Chapter III

The Fantastic History of Middle-earth: *The Lord of the Rings*

Probably no writer of fantasy has created in more perfection a ‘Secondary World’ than Tolkien, through his *The Hobbit* and its sequel, *The Lord of the Rings*. Written for the author’s own satisfaction with “little hope that other people would be interested” in it (Tolkien, Foreword. *LotR* ii ed., xv), *LotR* was welcomed by adults initially and then discovered by the children who had enjoyed *The Hobbit*. It was taken to heart by the youth in the college campuses who were fascinated by “the integrity and courage of imaginary beings in their world... in the face of mundane, pressing dilemmas in our own living” (E. Fuller, “Speaking of Books”). It was admired equally by the adults since Tolkien knew better than most that the adult mind has, if anything, greater need of fantasy than that of the child, and greater need of consolation.

It was a day of utter shock and dismayed disbelief for the literati when a poll conducted in January 1997 among twenty five thousand people throughout Britain by Waterstone and Channel 4, voted *LotR* as ‘the greatest book of the century.’ This ‘black day for British culture’ was followed by several similar polls which vindicated Tolkien’s position as the nation’s ‘most popular writer’. The polls conducted by the *Daily Telegraph* and later by the Folio Society confirmed Tolkien’s enduring popularity as the ‘Author of the century’, causing such a controversy and highlighting to such an extent the cultural schism between the literary illuminati and reading public as has rarely happened before in literary history. In terms of sales too, the popularity of *LotR* soars unabating, having sold more than fifty million copies worldwide. And before the Harry Potter phenomenon, Tolkien topped the Public Lending Right’s list of
the ten classic authors borrowed most from libraries. So, bought, borrowed or voted for, Tolkien was the undisputed Lord of Writers, raising many intellectual eyebrows on our ‘low cultural expectations’ while giving hope and happiness to millions of readers around the world. He has divided the critics, but has conquered the hearts of the reading public (Pearce, *Tolkien: Man and Myth* 1-10).

When *LotR* first appeared in 1954-55 it was received with a mixed response. *The Observer* and *The Times* considered it as an “extraordinarily imaginative work” which deals with a “stupendous theme” and the *Sunday Times* declared that the “English speaking world is divided in to those who have read *LotR* and *The Hobbit* and those who are going to!” (*LotR* (back cover); Pearce, *Man and Myth* 1-10). Tolkien’s friend and fellow-Oxford scholar C.S.Lewis expressed his elation thus:

> I have drained the rich cup and satisfied a long thirst ... Once it really gets under way, the steady upward slope of grandeur and terror (not unrelieved by green dells, without which it would be intolerable) is almost unequalled in the whole range of narrative art known to me. In two virtues I think it excels: sheer sub-creation – Bombadil, Barrow-wight, Elves, Ents – as if from inexhaustible resources, and construction. Also in *gravitas* .... (“The Gods Return to Earth” 1083/I).

*LotR* was derided more than it was praised, primarily due to the Leavisite aesthetic reigning at the time, the modernist values of which were contrary to its predominant available meanings. The negative responses to Tolkien’s work started with Edmund Wilson who dismissed it as “juvenile trash” (21). Nigel Walmsley asserted that by the end of 1968 *LotR* would be a “cultural anachronism” (85). Scholarly works on the fantastic too did not spare Tolkien. Colin Manlove considered Tolkien’s success the
result of the “paperback revolution and the disillusionment among the American young at the Vietnam war” (155,157). Theorists like Rosemary Jackson who defend fantasy as a literary genre, also found Tolkien’s work unworthy of serious studies since “[f]or Tolkien, the only way is backwards” (156).

The academic world, many of whose members once tried to pretend that Tolkien’s work just did not exist, has slowly begun to realize the potential that scholarly research on Tolkien offers. Recent critiques have made a convincing case for Tolkien’s contemporary relevance and the important insights he gives readers into understanding the world in which they live. The contours of a post-modern Tolkien are revealing themselves with the discovery of many post-modernistic themes such as discovery of the presence of magic realism in Tolkien’s story of the fantastic much before Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*. The global success of the cinema adaptation of *LotR* by Peter Jackson, the publication of the twelve volumes of Tolkien’s *The History of Middle Earth*, ‘the eco-friendly greening’ of Tolkien’s work by Patrick Curry, the multicultural, racist and queer readings of *LotR* as well as other post-modern readings of Tolkien and his fantasies prove to the awakened and continuing interest in Tolkien and to the fact that studies on Tolkien and his works are far from being exhausted. This also throws light on the understanding of the *Legendarium* and also on why Tolkien was so popular for so long in so many countries to have been voted as the ‘Author of the Century’. The myth he created remains both powerful and enigmatic and too often misunderstood. To understand the myth we need to first understand the man behind it. The grandiosity of the epic world Tolkien constructed from an enormous variety of medieval and classical stories, tradition and discourses, invented lands and languages demand that we need to know the author more to know the text better.
Born in Bloemfontein, in South Africa on 3 January 1892, John Ronald Reuel Tolkien lost his father when he was four. His mother Mabel had come back home to England with her two sons to her parents in Sarehole, Birmingham – the beautiful hamlet where the seeds of the Shire were planted. The four years at Sarehole were the most formative part of his life. After Sarehole, the family moved to a ‘dreadful’ house near the city. “This wrenching of the young boy from the rural life he loved to the urban existence he loathed … formed the creative tension which would animate the contrasting visions of life and landscape in Middle Earth” (Pearce, Man and Myth 18). His mother’s conversion to Roman Catholicism, the resultant estrangement with her family and the struggles she endured to defend her faith and to raise the boys and her untimely demise at the end of thirty-four trouble filled years, all had a profound and lasting effect on Tolkien’s personality. This must be the reason that Tolkien’s heroes, Bilbo and Frodo, as well as many other characters, are orphans and also that there are no mothers in LotR, only mother figures as in Galadriel, Goldberry and Shelob the she-spider. Tolkien considered his mother a martyr for the faith “who killed herself with labour and trouble to ensure us keeping the faith” (qtd. in Carpenter, Biography 39) and so, became fiercely loyal to the Catholic faith. It is his Catholicism that nurtured Tolkien’s love for medievalism and a disdain for the humanist ‘progress’ of the Reformation.

Mabel had wisely appointed Father Francis as the guardian of her two sons, who became Tolkien’s mentor and father figure- may be in part the origin of Gandalf. Father Francis arranged for the orphan boys to stay at a nearby lodging on the first floor of which stayed another orphan called Edith Bratt, a beautiful girl three years Tolkien’s senior, the future Edith Tolkien. She became his ‘Luthien’, the heroine of Tolkien’s epic saga “Story of Luthien and Beren” in The Silmarillion, the very core of his
mythical world, within which is set *LotR*. Tolkien’s love-life was interwoven with war, since he departed for the trenches soon after his marriage on 22 March 1916. Not surprisingly, battles play a large part in the climactic stages of *The Hobbit* and *LotR*. In spite of his troubled childhood and adolescence and troubled adult hood torn between two world wars, one in which he took active participation (the Carnage of the Somme battle, May 1916) and lost two of his best friends, Tolkien became an Oxford don, raised four kids, greatly enjoyed masculine company, pursued his passion for philology and invented languages and created histories and stories for those languages. Tolkien’s years of close companionship, the walking tours, the evening gatherings as T.C.B.S and later as The Inklings in Lewis’s room on Thursday nights made alive with literary debates, readings and beer drinking, the loss of so many dear friends in the World War I which left the survivors with a sense of insecurity and a need to stay close together, and partly the spirit of the times with precedents in ancient civilizations, all these made Tolkien’s male companion-ship profound, which in turn made possible the loyal Fellowship and the intimate companionship between Frodo and Sam remarkable, natural and inevitable.

In his last letter from the war front Tolkien’s friend and fellow T.C.B.S member G.B. Smith appealed to Tolkien- ‘may you say the things I have tried to say long after I am not there to say them’. Tolkien took it up as the clarion call to begin the grand project he had been meditating for a long time— to “create a mythology for England”, something similar to the Finnish Kalevela, “which I could dedicate simply: to England to my country” (*Tolkien, Letters* 144). The origin of the idea came from his taste for inventing languages, to create for the languages ‘a history’ in which they could develop. Tolkien has confessed that *The Silmarillion* from which sprouted his masterpiece work, *LotR* was “primarily linguistic in inspiration” (*LotR*, Foreword xxii).
What he had started hinting at in his early ‘Earendel’ poems, he decided to record in full because he “always had the sense of recording what was already “there” somewhere and not of “inventing” (Letters 131). Being a philologist, he went ‘inside language’, he was part of the story and was telling the truth about the world as it revealed itself to him. \textit{LotR} which was ‘sub-created’ from this vast history of the Middle-earth was written, out of popular demand, as a sequel to the much sought after story of \textit{The Hobbit} (1937) which Tolkien had originally written to amuse his own children.

In 1928, while undergoing the tedium of grading exam papers, Tolkien scribbled at the back of a page- “In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit” (\textit{Hobbit}3). He later observed: “Names always generate a story in my mind. Eventually I thought I’d better find out what hobbits were like” (Letters 131); and he did find them out, right to the hairs on their toe nails. Tolkien had set the scene for his fantasy world through the story of these simple, plain rustic folk of the shire who had no use for adventures which “[m]akes you late for dinner” (\textit{Hobbit} 6). \textit{The Hobbit}, written for the author’s own satisfaction is a fantasy story clearly designed for children and may be considered as “the froth on the surface of \textit{The Silmarillion}” (Cooper143), which in turn can be said to be the seedbed for \textit{LotR}. Tolkien cast his mythology in a remote and strange time in Middle-earth, which is our own earth in an imaginary period of antiquity painted in imaginative colour.

Tolkien hoped that \textit{LotR} and its related mythology might be found to be ‘true’ as “[e]very writer making a Secondary World wishes in some measure to be a real maker, or hopes that he is drawing on reality “( “On Fairy” 155 ). \textit{LotR} which had been begun as a mere ‘sequel’ to \textit{The Hobbit}, was to become an apology for his Andrew Lang Lecture. It is a sequel neither to \textit{The Hobbit} nor to \textit{The Silmarillion}. 

‘The new Hobbit’, as Tolkien modestly referred to the story, had every aspect of everything that he had worked on and worked out till then: the mythology, which provided the historical setting and a sense of depth, the fully formed Elvish languages which was the outcome of Tolkien’s ‘painful-play’ of over twenty five years, the Feanorian alphabet in which he wrote the elvish inscriptions, his profound religious faith, his deep love and knowledge of pagan myths, and a lot more. Tolkien’s grand design “… was to give back to his own country the legends that had been taken from it in the Dark Ages after the conquest” (Shippey, *Road to Middle Earth* 181).

One of the greatest strengths of *LotR* is the illusion of depth provided by the background histories and heroic tales of the First and Second Ages which constitute the history of Middle-earth and which are constantly alluded throughout. This depth is effected not by the tales of the battles of Isildur or the fall of Gondolin alone, but also by a sense of lost histories and of peoples whose very names have been obliterated. Tolkien considered *LotR* as “feigned” history (*LotR*. Foreword xxiv), that is, fiction carrying with it the illusion of historical reality, narrative which the reader accepts as ‘real’ while he reads it. In feigned history too, like in true history, the reader may find relevance to his own times and find meaning in it. The books are read not only for their powerful and hopeful affirmation about man, filled with philosophical import, but also for the sheer fun of it, because *LotR* is indeed, a good story and Tolkien is indeed, a good story teller.

In 1913, Tolkien read a poem ‘Crist’ by eighth century Anglo-Saxon writer Cynewulf:

‘Hail Earendel, brightest of Angels

Over Middle-Earth sent unto men.’
The creative artist in the philologist felt as if something had stirred in him. There was something very remote and strange and beautiful behind those potent words, far beyond the ancient English, if only he could grasp it, felt the great lover of words. The next few decades were spent in grasping this remote and strange and beautiful “something” behind those words.

In the summer of 1947, Tolkien was ready to show the typescript of *LotR* to Rayner, the son of his publisher Unwin, of Allen and Unwin. Though he didn’t know who was expected to read it, children or adults, Rayner was convinced that the ‘brilliant and gripping’ book deserved publication, preferably as a trilogy since it was voluminous. After several revising and ‘niggling’, for Tolkien was his own greatest critic - the first volume was published as *The Fellowship of the Ring* in 1954. Excitement over the alternate world of Middle-earth and the fate of its little rustic folks reached such heights that the second volume *The Two Towers* came out a few months later in the same year. The wait for the last volume became unbearable to fans and *The Return of the King* (1955) was published the following year. The initial print run was 3,500 since the interest in such books, the publishers thought, would not be so great and so the profit margin would be less. And the rest is literary history.

Tolkien had actually divided *LotR* into six ‘Books’ of an admirably complex neatness of its overall design. The first book takes Frodo the Ring-bearer and his companions to Rivendell where the Fellowship of the Ring is formed. Their journey south, the loss of Gandalf and the breaking of the Fellowship take up the second book. Subsequent books show the company further subdivided with adventures of their own, weaving their paths in and out of each other’s knowledge (often mistaken), and the heroes emerging triumphant through death-perils. The last six chapters of the sixth book are devoted to tying up loose ends, as Tolkien liked to do.
Modernist and realist criteria are ill-equipped to handle the success of Tolkien’s perfectly sincere, perfectly impossible narrative fantasy because as Brian Attebury, in his *Strategies of Fantasy*, tells post-modernism “is a return to story-telling in the belief that we can be sure of nothing but story” (40-41). Both by pre-modern and post-modern standards, Tolkien’s secondary world is a carefully crafted one, full of gentle humour, genuine danger and serious magic. He knew that the traditional story teller was not inventing new stories but retelling old ones, “that the art of the story-teller was not, like that of the modern novelist, in inventing something new but in re-telling something old and retelling it very well” (Sullivan 310). Tolkien wanted to tell a traditional story and so he took traditional materials he knew, from Scandinavian legends of pre-Christian northern Europe and Arthurian stories, and retold them as the high fantasies *The Hobbit* and *LotR*. Tolkien succeeded in bringing together the oral tale’s style and content in the novel’s format, thus creating an epic every bit as large as *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*.

*The Hobbit* opens with a variation of the traditional formulaic opening of “Once upon a time” - “In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit” (3) - bringing in the immediacy of the situation, typical of fairy tales and folk stories. *LotR* too evokes immediacy, apparently as if the omniscient narrator is continuing with the story of *The Hobbit* from where he had paused, though having a gap of sixty years between the two stories. This use of traditional story is one of the traits that characterize fantasy literature, according to Timmerman (1-4). Frodo the hero, is a traditional coming-of-age hero, who reluctantly takes up a quest, faces perils, succeeds and finally returns as a different person, having grown in life and experiences in the process.

A fantasy hero, even when not human, is quite like us. The common, naïve, childlike and usually country folk displaying great heroism as well as small shortcomings, makes it easier for the reader to enter into the story to see himself in the
action. The commonness and the humanness of the hero provide him growth by
experience while it provides the reader lessons on life’s way. Tolkien introduces these
commonest of the common ‘plain quiet folk’ (*Hobbit* 6) into the literary world with one
of the most factual and realistic representations:

They are (or were) a little people, about half our height, and smaller
than the bearded dwarves. Hobbits have no beards. There is little or
no magic about them, except the ordinary everyday sort which helps
them to disappear quietly and quickly when large stupid folk like
you and me come blundering along, making a noise like
elephants, which they can hear a mile off. They are inclined to be
fat in the stomach; they dress in bright colours (chiefly green and
yellow); wear no shoes, because their feet grow natural leathery
soles and thick warm brown hair like the stuff on their heads
(which is curly); have long clever brown fingers, good-natured
faces, and laugh deep fruity laughs (especially after dinner, which
they have twice a day when they can get it (4).

Hobbits are not magical creatures, nor are they interested in wielding magic’s
power over people and nature. They have stayed out of wars, conquests and struggles
of history. Hence their obscurity in the ancient lores and lays and even in the remotest
memories of one of the oldest inhabitants of Middle-earth, namely, Treebeard the Ent.
Living an isolated, self-contained and unadorned life, unaware of time and history,
in that pleasant corner of the world, they plied their well-ordered
business of living and they heeded less and less the world outside
where dark things moved, until they came to think that peace and
plenty were the rule in Middle-earth and the right of all
sensible folk (*LotR*, Prologue5).
It is when history knocks at Bilbo’s door in the shape of the dwarves and their old songs, in their quest for their treasure, that he (and the hobbit race too) begins to respond to and are affected by the impact of history.

The most salient characteristic of a hobbit is his insignificance, which in turn is his power. It is Frodo’s smallness and insignificance among the races of Middle-earth that makes him a good candidate as the Ring-bearer, protecting him from the gaze of Sauron and the Ringwraiths. Both Bilbo and Frodo are wrong heroes in the sense that they are reluctant and feel themselves unworthy to the task. Gandalf has to choose them for their particular tasks – Bilbo, to get back a treasure and Frodo, to destroy one, respectively. In turn, the heroes discover in themselves the very qualities necessary for their new found heroism – stealth, endurance, cunning, and courage – qualities which were actually disguised in their unassuming hobbit personality. They grow up to their respective tasks through their imaginative grasp of the challenges, through manipulation of power in an unexpected way.

Tolkien shows us in the creation of his characters that our personal decisions make history too and that heroism is important. In fact, it is in his definition of the hero that Tolkien may be most original, for all the traditional history at his command. The vast and powerful world of Middle-earth and its history is revealed to us largely from the point of view of the naïve, curious and relatively powerless hobbits. These creatures of ‘imagined wonder’ who surprise us with their familiarity and difference with us at once, while they surprise themselves too and ‘grow’, is Tolkien’s greatest success as a sub-creator. Tolkien gives the hobbits a moral stature which takes them from parody into true heroism. The moral responsibility shown in Bilbo’s giving up of the ‘Arkenstone’ and Frodo’s decision to carry the Ring to its destruction for the common good make their quests a moral history. Within Tolkien’s mythic framework, they are
Everyman, symbolic of the ordinary man who becomes wily-nilily involved in great matters, individually and collectively affecting and shaping events not as passive observers but as active participants. Frodo’s decision to take the Ring to Mordor is a major step in terms of self-development, to realize the potential of the ordinary man. In fact the hobbits “are Tolkien’s primary picture of man” (Rogers 73).

Frodo starts as a reluctant hero (“I am not made for perilous quests; I wish I had never seen the Ring! Why did it come to me?” (*LotR* 61), but he is the chosen hero to become the Ring-bearer. As Gandalf tells him, “…. Bilbo was meant to find the Ring, and *not* by its maker. In which case you also were meant to have it” (56). Chosen, he may be, but any conception of a hero demands that the hero’s actions be substantially based on free choice and human will; and Frodo’s decisions, first in the Shire and then at Rivendell to set out with the Ring are acts of independent resolution. He assumes the burden of the Ring, unwittingly and unknowingly, as a naïve hobbit among the Great present at the Council of Elrond, unaware of the full impact of his decision: “I will take the Ring… though I do not know the way” (270). At Rivendell his simple naiveté ends, when tested at the Mirror of Galadriel, but not his simplicity. Again at the seat of Amon Hen, when he encounters the true nature of the forces of evil and of the dominating power of the Ring, it is his free choice that aids him to transform the Ring into a tool and thus escape Boromir by becoming invisible:

The two powers strove in him. For a moment, perfectly balanced between their piercing points, he writhed, tormented. Suddenly he was aware of himself again. Frodo, neither the Voice nor the Eye: free to choose, and with one remaining instant in which to do so.

He took the Ring off his finger (401).
From sheer dependency upon the assistance of others by proclaiming his helplessness ("I do not know the way") he grows into one ready to be the ‘One Alone against the World’ through his free choice.

During his journeys Frodo discovers who he is, what he lives for and why. He also discovers noble qualities he never imagined he had: bravery, strength, determination and patience. About this change, Tolkien later observed: “Nothing moves my heart, beyond all passions and heart break of the world, as much as watching a character become noble – ‘from the Ugly Duckling to Frodo’ (Tolkien, Letters 232). This self-discovery makes him kind and forgiving as he grows wiser and he can forgive Gollum like a true hero. He can forgive even Saruman because he thinks “it is useless to meet revenge with revenge: it will heal nothing” (LotR 1019). Frodo’s rejection of war is Tolkien’s rejection of war, the consequences of his personal experiences and loss in the war and the post-traumatic shock and despair at the futility of ‘a war to end all wars’ expressed by a war veteran.

Despite becoming tougher than he was at the start of the story, Frodo still has his humble hobbit virtues at the end. He achieves the ultimate victory of redemption at the end of a pilgrimage of sacrifice, carrying the burden of his cross (which is the Ring) with his hopes pinned to the ray of light at the end of the dark journey. By sacrificing himself he saves the Shire, like Christ himself, aided amply by the right choice, as Tolkien the strong Catholic would have had. C.N. Manlove finds fault with Tolkien that,

Frodo always chooses correctly [or] … is pushed into making the right decision … that the reader gets a sense of inevitability; the possibility of making a wrong choice recedes to vanishing point and with it the very idea of choice (176).
Therefore it is not mortal will but luck which is the architect of success [of the story] (183).

But the accusation proves wrong as Frodo moves on towards Mordor and comes more and more under the Ring’s power, willing against his will to be revealed to Sauron and later to claim the Ring as his own. All through this heavy burden of the Ring on him, it is his indomitable will that sustains him to achieve his goal. The other strength that saves Frodo from the worst ravages of the Ring is that he binds himself to the others rather than to love of power, and that, is his heroism. The Ring which has corrupted many and has tempted even the noble, with a will to control and ‘bind’ human as well as elvish minds, does not blind Frodo but only makes him more in bond with his fellow beings and more compassionate, even to the basest of creatures. This “is the cornerstone of [the] greatness [of LotR]” (Sale 288) and of its chosen hero Frodo.

Unlike typical fantasies, LotR has more than one hero. It is the story of the initiation of Aragorn as the King, as it is the initiation of Frodo into manhood. Tolkien develops Aragorn as an ideal hero; like Arthur, like Sigurd or like Beowulf, he is a mythical hero typical of fantasy. Aragorn too is the chosen hero, a natural leader. “[G]reat and terrible a Lord he might have become in the strength of his will, had he taken the Ring to himself” but “nobler is his spirit than the understanding of Sauron” (LotR 876). The most important man in LotR, Aragorn represents the Guardian’s responsibility for the world. Metamorphosing from ‘Strider’ to King Elessar, Aragorn is the “Renaissance vision of man as a proud self-confident individual within a unified society whose structure gives a place and a sense of individual worth to all its members” (Evans140). He helps recreate this society through his own will and is born to reign in Middle-earth as the epitome of his race. Aragorn the heroic hero, is our hidden dignity- our Christ-self. He is the Adam, who does not fall. He is the symbol of
the happy turnabout of the restoration of man as a race; therefore, as Deborah Rogers observes “[i]ndividually, we are hobbits; collectively, we are Aragorn” (76).

If Aragorn represents the collective human race, Gandalf the ‘chosen angel’ of the story would epitomize its collective wisdom and its eternal hope. ‘The Odinic wanderer’ (Tolkien, Letters 119) is a mage and shaman with parallels in every cultural memory, like the Celtic Merlin and the classical Hermes. “Needless were none of the deeds of Gandalf in life” (LotR 356). Like Shakespeare’s Prospero, Gandalf is aware of a supernatural purpose in the universe, of a moral order which directs even trivial actions and seemingly unrelated events. Gandalf knows, “even the very wise cannot see all ends” (59); nevertheless, he counsels Frodo to show mercy to Gollum: “My heart tells me that he has some part to play yet, for good or ill, before the end; and when that comes, the pity of Bilbo may rule the fate of many – yours not least” (59).

In the mines of Moria, Gandalf passes through a ‘cleansing’ process typical of the death-rebirth pattern of Quest literature, a metamorphosis analogous to others in LotR. His return to Middle-earth as the White Rider in a new body and greater powers is like the Second Coming of Christ in Triumph: “His hair was white as snow in the sunshine; and gleaming white was his robe; the eyes under his deep brows were bright, piercing as the rays of the sun; power was in his hand” (494-95). The description has clear implications of the image of Christ in the Book of Revelation:

[O]ne like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden girdle round his breast; his head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow; his eyes were like a flame of fire, … in his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth issued a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength (Rev. 1:13-16).
The metamorphosis of Gandalf is available to everyone with a true self to be realized. Hence his participation in the “Joy” Tolkien describes in “On Fairy Stories”. Right through all the cares and sorrow in the wizard’s face, Pippin could perceive that “under all there was a great joy: a fountain of mirth enough to set a kingdom laughing, were it to gush forth” (LotR 759). This is the power of the imagination to sustain its believers, with hope and “a piercing glimpse of Joy” (“On Fairy”154).

C. S. Lewis considers LotR as “a recall from facile optimism and wailing pessimism alike” (qtd. in Garth 312). Sam Gamgee, Frodo’s man-servant and friend, embodies that midpoint. The humblest of the hobbits, without pretensions or ambitions—except perhaps to have a garden of his own—Sam “is indeed”, in Tolkien’s words, “a reflexion of the English solider, of the privates and batmen I knew in the 1914 war, and recognized as so far superior to myself” (qtd. in Carpenter, Biography 89). He is the representative of the powerful sub-theme of the exaltation of the humble, who realizes that rather than ‘put himself forward’, he had been put forward— he had been chosen. In Shelob’s lair, it is his indomitable spirit that sets the potency of the Phial of Galadriel in motion, blazing it like a white torch in his hand, while he chanted in an unknown language:

\[
\begin{align*}
A \text{ Elbereth Githoniel} \\
O \text{ Menel palan – diriel} \\
\text{Le nellon si di’nguruthos !} \\
\text{A tiro nin, Fanuilos ! (LotR 729)}
\end{align*}
\]

“In that hour of trial it was the love of his master that helped most to hold him firm; but also deep down in him lived still unconquered his plain hobbit-sense: he knew in the core of his heart that he was not large enough to bear such a burden … [of] a garden swollen to a realm.” (901). This conscientious smallness characterized as ‘plain hobbit-
sense’ gives Sam the strength to resist the ruses of the Ring’s power, making him the symbol of unrelenting faith and hope in the novel, even at the face of death. And so, his soul is healed at the end of the quest and Sam is sublimated from immature to mature innocence. Sam, the true hero of the story is us- the readers- who are ‘caught by the ears’ and yanked over into the world of the quest, a quest which transforms the mundane to the magical.

The quest theme, the journey of Man to the achievement of a higher and more complete state of awareness, developed by Tolkien, is a common theme of fantasy and mythic literature as also archetypal romance. *LotR*, having both mythic and archetypal elements in it has the central search and transition theme of quest, which provides the moral and structural framework for the fantasy. The quest is a journey of the hero from ignorance to understanding, from imperfection to perfection, from innocence to experience. It is a journey to the centre of life; a search for regaining of a clear conscience, of great moral and spiritual significance. It is “metaphor for man’s inner life” (Evans 63).

Tolkien uses the quest theme magnificently in *LotR*. The quest that Bilbo undertakes in *The Hobbit* is a fairly traditional one, of the hero leaving his comfortable home in search of a treasure, encountering adventures ranging from the uncomfortable to life-threatening ones during the journey and thereby developing a hitherto unsuspected adventurous part of himself. A final twist in the tale is when Bilbo gives away his own treasure to bring peace between the Elves and the Dwarves. Tolkien has upended the usual form of quest in *LotR* by several modifications. Both in *The Hobbit* and *LotR* he chooses for his heroes, unexpected figures - the hobbits - weak, powerless and overlooked ‘halflings’ who are neither warriors nor royal descendents, as tradition demands. But Bilbo and Frodo prove themselves as capable of heroic fights and
struggles, physical as well as mental, and also moral decisions. Though chosen heroes, they are not simply puppets in the hands of ‘wanton gods’. Frodo takes certain moral decisions which decide the fate of the Ring as also the fate of Middle-earth. He is a different individual at the end of the story than he was when he first set off from Bag’s End to escape the Black Riders; as Saruman endorses, rather grudgingly, he has ‘grown’ (LotR 1019). Tolkien makes an in-depth study of the inner life of Frodo in LotR which he does not attempt to do in the character of Bilbo in The Hobbit. This kind of psychological interpretation and character development of the hero as part of the heroic journey of a quest is unique in Tolkien. Again, unlike the usual form of quest, Frodo’s journey is not to find a treasure, but to lose one. It is an anti-quest, where the hero’s mission is to destroy a treasure or return it to its source- a paradoxical twist to traditional quest pattern that amounts to genius. Frodo already has the Ring, which can be destroyed only at the place of its origin, at the Crack of Doom. The treasure sought is not the Ring, but lasting security for the idyll of the Shire.

LotR is a quest undertaken by an Everyman figure, the Hobbit, who loves his hobbit-holes and its comfort, with his regular meals, and who prides in his genealogies. Frodo’s trials and troubles across mountains and plains, his despair and hope in times of tests as the weight of the Ring ever increases into a physical reality over his body and mind, is the journey of Everyman in a landscape of moral ambivalences, on a quest with metaphysical and mystical overtones. As Frodo crawls up Mount Doom against the power of the Ring, we too are growing mentally and spiritually, through a route that is purgatorial. The paradox of this particular quest is that what is most wanted is most against the grain. Along with the struggle of good against evil, there is the hero’s struggle within himself. Frodo’s inner struggle to do what he must do against what he can hardly bear to do, reaches down to our own deepest sense of identity and the deep
awareness “that the ultimate goodness of the universe requires an ultimate sacrifice of the self that would usually seem to be the ultimate personal disaster” (Brewer 256).

This is the personal quest of Frodo.

Like Frodo, each of the main characters has his own personal quest. Aragorn’s long journey to restore the lost kingdom of Numenor and to return as the rightful king of Gondor interweaves with Frodo’s journey and overlaps it towards the end. The transition of Gandalf the Grey into Gandalf the White, through a sacrificial death and purgatorial experience he willingly accepts in the chasms of Moria, is his personal spiritual quest. The fourth hero to undertake a personal quest is Sam, the most unassuming, yet the one who emerges finally as the central hero of LotR.

The essence of the quest is the successful achievement of the hero which is a victory of all men over what is hostile to human fellowship and joy. This is eucatastrophe, “the Consolation of the Happy Ending” (“On Fairy” 153). It is here that Tolkien achieves the final perfect twist to the quest. At the Crack of Doom, at the very brink of success, Frodo relinquishes the quest; he refuses to destroy the Ring: “I have come…. But I do not choose now to do what I came to do. I will not do this deed. The Ring is mine!” (LotR 945). The moment marks the likely failure of the quest. But then comes Gollum to the ‘rescue’, in a splendid narrative turn, and bites off Frodo’s finger along with the Ring, only to fall by himself into the abyss of fire beneath. With this unexpected yet true gesture, which is symbolically significant of a view of life, Tolkien saves the world of Middle-earth and also, saves the quest. Sam’s reaction is appropriate in terms of a eucatastrophic moment: “[T]he Quest is achieved, and now all is over. I am glad you are here with me. Here at the end of all things, Sam” (947). The
quest achieves eucatastrophe again in ‘The Field of Cormallan’ when the army of the west feels Sauron’s power crumbling, with the destruction of the Ring. With the aid of the eagles, Gandalf flies to the rescue of Sam and Frodo, who are lying almost unconscious on Mount Doom with no hope of rescue – their task done but unaware of the victory they have initiated. When Sam wakes up and sees Gandalf after a few days, he exclaims: “Gandalf! I thought you were dead! But then I thought I was dead myself. Is everything sad going to come untrue? What’s happened to the world?” And Gandalf replies: “A great shadow has departed …” (951). The joy and peace that Frodo and Sam and the entire Middle-earth achieve, is eucatastrophic.

The destruction of the Ring and the final triumph of good and that of the quest shot through with contingency, obeys Tolkien’s prescription of ‘the Consolation of the Happy Ending’ which involves a “sudden joyous “turn” … a sudden and miraculous grace; never to be counted on to recur” (“On Fairy” 153). But this consolation is not that of faith; it is the consolation of hope. The happy ending is not a flight from reality, but a revelation of it. Frodo embarks on his quest to seek the ultimate truth which is revealed only with suffering and trial. The ‘Happy Ending’ of the quest provides us with an analogy for our own journey. Frodo, by destroying the Ring and thereby Sauron, initiates the new age of Man. This affirms our power to change the world and reveal the truth, our power to know “joy” of the triumph of good, order and meaning and of the denial of “universal final defeat”(153).

Though the victory over Sauron and the Ring is momentous, much damage has been done and much sacrifice lies ahead for those of Middle-earth. The Shire must be reclaimed, Saruman must be vanquished, the elves must depart to the Deathless world across the sea. Frodo realizes that he too must leave to the west to heal himself:
I have been too deeply hurt, Sam. I tried to save the Shire, and it has been saved, but not for me. It must often be so, Sam, when things are in danger: some one has to give them up, lose them, so that others may keep them (LotR 1029).

The Consolation of the Happy Ending for Tolkien is not a matter of cheap grace. His trilogy and its quest ends with hope, but it is a hope bound up with sacrifice, sorrow and uncertainties.

To Tolkien, the truth “glimpsed” in a fairy story is heavenly, and the joy of deliverance Christian; that is, an affirmation of God’s world which in our world appear as the happy ending of a fairy story. Hence we have a hero like Frodo who can achieve redemption and can promise this final joy to us. Tolkien suggests the Christ story which begins and ends in joy as the prototype for all sub-creation and the joy of the Christian resurrection as the basis of ‘wonder’ in every happy ending. Inasmuch as allegory is part of the primary world, allegorical elements can be read into LotR, in Frodo’s journey into Mordor echoing Christ’s journey or in contemporary problems being treated in Frodo’s world which are ultimately moral and allegorical fantasy elements.

Though LotR possesses eucatastrophe and hence is optimistic and Christian, the book with its tragic and pagan tone does not bear out this view; At the end of Frodo’s quest one is left with a sense of loss, reflecting the attitudes and interests of Tolkien the student of Beowulf rather than that of Tolkien the Christian. The quest is not simply an attempt to achieve something; it is also a journey, both internal and external, at the end of which the world will be set aright. The Ring is destroyed, but so really is Frodo. The Shire is saved, but Middle-earth will remain damaged, reduced and broken. The quest hero Frodo is never accorded a hero’s welcome; the Elves and other aspects of beauty fade away from Middle-earth; and men are left with a continuing struggle.
Tolkien knew this as do his readers, that there is no true end to any fairy tale. Thus the victory in *LotR* is an interim halt; the resting place, the heavenly realm guaranteeing immortality is in other worlds. Frodo is allowed to pass over the sea to be healed before he died, if that could be possible- a reward as well as a purgatory for a while- a period of reflection and peace, in an Earth unspoiled by evil. In Tolkien’s definition of Recovery, “*evangelium*” permits only a “fleeting glimpse of joy” in this world (“On Fairy” 153), not a permanent transportation to the next. In our historical existence even the best solution involves loss as well as gain. This uniqueness of Tolkien’s treatment of the quest theme in his fantasy tale is what rallies critics like W.H. Auden behind him:

> If there is any Quest Tale which, while primarily concerned with the subjective life of the individual person as all such stories must be, manages to do more justice to our experience of social–historical realities than *The Lord of the Rings*, I should be glad to hear of it ("Quest Hero" 61).

A traditional fantasy hero’s quest evokes adventures in an alternate world. Tolkien maintains fantasy as a sub-creation, not making a comment on life, but making a ‘Secondary World’ your mind can enter into. Middle-earth, where the action of *LotR* takes place, is a complete alternative world or an alternative version of our world, in the remote past. Middle earth is the world that God created – the actual world of this planet, Tolkien claims:

> I have … constructed an imaginary ‘time’, but kept my feet on my own mother-earth for ‘place’…. The theatre of my tale is this earth; the one in which we now live, but the historical period is imaginary” (Letters 7-26).
This sub-creative world which stretches from the Shire to Mordor is peopled with a variety of created beings – men, hobbits, elves, dwarfs, orcs, wargs, wizards, ents and others. The names of people and things and the maps of places make Middle-earth seem more real, thus “giv[ing] *LotR* the appearance of real history, just as Tolkien intended” (Colbert, *Magical Worlds of LotR* 102). The story of the Ring stretches from the First Age to the Fourth Age, providing a sense of extension in space and time. The sense of history in Middle-earth is greatly enriched by the old legends and tales which each race hands down from generation to generation. Both Tolkien and his characters have a strong sense of history and a vision as it were of a great expanse of years behind them, enriching every inch of the land with history, so much so that, “[i]n the Tolkienian world, you can hardly put your foot down … without stirring the dust of history” (Lewis, “The God’s Return to Earth” 1083/I).

Tolkien’s Middle-earth has the most complex topography of all secondary worlds, but they correspond to similar areas in the primary world. It is a haunted world where trees move and mountains threaten and the weather is always a metaphor – a world where at least one of what Tolkien calls “primordial human desires” is satisfied, that is; “the desire to hold communion with other living things” (“On Fairy ”117). It is an ‘elvish’ Eden, a picture of pre-industrial England, a place of unspoiled greenery, fields and forests especially. There is an active animism in Middle-earth’s natural world which is literally alive, helping or hindering human (or non-human) will for good or ill. The Lonely Mountain has roots; the roots of the trees are their ‘feet’; the Caradhras mountain shows the Fellowship its displeasure by snowing heavily when they approach it; the herb *athelas* heals even the air, making it sparkle with joy; the great engulfing clouds and the blasted and poisoned landscape around Mordor reflect Sauron’s evil power and dominion; the trees, stone, blade and leaf listen. Nature becomes sterile
wherever evil dwells – in the dragon’s den in Fanghorn Forest and in Mordor - because evil in its very nature is non-creative. This natural rhythm and phenomena which foster a sensitivity to the other, which is characteristic of Middle-earth, raises *LotR* to a novel of what Tim Robinson calls “geophany” – a showing forth of the Earth (32).

“Long before ecology became fashionable, the trilogy celebrated the natural wonders of our world” (G. O’Connor 48–49). Tolkien’s feeling for the environment, reflected through the depiction of an animate alternate world, is not only a contemporary feeling of the romance with its entire archaism, but also an apocalyptic anxiety about ‘the shadow of the times’.

There are three domains in Middle-earth, each nesting within the larger one: the social, which is represented by the Shire, the natural, represented by Middle-earth and the spiritual, represented by the Sea. Tolkien says, “...fairy stories as a whole have three faces: the Mystical towards the supernatural; the Magical towards Nature; and the Mirror of scorn and pity towards Man. The essential face of Faerie is the middle one, the Magical” (“On Fairy”125). The marvellous in Middle-earth is part of its natural law. *LotR* begins and ends with the hobbits in the social, cultural and political world of the Shire. It represents the hobbits’ strong sense of community, their decentralized democracy, their ‘bioregionalism’ (living within the natural limits of an area) and their enduring love of and feeling for, place. It is in ultimate contrast to the brutal universalism and totalitarianism of Mordor. For the hobbits the Shire is a paradigm of creation and involves a communal affirmation of its value. Leaving it is a great sacrifice and the thought of return is a constant refrain that rekindles their hope in the course of their journey.

The Shire nests within the larger and varied natural world of Middle-earth, which includes the human world. There are plenty of dangerous wild places in Middle-
earth which evoke a sense of a tragically endangered natural world, savaged by human
greed and stupidity. The striking local distinctiveness of these places contribute “to the
uncanny feeling, of actually having been there, and knowing it from the inside …- the
sensation … of actually walking, running, fighting and breathing in Middle-earth”
(Menzies 57). Middle-earth’s distinctive places themselves are animate subjects with
distinct personalities, while the peoples are inextricably in and of their natural and
geographical locales: the Elves and their wood and forests, the Dwarves and mountains
and the hobbits and fields and garden. The most beautiful places in Middle-earth are
so, because they are loved by the people who share them. Tolkien’s radical ecologism
of a return to the roots, “anticipates, both ‘social’ and ‘deep’ ecology, and retraces a
pre-modern way of understanding the world” (Curry, Defending Middle Earth 28).

The most encompassing of all is the third sphere of Middle-earth, the Sea
which symbolizes an ethics rooted in spiritual values. Though himself a devout
Catholic, here Tolkien deals with the problem of spirit in a secular age, making no
explicit reference to any organized religion at all. The rich and complex spiritual world
of Middle-earth contains both a polytheist-cum-animist cosmology of natural magic
and a Christian ethic of humility and compassion, both of which, as Tolkien felt, are
necessary. This fusion of the Christian ethics and a neo-pagan reverence for nature,
together with a liberal humanist respect for the small, precarious and apparently
mundane is very relevant to resisting the immense and impersonal forces of modernity
and its savage pride in the efficiency and self sufficiency of its own reason. Tolkien’s
love of the sea in LotR offers a kind of sadness and the prospect of loss, but it is also a
means of redemption.

Though these qualities of the people, places, seasons and air of Middle-earth
belong to the North-Western part of Europe, the books are not ethnocentrically limited
to a particular area, thanks to Tolkien’s master strokes. He presents the home and heartland of Industrial Revolution as a place where it has never happened; the birth place of colonialism and imperialism, as an unstained ‘Fourth World’ of indigenous tribes. The only place in Middle-earth which is industrial, imperialistic and therefore corrupt is Mordor. According to anthropologist Virginia Luling, Tolkien’s Middle-earth is a Europe that has never been ‘Europeanized’ or ‘modern’ (qtd. Curry, Defending 8).

And to anyone living in the West or anyone affected by it, (which is to say nearly everyone anywhere), the story of LotR and its potential relevance, is about the resistance to just that, thereby offering not an ‘escape’ from the world, but hope for its future.

Middle-earth, like other fantasy worlds, is a place that enables the free out-let of thought and emotions in a way that real world narratives operating under stylistic narrative and a range of other constraints would not permit. But this does not mean that the fantasy world of this alternate universe is escapist. Fantasy may transport a person from reality to a world where Elves interact with men and where dragons sleep on their hoards beneath the mountains; but while doing this it also provides a mirror up to life. Tolkien may offer the reader great imaginative license, which is very true of Middle-earth: at the same time he is also showing us or helping us to find out who we are, what we are and why. LotR provides us with a sense of otherness, of difference, in a distant world that is still our own earth, though disfigured by time, the strange and vague echoes of which still linger in our language and culture. It is Tolkien’s insight in his Secondary World “that connects to us not through a journey through space or time …but through the sensibility of the hobbits, which, for all their faults, is more like ours than … Aragorn’s; and of course, through a sense of place” (Lyons 34). This is the
‘Recovery’ that fantasy achieves for the reader and which re-enchants him through the secondary world.

It is magic along with the supernatural that render a sense of otherness to the Secondary World and that makes it ‘fantastic’. Tolkien uses the term Enchantment for what he calls the “elvish craft” in fantasy: “Enchantment produces a Secondary World into which both designer and spectator can enter, to the satisfaction of their senses while they are inside” (“On Fairy” 143). This elvish craft is different from the self-centred power of the ‘mere Magician’. Tolkien considers magic as a sort of scientific-technological ingenuity culminating in the vulgar devices of the laborious scientific magician, whereas enchantment is the magic of the ‘faerie’ – the primal desire at the heart of the Faerie: the realization, independent of the conceiving mind, of imagined wonder (116). The magic of Middle-earth is not a playful, silly magic, nor is it special-effects showmanship. It has an end greater than itself: “the satisfaction of certain primordial desires” (116), in the form of archetypes. The magic and the supernatural in Tolkien’s fantasy is unique that they are integrated into the spirit of Middle-earth as a natural part of the environment to serve this end. Magic is crucial to the plot of _LotR_, but Tolkien does not explain them; it seems that he even denies that magic is important in his world. Tolkien, says that, he is “too casual” about referring to magic in the book, especially about terming it ‘magic’ at all; the question, he says, is very “difficult” (_Letters_ 199).

It is the wizards, especially Gandalf and Saruman, who wield visible magic in _LotR_, but Tolkien uses the word ‘wizard’ to mean something “utterly distinct from Sorcerer or Magician” (159). Gandalf and Saruman, who appear to use magical spells, are actually supernatural beings created by Illuvatar, the God of Tolkien’s world. Their God-given gifts are something quite different from magic. To the hobbits of the Shire,
Gandalf is mainly the Wizard, with “fires, smokes, and lights” (*LotR* 25). But Gandalf is not mere ‘squibs crackers and backarappers’ (27) alone. Magic is with him, around him – magic is him! He “work[s] up the best magic he could” to fight the goblins (*The Hobbit* 90); he creates fire and light with his staff; he uses spells and counter spells when fighting the Wargs or Orcs; the gates of Moria open at a spoken command from him; and as Gandalf the White, enemies scatter and darkness dispel with his mere presence.

The Elves, the supreme among the created beings, also use magic in their interaction in Middle-earth; magic is part of their very being. At Elrond’s command the river of Rivendell rise up in a wrath of flood as “a plumed cavalry of waves[of]… white riders upon white horses with frothing manes” (*LotR* 214) and saves Frodo from the Black Riders. The Mirror of Galadriel shows to Frodo and Sam, “things that were, and things that are, and things that yet may be” (362). The crystal phial with the light of Earendil’s star, which Galadriel gifts Frodo, the grey dust and the seed that ‘the Lady’ gives Sam, the *lembas* or waybread, that will serve a traveller ‘when all else fails’” (370) and the elvish robes which will aid them “in keeping out of the sight of unfriendly eyes”, all appear as Elf-magic to the hobbits and dwarves and men: “‘Are these magic cloaks?’ asked Pippin, looking at them with wonder. ‘I do not know what you mean by that,’ answered the leader of the Elves” (370) Presenting the Ring-bearer with the magical Mirror, Galadriel, too, says:

> ‘For this is what your folk would call magic, I believe; though I do not understand clearly what they mean; and they seem to use the same word of the deceits of the Enemy. But this, if you will, is the magic of Galadriel’ (362).
All this, as also Aragorn’s ability to heal with the herb *athelas*, is magic from the point of view of the hobbits. Tolkien factually observes:

[H]obbits have never, in fact, studied magic of any kind… [and their] art of disappearing swiftly and silently, when large folk whom they do not wish to meet come blundering by… [is] due solely to a professional skill that heredity and practice, and a close friendship with the earth have rendered… [which] to Men … may seem magical

(*LotR*, Prologue 1).

But what appears as magic in Middle-earth might be superior knowledge or a difference in perspective rather than actual enchantment. What one fails to understand about another race or created being evokes wonder and hence is deemed magical, just as in the Primary World. “What is technology to the Elves – a means of apprehending “possible” future – is mystical, baffling, [magical] to the hobbits, who could not possibly understand it” (Battis 917). Hence, since his meeting with Galadriel beside the silver mirror, she seemed to Frodo “no longer terrible” (*LotR* 376) or perilous, nor filled with hidden power, because with that encounter, perhaps Frodo had moved closer to ‘Recovery’.

The Ring which is the crucial nexus of the story of *LotR* is a magical ring of great power that makes the wearer invisible and controls all the other rings of power. The fate of Middle-earth depends on the destruction of the Ring, which in turn, depends on Frodo’s choice, on his moral decision. The Ring which is the only thing with clear magical entity can be destroyed only by non-magical means. Tolkien wanted the Fellowship’s mission to destroy the One Ring to be tough and dangerous, demanding great moral strength and endurance; that is what makes it worthwhile. It is white magic or theurgy, the magic which controls great spirits of the universe for good purposes.
This magic relates firmly to the external world and is relevant and meaningful. It does not take Frodo to Mount Doom with one wave of a magic wand or with the sprinkle of fairy dust or on a magic carpet. It is a magic with moral implications; and “those who use it wisely demand choice and moral decision, often from themselves” (Evans 118).

The magic of Middle-earth is thus a natural accomplishment of the supernatural beings that abounds the secondary world of Middle-earth, effecting its enchantment. Tolkien says; “I desired dragons with a profound desire …. [T]he world that contained even the imagination of Fafnir was richer and more beautiful, at whatever cost of peril” (“On Fairy ”135), because fairy-stories are plainly not primarily concerned with possibility, but with desirability, and fantasy, the making or glimpsing of other worlds, was at “the heart of the desire of Faerie” (135). It is this profound desire of Tolkien for dragons revealed through the depiction of the supernatural elements that enhance the grandeur and rich complexity of the canvas of Middle-earth.

Middle-earth is inhabited by a range of supernatural creatures of as wide a spectrum as the Elves, the supreme ‘First-born’ of Illuvator at one end, to orcs and Gollum, the basest among the created beings, at the other end. Elrond the Half-elf Lord of Rivendell, with powers superior and divine, and Galadriel the Elven-queen who creates and nourishes life, are the most superior beings who preserve and guide the rest of Middle-earth. Yet the Elves are symbolic figures in the background- “relics” and “exiles” from the Blessed Realm (Evans 115), who address our imagination from the fairy-story past and are not directly involved in the great moral choices Frodo must make. After the destruction of the Ring, the Elves leave Middle-earth and pass into the Undying Lands, because either way the Elves stand to lose; those who choose to remain, like Arwen, become mortal and die. Generous, compassionate and wise, with a combination of pathos and civility (The Silmarillion 121) integrated into skill and
beauty, the Elves are like highly refined human beings representing “the pathos of a
dying culture passing into history as it finds itself out of step with the changing world”
(Evans 116).

Other than the supernatural Elves and the Istari- another ethereal being to which
belong Gandalf, Middle-earth is inhabited by many strange creatures, both mythical
and inventive. The Ents, as ‘old as mountains’- who awoke in the great Forests of Arda
from the thoughts of Yavanna the Queen of the Earth - are the Shepherds of Trees, and
are a race closer to primitive ‘natural’ life. Unlike others who read lore or search the
past, they are the past, living metaphors. As symbolic personifications of the raw
elemental power of nature and of things that grow in the Earth, they reflect the essence
of nature. Representing the active animism of the natural world is Fangorn or
Treebeard, the Lord of the Ents:

… a most extraordinary face … a large Man-like, almost Troll-like,
figure, at least fourteen foot high, very sturdy, with a tall head and
hardly any neck. Whether it was clad in stuff like green and grey bark,
or whether that was its hide, was difficult to say … [T]he
arms…were…covered with a brown smooth skin …the long face …
with a sweeping grey beard, bushy, almost twiggy at the roots, thin and
mossy at the ends …. [The deep eyes] … as if there was an enormous
well behind them, filled up with ages of memory …, but their surface
was sparkling with the present … [I]t felt as if something that grew in
the ground asleep …between deep earth and sky had suddenly waked
up … [from] its own inside affairs for endless years (LotR 463).

The Ents articulate and embody Tolkien’s own profound love for trees and
wooded landscapes, and for the link with the past that they represent through their
longevity and persistence. We love them for “their slowness, their physical power, their essential loneliness” (Lyons 189-90). The Ents’ perspective is alien, by way of contrast of a theme apparent elsewhere in *LotR* - the short, transient span of human life. The Ents have lost their Entwives and so the race will dwindle and fade, symbolizing the irreplaceability of nature destroyed by the reeking powers of industrial society. Defeated as they are, they still choose defiance, in accordance with the northern idea of courage Tolkien admired so much in *Beowolf* and elsewhere. The walking-talking giant sentients of trees, the Ents - complete and total in themselves - are Tolkien’s classic examples of defamiliarization leading to Recovery. The Ents deepen our awareness of real-life trees and enliven the defamiliarizing effect of fantasy, making the familiar seem unfamiliar for a time so that we can know it more fully and anew (that is, regain a clear view of things) and thus promote an increased environmental sensibility.

The hobbits do not possess any supernatural qualities; yet they too are inventive sub-creations of Tolkien’s secondary universe. Like fairy-story animals, these small, hairy, quaint and fun loving beings provide a commentary on our own comfort loving, self satisfied life and conservatism. Tolkien saw the hobbits as human and related to man. They are made small to exhibit the pettiness of man and “mostly to show up, in creatures of very small physical power, the amazing and unexpected heroism of ordinary man ‘at a pinch’” (Harvey 118). Hobbits are not utopian or ideal, but generalizations of certain basic characteristics common to ordinary men. Through the hobbits, Tolkien tells us that we too are specially graced and gifted individuals with the potential within us to measure up if called upon, although we may doubt our worth and abilities, even upon the brink of success. Though human in spirit, the hobbits are defamiliarized through estrangement and re-enchanted through Recovery, thus completing the sub-created supernatural world of Tolkien.
The aspects of magic and supernatural in fantasy are strongly linked with the problem of good and evil. The manifest battle between light and dark, and the struggle between good and evil impulses within the minds of the inhabitants of Middle-earth, already present in *The Hobbit* in the development of the character of Bilbo, is the essence of *LotR*. The Middle-earth tales are not simply tales of Good versus Evil, with all the good just good, and the bad, just bad. They are much more subtle than a mere out and out conflict between Good and Evil. The good often display moral rectitude and so are not necessarily good and their counter parts who disobey the moral imperatives are not necessarily moral degenerates.

Tolkien’s starting point is that, in the beginning, Evil did not exist; nothing was *made* evil. “For nothing is evil in the beginning; Even Sauron was not so” (*LotR* 267), says Elrond the Half-elven to the council. All evil beings have finally fallen – Satan, Melkor and Sauron. Sauron represents the wholly evil will as far as possible, because Tolkien never dealt with Absolute Evil. Orcs, trolls, wargs and the other minions of Sauron are slaves of evil, rather than evil, having no minds of their own to choose or use their free will; and having been under the control of evil from the beginning and being perverted from the created beauty of Illuvatar, they cannot know Good. What they only know and depict, like Shelob the giant spider, is the impersonal world of destruction and death which is the other side of man’s self-awareness- the sense of being destroyed without reason.

In Tolkien’s reading evil is not original with the creation of the world, but inevitably arises where created beings are free to make choices and exercise free wills in making decisions which may either enlarge their imaginative life or narrow and pervert it. The perverted will provides shapes for evil. In its choice to do evil it keeps cutting down its freedom until there will have no will left for choosing. Both the forces
of light and darkness have this potential – Saruman, Gollum, Galadriel and even Bilbo and Frodo, at times. Bilbo’s ‘invisibility’, and his longevity is paid for by his becoming ‘thin and stretched’ (47), unlike his true self. Frodo becomes helpless and possessed under the Ring’s power. As they use the Ring, Bilbo as also Frodo becomes invisible and walks under the Eye of the dark power that Rules the Ring.

To become invisible is to be without form; hence Sauron has no form, but is always a concept, a “darkness”, a name which lives in the minds of others, a thought in the minds of those who have become “things” animated only by the thought of their master- ‘the un-nameable’, ‘the invisible’ that Rosemary Jackson identifies in post-Romantic fantasies(42). He exists because he is called into being by the desires of others; he gains power by controlling the lives of others – through the Eye which symbolizes his power, through the palentir which the Eye uses to search minds and also through the Ringbearer’s mind as when on top of Amon Hen Frodo suddenly feels the Eye of Sauron searching for him; Sauron, thus, is the “inspecting gaze” that Foucault refers to (155).

Tolkien knew that in modernity, evil cannot be avoided but can only be the subject of constant negotiation. Invisibility ironically is a highly visible form of evil, ‘seeing without being seen’, which is one of the unavoidable features of modernity. Sauron becomes an Eye – the Eye without voice, the gaze itself, the silent text, the body without organs – and is only visible when he is consciously looking. This separation, which is unavoidable and characteristic of modernity, can become an isolating egoism. The Ring is the illusion of separation and a symbol to which this illusion of separation leads, which is inherent in modernity and so, cannot be destroyed. The fantasy setting of the novel allows Tolkien to contrast the evil inherent in modernity with other forms of social organizations, which makes the book so
significant. The evil on which the book focuses, namely, the capacity of the Ring to make the wearer invisible, is inalienably characteristic of the present age, precisely because it takes its most radical form in modernity. Because this form of evil exists in and characterizes modernity, a fantasy novel such as *LotR* is an excellent and perhaps the only form which can reflect on it.

It is necessary to give evil form so that it can be dealt with. Thus the ‘invisible’ evil of the past becomes the ‘shadow’ that haunts the history of Middle-earth. The word, used repeatedly and pointedly, cast shadows throughout the canvas of the novel. The verse of Elven-lore, quoted by Gandalf, which may be considered as the theme-song of *LotR*, too evokes the pervading presence of the ‘shadows’:

One Ring to rule them all, One Ring to find them,
One Ring to bring them all and in the darkness bind them
In the Land of Mordor where the Shadows lie (50).

The association with shadow is metaphysical: “Gandalf the grey fell into shadow [in Moria]”, says Aragorn (355); when the Fellowship reach the elf-haven, they find that “on the land of Lorien no shadow lay “(349); a chapter on Mordor is even entitled ‘The Land of Shadow’; and sometimes the shadow becomes a personification of Sauron. Just as the Ring wraiths, shapes poised between substance and shadow- the Shadow, which is an absence caused by a thing and not a thing in itself, becomes a presence, a kind of life.

Tom Shippey is of the opinion that, here Tolkien’s characteristically twentieth century position may be viewed in the light of two assumptions on the nature of evil, which are apparently in contradiction (*Tolkien: The Author of the Century*, chap.III). One is that of Orthodox Christianity, the Boethian view of evil, modernized by Tolkien’s close friend and associate C.S. Lewis. According to this there is no such
thing as evil, but only the absence of good which people identify as evil and which in the long run or in the divine plan, would be brought to good, as the Fall of man was, by the incarnation and the death and resurrection of Christ. Tolkien fictionalized this view through the unlikely medium of the Orcs, presenting them as characters with no self-awareness or capacity for self-criticism, clearly dramatizing the Boethian view that evil is the absence, the shadow of good. The second view on the nature of evil is that evil does exist and has to be resisted by all means virtuous, or else it will be a dereliction of duty. This belief that the world is a battlefield, between the equal and opposite powers of Good and Evil, so that in reality there is no difference between the two, is a Manichaean point of view. Though an orthodox Christian and less tolerant to heresy, Tolkien’s education, faith and the circumstances of his time all set up “a deep-seated contradiction between Boethian and Manichaean opinions, between authority and experience, between evil as an absence (the Shadow) and evil as a force (‘the Dark Power’)” (135). Tolkien juggles the Boethian and the Manichaean views of the nature of evil, which, expressed through the paradoxes of wraiths and shadows, and through the Ring, drives much of the plot of *LotR*.

‘The Shadow of the Past’ appears in the Third Age as the One Ring – the ‘thing’ is made visible, given form in order to be corrected or destroyed. The Ring assumes ambiguity and wields power from the very beginning, from the time Bilbo, with much reluctance, hands it over to Gandalf, (“I won’t give my Precious away” (*LotR* 34)); and also when Frodo wants to fling it into the fire, but “could not do so, not without a great struggle” (60). Bilbo and Frodo are reluctant to part with the Ring – the Boethian concept of evil as internal, caused by human sin and weakness and alienation from God. In the Manichaean view, evil is a force from outside making the Ring evil and obeying the will of its master, stirring up and animating evil forces. Six times Frodo
puts on the Ring, but except when in the house of Tom Bombadil who is unaffected by the Ring, he experiences the compelling influence it has on him; he feels that the Ring is behaving in response to some wish or command from outside. As they move closer to Mordor, Sam and Frodo experience the Manichaean images of the Ring stronger. On Mount Doom, Frodo’s hand creeps again and again towards the Ring until he tells Sam: “Help me, Sam! Hold my hand! I can’t stop it” (943). When, at the edge of the Crack of Doom, Frodo puts on the Ring in a final act of claim over it, “I do not choose now to do what I came to do …. The Ring is mine” (945), he is given in to temptation and is also overpowered by evil- a juggling between the Boethian and Manichaean concepts. More likely, to Tolkien the true Christian, it is a challenge to the last request in the Lord’s prayer - ‘Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil’- by which one is asking God to keep one safe from oneself and also from outside evil. Tolkien intends the danger the Ring poses as something that comes both from inside and from outside; evil comes from individual imperfections, as also from evil forces over which the individual has no power. According to Shippey, this view of Tolkien on the nature of evil as something more than, “a sort of psychic amplifier magnifying the unconscious fears or selfishnesses [sic]of its owners”, or an external force like “a sentient creature with urges and powers of its own”(136), makes LotR a greater work than most other fantasies, where the hero is called to fight only his enemies and not his friends or himself, as in Frodo’s case. It also makes LotR a work more relevant to the real world of war and politics from which Tolkien’s experience of evil clearly originated.

The Ring has been variously interpreted as the lure of the modern world, as the emblem of Sin and as an allegorical representation of atomic weapons. But Tolkien denies this, saying that “my story is not an allegory of Atomic power, but of Power (used for Domination)” (qtd. in Curry, Defending 103). The two prime facts of Middle-
earth are power and its consequence, suffering. Tolkien describes the primary symbolism of the Ring as the will to mere power, seeking to make itself objective by physical force, mechanism and also by lies, making the owner invincible while ‘possessing’ its possessor and turning everything into evil. Power is always evil, because it allows the wicked to domi- nate the world and it makes the good inescapably corrupting. Tolkien associates power with his wicked characters and denies it to his heroes who have regained a clear view of things as apart from themselves, who have achieved ‘Recovery’. Gandalf, Elrond, Galadriel and Aragorn are quite powerful, yet they do not fall to evil ways, because the mere possession of power need not lead to wickedness but the exertion of one’s strength through force that is corrupting. Force is compulsive, demanding and based on fear rather than love. Here is the difference between the powers possessed by Galadriel or Gandalf and Sauron. Power such as Gandalf’s is personal and vaguely spiritual; force such as Sauron’s is impersonal and materialistic.

But such power as Sauron’s has several inherent weaknesses. To wield the Ring and its power he had to let a great part of his own power to pass into the One Ring; that is, if the Ring is destroyed, its power and consequently Sauron’s own power would be dissolved to vanishing point. Moreover, Sauron who wanted Power incarnate in the Ring for himself alone, could not conceive of others who would think differently from himself, whose attitudes toward power could be different: “Into his heart the thought will not enter that any will refuse it, that having the Ring [they] may seek to destroy it” (LotR 269). These weaknesses are exploited by those fighting Sauron, since Good can imagine what it is like to be bad, but Evil cannot imagine the other way round, nor can it imagine anyone as being different from itself; and this proves its doom.
The more obsessed and more corrupted in the pursuit of power are the more individual and more original of Tolkien’s presentations of evil, namely, his concept of the ‘Ringwraith’. Existing in a realm between being alive or dead, with an obvious doubt of whether substantial or insubstantial, the Ringwraiths were once men ensnared by Sauron who “fell under the dominion of the One [Ring], and … became Ring wraiths, shadows under his great Shadow, his most terrible servants” (51). They work psychologically, paralyzing the will and disarming all resistance. Under the dominion of the Dark Lord they become wraiths or rather make themselves into wraiths - an idea quite familiar and in a way non-fantastic to Tolkien and his contemporaries. The realism of this image of evil is increased by the examples of people on their way to becoming wraiths themselves. Bilbo and Frodo are just at the ominous beginning of it; Gollum, pure evil growing out of mere human weakness and selfishness, is further down the road; but the best example of ‘wraithing’ in LotR is Saruman. In his pursuit of knowledge and finally control, Saruman co-operates consciously with forces of evil, and having thus been steadily eaten up by evil, he finally becomes a wraith. After his accomplice Wormtongue cuts his throat,

about the body of Saruman a grey mist gathered, and rising slowly
to a great height like smoke from a fire, as a pale shrouded figure
it loomed over the Hill. For a moment it wavered, looking to west…
and with a sigh dissolved into nothing (1020).

As Frodo looks down at the body with pity and horror, “it shrunk and the shrivelled face became rags of skin upon a hideous skull” (1020) - a wraith, of course. The concept of the Ringwraiths and the hints of the process of ‘wraithing’ are responses to what Tolkien found in his own life experience, of a ‘moral vacuum’ representing
anyone whose desire for power leads to the subordination and erasure of one’s self and humanity.

Gollum is the living, horrible example of the destructive power of the Ring when it can completely dominate the will of its victim possessor. He/It illustrates the self-destructive potential of all created beings in their desire for power. Unlike Bilbo or Frodo, who never sought the Ring, Sméagol takes it by craft and violence and harms others using it, because the Ring had given him power according to his stature: “He hated it and loved it, as he hated and loved himself. He could not get rid of it. He had no will left in the matter” (55). Sméagol’s claustrophobically exclusive, unhealthy narcissism under the Ring’s power, overriding all other duties of care, love and honour, turns him into the withered, totally depraved, “abhuman” creature he becomes – Gollum (Zlosnik 47-58). In his depravity he approaches a reptile nature, and uses exclusive sibilants, calling the lost Ring and sometimes, even himself, “Precious”:

‘Ach, sss! Cautious my precious! More haste less speed.
We mussn’t rissk our neck, musst we, precious? No,
precious – gollum!’ …
‘…Where is it, where is it: my Precious my Precious?
It’s ours, it is, and we wants it’ (LotR 613).

Gollum, as a twist on the ‘classical guide’ of myth, leads Frodo to Mount Doom, as well as to compassion. Gollum is that failure of perception which Tolkien describes as the failure of Recovery to regain “a clear view” of things “apart from ourselves” (“On Fairy”146). Smeagol never does this, even after Frodo befriends him. His destruction at the very moment of possession of the Ring, at the very height of power, is the final irony in his petty yet vital existence. Gollum achieves his quest on Mount Doom, united at last with the Ring’s unholy power. When he topples over the brink of the Mountain
into the Fire of Doom, with a last wail ‘Precious’, failing to achieve Recovery, it is Frodo’s ego that falls into the fire. Gollum, with his small size and still smaller vision, too, serves larger purposes and plays his part before the end, as a great catalyst of transformation.

Despised and outcast, Gollum represents the weakness and evil that lurks in the soul of a hobbit. In Jungian terms Gollum is Frodo’s (and Sam’s) Shadow. He is Frodo’s alter ego, Frodo’s own doubts, fear suspicion, greed, selfishness, cowardice, and his false self. His schizophrenic debate with himself whether to destroy Frodo or not, shows the possibility of reform in him, that “[e]ven Gollum was not wholly ruined” (LotR 55). Though the good half in him loses, his dangerous split personality parallels Frodo’s own inner struggle between his will and inclination. To Sam, at one time, the two, tempted by power beyond their natures, appear “akin and not alien: they could reach one another’s minds” (618). Frodo can see in Smeagol what he himself might have been. Tolkien presents Gollum as an alternative view to show what hobbits might have become (or what we might become) by the corrupting will of Power. We have all got our Gollums too—suppressed, rejected but always with the potential to achieve supremacy. He is the desperation within us—the lack of an imagined self— not to be approved of, but in a sense, to be loved. For this reason, for all our disgust we can’t help pitying this victim of the Ring. Tolkien’s great capacity as a fantasist to achieve images of such psychological penetration is revealed through this change in the depiction of the villain, from the simply conceived Smaug of The Hobbit to the more complex victim in LotR—Gollum.

While Gollum, Saruman, Boromir and Denethor fail to achieve Recovery, being corrupted by the Ring’s power, there are others who are untouched by the power of the Ring. The courageous renunciation of power by Bilbo, Frodo, Faramir, Aragorn and
others is what ennobles *LotR*, animating and supporting its far greater dignity and seriousness. As Shippey suggests, the power of the Ring could be ‘addictive’ (*Author* 119), yet for those who can shake it off in the first place, it has no more power than any other temptation. While the idealistic and devotedly heroic capacities of men cannot be trusted with power, power can be safely invested in the ‘halflings’ and beings who can rise to idealism and heroism under pressure of outrageous events, without premeditation. The way of the Ring to Gandalf’s “heart is by pity, pity for weakness and the desire of the strength to do good” (*LotR* 61); he dares not take it, not even to keep it safe, unused. Though it has no power over Bombadil, he would soon forget it or most likely throw it away, for such things have no hold on his mind. The Ring is not a temptation to Faramir who is sure that he “would not take this thing, if it lay by the high way” (671). Frodo, Bilbo and Gollum lack the depth of understanding or of properly using the Ring, for the Ring “give[s] power according to the measure of each possessor” (366); the Ring’s power over them is the petty desire for possession which makes them wizened, pathetic, mean, grasping and totally helpless.

Until the passing of the Third Age, evil had a physical and real form in the One Ring and in the Eye; from the Fourth Age, evil is viewed a philosophical concept, spiritual like Morgoth, lurking in the shadows for the Last Battle. Evil does not vanish with Sauron and his Ring. The tales of the origin of evil tragically underscores its existence in the world and in the hearts of men forever. The end of the evil ones only means the beginning of the reality of the problem of evil in our existence. Here Tolkien’s position in dealing with the problem of evil is in tune with that of Gandalf that all one can do is combat evil when and where one is, for there is no permanent solution to it:
[I]t is not our part to master all the tides of the world, but to do what is in us for the succour of those years wherein we are set, uprooting the evil in the field that we know, so that those who live after may have clean earth to till. What weather they shall have is not ours to rule” (*LotR* 879).

Ursula Le Guin strongly supports Tolkien on this: “Those who fault Tolkien on the Problem of evil are usually those who have an *answer* to the Problem of Evil – which he did not” – (qtd. in Curry, *Defending* 101). Posing evil as a ‘problem’ instead of what it is, is escapism and therefore inevitably problematic and incomplete. Tolkien very well knew this: hence the complex and tenable world of suffering, waste, loss and injustice and a war of ‘long defeat’ to be coped with and lived with in *LotR*, as in real human lives.

Yet, Tolkien’s essentially Christian vision provides his universe with order, purpose and a place for all created beings and a relationship of moral and spiritual meaning, where individual responsibility, free will to choose good or evil and fellowship have a positive function. It is the choice of man and his gestures towards right or wrong that shapes events of the world and the lives of others, for better or worse, giving meaning to an individual’s actions in a context larger than himself. Such a sense of moral conclusions, of the possibility of action, where the emphasis is on ‘function’, gives meaning to individual lives in a way that most modern fiction cannot do. Tolkien visualizes the creative artist as a moral being who orders the world in his imaginative work and thereby expresses the Truth which is at the source of lives and actions. Imagination gives man power over his life, a life in which he may fight evil and defend good, may use past history to affect the course of the present for changing
the future, or as Tolkien says, may realize ‘imagined wonder’. Thus Tolkien suggests how our imaginative power to make fantasy can be used in order to know the truth.

Like Lewis’s, Tolkien’s morality too is essentially Christian morality. A Christian reading of fantasy and man’s history would be ultimately moral and allegorical; but Tolkien denies that he has written an allegory. Sauron is not Hitler, the Ring is not the atom bomb and the ‘Scouring of the Shire’ is not about contemporary England. But the book is like a parable, consciously aimed at putting across the general Christian view that the world is a battlefield between the forces of good and evil.

Tolkien works out a quasi-Christian morality in pagan terms creating a pre-Christian literary and cultural scenario into a quest incorporated with the major moral questions of life. By presenting a landscape of utter contrasts and a dualistic camp of Good and Evil, of Gandalf vs. Sauron, Fangorn vs. Saruman, Sam vs. Gollum and Frodo vs. Ring, “Tolkien appeals to the residual Christianity of our culture” (Hodgart 11).

But unlike Lewis’s morality, which has been accused of being propagandist, Tolkien’s has no explicit trappings of religion in it. In a letter to his friend Rev. Murray, Tolkien says:

LotR is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously so in the revision. That is why I have not put in or have cut out, practically all references to anything like ‘religion’, to cults or practices, in the imaginary world. For the religious element is absorbed into the story and the symbolism (Letters 172).

Exploring the sacred in a pre-Christian world by embodying certain moral and intellectual themes, Tolkien has ‘re-paganized’ the Christian vision. Hence LotR is filled with foreshadowing of a Christian truth that had not yet revealed itself in fullness.
Frodo’s journey certainly reveals the presence of a governing, if inscrutable, loving Providence and the privileging of mercy indicative of the Christian myth. Gandalf clarifies Frodo’s doubts of his choice as the Ring-bearer thus:

‘You may be sure that it was not for any merit that others do not possess: not for power or wisdom, at any rate. But you have been chosen, and you must therefore use such strength and heart and wits as you have (LotR 61).

This recognition of being chosen or called to a special task is at the heart of Christian life. LotR contains repeated hints that ‘there is more than one power at work’ in Middle-earth, referred to differently as fate, chance, luck or ‘accident’, in tune with the Icelandic sagas which had deeply influenced and inspired Tolkien. When Tom Bombadil rescues the hobbits from Willow-man, he says “just chance brought me then, if chance you call it” (126). Gandalf tells Frodo that “Bilbo was meant to find the Ring, and not by its maker. In which case you were also meant to have it” (56). The council of Elrond is the result of a ‘chance meeting’ of the members by a strange coincidence. At almost any point in the novel, things could have gone wrong disastrously. But Providence intervenes at crucial times, as at the brink of the Crack of Doom in the ‘mis-shape’ of Gollum, when Frodo stands unwilling to part with the Ring.

But the fall of Gollum into the chasm with the Ring is not just an accident, or ‘biased fortune’ as Manlove would call it (176). Even before the start of his quest Gandalf places the options open to Frodo, “the decision lies with you” (LotR 61). Therefore, the quest is acquired as a result of a string of decisions taken by Bilbo, Frodo and Sam by exercising their free will, out of pity and mercy: “It was pity that stayed [Bilbo’s] hand” (59) from murdering Gollum. It was pity that urged Frodo to reform him to being Sméagol again, and it was pity that restrained Sam from imparting
a killing thrust on the betrayer. As Shippey concludes: “Frodo spares Gollum from Sting, and Gollum in the end rescues Frodo from the Ring” (Author 144). In Tolkien’s view, the logic of luck is that no one knows how events will turn out, so one should keep on trying by exercising one’s free will, with the confidence that some external power will intervene through earthly agents. For this, one has to seize opportunity with both hands, holding on to one’s courage.

In *LotR*, ‘Mordor’ and the ‘Shadow’ seem to be more visible and at hand than the Valar or ‘luck’ and ‘chance’, foreboding a basic denial of security throughout. The words of the wise too envisage defeat as a long-term prospect. Galadriel speaks of their fight of ‘long defeat’ through the ages of the world and Elrond agrees, “I have seen three ages in the West of the world, and many defeats and many fruitless victories” (243). Through all this pessimism and expectations of defeat, Tolkien is sublimating the courage of the characters, especially of the hobbits, which would otherwise look smaller. He presents courage as the strongest element of the Middle-earth virtues. Shippey maintains that Tolkien was “reintroduce[ing] to the world ‘the theory of courage’: not just courage … nor images of courage, but the ‘theory of courage’” (Author 149) based on the literature of Old Norse (and perhaps Old English). According to it, victory or defeat has nothing to do with right and wrong; even total control of the universe by evil forces should not budge a hero from his fight for right. This asks more of people than Christianity does, because it offers no heaven, no salvation and no reward for virtue, except the sombre satisfaction of having done right and being able to carry on. In the modern world where the theory of courage has vanished beyond redemption, Tolkien wants to introduce a new and meaningful image of courage which his characters could live up to and which our un-heroic world could emulate.
There is no easy hope in the lonely, non-aggressive courage shown by Bilbo in *The Hobbit*, or the image of courage of the hobbits of *LotR*, centred on laughter, cheerfulness and a refusal to look into the future at all, always conscious of long-term defeat and doom. “[T]he slow kindled courage of his race” (*LotR* 841) awakens in Merry at the sight of Eowyn’s ferocious fight with the Nazgul and he stabs the Black Rider from behind and in turn is wounded. Pippin brings down a hill-troll and falls under its weight, almost dead. But even at the point of imminent danger and death, Pippin “laughed a little within…, almost gay it seemed to be casting off at last all doubt and care and fear” (893). Sam and Frodo, after the destruction of the Ring in the great Fire of Mount Doom, wait for the end of all things, their last strength of mind and body swiftly ebbing, and Sam wonders:

‘What a tale we have been in…?’

But even while he spoke so, to keep fear away until the very last, his eyes still strayed north,… to where the sky far off was clear, as the cold blast, rising to a gale, drove back the darkness and the ruin of the clouds (950-51).

Though he had no hope in the whole affair from the very beginning, “being a cheerful hobbit he had not needed hope, as long as despair could be postponed” (638); at this point of paradox Sam’s loyalty gives him courage, to stick to his master to the very end, which was what he had chiefly come for. The most classic example of the theory of courage is when Frodo and Sam, after their supposedly last meal, talk about themselves as heroes of future hobbit narratives, at the stairs of Cirith Ungol; and Frodo laughs, “a long clear laugh from his heart. Such a sound had not been heard in those places since Sauron came to Middle-earth” (712). Not long after, Gollum finds them sleeping, peace
in their faces, and he touches Frodo, which is almost a caress, in a fleeting moment of likely redemption.

Tolkien’s theory of courage suggests that those, like Sam and Pippin, who always expected disaster and defeat at the end, could remain immune and even cheerful, when their expectations are confirmed, while those who need hope to keep going, fall into despair, when hope is withdrawn. Sam’s hopeless cheer, Treebeard’s ‘sad happiness’ and Merry’s use of light words at times of despair form Tolkien’s new-model image of courage, which prompts one to do right and to carry on, while persistence offers no guarantees in the face of defeat, in the complete absence of any faith in luck or hope. This is the non-aggressive, cold-blooded hobbit courage; it is “internalized, solitary, dutiful – and distinctively modern” [as opposed to the pre-modern quality of luck]… even heroes and warriors ought to come to respect it (Shippey, Author 28). The culture which Tolkien so lavishly resurrects is the world of Beowulf and the Norse Sagas – “an arena, no paradisal garden or utopian golden age but a world shot through with archetypal threats and phobias” (Hannabuss 88).

Courage gives rise to hope. Though the failing characters like Denethor as well as the victorious ones like Frodo or Fangorn, both convey existential despair, LotR does not give such an impression as a whole. The novel balances loss and defeat with acceptance, optimism and even defiance, balancing the Christian belief Tolkien adhered to, the pre-Christian heroic world he was attached to and the post-Christian world he lived in. During the siege of Gondor, when the Lord of Nazgul threatens Gandalf at the gate of Minas Tirith, that it was his “hour”: “[I]n that very moment, away behind in some courtyard in the City, a cock crowed …. And as if in answer there came from far away another note. Horns, horns, horns …. Rohan had come at last (829). The cock crows, signifying a new day, new life, resurrection and hope; and in reply come the
horns, symbolizing defiance, recklessness and rejection of despair that is Sauron’s chief weapon, which are pre-Christian answers to the existential dilemma posed by the Nazgul.

Though a distinctively Christian hope is not an explicit part of \textit{LotR}, the members of the Fellowship stake their lives on a future realization of the good beyond the bounds of the world. Uncertain of any success in their quest, they are called to be faithful rather than victorious. Their hope is profoundest when the prospects seem bleakest, as when Sam beholds a single star shimmering among the cloud-wrack of Ephel Duath in Mordor:

\begin{quote}
The beauty of it smote his heart, as he looked up out of the forsaken land, and hope returned to him. For like a shaft, clear and cold, the thought pierced him that in the end the Shadow was only a small and passing thing: there was light and high beauty for ever beyond its reach…. He … laid himself by Frodo’s side, and putting away all fear he cast himself into a deep untroubled sleep (922).
\end{quote}

This is transcendent hope in the relative power of good, illumined by a lone star, triumphing over the vast dark sky of Mordor’s evil and the deep and paradoxical truth that dark has no meaning apart from light, the primal final reality. Sam discerns that “[t]he light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” (John 1:5). He also discerns that the great tales that really matter were told about those who refused to surrender, about those who ventured forward in hope without any assurance of victory, unlike the ‘There-and-Back Again’ adventure stories which folks sought after sportingly. Plumbing into the depths of real hope Sam gets the spiritual insight that
their quest tale which is a part of the One Great Story is not only the story of the
destruction of the ruling Ring, but also a narrative of redemption and eucatastrophe.

To complete such a quest requires hope as well as faith working through love,
and forgiveness which is the real impetus for human love. The summons to pity and
forgiveness is voiced most clearly by Gandalf on behalf of Gollum: “Many that live
deserve death. And some that die deserve life. Can you give it to them? … .[T]he pity
of Bilbo may rule the fate of many” (LotR 59). Ralph Wood sees this as the leitmotiv of
Tolkien’s epic, and its animating theme (“Frodo’s Faith”). Frodo, in judging Gollum is
in the danger of committing the subtlest and deadliest of sins—self-righteousness-
because what the Ring has done to Gollum can happen to anyone. Just as there is not
much hope for Gollum’s cure, neither is there much hope for many others, including
Frodo himself. Pity and mercy are bound up with fate and Providence in the wisdom of
Gandalf’s advice ‘not to strike without need’; so also is the notion of Gollum’s possible
if unlikely ‘cure’. And ultimately it is Frodo’s mercy towards Gollum that makes him
heroic enough to defeat Sauron. In this sense, it can be said that Frodo did not fail in
his quest at all, but rather succeeds magnificently as Gollum slips off the ledge of
Mount Doom with the Ring.

Such virtues of pity and mercy which are so essential to Tolkien and so central
to his biblical faith would indeed be a vice in the heroic world of his inspiration and in
the modern cultures. Greater than philia, the intimate love that friends share, it is agape
—the unconditional love of those who are not only radically ‘other’ to us, but who
deserve our scorn and cannot reciprocate our pardon, and the pity for those whom we
do not trust, even our enemies. It is precisely such pity that Gandalf offers to Saruman
after the battle of Helms Deep and it is agape that Frodo shows when sparing him after
the scouring of the Shire. For Saruman, Frodo’s pity and forgiveness is a punishment too miserable and quite beyond his perception:

There was a strange look in his eyes of mingled wonder and respect and hatred. ‘You have grown, Halfling,’ he said….

‘You are wise, and cruel. You have robbed my revenge of sweetness, and now I must go hence in bitterness, in debt to your mercy. I hate it and you!’ (LotR 1019).

Of this Ralph Wood observes, “Tolkien captures the transcendent, even divine quality of real love by having it issue in a pity and pardon utterly unknown either to the warrior cultures of the ancient world or to our own equally merciless culture of competition” (“Frodo’s Faith”).

The greatest achievement within the story is the confounding of the mighty by the manifestation of such virtues and the renunciation of Power achieved by the small and humble hobbits. The ‘small’ here anticipates the Christian paradox of strength in weakness that Frodo proves true and Tolkien endorses later on, that LotR is about “the ennoblement or sanctification of the humble” (Letters 237). For “[n]othing moves my heart”, he says, “beyond all passions and heartbreaks of the world”, as much as watching a character become noble, “from the ugly Duckling to Frodo” (232). But this exaltation of the meek and the humble demands much sacrifice from the hobbits and other created beings who are called to give up even their lives for the sake of a higher good, that lies at the heart of human ethics. The spirit of sacrifice which accompanies the selfless exercise of free will is omnipresent in the tales of Middle-earth. The whole journey of Frodo carrying the burden of the evil Ring is a sacrifice, at times reminding one of the Passion of Christ, trudging towards Calvary with the cross of mankind’s evil.

The selfless love of Sam for his master, the undying loyalty of Gandalf, Aragorn and
the others to the triumph of Good, the sacrificial deaths of Boromir and Gandalf, and the self-willed fading of the Elves from Middle-earth who had only desired “to preserve all things unstained” (LotR 282; Silmarillion 288), all epitomize that there is no greater love than laying down one’s life for others.

Selfless sacrifice is linked intrinsically with the perennial question of time and eternity, particularly in relation to life and death. Death is seen as the gift of the One to men, and not a punishment. Arwen, the Elf-princess, in choosing the mortal Aragorn chooses death and thus sacrifices immortality. The blessing is not in the extention of life but paradoxically in the fullness of life. Tolkien warns of confusing true ‘immortality’ which is the freedom from Time, with what he calls ‘endless serial living’ or clinging to time – like that of a Ringwraith (“On Fairy” 153; Letters 285-6). But man will arise, Tolkien hopes, as does Aragorn, because “we are not bound forever to the circles of the world, and beyond them is more than memory” (LotR: Appendix A: v, 1063). Arwen too, goes forth to her rest in the hope of a resurrection, a radically renewed life beyond the circles of the world; “… and there is her green grave, until the world is changed (1063). This is the evangelium that Tolkien envisages in “On Fairy Stories”, similar to that of the fairy-story of the Gospel and its eucatastrophic resurrection (153,155).

The Ring tale is about immortality and escape from death, which according to Tolkien is “the oldest and deepest desire, the Great Escape” (153). Elsewhere he declares: “[t]he real theme for me is about …Death and Immortality : the mystery of the love of the world in the hearts of a race “doomed” to leave and seemingly lose it; the anguish in the hearts of a race “doomed” not to leave it, until its whole evil aroused story is complete” (Letters 246). But there is no escape from death except through death, if at all. “What LotR has to say ultimately is that if true happiness is to be found
by mortals, it will be found not in time but in eternity” (Aldrich 100). As in Tolkien’s story *Leaf by Niggle*, everything becomes more real after death for Frodo and Bilbo, bound for the Blessed Realm, while for those others left behind in Middle-earth, the sense of exile becomes intense: “…[b]ut to Sam the evening deepened …” (*LotR* 1030).

Tolkien is too honest to end his fairy tale with the conventional formula of “so they lived happily ever after”. Good has triumphed over Evil, which is Tolkien’s prescription for Fairy-Tales: “the Consolation of the Happy Ending which involves a ‘sudden joyous’ ‘turn … a sudden and miraculous grace’ (“On Fairy” 153).

Nevertheless, this grace is ‘never to be counted on to recur’. It is a consolation not of faith, but it is the consolation of hope. And the ‘Happy Ending’ is not final as most of the characters are staring ‘universal final defeat in the face’ and moreover, as even the best solution involves loss as well as gain. Victory in *LotR* is but a temporary respite, because, as Tolkien knew, evil will surface again in other forms. No reader of *LotR* can escape this incredible sense of evil. But Tolkien has done something very unique, something even Dante or Milton could not achieve; “he has made the good attractive and shown that it is a worth while goal to pursue” (Hughes, “Tolkien Worldwide” 994) – a message which continues to take hold, especially among a whole new generation of readers.

Thus *LotR* presents an imagined world where there are absolute values, no matter what their theological basis and no matter how imperfectly we may realize them. It is a world where each man must choose the way he will take, not once but constantly. Sometimes he may choose wrongly, but even a poor choice is better than none at all. In Tolkien’s world and ours, the capital sins are indecision and indifference; each choice matters, and somehow, has an effect on future events. For this reason, justifiably so,
Tom Shippey presents *LotR* “as a description of the continual activity of moral choice” (*The Road* qtd. in Hunter 32).

The constant struggle of moral choice and the call to pursue the goal of moral values transforms the central element of the fantasy of *LotR* as something hardly fantastic at all, but rather as the very embodiment of reality. Verlyn Flieger examines *LotR* closely and finds that, “Tolkien’s fantasy is both attractive and powerful not because of its fantasy but because of its reality, because his world shows us that things are ‘so in our own world’ (7). It is Tolkien forcing us into “the hard recognition that things are so in the world” (“On Fairy”144) with a direct reference to the primary world. Thus the ‘hard recognition of facts’ acts in tandem with that seemingly opposing “arresting strangeness” in Tolkien, as the best fairy-stories will have them both.

The alternate world of *LotR* offers an image of the kind of rural conservationist ideal which a generation disillusioned by the vices of wars, technology and modernity were looking for. It becomes a metaphor for the perennial human longing for roots, a long tradition and a mythology, by transporting the reader from the familiar conventions of English village life to the strange and the less familiar world of fantasy and enchantment. Once ‘There and Back Again’ the reader is re-enchanted to take up the challenges of his reality. The ethos which Tolkien’s literary mythology presents which is as significant for the contemporary world as it would be for any other, and the remedy for pathological modernity that he achieves by re-enchantment through his rural fantasy is taken up half a century later by J.K. Rowling and administered to the generation Hex readers through her ‘sub urban fantasy’ of *Harry Potter*. 