an apocalyptic battle in Tolkien’s legendarium is not without its problems, however, as it was largely abandoned and not fully developed.

This is one of the regards in which we can discuss the presence of fate, free will, cosmic order and doom. Given that *The Silmarillion* begins with a literal story of creation, we can look there for some indication of the rules that govern Tolkien’s Secondary World. *The Silmarillion*’s first chapter, *Ainulindalë*, describes the creation of the world (called Ëa). The omnipotent creator (or god), Ilúvatar, created the Ainur[[8]](#footnote-8), a group of divine spirits, one of whom, Melkor, eventually became the main antagonist in *The Silmarillion*. Along with the Ainur, Ilúvatar began creating the world through music (an idea also seen in other creation myths). However, Melkor seeks to magnify his own part, which creates disharmony and discord. The first theme began by Ilúvatar and the Ainur is abandoned because of this. A second theme is begun but is ultimately abandoned because Melkor again creates disharmony in the theme. The third and final theme contains two themes, one sorrowful and the other violent (Melkor’s theme). The sorrowful theme comes to incorporate the other theme’s notes into its own. The music then halts and Ilúvatar scolds Melkor for his discord and disharmony. Ilúvatar then bids the Ainur look upon their creation by showing them a sort of vision:

And as they looked and wondered this World began to unfold its history, and it seemed to them that it lived and grew. […] And many other things Ilúvatar spoke to the Ainur at that time, and because of their memory of his words, and the knowledge that each has of the music that he himself made, the Ainur know much of what was, and is, and is to come, and few things are unseen by them. Yet some things there are that they cannot see, neither alone nor taking counsel together; for to none but himself has Ilúvatar revealed all that he has in store, and in every age there come forth things that are new and have no foretelling, for they do not proceed from the past. (Tolkien, 2002, 6-7)

Upon entering the world Melkor proclaimed himself master of it in front of the other Ainur before fleeing to remote parts of the world.   
An immediate interpretation would be that the seeds of evil, so to speak, are sown from the very beginning. To be more precise, the capacity for evil is present from the very beginning of the world’s existence, as both Melkor’s vainglory and desire to dominate are showcased both in the themes of the Ainur and once he enters the world. This deals with the theological concept of theodicy, which is an explanation of why evil can exist in a world with an omnipotent god.   
The quote above does raise some interesting questions about free will and fate. Thus the theme of fate is introduced at the very beginning of *The Silmarillion* and becomes a recurring theme throughout. In the vision shown to them by Ilúvatar, the Ainur see the future. If Ilúvatar shows them the future of the world, does that mean it is a fixed future? Even then, the last part of the quote about “things that are new and have no foretelling” also sows seeds of doubt as to the workings of the world. The question of a fixed future becomes further complicated when Tolkien introduces the race of men:

[…] he [Ilúvatar] willed that the hearts of men should seek beyond the world and should find no rest therein; but they should have a virtue to shape their life, amid the powers and chances of the world, beyond the Music of the Ainur, which is as fate to all things else […]. (Tolkien, 2002, 35-36)

This obviously further complicates matters. With the music being “as fate to all things else”, Men seem to have a valued position with free will. But the wording itself of the quote, especially “amid the powers and chances of the world” is worthy of some consideration. It can be read as Men having some degree of autonomy, but “amid” these other powers. This can be understood as these powers and chances also having an effect on Men. But it can also be read to be suggesting that Men’s virtue trumps these powers and chances. This problematic wording and use of the words “fate” and “doom” makes for a complicated reading of *The Silmarillion* and Tolkien’s other posthumous texts set in Middle-Earth. This is especially the case in the story of Túrin, whose fate and doom is often referred to, as we shall see later.

First, however, it would be beneficial to pursue the idea of fate a bit more, specifically how it pertains to prophecy or foreknowledge. The very idea of fate suggests that things are planned by a divine being. They can therefore be foreseen. As seen above, the Ainur were shown the history, as it were, of the world in a vision. But because their direct dealings with characters in *The Silmarillion* are cursory at best, this is a difficult question to answer. More on this later.   
Julaire Andelin identifies three types of prophecy in Tolkien’s legendarium: Prophecies by Ainur or seers, prophecy in death and forebodings (Drout, 2007, 544-545).   
There are cases of foresight both in *The Silmarillion* as well as *The Lord of the Rings*, but they are interestingly enough never uniform. There are varying degrees of foretelling, both with regards to accuracy and certainty. For instance, in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Aragorn warns Gandalf before venturing into the mines of Moria: “It is not of the Ring, nor of us others that I am thinking now, but of you, Gandalf. And I say to you: if you pass the doors of Moria, beware!” (Tolkien, 1991, 387). As readers of *The Lord of the Rings* are aware, Gandalf does fall to his apparent death after entering Moria. After exiting the mines, Aragorn directly references his warning: “’Farewell, Gandalf!’ he cried. ‘Did I not say to you: *if you pass the doors of Moria, beware*? Alas that I spoke true!’”(Tolkien, 1991, 432) What is interesting about this case of foresight or prediction is both the puzzling vagueness of Aragorn’s warning and his subsequent repetition of it. On the surface, one would be tempted to interpret his warning as just a “bad feeling” on account of its vagueness. But it is vague yet at the same ting strangely specific. It reads as a vague warning to Gandalf, but it is also specific because he only warns Gandalf. Aragorn is not expressing any concern over the rest of the fellowship – his “bad feeling” only pertains to Gandalf. Julaire Andelin classifies this foretelling as a “foreboding of the heart” (Drout, 2007, 545).  
An instance of “prophecy in death” occurs in *The Children of Húrin*, where the character Húrin tells the elven king Turgon: “This I say to you, lord, with the eyes of death: though we part here for ever, and I shall not look on your white walls again, from you and from me a new star shall arise” (Tolkien, 2007, 58). This is a curious case, as on the surface it would appear that this prophecy is caused by some degree of foresight in the eyes of death (he even says so quite specifically), but it is complicated by the fact that Húrin does not die until many years after making this prophecy. It does hold true, but given these complications we cannot fully rely on the three types of prophecies given by Andelin. It is certainly not the case that every character in Tolkien’s legendarium is gifted with foresight, but it is remarkable just how many of the central characters are seers or are able to perceive something about to pass. This should be compared to the way magic works in Tolkien’s secondary world – it is always very vague.  
In *Unfinished Tales of Númenor and Middle-Earth* upon meeting a group of elves in the mountains, the man Tuor is gifted a vague glimpse of his future: “[…] a great doom is written upon your brow, and it shall lead you far from Middle-Earth, as I guess.” (Tolkien, 1998, 29) We are not given any indication as to how the elf in question, Gelmir, is able to know this, but it is one of many places where Tolkien uses the word “doom”, further implying things are not fully left up to chance or free will.   
The sheer amount of times “fate” or “doom” are used is enough to make us doubt that everything is happening as a result of the characters’ free will. While these words are often uttered by characters in dialogue, the narrator also uses them quite frequently. In this regard, there are also subtle indications that sometimes an Ainu is guiding things behind the scenes. These are rare, as the Ainu in general do not interfere in the lives of men and elves, but because they sometimes do act, it opens the possibility that they are acting according to a plan, namely the vision mentioned earlier. Tuor, for example, follows a herd of swans to an abandoned city where he discovers a hauberk, a helmet, a shield and a sword. These artifacts were left by an elven king called Turgon years before at the behest of Ulmo (one of the Ainur). The swans were directed by Ulmo, it would appear. We then see that doom and/or fate are also woven into artifacts (as we shall see later in the case of the Silmarils). Upon acquiring the armor and weapons, Tuor exclaims: “[…] I will take these arms unto myself, and upon myself whatsoever doom they bear” (Tolkien, 1998, 36). Here it would seem that Tuor is aware that his discovery of the artifacts is significant in some way or another. This is another instance of a foreboding. Tuor is aware of the significance of his discovery, but again Tolkien is strangely vague about it.

Before we venture further into Tolkien’s posthumous works in search of the word “doom”, we also need to note, however, that the word “doom” often takes on different meanings. For instance, after having accidentally caused the death of an elf, the man Túrin flees the elven king Thingol’s realm. Thingol then calls for witnesses to be heard, after which he “[…] lifted up his hand to pronounce his doom” (Tolkien, 2007, 93). In this case, “doom” merely means a sentence of sorts. It is not a force that determines the actions of characters’ lives. This sentencing can, obviously, make a difference in the world. Tom Shippey points out that if it was a death sentence, it could lead to the death of the character over which it was pronounced (Shippey, 2005, 288). But it is not a “force” as such in this instance. Rather, it is just a judicial sentence passed by someone in power. This power can mean that the “doom” does come to pass, but it remains a possibility, not a fact set in stone.  
We must also consider the voice of the narrator when discussing the word “doom”. In the chapter *Of Beren and Lúthien*, the elf-king of the elven realm Doriath, Thingol, presents the man Beren with a daunting quest for his daughter Lúthien’s hand in marriage in a tale similar to many folktales of a prince who must endure many ordeals to finally win his bride. Thingol challenges Beren to acquire a Silmaril (an artifact the elves desire greatly, now in the possession of Melkor). Just as Thingol has challenged Beren, the narrator remarks: “Thus he wrought the Doom of Doriath, and was ensnared within the curse of Mandos” (Tolkien, 2002, 197). While we shall look at the specifics of the curse of Mandos later, it is fitting to consider the use of “doom” in the quote above. A case can be made for the interpretation that the narrator uses “doom” in this context because the narrator knows what will happen later on in the story. There is no indication that Thingol himself is aware that he “wrought the Doom of Doriath” in this instance, meaning that the wording could be read simply as “this is where it all went wrong for Thingol”. We should note the difference, then, between “doom” as we discussed above, where it is used to describe a sentencing or judicial decision, and here, where it describes the more popular sense of the word. The latter could be taken as describing the downfall of Doriath, rather than Thingol pronouncing a specific fate of the realm. We shall return to this issue of Thingol and his “doom”, but first we must turn to a central event in *The Silmarillion*, which comes to impact much of the narrative.

The overarching narrative (to the extent that a single narrative exists) in *The Silmarillion* concerns possession of the Silmarils, which are gems crafted by the elf Fëanor. These artifacts contained within them the light of the two trees which brought light to the world. Melkor successfully corrupted and destroyed the trees, but they ultimately flowered into the sun and the moon. Melkor’s corruption of the trees is brought about by himself with the help of a giant spider called Ungoliant. This event is referred to as “the darkening of Valinor”. The creation of the Silmarils is connected to fate both by the narrator and the Ainu called Yavanna: “[…] Fëanor, being come to his full might, was filled with a new thought, or it may be that some shadow of foreknowledge came to him of the doom that drew near […]” (Tolkien, 2002, 69). This is certainly very vague, and Yavanna’s claim carries on in the same vein: “The Light of the Trees has passed away and lives now only in the Silmarils of Fëanor. Foresighted was he!” (Tolkien, 2002, 83) We must then ponder if Fëanor truly did perceive a threat to the two trees. Another explanation is that Yavanna’s wording is not meant to convey any foresight on the part of Fëanor, but to convey that they are fortunate that Fëanor did create the Silmarils. Given that on two instances Fëanor’s creation of the Silmarils is said to be connected to fate in the text, this gives an indication that there is some degree of fate present. However, as the narrative unfolds, Fëanor’s possessiveness which ultimately leads to his own downfall also opens up the possibility that his own pride and skill in artisanship was the *primus* *motor* for his creation of the Silmarils. This highlights the complexity in Tolkien’s Secondary World. We are not sure which “forces” are at play. Was it just Fëanor’s gift in artisanship which prompted him to create the Silmarils, or did he foresee the end of the two trees? Tolkien cleverly avoids leaning too close to one or the other.

Another point in the intersection between free will and fate concerns oaths. A philologist by trade, Tolkien placed a great deal of weight on the meaning of words. In his legendarium, the utterance of words is no small thing. Oaths play a big part in his writings, and when they are sworn they seem to set down a course in life for those who swore it. The oath of Fëanor is in *The Silmarillion* often referred to as having great influence on the course of the world, as many characters and events are influenced by it. When Melkor slays Fëanor’s father and steals Fëanor’s Silmarils, he and his sons swear an oath to retrieve the Silmarils and wage war on anyone not of his house to hold the Silmarils. Naming Ilúvatar as a witness, the oath is described as having great future consequences: “For so sworn, good or evil, an oath may not be broken, and it shall pursue oathkeeper and oathbreaker to the world’s end” (Tolkien, 2002, 90). The wording used here indicates that upon swearing an oath, the future is set for those who swore it. This can obviously be read as placing restrictions on the free will of those swearing the oath. In *Return of the King*, Aragorn summons an army of undead men who did not fulfill their oath to Aragorn’s ancestor, who cursed them. This is but another example of the importance of words spoken, especially when they are oaths. This example can be used to further highlight how Tolkien clouds the relationship between the forces that govern lives. While Men are said to have free will, this free will would seem to be limited by a curse, when Aragorn’s ancestor Isildur cursed a group of men who would not fulfill their oath. This is perhaps an extreme example, as Men (with free will) who have sworn an oath only to break it are then on top of that cursed as well. One can easily see the complexity at work here, as three independent “forces” or “powers” are present.

In relation to oaths, what comes to guide much of the story in *The Silmarillion* is the so-called “curse of Mandos”. After Fëanor swears the oath just mentioned above, a herald from the Valar (or Ainur) arrives. Further showing that some characters within Tolkien’s legendarium possess foresight, the herald warns Fëanor and his Noldor kin: “Go not forth! For the hour is evil, and your road leads to sorrow that you do not foresee” (Tolkien, 2002, 92) Fëanor and his Noldor kin (an elven faction) refuse to heed this warning and continue towards the coast, where they encounter another clan of elves called the Teleri. After Fëanor requests that they give him their ships, the Teleri king Ölwe refuses: “For this I say to you, Fëanor son of Finwe, these are to us as are the gems of the Noldor: the work of our hearts, whose like we shall not make again” (Tolkien, 2002, 94). Fëanor’s violent reaction further underlines his fall from grace, as he of all should recognize their reluctance to give up their most prized creations. His violent reaction manifests itself as swords are drawn and he and the Noldor begin slaying the Teleri in order to acquire their ships. After this event known as the kinslaying, the Noldor come upon a dark figure:

There they beheld suddenly a dark figure standing high upon a rock that looked down upon the shore. Some say it was Mandos himself, and no lesser herald of Manwë. And they heard a loud voice, solemn and terrible, that bade them stand and give ear. Then all halted and stood still, and from end to end of the hosts of the Noldor the voice was heard speaking the curse and prophecy which is called the Prophecy of the North, and the Doom of the Noldor. Much it foretold in dark works, which the Noldor understood not until the woes indeed after befell them; but all heard the curse that was uttered upon those that would not stay nor seek the doom and the Pardon of the Valar.  
‘Tears unnumbered ye shall shed; and the valar will fence Valinor against you, and shut you out, so that not even the echo of your lamentation shall pass over the mountains. On the House of Fëanor the wrath of the Valar lieth from the West unto the uttermost East, and upon all that will follow them it shall be laid also. Their Oath shall drive them, and yet betray them, and ever snatch away the very treasures they have sworn to pursue. To evil end shall all things turn that they begin well; and by treason of kin unto kin, and the fear of treason, shall this come to pass. The Dispossessed shall they be forever. Ye have spilled the blood of your kindred unrighteously and have stained the lands of Aman. For blood ye shall render blood, and beyond Aman ye shall dwell in Death’s shadow. For though Eru appointed you to die not in Eä, and no sickness may assail you, yet slain ye may be, and slain ye shall be: by weapon and by torment and by grief; and your houseless spirits shall come then to Mandos. There long shall ye abide and yearn for your bodies, and find little pity though all whom ye have slain should entreat for you. And those that endure in Middle-Earth and come not to Mandos shall grow weary of the world as with a great burden, and shall wane, and become as shadows of regret before the younger race that cometh after. The Valar have spoken’ (Tolkien, 2002, 95-96)

As mentioned earlier, in challenging Beren to acquire a Silmaril, Thingol was “ensnared within the curse of Mandos” when he “wrought the doom of Doriath”. This comes about because Thingol in that moment desires a Silmaril. Beren eventually acquires the Silmaril which then passes to Thingol. He is then drawn into the struggle for possession of the Silmarils and thereby becomes embroiled in the Doom of Mandos. The reason for Thingol ultimately bringing doom to Doriath then starts at the moment he challenges Beren to acquire a Silmaril, as his challenge is a result of his desire for the possession of a Silmaril. This accounts for how he comes to be ensnared by the doom of Mandos. This relationship by the curse and Thingol underlines how the curse is a force and people can come under the influence of it. We will explore curses in more detail below.

With regards to free will in a world with an omnipotent creator, Edmund fuller notes that:

It is a premise of Christian theology that man must cope with certain of his problems with all his own resources. There are things in which it is up to him to succeed or fail. Yet the Will of God, if not completed through one option, will complete itself through another […]. (Zimbardo and Isaacs, 2004, 23)

Does this mean that we must perceive free will as forks in the road that may go in different directions, but ultimately they all end up in the same place through fate and providence? If we go by the *Ainulindalë*, the Ainur saw the history of the world in Ilúvatar’s vision, which would therefore make the conclusion that everything is already “planned” an appealing one. However, this is problematic because of the gift given to Men by Ilúvatar: the virtue to shape their lives even beyond the music. Are these two concepts not at odds? Edmund fuller’s statement can also be expressed metaphorically where fate is a stream of water. If a character then is a leaf, fate governs that leaf’s ultimate destination, in that the stream of water will ultimately end in the same pool. But the stream can spread and a leaf can take a different path. Free will can then decide which path is taken, but fate still governs the overall destination. We may then choose to perceive Fëanor’s metaphorical leaf in the stream as travelling by a much more restrictive path than the metaphorical leaves of Men, as they have free will. But the extent of this free will is once again complex.

While Edmund Fuller draws on Christian theology to explain Tolkien’s legendarium, others (as seen in the chapter on Tolkien Scholarship) have argued that Tolkien’s background as a medievalist serves as a better lens through which to understand the inner workings of his legendarium. One such example is Kathleen Dubs, who uses the philosophy of Boethius, a 6th century philosopher. If we consider that Tolkien’s works are not overtly Christian, as no direct god-worship appears in his works, in fact, there is just about no religion present, it seems is fitting to draw on Tolkien’s background as a medievalist. This is also the case because of the numerous inspirations from early works we have covered. Kathleen Dubs uses Boethius’ *Consolation of Philosophy* as a way of illuminating the seemingly contradictory relationship between fate and free will, which we have already dealt with in some depth. *Consolation of Philosophy* is useful as it provides us with definitions that make us able to distinguish between the terms that would seem to be two words for the same idea: providence and fate.  
In her essay, Dubs claims both that Tolkien would have been aware of *Consolation of Philosophy* and that it serves as a useful range of ideas for Tolkien who was writing his own mythos. She also argues that Boethius thus became essential as Tolkien was writing an independent mythos and history (ed. Chance, 2004, 134). This is a point highlighted by other academics, namely Verlyn Flieger, who argued the interesting dynamic between fate and free will serves to separate Tolkien’s legendarium from other mythologies, as we shall see later.  
As mentioned above, Dubs uses Boethius to separate the terms providence and fate:

Providence is the divine reason itself, the unfolding of temporal events as this is present to the vision of the divine mind; fate is this same unfolding of events as it is worked out in time, as we perceive it in the temporal world. We as humans are unable to know providence. All we can know is fate. (Ed. Chance, 2004, 135)

She further notes that: “[…] providence, which rules all things, also governs fate, which is the earthly manifestation of that rule” (ed. Chance, 2004, 135). Fate, then, is what we or characters in a story are able to perceive. We are not able to perceive the great pattern (providence), but fate we are able to identify. The obvious parallel to draw in relation to Tolkien is in the vision Ilúvatar shows the Ainur. The overarching plan or order, as it were, is known to Ilúvatar and the Ainur. We may call this providence. The events as they unfold to the characters in Tolkien’s legendarium, then, we may call fate.   
But where does free will fit in? Dubs argues that Boethius’ and Tolkien’s view on free will are the same. She quotes Boethius’ view on free will:

You can indeed alter what you propose to do, but because the present truth of Providence sees that you can, and whether or not you will, you cannot frustrate the divine knowledge any more than you can escape the eye of someone who is present and watching you, even though you may, by your free will, vary your actions. (Ed. Chance, 2004, 137)

It would seem there is room for free will, but providence is aware of this happening. Dubs further argues that any contradiction’s in Tolkien’s legendarium are resolved by following Bothius’ example in being able to distinguish between:

[…] providence, which orders the universe; fate the temporal manifestation of that order; chance, that “fate” which occurs not according to our expectations, and for causes of which we are unaware; and, of course, freedom of will, which operates as part of this providential order (Ed. Chance, 2004, 141)

This description of free will as operating as a part of “providential order” is similar to Verlyn Flieger’s interpretation, as will be discussed below. Flieger summarizes the boethian philosophy very well, noting it “[…] reconciled human free will with God’s foreknowledge by postulating God as the foreknowing spectator of events whose vision takes in the future quality of man’s actions” (Flieger, 2002, 179).

In Tolkien’s texts, this question of free will becomes relevant in the story of Túrin as a curse is brought into play. Túrin’s father, Húrin, was captured by Morgoth and his children cursed:

The shadow of my purpose lies upon Arda, and all that is in it bends slowly and surely to my will. But upon all whom you love my thought shall weigh as a cloud of Doom, and it shall bring them down into darkness and despair. Wherever they go, evil shall arise. Whenever they speak, their words shall bring ill counsel. Whatsoever they do shall turn against them. (Tolkien, 2007, 64)

This quotation is obviously a curse, which further complicates the problem of fate and free will, as we have already identified curses as a force which can come to govern events in Tolkien’s Secondary World. The question is very much at the forefront of the story and is even referenced by the characters, as Túrin calls himself “Túrin Turambar”, meaning “Master of Doom”. Believing him dead, Túrin’s sister Niënor calls him “A Túrin Turambar turún ambartanen” meaning “master of doom by doom mastered”. The paradox should be tangible for everyone when expressed so.   
*The Children of Húrin* is a story in which every choice Túrin makes leads to disaster. However, as Tom Shippey points out, some of the circumstances under which Túrin makes a rash (and often disastrous) decision often seem to be governed by something other than chance or ill-luck. Generally, Túrin’s pride leads him astray (as will be explored further later), but the events leading up to these decisions do not seem random. Is this Morgoth’s curse at play? Men, as noted earlier, were gifted with free will, but the extent of this free will is unclear both in and of itself, but increasingly so when oaths or curses are also at play. Tolkien supplies us with a hint of sorts, when Túrin, having unknowingly taken the elf Saeros’ seat in the elven king Thingol’s hall, becomes embroiled in a harsh exchange of words, revolving around his sister and mother, whom Túrin feels he has abandoned. An elven spectator named Mablung rebukes Saeros, saying: “Indeed I feel that some shadow of the North has reached out to touch us tonight. Take heed, Saeros, lest you do the will of Morgoth in your pride […]” (Tolkien, 2007, 88). This quote can be read simply as Mablung saying that Saeros’ attitude is more befitting of Morgoth than of the elves. But with Morgoth’s curse known to the reader, the possibility that the curse is somehow behind the event is more appealing.   
Tolkien also provides the reader with a literal shadow of Morgoth, as we are told that a plague sent by him caused the death of one of Túrin’s sisters. By providing the reader with an example of a very literal shadow sent forth by Morgoth, Tolkien successfully makes the reader ponder whether or not his curse is actually at play. Christopher Tolkien mentions in the introduction to *The Children of Húrin* that his father suggested an alternative title “The Tale of the Curse of Morgoth” (Tolkien, 2007, 18). The title of any work should not be taken lightly, and the fact that Tolkien pondered the title Christopher mentions would seem to suggest that we should place some importance on the curse of Morgoth. With this additional information, we should perhaps place further weight on the degree to which Morgoth’s curse is at play.  
As noted by Shippey, the fact that Saeros should pick on Túrin’s sorest spot seems more than chance (Shippey, 2005, 300). However, free will does belong to men, but in this case we should perhaps see Túrin’s pride and rashness cause his tragic demise. We can consider that Túrin is free to react to the circumstances, but his inner being causes his less than optimal choices. It is also possible that Morgoth’s curse was behind the circumstances being what they were but time and again it is Túrin’s pride which causes him to make the wrong decision. However, in relation to the proposed alternate title mentioned earlier, Christopher quotes his father, from what would appear to be an early version of *The Children of Húrin*: “So ended the tale of Túrin the hapless; the worst of the works of Morgoth among Men in the ancient world” (Tolkien, 2007, 18). We should pay attention to the wording as Túrin is described as a work of Morgoth. This seems to imply that Túrin’s life was controlled, in some sense, by Morgoth. This lends further support to the idea that we should see curses as a force or power in Tolkien’s Secondary World.

Related to this freedom to react is the case of Fëanor. Verlyn Flieger is the author of this description as elves being “free to react”, as will be described below. As mentioned earlier, the light of the two trees survives in his Silmarils, who are then stolen by Morgoth. When Yavanna rejoices over Fëanor’s apparent “foresight” the Silmarils are not in possession of Fëanor, but have already been stolen by Morgoth, unbeknownst to anyone but Morgoth. The Ainur ask for Fëanor to surrender the Silmarils, which he in his possessiveness refuses: “This thing I will not do of free will.” (Tolkien, 2002, 84) We shall return to the paradox in this statement later. As pointed out by Verlyn Flieger, “[…] Tolkien’s point is neither the fate of the Silmarils nor the ultimate destiny of Fëanor, but rather his attitude and motives […].” She further notes that

“subsequent events or deeds would not be externally different, but the motives behind them could be different as could his attitudes toward himself, the Silmarils, and the peoples whose lives are intertwined by his.” (Flieger, 2002, 114)

It can definitely be argued that there is some truth in this. It is not a stretch of the imagination that Fëanor would have pursued Morgoth in search of the Silmarils if he *had* agreed to surrender them to the Ainur. But the motivations would have been different. Tolkien can be said to highlight this emphasis on motivation or moral choice. When Fëanor is asked to surrender the Silmarils, they are no longer in his keeping, as they have been stolen. That his decision to either give up the Silmarils or refuse has no practical relevance (because Morgoth now possesses them) serves to highlight that it is his motivations behind his choice which are important. Verlyn Flieger interprets Tolkien’s portrayal of Fëanor’s room to act as such: “[…] free will is more important as a factor in internal governance than as a determiner of external events” (Flieger, 2002, 115).  
We may also recall the prophecy via curse quoted earlier in this chapter. The curse of Mandos very much guides the plot of *The Silmarillion*. Ultimately, the curse springs from Fëanor’s oath and his Noldor kin’s decision to follow him. The oath in turn springs from Fëanor’s possessiveness and greed which is the impetus that fuels his quest to recover the Silmarils. If we view this in terms of Flieger’s idea that elves can respond well or badly to events, we may conclude that the curse of Mandos springs from Fëanor’s bad reaction to the theft of the Silmarils. It seems no big stretch of the imagination to say that the war wrought between the elves and Morgoth over the possession of the Silmarils would have happened anyway, but Fëanor’s reaction very much sets the tone and decides the nature of many lives in Middle-Earth.

This idea becomes interesting when Men are considered. It has already been mentioned that men have the gift of free will bestowed upon them. Túrin is a man, and his decisions cause havoc for himself, but also leads to the ruin of an elven kingdom, as he urges the ruler of Nargothrond (a secret underground elven kingdom) to abandon their secrecy and build a bridge so as to lead armies out. However, this ultimately also provides a route for invading armies to take Nargothrond, which does indeed lead to its destruction.  
We have to consider, then, if Tolkien was consistent in his portrayal of the difference in free will between Men and Elves. While there can be made a case for Fëanor’s decision to keep the Silmarils and how this is somewhat connected to interior consequences (in that his quest to reclaim them is fuelled by his own greed), we cannot know for certain if events would have happened differently if he would have agreed to hand them over. There does not seem to be a very big difference in how elves are free to react well or badly to events and how Men have free will. Perhaps the explanation should be found in the fact that *The Silmarillion* was published after heavy editing by Christopher Tolkien, as he never had complete texts to work with. As we know, Tolkien continued his process revising and rewriting until he died, and it should therefore come as no surprise that there are inconsistencies.

In accordance with the relationships described above, it is appropriate to provide an overview of the “forces” that govern the lives of the inhabitants in Tolkien’s secondary world. The Ainur were shown a vision of the history of the world, suggesting that fate is a useful concept in this worldview. Tolkien even worked on the so-called *Dagor Dagorath* outlining the end of the world, in which certain characters were to play a specific part. However, men are specifically stated as having free will, but how far this free will extends is somewhat unclear. Verlyn Flieger comments that elvish characters can respond to events how they choose, but their ultimate end is predetermined (Flieger, 2002, 140). Through oaths or curses the actions of characters are also impacted.

Verlyn Flieger is one of the frequent contributors to Tolkien Scholarship. In her essay “The Music and the Task: Fate and Free Will in Middle-Earth” in *Tolkien Studies VI* she examines the seemingly opposing forces in Tolkien’s secondary world. Flieger’s essay revolves around what happens when fate and free will intersect and how this can be said to make sense. This intersection she labels as a “green sun”, which is a term Tolkien used in his lecture “On Fairy-Stories”. It describes “[…] an element, a feature, or aspect intentionally contrary to the Primary World but essential and formative in the Secondary one” (Flieger, 2009, 152). With “On Fairy-Stories” in mind, we must then accept elements or aspects of a text which do not make any sense in our world as completely rational in the secondary world.   
Flieger then goes on to provide answers as to why Tolkien would deliberately create a secondary world where two forces are seemingly at odds with itself thus creating a paradox. Her reasons are threefold: The first reason is strategical. By creating a unique dynamic between fate and free will, Tolkien avoids (or at least delays) comparisons to more well-known mythologies. In other words, it seems new. This was also a key point in Kathleen Dubs’ argument. Flieger mentions the “creation by committee” as an example, where the world in Tolkien’s mythology is created through song by a group of angelic beings along with Ilúvatar, instead of the world being created by a single divine being. The second reason is personal. Flieger argues that as Tolkien began writing his texts that would eventually become *The Silmarillion* during and after World War I, his writings were influenced by his experiences during this war. A number of his closest friends died during this war, and therefore, Flieger argues (with reference to certain letters), that Tolkien thought about the death of his friends and if these were “destined” or “fate” (Flieger, 2009, 160). Thus, thoughts on why his friends had died could have led Tolkien to ponder whether things happened according to a divine plan and to do this in his fiction. Of course, as Flieger notes, this road of biographical criticism is dangerous, as one can easily place too great importance on certain events (Flieger, 2009, 161). However, we would be inclined to agree that it is no stretch of the imagination to claim that Tolkien’s experiences in World War I left traces in his fiction, especially because some of his texts were started around that time.  
The third reason Flieger calls sub-creative. According to Flieger, Tolkien

# […] was not designing an inter-office flow chart by which responsibility could clearly be traced from one department to another; he was creating characters and situations through which he hoped to show how confusing the complex interaction of competing but interactive forces can be to actors and beholders alike (Flieger, 2009, 164).

Clearly this intersection between fate and free will is meant to be confusing, according to Flieger. A deficiency with Flieger’s three reasons for Tolkien’s paradox of fate and free will lies in the third reason. It is poorly defined, and the connotations she wants to bring out by using “sub-creative” as a title also remain unclear.

Flieger also devotes pages in her book *Splintered Light – Logos and Language in Tolkien’s World* to treating fate and free will. As we have done above, she spends some time on the creation of the world through music. Flieger uses the idea of music as a metaphor, saying that “The Music will always have the same form, but how it is played […], whether fast or slow, *presto* or *andante*, is up to the performers” (Flieger, 2002, 115). This brings us back to the point raised earlier. While Flieger uses this metaphor to explain Fëanor’s room to act (he can respond well or badly), we would like to apply it to Men as well. If the music has a pre-defined end (or crescendo), does this not affect the scope of man’s free will? Just how different is Man’s free will from the scope in which elves can act or react?

To try to provide an answer, we can look at the Ainur. As stated earlier in this chapter, the dealings between Ainur and other characters are often cursory, and their dealings predominantly lie with the elves. There are instances where Ulmo, a spirit of water, shows up to guide Tuor (a man). But the Ainur live in Valinor with those of the elves who ventured across the sea. The elves that made the crossing from Middle-Earth to Valinor have seen the light of the two trees, and the elves who stayed behind have not. Men have, like the elves who stayed behind in Middle-Earth, not seen the light. This is but one way certain elven kin are different from men. This can be argued to account for their more frequent dealings with the Ainur. After all, the elves who saw the light lived together with the Ainur in Valinor, and some even stayed while some returned to Middle-Earth where the majority of the plot in Tolkien’s legendarium takes place. While it is not controversial to claim that the elves are more closely connected to the Ainur than men, the dealings of the Ainur are not restricted to elves. There are some dealings between Ainur and men in Tolkien’s legendarium.  
As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the Ainu called Ulmo has direct dealings with the man Tuor. The question of free will is once more relevant in this narrative arc, as Tuor is largely guided by Ulmo. Tuor, the cousin of Túrin, comes to play the part of an instrument in the will of Ulmo, as Ulmo delivers a message via Tuor to the elven king Turgon who resides in the hidden kingdom of Gondolin. In order to fully grasp Tuor’s role in this, we need to map out just how these events fit together in the grander scheme. Tuor is the son of Huor, Húrin’s brother. Tuor was born shortly after the battle in which Huor was slain and Húrin was taken captive by Morgoth and since then cursed. Tuor grew up in the foster-care of a group of elves, but was captured by a group of men in Morgoth’s service and became a thrall. Escaping his bonds, Tuor sets out to find the elven king Turgon, who escaped the battle in which Huor died and Húrin was captured. Tuor desires to seek Turgon out, as he is in Tuor’s father and uncle’s debt. Turgon has previously been made aware by Ulmo that a person will come to him from Nevrast (Turgon’s former dwelling). Turgon was therefore instructed by Ulmo to leave some weapons and armor, which Tuor found, as discussed in the beginning of this chapter. Ulmo informs him:

‘Thus it may come to pass,’ he said, ‘that the curse of the Noldor shall find thee too ere the end, and treason awake within thy walls. Then they shall be in peril of fire. But if this peril draweth nigh indeed, then even from Nevrast one shall come to warn thee, and from him beyond ruin and fire hope shall be born for Elves and Men’ (Tolkien, 2002, 146)

After finding arms and armour, Tuor encounters Ulmo on a beach, where he is instructed to seek out Turgon in Gondolin. Though this task set upon him by Ulmo is aligned with his own wishes, he is still an instrument of the Ainur. This becomes even clearer when Tuor finally reaches Turgon, as Ulmo speaks through Tuor, warning Turgon that the curse of Mandos was nearing its fulfilment and Turgon and his people should depart their lands.   
Turgon eventually refuses, and his kingdom is finally discovered by Morgoth and destroyed. Prior to this, however, Tuor weds Turgon’s daughter Idril, and the two of them escape the onslaught. Idril gives birth to their child, Ëarendil, who ultimately sails to Valinor to plead for the lives of the elves and men residing in Middle-Earth. The Valar hear his plea and overthrow Morgoth.  
What is interesting about this whole narrative strand from Tuor’s encounter with Ulmo to the Valar’s intervention is Tuor’s role in it. Ulmo’s prophecy to Turgon specifically stated that from Nevrast a person would come, and from him hope shall be born. As Tuor was guided both to the arms and armor left for him by Turgon and towards Turgon’s kingdom itself, it seems obvious that he is being helped on his way. Additionally, as Ulmo’s prophecy eventually comes to fruition, one can wonder just how much free will Tuor actually has. The prophecy comes true, as the deciding factor in the Valar’s decision to overthrow Morgoth comes from Ëarendil’s plea. Ëarendil would not have been born if Tuor had not made it to Gondolin. And seeing as Tuor was guided towards Gondolin by Ulmo, free will as such is hard to fit into this sequence of events. Even though Tuor’s desire is to reach Turgon, it would not have been possible had it not been for Ulmo’s (and thereby the Ainur and Ilúvatar’s) intervention. Furthermore, the prophecy by Ulmo is also strangely specific, as it foretells that hope shall be born “beyond ruin and fire”. As Turgon’s city of Gondolin is sacked by Morgoth with the aid of fire among other things, we can once more see that things are planned or at least foreseen (in this case by Ulmo).

We have now examined the different forces that govern the lives and fates of the characters in Tolkien’s secondary world. Tolkien’s description of the music that creates the world creates some problems with regards to free will. While it is described that free will was given as a gift to men, it seems hard to categorically deny that they are just as restricted in their room to act as elves, with perhaps only few nuances. In describing the music to the renegade Melkor, Ilúvatar states that: “[…] no theme may be played that hath not its uttermost source in me, nor can any alter the music in my despite” (Tolkien, 2002, 6). Verlyn Flieger connects this idea to one of Tolkien’s letters, where Tolkien talks of free will. “Within the confines of his Secondary World, Eru’s[[9]](#footnote-9) gift to humankind of free will is only “operative within provided circumstances,” that is, that have their “uttermost source” in him” (Flieger, 2002, 53). Once more this brings us to the problem of how men and elves are different with regards to free will. As quoted earlier, Fëanor’s refusal to give up the Silmarils involves the words “This thing I will not do of free will”. Whether intended or not, this brings up the question if Fëanor (and thereby elves) possess free will. We have already pointed to Flieger who claims the room to act for elves is confined just to react well or badly. That is, the elves can only alter their motivations. To Flieger, elves can only maneuver internally. But the difficulty in comprehending how this differs from Men becomes even greater when things such as curses or oaths are brought into play.   
As examined in the case of Túrin, Morgoth’s curse can be seen as highly limiting Túrin’s room in which to act. Tolkien’s suggested alternative title “The Tale of the Curse of Morgoth” further underlines the importance of this curse and how it plays a part in Túrin’s life, as previously mentioned.

Verlyn Flieger concludes that “[i]t is as if Tolkien intended his readers to be as much in the dark about the relative powers of fate and free will in his Secondary world as they are and always have been in the Primary one” (Flieger, 2002, 130). This argument is one we would concur with, and in this chapter we have provided a number of examples that underline the complex relationship between the forces (fate, free will, oaths, and curses) which are all at play (sometimes at the same time) in Tolkien’s Secondary World. Tolkien has successfully created a world in which the relationship between these forces is highly complex. Tolkien phrases key sentences in a way that leave them very open, and it seems impossible to create a hierarchy between the forces just mentioned. For instance, while Ilúvatar’s shows the Ainur a vision of the history of the world, Tolkien allows something else to happen, as “[…] in every age there come forth things that are new and have no foretelling[…]” (Tolkien, 2002, 6-7). Bluntly put, this seems to allow for anything to happen, and would seem self-contradictory. Free will has been examined in great depth, but Tolkien once more seems to allow for other powers to overrule that free will, as seen in the case of Túrin, where Morgoth’s curse seems to be a greater force than Túrin’s free will. So to conclude, this relationship between these forces is highly complex, and while it may also owe something to the fact that Tolkien never finished the texts, Flieger’s argument that the complexity of the relationships is intentional is one we choose to support.

# Tolkien and Morality

Examining morality as a thematic concept in Tolkien’s legendarium, even if said writings are not intended in any way as being read biographically, cannot be done without appreciating Tolkien’s relationship to theology. Morality is a key term in both religion and Tolkien’s writings, and despite this paper having little interest in biographical readings, one cannot ignore a key factor that is the basis for an important aspect in Tolkien’s work. Morality is prevalent in all Tolkien’s texts, though it only occasionally takes seat in the forefront of the narrative. We may look to Tolkien himself who, in one of his letters, stated that, “*The Lord of the Rings* is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision” (*Letters*, 172). This should quickly end the debate about whether the works are of religions nature. What is of interest at present, however, is the following quote by Tolkien, “[fantasy literature] must contain elements of moral and religious truth (or error)” (*Letters*, 144). Morality and religious conviction are tied together, and therefore we can quickly establish that gaining an understanding of morality in Tolkien’s texts will prove meaningless and fruitless if one does not take Tolkien’s personal background into consideration. It is no secret that Tolkien had a negative opinion of allegorical readings, as previously stated; however, the texts offering moral insight and being applicable in that sense is not impossible. It is a chief concern how the notion of morality becomes something applicable, and how this is represented in *The Silmarillion* (though employing examples from other texts is unavoidable and offers valuable perspective and insight). Generally, it is the heroes’ moral choices and deeds, rather than supernatural abilities, which make them ‘good’. Drout notes in his *J. R. R Tolkien Encyclopedia* that, “it is more important to strive for moral virtue than for military victory – better to lose a battle than to win it by doing evil” (Drout, 2007, 644). Furthermore, a number of specific moral virtues, found primarily in *The Lord of the Rings* but present in all Tolkien’s writings, are what shape the protagonists of the stories. The virtues are simplicity, generosity, hospitality, faith, sacrifice, wonder, trust, hope, submission and courage (Drout, 2007, 644). These are notions we may apply to characters, situations and deeds that enable us to gain an understanding of how and where morality becomes most important. Additionally, one aspect we must appreciate is that the children of Ilúvatar, that is, the children of the Creator, are given the Imperishable Flame, which grants the possibility of committing heroic deeds. In other words, it grants moral freedom. That is why, in Tolkien’s works, taking away someone else’s freedom is a grave moral wrongdoing since it goes against the will of God. This is closely tied with Morgoth, the antagonist, and stresses well exactly how significant it is when Morgoth wants to take away the free will of others and to dominate them. This is most directly what we can identify is a prime example of evil, and most (if not all) evil deeds in the texts are based on taking away other characters’ freedom or destroying what they created. Examining morality, therefore, might best start with an examination of the notion of evil.   
  
The notion of evil is naturally tied closely together with morality. Tom Shippey explores evil in relation to Tolkien in his *J. R. R. Tolkien: Author of the Century* book, and one major observation is the importance of Boethius, a sixth century Roman senator who was sentenced to death and waiting on death row while writing his *Consolation of Philosophy*. Shippey asserts that both Lewis and Tolkien must have been intimately familiar with Boethius’ writing, which concerns itself primarily with the notion of evil. The Boethian view is simple: according to it, there is no such thing as evil. Instead, what people call ‘evil’ is, in fact, merely the absence of good. Furthermore, people wrongfully identify evil things which seem to their disadvantage (like being on death row, as Boethian was) as evil, while in truth they are, in the great divine plan, to their advantage. C. S. Lewis supports this argument and contends that even people who do evil excuse their actions and try to rationalize them. Shippey paraphrases thus:

Even evil-doers are liable to excuse themselves in terms of what is good: breakers of promises insist that they do so because circumstances have changed, murderers claim that they were provoked, atrocities are excused as retaliation for earlier atrocities, and so on (Shippey, 2001, 131).

While this seems a fairly romantic take on the whole notion of evil-doing, one can understand the point. Whether an action is heroic or terrible often depends on which side of the struggle you are on, and, as is popularly asserted: history is written by the victors. Lewis himself goes on to say that, “in reality we have no experience of anyone liking badness just because it is bad” (Shippey, 2001, 131). As a whole, these arguments, as well as Boethian’s writing, are rather abstract. The whole concept, however, is undeniably apparent in Tolkien’s writings, as we shall see in the following examples. First we may look to a specific example borrowed from *The Two Towers*. Frodo has been paralyzed by the spider Shelob; Sam leaves Frodo after equipping the One Ring, lest he be captured by the approaching orc patrol and their whole quest be for naught. The orcs assume that a powerful elf warrior wounded Shelob and that is why Frodo is left alone, paralyzed and harmless. The orcs say the following about Frodo:

[Frodo] may have had nothing to do with the real mischief. The big fellow with the sharp sword doesn’t seem to have thought him worth much anyhow – just left him lying: regular elvish trick (Tolkien, 1991, 439)

What is noteworthy is that even the vile orcs can see the wrongness of abandoning a companion and declare it an “elvish trick” to do so. Even if the orcs’ moral compass is questionable at best, they do *have* a moral compass and that alone is significant. As noted, whether an action is evil or not depends on where you stand; to an orc, felling a tree would be a small thing, while to an elf it would be a grave sin. The morality of orcs warrants closer inspection as they fulfill an important role in the narrative. A reader does not, at any point, feel sympathy for the orcs. Their actions are vile, their appearance is disgusting and we learn next to nothing about them on a deeper, personal level. It is completely intentional that orcs are portrayed and used in this way, because they must serve as an enemy and represent the opposite of the moral good characters. The races of Men from the East and South are also introduced in Tolkien’s writings, and they, too, are evil. However, unlike the orcs, these men are offered forgiveness and the chance to atone for their actions. This, by default, places them in a different category from the orcs who are entirely incapable of escaping their immorality and always serve an evil lord. It is an interesting topic for discussion that, if we accept that as long as a character acts within what he considers “right”, he is, then, acting morally. Following this train of thought brings us to moral relativism, which, in the case of the orcs, is fascinating. As noted, morally sound behavior is relative to where you stand, and if the orcs believe that they are acting as they should, does that make them “good” within their own culture? In Tolkien’s world, of course, there is a divine idea of what constitutes morally unquestionable behavior which automatically disqualifies the orcs from being good by virtue of their alignment. While the evilness of e.g. Saruman was a choice based on his assumption that fighting Sauron was futile, the evil of the orcs appears to be innate and unalterable.   
  
Taking a step back and looking at Tolkien’s legendarium as a whole, there is an intriguing element of contrast present. The following is closely linked to two major ideas in Tolkien’s writings: nothing is created evil, and evil cannot create anything independently. Even in the earliest part of *The Silmarillion*, with the creation of Ëa, the universe, Ilúvatar created the world through his Music in a beautiful way. He himself also created all the Valar, including Melkor, who became Morgoth. Morgoth was not created evil but turned so due to his jealously and his overwhelming desire to rule. Morgoth stands in stark contrast to the Valar; where they create, he destroys. This relationship of opposites is persistent throughout all the texts and all the Ages. In *The Two Towers*, Treebeard remarks that, “But Trolls are only counterfeits, made by the Enemy in the Great Darkness, in mockery of Ents, as Orcs were of Elves” (Tolkien, 1991, 107). For Gandalf, there is Saruman. For the Elves, as noted, there are the orcs. In fact, the history of the orcs is in itself rather intricate; Tolkien himself had several different origins outlined for the orcs but never settled on one. The view present in *The Silmarillion* (Christopher presumably made a conscious choice on the matter) is that the orcs are corrupted elves, while other sources, such as *The History of Middle-Earth* and *The Book of Lost Tales*, imply or contain other theories. The race of Men has their counter in the Ringwraiths, who are corrupted by the power of the One Ring. Lastly there are the hobbits, whose opposite comes in the form of a single character: Gollum.   
Tolkien often employs the literary device of having two characters face similar dilemmas. This serves to contrast and highlight the right and wrong reaction to said dilemmas. For example, in *The Lord of the Rings*, the two characters Théoden and Denethor are in similar positions as they both rule large kingdoms and they both lose a son. But where Denethor breaks down and ultimately succumbs to insanity, Théoden uses the death of his son as a sort of motivation to keep fighting. Similarly, Denethor’s sons Boromir and Faramir face the same dilemma, as they are both confronted with the Ring. In this case, Boromir tries to seize the ring, while Faramir rejects it. Tolkien’s use of contrasts by using pairs therefore highlights the “right” decision of Faramir, because we see the fall of his brother Boromir as a result of his “wrong” decision. This device is also used in *The* *Silmarillion* as the characters Aulë and Fëanor both are faced with the choice to give up their prized creations. In light of what is described above, it comes as no surprise that they choose differently. Aulë the Smith is a Vala; one of the many sub-creators of Middle-Earth. Aulë, not unlike Melkor, appreciated craftsmanship, progress and the creation of things, both items but also life. Aulë creates the race of dwarves, but when Ilúvatar questions his act of creation, Aulë offers to destroy the dwarves, even though it would grieve Aulë to do so. Ilúvatar then becomes pleased because of Aulë’s humility and asks him to spare the dwarves. The inspiration for this dilemma most likely comes from the bible story of the Binding of Isaac, in which God asks Abraham to sacrifice his son, but after Abraham is about to comply, God stops him since God then has learned that Abraham fears God, and listens to him. Ilúvatar, in the same way, does not have Aulë destroy the newly created race of dwarves since Aulë repented his actions. Aulë is, however, not rewarded for creating the dwarves; the sin of the situation is that the dwarves were created before the Children – the elves – were set free in Middle-Earth. The dwarves must sleep, deep in the mountains, until after the elves have inhabited the world. This explains both why dwarves have a love of the underground and craftsmanship, and why the elves and dwarves have always had a strained relationship to one another; their mistrust for each other and differences are innate.   
Contrast Aulë’s situation to that of Fëanor, who creates the Silmarils, but is unwilling to give them up after the light of the Two Trees (which also lives in the Silmarils) is gone from the world. Aulë is willing to give up his creation in his humility, but Fëanor is not because of his greed and possessiveness. That these two characteristics largely lead Fëanor astray further serves to contrast Aulë and Fëanor’s decisions. Tolkien’s use of pairs making different choices thus highlights the morality of the actions of said pair. If the decision of Aulë had no counterpoint in Fëanor, it would not be as clear, as readers are shown just how far-reaching the consequences of Fëanor’s decisions are.

One early example of morality playing a big part comes in form of the deception of Sauron in the Second Age. The morally “good” characters in the setting are good through-and-through; that is, they have incredibly clear conceptions of what constitutes proper behavior and actions. If we look at contemporary fantasy literature, morality is tackled in an interesting way, with characters being ambiguous and the reader sometimes even struggling to agree with the protagonists. Sometimes, for instance, a character may have to do one evil deed to prevent an even more evil consequence if he hesitates. In Tolkien’s writings, morality is more straight-forward. In the Second Age, Sauron is overthrown and captured by the forces of good. He is brought to Amenelos, the capital of Númenor, to atone for his crimes and even brought to trial. A simple thing such as lying is what eventually incurs the downfall of Númenor; Sauron gains influence through deception and lies, and the mere idea of committing a moral fatality such as lying is so far from the minds of the Númenoreans that they cannot see through it and are doomed. The lie he created was concerning the mortality of men. Mortality is a gift from Ilúvatar, but Morgoth convinced men that the Valar feared them and that they should strive for immortality for themselves, like the elves have. The gift is explained thus in *The Silmarillion*:

It is one with this gift of freedom that the children of Men dwell only a short space in the world alive, and are not bound to it, and depart soon whither the Elves know not. […] For Elves die not till the world dies, 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; and dying they are gathered to the halls of Mandos in Valinor, whence they may in time return. But the sons of Men due indeed, and leave the world […] Death is their fate, the gift of Ilúvatar, which as Time wears even the Powers shall envy (Tolkien, 2002, 36)

The above is a powerful passage and explains well some of the differences between men and elves. Sauron succeeded in making men jealous of the elves’ immortality. He names the mortality of men a curse rather than a gift, and convincing men was probably easy since neither elves nor men fully understand mortality or what waits beyond death for the race of men. In fact, the Nümenoreans, who were most numerous and prosperous in the Second Age, were blessed with long life, and far outlived normal men. This, however, was not enough for them and they were envious of immortality:

Now this yearning [for immortality] grew ever greater with the years; and the Númenóreans began to hunger for the undying city that they saw from afar, and the desire for everlasting life, to escape from death and the ending of delight, grew strong upon them; and ever as their power and glory grew greater their unquiet increased. For though the Valar had rewarded the Dúnedain with long life, they could not take from them the weariness of the world that comes at last, and they died. […] And the Númenóreans began to murmur, first in their hearts, and then in open words, against the doom of Men, and most of all against the Ban which forbade them to sail into the West. (Tolkien, 2002, 315)

At this point in the history of Middle-Earth, the West was still a physical place one could travel to by boat; here the Valar lived and could potentially be approached, but it was forbidden for men to do so. Sauron had them believe that the secret to immortality lay there, and they grew jealous and hateful. Relating this to morality is incredibly interesting, especially (as we must) if we consider theology. The elves have a preordained path and know both their place in Middle-Earth and what waits after death. The moral error here, naturally, is jealously of the elves. The moral lesson is that not knowing the specific purpose of life is something men must live with and accept, yet still strive to live a morally sound, ‘good’ life. At this point, however, the Númenoreans are scared:

‘Why should we not envy the Valar, or even the least of the Deathless? For of us is required a blind trust, and a hope without assurance, knowing not what lies before us in a little while. And yet we also love the Earth, and would not lose it. (Tolkien, 2002, 316-17)

They fear death and the unknown, and just like religion requires blind faith on behalf of the believer before he is permitted into Heaven, so too is faith required of the men in Middle-Earth, since, “the mind of Ilúvatar concerning you is not known to the Valar” (Tolkien, 2002, 317). It is a powerful lesson, and one must appreciated how Tolkien did not offer any explanation as to what happens with men after death. This detail relates back to him being a self-proclaimed discoverer of legend, rather than an inventor of story; everything in *The Silmarillion* is, or was at some point, known by the characters of the stories and is not told by an outside narrator. It was all objective truth, or, in other words: it was simply history. This was one example of moral conundrum in Middle-Earth, but as we shall see, the issue of morality may be tackled in other ways.

Contemporary fantasy authors such as Joe Abercrombie and George R. R. Martin tackle morality in a significantly different way. They play with what is commonly referred to as ‘the moral grey zone’, where characters, both of good and bad alignments, wander into morally questionable areas. Often a character may have to commit an evil deed if an even more terrible consequence is to be prevented; other times, the protagonists simply cause havoc comparable to that of antagonists, and though the characters are still recognized as protagonists rather than antagonists, their deeds, indeed even their motives, are often questionable at best. This causes a shift in the perception of a “protagonist”; he is not necessarily a good character but simply *a* character, and whether he is good or not is secondary. A protagonist, then, is simply the character whose point of view we, as readers, follow but not instantly identify with.  
Part of the explanation, of course, is that there is a difference in sub-genre and, in extension, the overarching struggle of the narrative is (typically) moved from being epic quest-esque to personal stories with strong character focus. These are some key differences between the high fantasy genre (of which *The Lord of the Rings* is part) and the low fantasy genre, in which we follow the adventures of a single character, or perhaps a small group of characters.

It appears of little academic value to here reiterate and discuss whether or not Tolkien’s legendarium is a religious work. Much research has been done on the topic, and while details may (as they often are) be debated, Tolkien’s own faith and the fact that it *did* play a part in the making of Middle-Earth is undisputable. The degree to which it plays part, and where it is most prominent, may be of interest, not least when examining a concept such as morality. Taking a step back and looking at the foundation of *The Silmarillion*, Clyde Kilby addresses the relationship between general mythology and Tolkien’s myth for Middle-Earth:

There is no doubt of its general similarity in such archetypes as a creator, a creation, a “high” race and a hierarchy, protagonists and antagonists, a sense of doom, heroic undertakings, conduct measured in terms of moral law, and an ending with a new earth and heaven. (Kilby, 1976, 59)

The author goes on to comment that, to him, *The Silmarillion* is as much based on a “Biblical pattern” as it is based on mythologies. This is an interesting opinion due to the simple fact that Tolkien himself hesitated to call any of writings direct Christian works, but never hid his enthusiasm for mythologies and the influence they had on him. Furthermore, what is of immeasurable importance, and what relates back to Tolkien’s clearly stated opinion of allegories; he had no overarching scheme or idea, as it were, for neither his mythology, the development of his world or even his narratives. This is evidenced by the fact that the ring from *The Hobbit* only became the One Ring much later, when Tolkien started to conceive *The Lord of the Rings* and wanted to (wanted to, not had to) link the two narratives together. Furthermore, for instance, Tolkien did not know which role Strider would play in The Pranching Pony while writing *The Lord of the Rings*; the writing and development of the story was a continuous process. This is significant because other authors, such as C.S. Lewis, appear to have clear schematic plans for their narratives and structure their stories based exactly on those plans. Tolkien comments on this himself in a letter to Kilby:

Much of this is true enough – except, of course, the general impression (given almost irresistibly in articles having this analytical approach, whether by Christians or not) that I had any such ‘schema’ in my conscious mind before or during the writing (Kilby, 1976, 56)

We must direct our attention to his wording: the *conscious* mind, because Tolkien was undoubtedly aware that, without being overtly constructivist, an author’s background plays a role in his writings, whether he likes it or not, and whether he is conscious of it or not. Clyde Kilby puts it well when the he asserts that, “No doubt Tolkien would have agreed with C. S. Lewis’s conclusion that the deeper meaning of a story must rise from the writer’s lifetime spiritual roots rather than be consciously inserted” (Kilby, 1976, 56). Clearly C. S. Lewis, in prime part because of his religious conversion, quite consciously put direct Christian themes in his *Narnia* series. Still, however, the point stands and any Tolkien scholar would be hard pressed to disagree. That such themes and concepts are present in Tolkien’s writings stem from his “lifetime spiritual roots” and are not consciously inflicted upon the work, clearly defining “morality” naturally becomes somewhat difficult. One can only base the approach on the vague notions of Christian good-and-evil and look at *The Silmarillion* not as a work with religious themes, but as a work with different themes, some of which are more strongly associated with areas such as Christianity/mythology than others. The powerful love story of Beren and Lúthien, for example, was dear to Tolkien (so dear, in fact, that the names Beren and Tolkien are inscribed on his and his wife’s tombstones), but neither he, nor anyone else presumably, would claim that love is strictly a Christian, mythological or otherwise, theme.

The tale of Beren and Lúthien, which has many names but is simply called “Of Beren and Lúthien” in *The Silmarillion*, offers a venue for a thought-provoking discussion of morality. Here we find true ambiguity in Tolkien’s morality, not least because, unlike almost all the rest of *The Silmarillion*, the tale of Beren and Lúthien offers deeper insight into the motives of prominent characters that is not normally found throughout the book. The major reason is, as noted, that *The Silmarillion* is meant to be a compilation of “old” stories, which, due to its very nature, does not concern itself overly with deep-rooted motivations and desires but rather approaches stories on a more general level:

[…] ‘summary’ is exactly right, for *The Silmarillion* is a summary and was even designed to feel like a summary, a compilation made much later than the events by one looking back over a great gap of time. (Shippey, 2005, 293).

With Beren and Lúthien, however, the perspective is somewhat different, and the most striking deviation comes from Thingol, King of Doriath in the First Age, and father to Lúthien. The tale of Beren and Lúthien is a tale of love, though an unhappy one because Beren is of the race of Men and Lúthien is an elf. Her father, Thingol, approves not of their feelings for one another and devises a morally questionable plan to dispose of Beren without taking direct action himself. Thingol considers Men a lesser race compared to the elves, and cannot abide the idea of his daughter marrying a human but cannot directly say so. Thingol declares to Beren:

I too desire a treasure that is withheld. For rock and steel and the fires of Morgoth keep the jewel that I would possess against all the powers of the Elf-kingdoms. Yet I hear you say that bonds such as these do not daunt you. Go your way therefore! Bring to me in your hand a Silmaril from Mogoth’s crown; and then, if she will, Lúthien may set her hand in yours. (Tolkien, 2002, 197)

Beren calls this a “little price”. Truthfully, all who are present while Thingol speaks, and all who read the story, recognizes this hopeless quest as an attempt to commit murder. Stealing a Silmaril from the Crown of Morgoth is a hopeless endeavor, and this bargain is certainly unlike what one has come to expect of the wise, gracious and kind race of elves. Additionally, in this instance, Thingol’s actions are linked to his greed as well; we may think of the Silmaril’s as we think of the One Ring: a material good, a jewel, which is strongly desired by many, and this desire may even overshadow their capability to think rationally. Shippey puts it well when he writes, “[…] there may be a yet worse motive [than murder]; the sudden ‘desire’ for a Silmaril could contain a genuine impulse of greed beneath a calculated impulse of hatred” (Shippey, 2005, 296). Indeed, though Thingol appears to not be consciously aware of it yet, his desire for the material wealth of a Silmaril outweighs his love for his daughter and his compassion for a fellow inhabitant of Middle-Earth. From a moral standpoint that is certainly hard to defend, and shows well that even in a seemingly morally unambiguous universe such as Middle-Earth, morality is difficult to label simply black and white; there appears to always be shades of grey, in mere fact due to people’s different motivations and ambitions in addition to simple flaws of character.

The tale of Beren and Lúthien is one of heroism and love, presented as a myth. Morality, as we have seen, is in the forefront, and as Richard Purtill correctly observes, “One function of myth is to convey moral values” (Purtill, 1984, 45). How exactly these moral values are conveyed differs greatly, and sometimes the whole affair is rather vague. Tolkien himself stated that one purpose of his writing was:

[…] the encouragement of good morals in this real world by the ancient device of exemplifying them in unfamiliar embodiments, that may tend to ‘bring them home’” (*Letters*, 94).

This stresses the idea that morality is dealt with through various situations characters find themselves in, but de-coding the moral message is up to the reader. Tolkien presents the conundrum but what a reader gains from it on a philosophical level is up to the reader himself. For instance, the example above is a moral dilemma of one sort, but others exist; in the case of Bilbo in *The Hobbit*, for instance, the tale features Bilbo who at several points must match his physical courage to that of his moral courage. Despite his height and physical weakness, he is of good character and learns so himself throughout the story. Morality is explored somewhat differently in *The Silmarillion*, but the point nevertheless stands. Tolkien goes to great lengths when explaining the virtues of each individual, especially in the first part of *The Silmarillion*; elves who are the wisest, the most beautiful, the kindest and so on. Retaining these qualities in the face of hardship and evil is often difficult and the true moral dilemmas present themselves when things get rough. The above example with Thingol is one example, and another comes in form of the sons of Fëanor who swear an oath to regain their father’s lost Silmarils and, in consequence, end up committing terrible and immoral acts. Fëanor was described in the following way, which serves to prove just how significant he was:

For Fëanor was made the mightiest in all parts of body, in mind, in valor, in endurance, in beauty, in understanding, in skill, in strength and in subtlety alike, of all the Children of Ilúvatar, and a bright flame was in him. (Tolkien, 2002, 109)

Morally it is a terrible thing in Middle-Earth, when either beauty is lost or damaged, or a renowned character dies. The evil actions contained within *The Silmarillion* are often actions whose consequences are the destruction of beautiful creations. That is why the significance of the theft of the Silmarils cannot be overstated, and exactly how grievous a moral wrongdoing it is cannot be stressed enough. However, there is a flipside to that coin in the case of Fëanor and his Silmarils; as noted with Thingol, greed plays an important role and seems to cause immoral actions. The Silmarils are the most treasured and most beautiful of the elvish creations, but much destruction and death happened after they were lost and it could, for the most part, have been avoided if Fëanor (and his sons) let go of the Silmarils and their greed. Fëanor flatly refuses to give up the Silmarils, which are mere material possessions, however beautiful, and the consequences of this immorality are quite severe. For example, in their quest to regain the Silmarils, the sons of Fëanor commit the first ever murder of an elf by another elf. Early in the chapter, a list of ‘good’ character traits was mentioned. The evil ones (or ‘deadly sins’) are as follows: pride, envy, sloth, anger, gluttony and lust, all of which are obviously closely tied to Christianity. We may find a Christian reading of Fëanor’s situation in *Tolkien: Myth, Morality and Religion*, in which Purtill notes that, “Thus Fëanor acts out to some extent the role of Adam, who brought evil into the world by disobedience” (Purtill, 1984, 115). The Christian reading suggests that though free will exists, there is a predefined purpose for life, and Fëanor, by exploiting his free will and acting outside of the given plan (or his given role) brings about chaos and unhappiness for himself and others:

In *The Silmarillion*, it is made clear that our destinies are given to us by God, and that our choice is whether to freely accept those destinies and be happy or to reject those destinies and be unhappy. This is made very clear in the story of Fëanor, the creator of the Silmarils. (Purtill, 1984, 122).

Fëanor was meant to create the Silmarils, just like Bilbo was meant to find the One Ring in *The Hobbit*. The Silmarils were created from the life of the Two Trees of Valinor, Telperion and Laurelin, but the trees were destroyed by Morgoth and their essence lost. One of the Valar, Yavanna, can repair the damage done if she is given the last remaining Silmaril, which is in Fëanor’s possession:

The Light of the Trees has passed away and lives now only in the Silmarils of Fëanor. Foresighted was he! Even for those mightiest under Ilúvatar there is some work which they may accomplish only once, and once only. The Light of the Trees I brought into being, and within Eä I can do so never again. Yet had I but a little of that light I could recall life to the Trees, ere their roots decay: and then our hurts should be healed and the Malice of Melkor confounded. (Tolkien, 2002, 83)

The trees mean exceptionally much to the elves and healing them would be a great deed. It would, however, cause Fëanor much pain since he would lose the last Silmaril. He would have to sacrifice a lot; more than he is willing to. This is reminiscent of Frodo in *The Return of the King*, where he can end the struggle by sacrificing something dear to him: the One Ring. Frodo is ultimately unable to (though how the Ring affects the bearer psychologically naturally plays a great part here. Fëanor fails for a different reason), just like Fëanor is unable to part willingly from his Silmaril. Fëanor’s response to Yavanna is this:

For the less even as for the greater there is some deed he may accomplish but once only; and in that deed his heart shall rest. It may be that I can unlock my jewels, but never again shall I make their like: and if I must break them I shall break my heart […] (Tolkien, 2002, 84)

The significance of this statement is only amplified by the fact that elves, as noted, may die from heartbreak and longing. There are numerous examples of elves dying from grief in the Early Days, which makes the breaking of a heart a strong proclamation. Fëanor’s possessiveness gets the better of him, though, unfortunately, it is ultimately irrelevant what he chooses since he learns that the last Silmaril has been stolen by Melkor. The story of is Fëanor is interesting for several reasons, though primarily because the focus of this paper is a thematic analysis of *The Silmarillion*, and here we find multiple themes. Fëanor needs to choose between himself and others; in other words, to either make a sacrifice himself or cause the suffering of others. Purtill notes concerning this:

They [elves] can also be moved by pride, envy, and anger. Possessiveness for the Silmarils, envy of the Valar, anger at his father’s death, and a pride that will not admit his own limitations all go into Fëanor’s fall. (Putill, 1984, 124).

The moral lesson Tolkien seems to instil here is that one evil deed potentially causes disaster and an avalanche of evil deeds in return. Had Fëanor chosen the morally ‘correct’ choice, there would not have been murder of elf by elf, treachery and other negative consequences, though Fëanor himself would suffer. If we again compare the fate of Fëanor to that of Frodo, we quickly see that Frodo did fulfill his given task; had he not, evil would have prevailed and the Free Peoples of the World[[10]](#footnote-10) cast down and defeated. The suffering of one for the benefit of the many is reminiscent of Christ, of course, and as already noted morality and religion are closely connected in Tolkien’s worldview:

Morals should be a guide to our human purposes, the conduct of our lives: (a) the way in which our individual talents can be developed without waste or misuse; and (b) without injuring our kindred or interfering with their development. (Beyond this and higher lies self-sacrifice for love.) (*Letters* pp. 399-400)

There are multiple elements here which are closely connected to Fëanor: he wanted to (and did) develop his talents and the creation of the Silmarils was the work of his life. He put everything he had into that creation, and therefore would feel that it would be a ‘waste’ or ‘misuse’ if he simply abandoned the Silmarils or gave them over to Yavanna so she could bring life back into *her* creation, which were the Trees of Valinor. Where Fëanor commits a moral error, however, is when his love for his creation ends with him ultimately injuring, even killing, fellow kindred. His pride was his downfall, and just like losing a war fairly is better than winning a war through unfair means, suffering yourself for the greater good is a moral virtue.

# Túrin Turambar and Morality

Analyzing *The Children of Húrin* must have its starting point at the Finnish *Kalevala*, because in it we find the tragic tale of Kullervo which heavily influenced and inspired Tolkien, and which became the basis for *The Children of Húrin*. Kullervo is a tragic hero in the *Kalevala*, and wastes his great potential; he is raised badly and ends up vengeful, ignorant and immoral and much of the story is directly mirrored in *The Children of Húrin*. There is much evidence for the link between the two stories. In a 1914 letter to Edith Bratt, Tolkien mentions how he is working on a story based on a tale from the *Kalevala*:

Amongst other work I am trying to turn one of the stories – which is really a very great story and most tragic – into a short story somewhat on lines of Morris’ romances with chunks of poetry in between. (*Letters*, 7)

The date shows how early the work began, and the letter implies well how much Tolkien appreciated the *Kalevala*. The work continued for a long while, and in 1955 Tolkien reflects back on the early work of *The Silmarillion* and writes:

I mentioned Finnish, because that set the rocket off in story. I was immensely attracted by something in the air of the Kalevala […] But the beginning of the legendarium, of which the Trilogy is part (the conclusion), was in an attempt to recognize some of the Kalevala, especially the tale of Kullervo the hapless, into a form of my own. (*Letters*, 214).

This, then, makes it unsurprising that the tone and construction of *The Children of Húrin* is much like that of classic myths, and that the fate of Húrin mirrors that of Kullervo; Tolkien simply wanted, as he plainly states, to make it into “a form of my own”. Lastly, Tolkien again refers to the work in a 1964 letter, in which he again states how the story of Túrin is a “major matter” in the First Age:

The germ of my attempt to write legends of my own to fit my private languages was the tragic tale of the hapless Kullervo in the Finnish *Kalevala*. It remains a major matter in the legends of the First Age (which I hope to publish as *The Silmarillion*), though as ‘The Children of Húrin’ it is entirely changed except in the tragic ending. (*Letters*, 345)

The story of Túrin Turambar cannot be ignored when discussing major themes in *The Silmarillion*; the story is full of events, characters and deeds which enable us to understand the different concepts and themes present in *The Silmarillion* considerably better. Fortunately the tale of Túrin has been re-released into the 2007 stand-alone book *The Children of Húrin* (definitely one of the less-redundant re-releases bearing Tolkien’s name) and is now not only an entry in the compendium that is *The Silmarillion*. Pride is one of the biggest themes in this story, indeed in the entire *The Silmarillion*, starting, in fact, with the downfall of Melkor; it was his pride that led to him becoming evil and turning into Morgoth. Pride is also the prime vices of the Seven Deadly Sins, and:

Tolkien’s criticism [of pride] explores the tragic irony of noble characters’ self-defeat through errors in judgment attributable to pride; characters in his fiction exemplify the theme of pride as excessive confidence, often accompanied by rash or self-centered behavior, usually with tragic consequences. (Drout, 2007, 534)

The citation puts it eloquently and describes well the story of Túrin; in short, errors of judgment and the fatal character flaw of pride, plus extreme overconfidence and mistrust, ultimately causes his death after having lived a sad, cursed life. According to Drout in his *J. R. R. Tolkien Encyclopedia*, Tolkien was intimately familiar with the poem *The Battle of Maldon*, in which the protagonist Beorhtnoth is ‘powerful, fearless and proud’ (Drout, 2007, 543). The unsurprising downfall of Beorhtnoth was arrogance which led to him yielding too much ground to the enemy; he dies and his army is utterly defeated. It is an interesting perspective, because in small doses, the desire for honor and glory is respected and often regarded as morally sound virtues. If taken to their extreme, however, one is blinded by them and instead of actions being honorable, arrogance and overconfidence suddenly become major aspects of a hero’s character. There are numerous tragic heroes throughout the history of Middle-Earth. In *The Hobbit*, the dwarf king Thorin dies in the Battle of Five Armies because of his refusal to parlay with the men; Feanor’s story has been covered but is another example; the destruction of Númenor was due to pride and a hunger for more power. In *The Lord of the Rings*, Boromir and Denethor are classic examples, though Boromir’s downfall is primarily caused by the overwhelming influence of the One Ring. Though, even before the Ring has corrupted Boromir entirely, he is still skeptical of hobbits; in fact, he considers Gondor both a beacon of society and of hope, which is why he insists that power should rest with the men of Gondor.   
In *The Children of Húrin*, the protagonist Túrin must learn to subdue his pride and be free of it, lest he die. *The Children of Húrin* is, just like *The Lord of the Rings*, at this point a fully completed narrative with a beginning and an end. That alone differentiates it from much of the rest of *The Silmarillion*, though we see the same recurring themes and overall structure, unsurprisingly. Where the tale of Túrin becomes complex is when the nature of his fate (or doom) is introduced, and it is up to Túrin to adjust to his situation and make morally correct choices. However, what a reader quickly learns, and what Túrin learns as well, is that we never know everything and may only act based on what we do know. At all times in the story, vital information is hidden from Túrin, or simply unavailable and/or ignored, which always causes immense harm and grief in the end. The first issue to consider is this: if we accept that any human can only act based on what he knows and what he believes to be right, according to his own moral compass, can he be blamed for acting in what may seem an immoral way? Several of the terrible situations Túrin finds himself in are because of a lack of knowledge or bad luck, typically, and not because he is evil. As we shall see, sometimes Túrin does act questionably, or is simply unlucky, but within the Middle-Earth universe, he is not an evil character and always acts based on what he believes to be morally right. Here we are reminded of the orcs, who, as noted, also are subject to their own interpretation of what is right. Analyzing this story without writing overly much about Fate and Doom, which is done in the “Fate and Free Will” section in this paper, is somewhat difficult; we may draw logical conclusions based on what happens in the story and based on what we know of its context, but it must be stressed that the major themes of *The Children of Húrin* are Fate and Doom, and how inescapable Túrin’s fate is.   
Be that as it may, morality does play a role, as it does in all Tolkien’s texts. First we must establish context: Túrin’s father, Húrin, is captured by Morgoth, and because Húrin dares mock Morgoth a curse is placed upon him and his family; they will suffer ill-luck for the rest of their lives, and Húrin himself is Doomed to sit in Angband, Morgoth’s fortress, and watch the fate of his family, powerless to stop it. The first instance of pride we must examine is the outfall between Saeros the elf and Túrin; Saeros believes that men should be kept out of the city of Doriath, where Túrin is staying with Thingol, King of Doriath and his foster father. Saeros insults Túrin, which eventually leads to a confrontation initiated by Saeros who wants to stab Túrin from behind, but Túrin overpowers Saeros, strips him naked and forces him to run through the forest while Túrin is chasing him. Saeros, in panic, attempts to leap over a gorge but fails and falls to his death. The moral fatality on the part of Túrin is refusing to return to Doriath and face trial for what happened. A witness saw the whole ordeal, but Túrin, in his pride, would rather become an outcast and leave his life behind instead of facing potentially uncomfortable consequences. As it turns out, however, Túrin’s choice was (of course) the wrong one, as Saeros was in the wrong (as the witness could prove) and, as is later revealed, Thingol would have spared him anyhow. The witness, Mablung, comments on Túrin’s pride himself when trying to persuade him to return to Doriath instead of fleeing:

‘Your words are too proud,’ said Mablung, though he pitied the young man. ‘Learn wisdom! You shall not turn runagate. I bid you return with me, as a friend. And there are other witnesses. When the King learns the truth you may hope for his pardon.’ (Tolkien, 2007, 91)

The whole passage is reminiscent of much of the story: Túrin is often advised on matters but ultimately always only listens to himself. It also shows well how different the story is compared to many of the stories of *The Silmarillion*. In *Of Beren and Lúthien*, for instance, their actions are not predestined by a curse, or Fate, and they have the power to exercise free will in a manner much different than what Túrin can. Túrin may think he has free will, but the circumstance of his life naturally changes this drastically. This also means that analyzing the tale of Túrin from a purely morality-oriented perspective becomes somewhat futile, in that morality is dependent on the actions of free beings. That is why we must focus on character faults such as pride, which is very much part of morality. *Of Beren and Lúthien* continues to be relevant, for Túrin is compared to Beren by Nellas, a witness to the fight between Túrin and Saeros. When she gives her testimony to Thingol, she speaks thus:

‘Even Lúthien! And of her I was thinking that morning, and of Beren the Man.’ […] For Túrin reminded me of Beren,’ she said at last. ‘They are akin, I am told, and their kinship can be seen by some that look close.’ (Tolkien, 2007, 94)

Beren and Túrin were both great warriors and elf-friends, which is why they remind Nella of one another. The difference lies in what has already been explained: Beren’s free will, and Túrin’s curse. Additionally, Beren was the first man to form a romantic relationship with an elf, and at that is not little thing; even thousands of years later, in the Third Age, Aragorn’s relationship to Arwen is meaningful and rare. Beren was in many ways a classic hero, however, unlike Túrin, who is full of pride and often borderline evil. Túrin, after abandoning Doriath, joins (and eventually leads) a band of outlaws and survives on the edges of society. There are few men throughout the history of Middle-Earth which one can classify as being without significant character faults. Jonathan Evans remarks that the race of men is, “a race of beings for which power, especially political power, provides overwhelmingly seductive temptation” (ED Chance, 2003, 213), and there are numerous examples of this being true. This, naturally, only mirrors how humans function in the real world, and we are reminded of an earlier point: one must live to the best of one’s abilities, striving to make morally sound decisions and act wisely within one’s capabilities. None of the characters are perfect, but nevertheless Middle-Earth is full of heroic deeds, and moral virtue often comes in form of acting despite one’s short-comings and stepping up to the challenge, whereas to succumb to Darkness, which is present in all the Ages, is a moral fatality.   
This is all related to the Fall of Man, both a biblical story but also significant in other ways. Firstly, an important point in Jonathan Evan’s “The Anthropology of Arda: creation, theology, and the race of Men” is that, according to Tolkien, a prerequisite to any good story is the presence of evil. Furthermore, it is noted that Tolkien considers it a truth that humanity is ‘fallen’, “When Tolkien declares that there “cannot be any ‘story’ without a fall”, he means, of course, that all stories must reflect what for him is the essential truth about humanity: it is fallen” (Ed. Chance, 2003, 217). The citation from Tolkien is from a 1950 letter to his publisher:

In the cosmogony there is a fall: a fall of Angels we should say. Though quite different in form, of course, to that of Christian myth. These tales are ‘new’, they are not directly derived from other myths and legends, but they must inevitably contain a large measure of ancient wide-spread motives or elements. After all, I believe that legends and myths are largely made of ‘truth’, and indeed present aspects of it that can only be received in this mode; and long ago certain truths and modes of this kind were discovered and must always reappear. There cannot be any ‘story’ without a fall – all stories are ultimately about the fall – at least not for human minds as we know them and have them. (*Letters*, 147)

So it is established that stories must contain an element of truth and a fall. There certainly is a fall in all of Tolkien’s stories, though the way in which the fall exactly happens differs. Tolkien suggests that we would not understand or recognize a story without the fall, and in the case of Túrin the fall is obvious; indeed, we know he will fall from the very beginning when the fate of this father is revealed, and the curse on his family is explained. The relationship Tolkien had to both religion and mythology makes it no surprise that such a theme is in the forefront of the narrative; much of his work is inspired by mythology, though sometimes the similarities are more obvious than other times. Much of *The Silmarillion* has strong aspects of classic mythological texts, whereas stories such as *The Hobbit* operate in a different way. Túrin is a typical tragic hero, a literary device often employed in myths, most notably in the form of the famous Oedipus story.   
It is noteworthy how Tolkien always strived to create a mix of philosophy, under which morality naturally plays an important role, and storytelling. Often a work is either/or: either a work is heavily philosophical but with the adventure in the background or the adventure is in the very forefront but then lacks philosophical depth. Tolkien himself commented on this in a 1938 letter to Stanley Unwin:

But I should have said that the story had for the more intelligent reader a great number of philosophical and mythical implications that enormously enhanced without detracting from the surface ‘adventure’. I found the blend of *vera historia* with *mythos* irresistible. […] The underlying myth is of course that of the Fall of the Angels […]. (*Letters*, 33).

It is no surprise that Tolkien appreciated stories, especially the fantastic kind. He did feel, however, that much of what he read in the then recently-dubbed ‘science fiction’ or ‘fantasy’ genre was bland and unable to hold his attention, “I read quite a lot – or more truly, try to read many books (notably so-called Science Fiction and Fantasy). But I seldom find any modern books that hold my attention (*Letters*, 32). Which is why Tolkien would often return to old mythologies since those stories have an incredible depth to them. It is an interesting coincidence that what Tolkien sought so desperately in the genre he most appreciated, he himself managed to create seemingly without even contemplating doing it in another fashion. Purtill comments on Tolkien’s (and Lewis’) ability to blend philosophy and story based on the above letter:

This letter forms an interesting commentary on what Tolkien himself tried to accomplish and did accomplish in *The Lord of the Rings*: “philosophical and mythical implications that enormously enhanced without detracting from the surface ‘adventure’ […] are descriptions of Tolkien’s best work as well as Lewis’s. In fact, Tolkien’s work and Lewis’s are almost unique in the successful blending of these elements. There is plenty of science fiction that has philosophical elements, plenty of fantasy with mythical elements, but the blend of all three is rare. (Purtill, 1984, 39)

Though Purtill comments on *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien no doubt still attempted to mix these elements in his other stories as well. Naturally one may question whether he succeeded with *The Silmarillion* in the same sense that *The Lord of the Rings* was a success, given how drastically different the styles of the two books are. Arguments could be made that the story, or adventure, is not in the forefront of *The Silmarillion*; that it is not as readable and therefore lacking on the surface ‘adventure’ level. In the case of *The Children of Húrin*, however, one would be hard pressed to argue that it has neither philosophical depth nor a compelling story. Whether one likes the given story is less important. Referring back to Dostoyevsky’s authorship, his stories cannot in good conscience be criticized for lacking philosophical depth, and he is often praised for mixing complex themes with engaging stories. However, whether one appreciates the stories themselves is a matter of taste. The same is true for Tolkien and the tale of Túrin.

Lastly, there is the matter and manner of Túrin’s death. As noted in the beginning, the inspiration for *The Children of Húrin* came from the *Kalevala*, and especially the tragic ending of Kullervo is what Tolkien took to heart, and Túrin suffers the same fate. In short, Kullervo realizes much of the sadness and agony his actions have caused. Like with Túrin, Kullervo’s sister commits suicide and much innocent blood is shed by Kullervo’s sword, which, like Túrin’s sword, is able to speak to him. Kullervo becomes self-destructive and suicidal after his eyes have been opened to the damage he has caused, and he says to his sword that it now has shed much innocent blood and will now shed guilty blood as well. The sword replies thus:

Thus his trusty sword makes answer,  
Well divining his intentions:  
Why should I not drink thy life-blood,  
Blood of guilty Kullerwoinen,  
Since I feast upon the worthy,  
Drink the life-blood of the righteous? (Crawford, 2004, 360)

After which Kullervo throws himself onto the sword and dies, exactly like Túrin does. Túrin, too, has a conversation with his sword before dying:

Then he drew forth his sword, and said: ‘Hail Gurthang, iron of death, you alone now remain! But what lord or loyalty do you know, save the hand that wields you? From no blood will you shrink. Will you take Túrin Turambar? Will you slay me swiftly?’

And from the blade rang a cold voice in answer: ‘Yes, I will drink your blood, that I may forget the blood of Beleg my master, and the blood of Brandir slain unjustly. I will slay you swiftly.’ (Tolkien, 2007, 256)

Though the details of the stories are different, the inspiration for *The Children of Húrin* is apparent, which is a testament to how much influence mythologies such as the *Kalevala* exactly had on Tolkien.

After inspecting Túrin it is valuable to return to Beren, since Beren in many ways is the opposite of Túrin when it comes to moral virtue. One must stress vigilantly that a major factor is the curse of Morgoth on Túrin’s life; Beren does not operate under the same conditions and is therefore more ‘free’, despite the fact that, “a great doom lay upon him” (Tolkien, 2002, 193). Be that as it may, Beren is in many ways still a morally sound and free character. We examined earlier, briefly, the story *Of Beren and Lúthien* in which we saw how Thingol tried to have Beren killed. Beren, facing the almost impossible task of acquiring a Silmaril from the crown of Morgoth, still rose up to the occasion and acted soundly based on his own moral codex. One grand moral virtue is that of courage, and Beren is nothing if not courageous. The significance of the sons of Fëanor’s oath to regain the lost Silmarils at any cost cannot be overstated; in fact, Celegorm and Curufin, two of Fëanor’s sons, say the following when they learn of Beren’s quest to regain a Silmaril and bring it to Thingol in return for Lúthien’s hand:

Be he friend or foe, whether demon of Morgoth, or Elf, or child of Men, or any other living thing in Arda, neither law, nor love, nor league of hell, nor might of the Valar, nor any power of wizardry, shall defend him from the pursuing hate of Fëarnor’s sons, if he take or find a Silmaril and keep it. For the Silmarils we alone claim, until the world ends. (Tolkien, 2002, 199)

In the face of this, Beren shows courage and does not even contemplate ending his quest. Love is the moving force, as well as determination and Beren is a hero in the classic sense, unmoved and unaffected by opposition, great or small. Though while Túrin’s fate is ruled by the curse upon his family, Beren’s fate is closely tied with the quest for the Silmaril, and it ends up claiming his life. Much more could be said about *Of Beren and Lúthien*, but focusing on Beren as a moral character, the affair is relatively simple since Beren in every way embodies a moral hero. The best example of this in the story itself comes after Beren’s hand has been bitten off and he is nursed back to health by Lúthien; they spend time in the forest, alone, undisturbed by forces of evil or Lúthien’s parents. However, Beren swore an oath that he would not claim Lúthien as his own unless his quest is fulfilled. He stays true to his oath while Lúthien, “was willing to wander in the wild without returning, forgetting house and people and all the glory of the Elf-kingdoms” (Tolkien, 1977, 216). Breaking an oath is a grave thing in Tolkien’s universe, as we have seen, and the mere thought does not enter into Beren’s mind.

[H]e could not for long forget his oath to return to Menegroth, nor would he withhold Lúthien from Thingol for ever. For he held by the law of Men, deeming it perilous to set at naught the will of the father, save at the last need; and it seemed also to him unfit that one so royal and fair as Lúthien should always live in the woods[...] (Tolkien, 2002, 216).

So despite having the option of remaining in the forest and potentially living a happily-ever-after, Beren is bound by his word to return to Thingol and does so voluntarily and without hesitation. It speaks volumes of his moral compass, though it must be pointed out that *The Silmarillion*, unlike *The Lord of the Rings*, features larger-than-life characters with whom a reader is rarely supposed to identify with. In that sense they are not classic protagonists, but function as pieces in the stories which teach moral behavior.

Another example of a hero going above-and-beyond comes in form of the man Eärendil, who lived a few generations after Beren and Lúthien. In fact, he married Elwing, who was daughter of Dior the son of Beren. Eärendil was a sailor and fond of exploring. The virtues of Eärendil are many, but his main achievement comes in form of being the first human to sail to Valinor and ask the Valar for help. Middle-Earth was at this point at terrible war with Morgoth, and they were losing. Both elves and men were at risk of perishing entirely unless something drastic happened, and so Eärendil took it upon himself to seek out the Valar and beg for aid. “Here [Valinor] none but myself shall set foot, lest you fall under the wrath of the Valar. But the peril I will take on myself alone, for the sake of the Two Kindreds” (Tolkien, 2002, 298). He refers to the ban on men to sail to the West, but he is desperate and therefore risks death (or worse) just for a chance at saving the Two Kindreds: the elves and the men. It is an incredible, selfless act that speaks volumes about his moral equity. The Valar, too, recognized this fact, and Manwë spoke thus, “In this matter the power of doom is given to me. The peril that he ventured for love of the Two Kindreds shall not fall upon Eärendil (Tolkien, 2002, 299). His act is appreciated as entirely based on love and fear for the future of all the races, not just his own. Unlike Fëanor, Eärendil puts himself last and is willing to sacrifice everything, even his life, for the greater good.

What, then, have we learned of morality in Tolkien’s writing? As shown, morality did weigh heavily on Tolkien’s mind and he wanted to impart lessons on the reader. Using contrasts, Tolkien shows how there is a ‘right’ and a ‘wrong’ way to act, especially when the matter at hand concerns more than merely yourself; the stories of Fëanor and Aulë most clearly stress this.   
While we have established that though morality often works in a fairly straight-forward way, there do exist moral grey zones which complicate matters slightly. The story of Beren and Lúthien in which Thingol attempted to indirectly cause murder is one example of this. Technically Thingol does nothing directly to Beren, but the consequences of his words and actions which almost cost Beren his life (and did cost him his hand) are entirely questionable. That Tolkien’s moral compass was inspired by the Bible appears evident. Strong proof of this is again the Fëanor/Aulë contrast and the biblical reference in Aulë’s story.   
When it comes to alignment and good and bad characters, Tolkien’s work is fairly straight-forward. No larger-than-life heroic character ever switches side, and the same is true for evil characters. The biggest upset in this regard is the story of Saruman, but there are, in fact, no accounts of him being good; we may only assume, due to Gandalf’s former friendship with him, and the fact that he is an Istari, that he used to be uncorrupted.

# On Change and Elves and Men

As reader, one certainly wonders at Elves and Men; their relationship with one another and the wondrous relationship Tolkien seemed to have with elves. Fairest, wisest of all and undying; the elves seem the pinnacle of life and embody what one should strive to be: gracious, kind, festive, morally sound and a role model (of a sort). They are, however, not without fault and the ways in which they are different from Men warrants examination, for though Tolkien did favor Elves, Men play their own part and are a good example of “perhaps not better or worse, simply different”. From an academic standpoint, no doubt could one examine how this relates back to old mythologies. However, what is of interest here is rather how this relationship relates to movement and change in Middle-Earth, and how the laws that govern the macrocosm and microcosm are laws that are, indeed, subject to change. Ilúvatar is imbued with the capability to change Middle-Earth. As is eloquently noted in Verlyn Flieger’s *Splintered Light* Middle-Earth is subject to ebb and surge, advance and retreat, and Eru is the prime mover (Flieger, 2002, 170). It seems evident that while Tolkien often did seem rather nostalgic in his writings, especially when appreciating The Shire and its resemblance to rural England, his position on change, generally speaking, is that change, while not always for the better, is undoubtedly and unavoidably necessary. One can only go with the flow, as it were, both on a personal and individual level, but also on a grander level.

The nostalgic and oftentimes sad tone of beauty fading is apparent is almost all the texts, from the early Ages where the first creations by the Valar fade (or are destroyed by Morgoth), to the Silmarils which are lost; to the Second Age and the loss of Numenor, to the Third Age (which grants a number of examples from *The Lord of the Rings*), where the fading of Lórien and the disappearance of the Entwives are mourned. These are, naturally, simply examples, but there are plenty more to be found. While the nostalgic yearning is strong, the need for change, and its inevitability, is most apparent in the simple existence of the Elves. Though many positive attributes can (and should) be ascribed to Elves, they are, however, guilty of being anti-progressive. As notes, they, “desire to arrest change” (Flieger, 2002, 170). It must be stressed with vigor, though, that change is not equivalent to evil:

Mere *change* as such is not represented as ‘evil’; it is the unfolding of the story and to refuse this is of course against the design of God. But the Elvish weakness is in these terms naturally to regret the past, and to become unwilling to face change… They desired some power over things as they are… to arrest change, to keep things always fresh and fair (*Letters*, 236).

This reinforces the point of Elves being anti-progressive. Their intention is good, as their capability to even commit evil is severely limited (if present at all), but the ultimate consequence of arrested development and progression is stagnation. This is even further evidenced by one of the main weaknesses of the Elves: their “ability” to die from grief (in addition to mortal wounds, which also bypasses their immortality). Elves cling wholeheartedly and immovably to the past, and may fatally succumb to grief and longing rather than eventually accepting change, adapting and moving on. Flieger observes that change is, “part of the design, and must continue if the design is to be fulfilled”. This observation is true in more than one sense, not in the least because Middle-Earth, Arda, was created through the Music of the Ainur. Music moves forward and cannot be reversed, as the Valar experienced firsthand multiple times in the early Age where Morgoth was intent on destroying everything they created.

Men, in contrast, are different from the Elves. It may appear a curse that Men are subject to mortality while the Elves are not. Unlike the Elves, who primarily seek to preserve what is, and, if possible, avoid change, Men are given the power to change and act “beyond the Music” (Flieger, 2002, 170). Men see the present as a passing thing, and due to their limited time on Ëa they seek to move forward, to act, to change.

Tolkien’s romantic relationship to old mythologies, in this case Old Icelandic mythology, proves relevant yet again as we through it may gain further insight. In Northern Fates, *Url* is that which has passed, *Verlandi*, that which is present, and *Skuld,* what is yet to come. In this mode and line of thinking, the present is a static state and not a constant process; it is always in transition from one state to another, and, furthermore, “to look back with regret […] is to risk losing the capacity and will to go forward” (Flieger, 2002, 171).

Flieger goes on to comment on the change in perception (of life and the world) that experience brings. He refers to Barfield and his “felt change of consciousness” which considers any new experience as both internal and external. The idea here is that arresting change will limit experience, and therefore inhibit the ability to develop on a personal level and draw on experience. While the point is interesting and perhaps valid in other contexts (Barfields comment was regarding poetry originally), it seems rather inapplicable to this scenario with Elves and Men. There is little to no evidence that Elves, even considering their nostalgic nature, are unable to draw on experiences develop on an individual level. They are still incredibly perceptive and their understanding of the world, their consciousness, seems unburdened and, in fact, unparalleled.

# Tolkien’s Legendarium in a Biographical Context

As was noted already early in the paper, a biographical reading was not intended to be the primary focus. This decision was not because of the question of validity of biographical readings, though one should tread carefully when employing them; rather, it has been a deliberate choice of method to instead concentrate on the texts themselves, rather than relating them to Tolkien’s life. That being said, there are observations to be made. Any reading of an author’s work with a biographical focus is a risky endeavor. But while we do not claim to have any knowledge of the inner workings a man born 122 years ago, we are also aware that any piece of fiction will inevitably reflect the times during which it is written. The following is a brief discussion of the link between Tolkien’s life and the themes of his works.

In Tolkien’s essay “On Fairy-Stories” he argues that fairy stories should end with a “eucatastrophe” – a sudden joyous turn of events. This seems ironic once we detect the pessimism that sneaks its way into his works. For instance, in *The Lord of the Rings* near the end of the book, Frodo muses that the duress and wounds he suffered on his quest are somehow permanent and that he may never be fully healed. Instead, he pays a permanent price for his undertaking. Likewise, *The Silmarillion* features many stories where the best and brightest (both elves and men) fall to their ruin. While the eucatastrophe is present to some degree (Middle-Earth is cleansed of Morgoth and later Sauron), there are also characters that pay a heavy price.   
As mentioned in the chapter on Tolkien scholarship, many readings have argued that there are connections between his works and his experiences in World War I. Whether he would admit these connections himself, though, is another matter entirely. By placing Tolkien in a group of modernist writers, we can connect the points made in our analysis to a kind of sentiment shared by modernists. The most interesting aspect of Tolkien’s life when considering influence and his writings was naturally his world war experiences. Much could be, and has been, said about the war and the effect it had culturally, economically but also artistically, and how it impacted a whole generation. There are examples of Tolkien’s writings having a healing effect; they were a way of dealing with trauma. The way Tolkien portrays war in his novels is in itself worthy of scrutiny, since he quite clearly distances himself from the affair and even romanticizes it somewhat when Legolas and Gimli have a humorous kill-count competition while waging war. Much work could be done about the generation of men who fought in the war, and there exist several books from authors whose lives were changed dramatically because of it. T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* and Erich Maria Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front* are two modernist works (a poem and a novel respectively) which deal with the First World War.   
Through biographical readings we may gain insight into the minds and ways of thinking of a generation, and what one quickly learns is that in this case, the generation became a pessimistic one. By the end of World War I, a great number of Tolkien’s closest friends were dead. It is therefore not difficult to argue that this influenced his writing in some way. One way we can conclude this through a historical overview. In other words, we can conclude something by looking at what he wrote and when he wrote it. For instance, we know that Tolkien began writing “The Fall of Gondolin” during his stay at a Birmingham wartime hospital (Drout, 2007, 714). This sketch was later to become a part of *The Silmarillion*. Given the content of this tale, which revolves around the attack and eventual sack of a great elven city, it is hard to rule out that Tolkien was inspired to some extent by his wartime experiences. Tolkien lost friends in the war and his outlook on life was, unsurprisingly, changed. This is true for many authors of this period; they became pessimistic about the bleak future and faced immense existential crises. This is why some may theorize that Tolkien ‘escaped’ into Middle-Earth as a way of dealing both with post-war trauma but also to explore a romantic and different world. Tolkien was no romantic in the ordinary sense, however, as Middle-Earth is full of grim realism and harsh truths about fate and life. Biographical readings may uncover influences and relationships between what happened to the author and what is written, but a one-to-one relationship is almost always too simplistic and reveals little beyond dispute. For instance, a popular reading of *The Lord of the Rings* contends that it is a war allegory, but Tolkien himself addressed this in the Foreword to *The Fellowship of the Ring* where he said that:

The real war does not resemble the legendary war in its process or its conclusion. If it has inspired or directed the development of the legend, then certainly the Ring would have been seized and used against Sauron; he would not have been annihilated but enslaved, and Barad-dûr would not have been destroyed but occupied.” (Tolkien, 1954, 11).

So who does one trust? The author himself or the evidence suggesting that the war *did*, in fact, inspire or affect - or at least play a part in the construction of - all his work. But we must also stress that there is a difference between allegory, which Tolkien himself stated he was against, and being inspired, or influenced by your life in your treatment of certain themes and ideas.

We can also trace a line of existential musings in the works we have examined in this paper. That Tolkien in his works wonders if there is such a thing as fate is no surprise when we consider the death of many of his close friends. Questions like: “Why did I survive when my friends did not?“ can easily be related to ideas of predestination and fate. This can in turn be argued to fall under the trauma writing umbrella.

# Conclusion

Readers who have read and enjoyed *The Lord of the Rings* would be cheating themselves if they did not pick up *The Silmarillion*, *The Children of Húrin* and *Unfinished Tales of Númenor and Middle-Earth*. These works are crucial in understanding and appreciating Tolkien’s authorship, as they were the works of his heart. As we have seen, the texts are meaningful contributions to his secondary world. In fact, they provide the reader with a much bigger and more detailed understanding of Middle-Earth, and their value to a reader is not lessened by the fact that they were published posthumously. Furthermore, as noted in the “Authorship” chapter, *The Lord of the Rings* is but a part of the whole. The texts work well by themselves but also serve to put *The Lord of the Rings* in context and deepen a readers understanding of it.   
We can conclude that *The Lord of the Rings* does have literary merit, though the stylistic approach Tolkien employs may be criticized. *The Silmarillion* has literary merit as well, and the texts in relation to each other prove how Tolkien was able to adapt his writing style based on what he wanted his text to achieve. In other words, it was a conscious decision that, for example, *The Hobbit* was written in a light-hearted way, while *The Silmarillion* is significantly more archaic in tone and style. Whether one appreciates the stylistic choices remains subjective.

As shown in this paper, Tolkien’s idea on how information is to be given to the reader was in large part based on the idea of “depth”. That the reader often has the feeling that the narrator knows more than what he is telling was a deliberate strategy on Tolkien’s part and serves as a tool to provide that depth. The literary devices of allusions and references to stories that are not part of the book itself are tools consistently employed by Tolkien and they create coherence as well as depth. In his posthumous works, Tolkien achieved this depth through the way the texts were presented, as in they appeared to be tales that were handed down or compiled through the ages, and therefore did not contain every detail. This is one of the reasons *The Silmarillion* takes the form of a compendium of narratives.   
As a continuation of what we have learned about Tolkien’s stylistic choices, we can point to the implications inherent in Tolkien’s decision to produce a work of such a mythological character. This character can be said to be at the core of Tolkien’s Middle-Earth texts, as they are all connected. The tales are both connected to the reader, but also exist within the Secondary World, where the characters are also aware of them and they function as history. This sense of history again provides depth, which Tolkien achieves by allusions and references, which constantly expand the Secondary World. We may perceive this depth as something that is there for the reader to appreciate if he is willing, but enjoyment of *The Lord of the Rings* is not crippled should one choose to skip *The Silmarillion*. As noted, one can only gain something by reading the posthumous texts, but never lose anything by not doing so. Furthermore, due to the nature of references as pointed out in “Mythological Considerations”, depth may be achieved in several ways. In this case, not comprehending the allusions and references in *The Lord of the Rings* entails one kind of depth, while comprehension and understanding entails another kind of depth, as context is expanded. Finally, the mythological character of Tolkien’s works can be read as a modernist feature, as it serves to give the texts some kind of authority and timelessness. This has caused some to throw Tolkien into a group of writers that already contains James Joyce and T.S. Eliot.

The concepts of fate, free will and foresight in Tolkien’s works have also been examined. Numerous “powers” have been identified, and it seems impossible to create a hierarchy between these powers. We would argue that this was a deliberate choice, as it can be argued to show how we in the primary world can be in doubt with regards to free will and fate. Tolkien’s frequent use of words such as “doom” and “fate” as well as the characters’ overt references to these underlines how big a theme it is. This again owes much to the mythological character of Tolkien’s works as such works should naturally contain something about the way the world works. Though the references to these powers are numerous, the exact way in which they work remains somewhat of a mystery; their mechanical aspect, so to speak, is unrevealed, and this is one of the several mysteries left in Middle-Earth which, as noted, is one way of creating a detailed and deep world. By doing this, Tolkien’s concepts of fate and free will very much mirrors the Primary World. As a result, Tolkien’s reluctance or inability to clearly define these concepts can in turn be interpreted as natural for a man who suffered the loss of his friends in World War I. Because he no doubt found it difficult to provide an answer in the Primary World with regards to why he lost his friends, it comes as no surprise that he could or would not provide an answer in the Secondary World.

In regards to morality, Tolkien’s inspiration unsurprisingly comes from the Bible, as evidenced by the tale of Aulë. Morality in itself is a difficult concept, but what Tolkien’s stories do is show how immoral actions have specific, often negative, consequences. Naturally this approach is rather romanticized and almost simplistic; contemporary authors tackle the issue of morality in a more complex manner. We return to the issue of what the intended effect of a work is, however, and the effect of the stories within *The Silmarillion* is that they show how immorality, selfishness and other vices may have disastrous outcomes. On a textual level there are few-to-none surprises as no character switches alignment in dramatic ways. While characters such as Fëanor do commit morally questionable actions, he is still not part of “the Shadow”, or the “Enemy”; he is still part of the good side despite several of his actions becoming increasingly immoral. Elves can react morally well or badly. As a reader we are not in doubt with regards to his descent into moral downfall. This means that a character may act immorally in the grand scheme of things, and a character may serve the forces of Evil; these two are not necessarily one and the same.

The themes of fate, free will and morality can all be categorized as themes that existential in nature. In his treatment of these themes, Tolkien shows how morally "right" actions are to be strived after. However, at the same time, he creates a deeply complex world where the degree of free will is not very tangible. These existential observations are at the core of Tolkien's texts set in Middle-Earth and unsurprisingly so. When we consider the mythological character of the works, is seems logical that these existential themes are tackled. But, as mentioned earlier in the paper, his treatment of especially fate and free will leave the reader very much in doubt, much like in the primary world. Even though the room in which to act can be very limited, one can almost always choose between right and wrong. We would argue, then, that Tolkien's legendarium of texts has succeeded, as the thoughts and themes tackled therein are applicable in the real world, thereby living up to Tolkien's own ideal of the fairy story.

We can also relate Tolkien's treatment of these themes to his own idea that fairy stories "must contain elements of moral and religious truth". We hope to have shown that his treatment of fate and free will are very relateable to the real world, and that Tolkien's representation of morality had a basis in himself. Furthermore, we hope to have shown that Tolkien's treatment of these themes is inseparable from the form in which he chose to present his writings.

Lastly, an examination of Tolkien’s legendarium with focus on themes present in *The Silmarillion* has yielded results which further an understanding of this popular and complex authorship. Overall, the mythological character of the works examined in this paper is a defining characteristic as the themes of morality and free will are cornerstones of any working mythology. We hope to have provided useful observations with regards to the mentioned themes, and made a small contribution to the existing body of Tolkien scholarship.

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# Abstract

This paper concerns itself with Tolkien’s authorship and the body of literature which constitute his legendarium. Though the main focus lies primarily with *The Silmarillion* and other posthumous texts, *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* are referred to often so as to offer perspective and insight. It remains entirely impossible to subject any of Tolkien’s works to academic scrutiny without drawing on *The Lord of the Rings*. The paper spends little time reiterating the plot of the books and overall presupposes familiarity with at least Tolkien’s most popular writings. The primary objective is gaining a detailed understanding of *The Silmarillion* and its relationship to the other texts as well as its place within the legendarium as a whole. Much secondary literature is employed, which both sheds light on existing Tolkien scholarship and serves to validate specific readings. Furthermore, the secondary literature deepens understanding of how Tolkien’s body of literature functions and how it is constructed. The analysis is focused on a thematic review of *The Silmarillion*, with notions such as fate, free will and morality in the forefront. While the analysis provides valuable and useful information and enables detailed comprehension, the earlier sections of the paper describing problems such as whether or not *The Lord of the Rings* can even be considered literature, the effect of mythology and how information is conveyed, are extremely vital. Fully grasping individual texts in the legendarium without considering their place in relation to the other texts is difficult as well as meaningless. Overall the paper employs secondary literature where necessary and uses it to understand both the context and the content of Tolkien’s world and work. Furthermore, extensive use of *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien* is employed as they offer valuable insight into the author. These letters are used in conjunction with both secondary and primary literature as they may either shed light on important situations in the analysis, or serve as supporting arguments for the secondary literature.   
The overarching objective of this paper is contributing to the existing research done on the authorship of Tolkien, with focus on *The Silmarillion* as that text most often is not the primary subject for analysis and academic scrutiny.

1. “Legendarium” refers to the texts set in Middle-Earth [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. “loosely” because (writing about *The Lord of The Rings*) Tolkien said: […] it is not really a sequel to *The Hobbit*, but to *The Silmarillion*.” (*Letters*, 1981, 136). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*. All subsequent references will simply be called *Letters* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. a literary discussion group Tolkien was a part of. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For more on this particular subject, read *Tolkien and The Great War* (2003) by John Garth [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Quoted section from Carpenter, Humphrey: *Tolkien, A Biography*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1997 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lXAvF9p8nmM [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. For all intents and purposes, “Valar” and “Ainur” are interchangeable [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Another name for Ilúvatar [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. General term for the alliance who opposed Sauron in the Third Age [↑](#footnote-ref-10)