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J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Silmarillion* – a seminal mythological work and inspirational source for the author's conception of Middle-earth

J.R.R. Tolkien's "enigmatic and unfinished"[1] book *The Silmarillion* – posthumously published by Christopher Tolkien in 1977 – is often referred to as being a mythic work, or a collection of mythopoeic tales, but what exactly does that description entail? Logically, Tolkien's writings, by virtue of being labeled 'mythic' alongside of mythologies such as *The Iliad, Metamorphoses*, and *The Odyssey*, must possess qualities which warrant the description. While Tolkien's mythology is in a different category since his mythology specifically for Middle-earth, there are still important overlaps through which inspiration and influences may be traced. Concerning Tolkien's fascination with mythology we may look to Dmitra Fimi's *Tolkien Race and Cultural History: From Fairies to Hobbits* in which she comments on the following statement by Tolkien:

> I was from early days grieved by the poverty of my own beloved country: it had no stories of its own […], not of the quality that I sought, and found (as an ingredient) in legends of other lands. There was Greek, and Celtic, and Romance, and Germanic, Scandinavian, and Finnish (which greatly affected me); but nothing English […][2]

We may note how Tolkien felt that something distinctive was missing from English culture. Tolkien lamented the fact that England had no mythology to call its own, unlike countries such as Finland, Wales, and the Scandinavian countries, and it was an early (albeit unrealistic) goal for Tolkien to create something for England which it could call its own. While he did not create a mythology for England, Tolkien did manage to create a complex and engaging mythological backbone for Middle-earth which would influence every story set in his storyworld. The most well-known examples include *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and *The Children of Húrin*. Interestingly, according to Humphrey Carpenter's biography, Tolkien regarded himself as a "discoverer of legend" rather than an "inventor of stories"[3] which fits well with the overall narratological style of more or less all his writings. *The Hobbit* is an account of a hobbits' tale by a hobbit himself; *The Lord of the Rings* or

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[1] Joseph Pearce: True Myth. The Catholicism of the Lord of the Rings. In: John G. West (ed.): *Celebrating Middle-Earth: The Lord of the Rings as a Defense of Western Civilization*. Seattle, Wash.: Inklings Books, 2002, p. 83-94, p. 89.

[2] Dmitra Fimi. *Tolkien, Race and Cultural History: From Fairies to Hobbits.* Londonm Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, p. 50.

[3] Humphrey Carpenter. *J. R. R. Tolkien: a biography*. Boston (Mass.): Houghton Mifflin, 2000, p. 75.

the "Red book of Westmarch" is also written as an account of events by prominent figures who were actually present; and *The Silmarillion* is suggested to be a compilation of tales and legends often passed through the ages by the inhabitants of Middle-Earth and not simply invented by Tolkien. While *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* exist as intradiegetic entities, *The Silmarillion* functions somewhat differently since it includes both plot driven narratives as well as extradiegetic narration that presents factual overviews of the history and mythopoeic construction of Middle-earth. Several stories in *The Silmarillion* make use of *viva voce* accounts as well as translations from Elvish to the common tongue. *The Silmarillion* is a particularly valuable addition to the worldbuilding of Middle-earth because there is no overarching plot and the book consists of several independent sections. While *The Silmarillion* is now often thought of as containing relevant paratextual material pertaining to the "main" text *The Lord of the Rings*, it was meant as a separate and important foundational text. One can imagine both how and why this project became increasing complex and why Tolkien himself never finished it. Even though *The Silmarillion* never turned into a mythology for England itself, Tolkien would eventually content himself with creating a mythology for Middle-earth which served its purpose despite its unfinished state. One major issue concerned the impossibility of mimicking what the Finnish Elias Lönnrot did when he compiled what is now the *Kalevala*. Lönnrot spent years gathering folktales and legends, and they eventually evolved into what we now recognize as Finnish mythology. The fact that Tolkien created a working mythology for Middle-earth is precisely one of the major reasons why his worldbuilding significantly informed both the fantasy genre as a whole and particularly the subset of texts now recognized as high fantasy. For example, the quest fantasy[4] now often includes a protagonist without much worldly knowledge who must venture out into the unknown. Common tropes have at this stage been well-defined but most of what we recognize as generic fantasy started with Tolkien's conceptualization of the genre. The use of magic, the reliance on a group of adventurers, the focus on travel, and the existence of some evil that must be overcome or defeated – all these are aspects that Tolkien popularized.

While much post-Tolkien fantasy made deliberate use of past histories and mythologies to create a sense of depth in their storyworlds, extremely few of these may be found and read elsewhere. Notable examples include George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* (1996-present), Ursula K. Le Guin's *Earthsea* (1946-2001),

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[4] See chapter 1 in: Farah Mendlesohn. *Rhetorics of Fantasy*. Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 2008.

David Edding's *The Belgariad* (1982), and Robert Jordan's *The Wheel of Time* (1990-2013).

Tolkien lamented England's lack of mythology and looked to Scandinavia and especially Finland and its Lönnrot's *Kalevala*. The *Kalevala* is a collection of Finnish folktales, songs, and poems which Lönnrot edited together and added his own passages in order to provide coherence while staying true to the original elements. As pointed out by Fimi, Tolkien's fiction can be seen in a tradition of collecting and production, but Tolkien's results were different as he was producing almost everything himself. All he had was the name "Ëarendel" (which would become Ëarendil, a notable character in *The Silmarillion*) and the fairies[5]. This tradition of collecting and production is central in the context of understanding the role *The Silmarillion* plays. Fimi highlights James MacPherson, who published what appeared to be translations of old Gaelic manuscripts, and Iolo Morganwg who fabricated manuscripts. Both have been heavily criticized and discredited[6]. Other cases of collecting and production are viewed as works carrying national identity such as the tales of the brothers Grimm[7]. Tolkien, then, is easily distanced from both these categories as he neither collected old English tales by adding his own material to bind it together, nor did he make a disingenuous fabrication for anything but his fictional world. He is, however, writing his own material with the original inspiration or starting point being the name Ëarendel. Tolkien did ponder using a frame narrative where the texts are presented to us as his translations of Bilbo's book which would then consist of ancient sources. This would lend the texts some authenticity, but there is an important difference between fabrication (as done by MacPherson and Morganwg) and Tolkien's quite overt intention to use a narrative frame for his works. *The Silmarillion* as a frame became tremendously effective for later stories set in Middle-earth because it provides a strong common element that unites all the texts in Tolkien's oeuvre. It is an ingenious worldbuilding tool to have a detailed mythology at hand although Tolkien's struggles with regards to its management became somewhat of an issue. This is evidenced, in part, by the very fact that *The Silmarillion* was only published posthumously after extensive work by Christopher Tolkien. He compiled the legends and myths and tried to create a functioning whole that illustrates the depth and detail of Middle-earth's mythology.

So what exactly is the function of myths? Gergely Nagy offers insight in "The Great Chain of Reading":

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[5] Dmitra Fimi. *Tolkien, Race and Cultural History: From Fairies to Hobbits.* London: Palgrave Macmillan. 2009, p. 53-55.
[6] Ibid., p. 52.
[7] Ibid.

> We suppose that behind our mythological texts there are *mythologies*, religious-historical systems of belief, and the ability to *invoke* these background systems is one of the qualities of these texts: they can function as the remnant of these disappeared cultural phenomena, offering an insight into practices and beliefs that could hardly be gleaned in any other way.[8]

The basic function of mythologies is to define a culture and offer insight into a culture's history. What is meant by 'religious-historical' is important: mythologies always offer an aspect of creationism, unlike folklore or similar tales with smaller scope. This is extremely important to any mythology because it serves to answer the question of origin, creation, and higher powers. As we shall see, Judeo-Christian thought permeates Middle-earth and the inherent ideas and power structures in that religious camp are reproduced in Tolkien's conceptualization of Middle-earth. What a mythology offers now, however, is also the knowledge from the now-distant past and insight into cultural practices which are now no longer employed. Why this is important when considering Tolkien is simple: offering a history, or mythology, for a secondary world gives depth to the world. *The Lord of the Rings* is merely one part of Tolkien's legendarium; the fact that there is such a meaningful history of the Ages before the events in *The Lord of the Rings* is a potent literary device that solidifies the numerous references and allusions in Tolkien's work. All obscure references in *The Lord of the Rings* are meaningful because they are not simply loosely created but have a profoundness to them that is only fully understood by being knowledgeable about *The Silmarillion*. While understanding and knowledge of the information in *The Simlarillion* is not required in order to enjoy *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, it does provide context and additional information that undoubtedly serves to enhance the reading experience. The effects this has on immersion are significant too. In *The Road to Middle-earth*, Shippey comments that this depth gives:

> […] a sense that the author knew more than he was telling, that behind his immediate story there was a coherent, consistent, deeply fascinating world about which he had no time (then) to speak.[9]

This is closely connected to how information is conveyed in Middle-earth, and it is an interesting – and useful – literary device to have characters and the narrator know more than the reader. One merely gets an impression that Middle-earth holds more than what is shown when reading *The Lord of the Rings*, but to fully appreciate Tolkien's

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[8] Gergely Nagy. "The Great Chain of Reading: (Inter)Textual Relations and the Technique of Mythopoesis in the Túrin Story". In: *Tolkien the Medievalist*. Ed. Jane Chance. New York: Routledge, 2002, pp. 239–258, p. 239.
[9] Tom Shippey. *The Road to Middle-earth*. Boston (Mass.): Houghton Mifflin Co. 2003, p. 259.

craftsmanship it is rewarding to read the tales from the First and Second Ages[10]. It is not uncommon for an author of fantasy literature to refer to a distant past, but for there to be an actual written-out past in form of a mythic compendium is remarkable. The literary concept of Chekhov's gun is relevant in this context. Chekhov's gun stipulates that details mentioned in a narrative will eventually contribute to said narrative – such as a gun being shown early in a play being fired later in the play. Chekhov's intention therefore is to eliminate anything that does not add to the story. In his view, everything mentioned should provide meaning, and the mention of a gun on a wall with no follow-up would serve to distract the reader. While Chekhov wants to rid the story of irrelevant observations, Tolkien very much desires to provide them; Mark J. P. Wolf expands on this idea in *Building Fictional Worlds* where he argues that worldbuilding consists of information that does not directly serve to advance the plot[11]. However, sometimes Tolkien does in fact "let the gun go off", so to speak, in his posthumous texts in which there are numerous events and characters referenced in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Authors do not have to stay in Chekhov's or Tolkien's camp. They can do both, but Tolkien very often deliberately violates Chekhov's principle. At the same time, Tolkien time and again sought to provide that depth we have discussed above. In this sense, Chekhov's principle is violated in order to achieve that depth. He chooses to let the gun remain unfired which provides the sense that the narrator is withholding information because, as Shippey argued, he 'has no time'. While Tolkien did not invent this technique as he was inspired by older texts, his work showcases the influence these strategies may have on the completeness of a fictional world. Nagy refers to *Beowulf* in which there are several references to seemingly unimportant matters that remain unresolved:

> *Beowulf* [may be a] paradigmatic model for the "techniques of depth" we see in Tolkien. In *Beowulf* we find digressions and episodes inserted into the main story, many of which (by recounting other stories) hardly advance the plot in any apparent way, and there are also ongoing allusions to seemingly equally unrelated matters. […] [B]y links to the main theme, [they] provide contrasts and parallels that continually comment on and clarify the main points.[12]

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[10] *The Silmarillion* takes place in the First and Second Ages, while *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* are set exclusively in the Third Age.

[11] Mark J. P. Wolf. *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation*. New York: Routledge, 2013

[12] Gergely Nagy. "The Great Chain of Reading: (Inter)Textual Relations and the Technique of Mythopoesis in the Túrin Story", pp. 240.

Beowulf is a classic example and Tolkien's familiarity with the epic poem is well-documented[13]. It is no surprise, then, that Tolkien was inspired by the form and function of the poem and in certain areas sought to mimic the parts he felt worked particularly well. As we shall see, in the story of Túrin Turambar, Tolkien again drew his inspiration from a specific story (in this case the tale of Kullervo from the Finnish *Kalevala*) and though the overall construction of Tolkien's own tragic story is different, in certain aspects there is a one-to-one relationship between the story that inspired Tolkien and Tolkien's own writings. Returning to *Beowulf*, it is representative of all the mythological stories Tolkien came to appreciate and their intricate details contributed to his inner need of creating a *full* body of literature; a comprehensive legendarium in which there are no meaningless allusions or references; a work where the past is significant, realized, and completed in a book that complements the *magnum opus* itself. No doubt Tolkien's envisioned *The Silmarillion* as his greatest creation but the quality and popularity of *The Lord of the Rings* has no equal – despite the intradiegetic and extradiegetic importance of *The Silmarillion*. The only fault of *The Silmarillion* was its unfinished state and the difficulties Tolkien faced in completing the work without any inconsistencies or unsatisfactory elements.

Familiarity with the First and Second Ages is required in order to fully understand the popular Third Age and, as Nagy asserts and which refers back to the *Beowulf* situation, "Tolkien 'assumes' acquaintance with other stories in the same way as *Beowulf* does[14]". This means that knowledge of *The Silmarillion* is "assumed" but not a prerequisite for reading *The Lord of the Rings*; it remains an independent narrative. Furthermore, Nagy presents an interesting argument where the chief concern is with the *texts* themselves. For Nagy, "the critical task is to clarify how implied texts and textual relations contribute to the perception of the whole interconnected system of texts[15]". In short, it is an examination of how the texts function, but one important aspect is noteworthy before venturing forth: Nagy's article was written in 2003 and uses the tale of Túrin Turambar as the primary example. This means that it was written before *The Children of Húrin* was published in 2007, and therefore certain elements are somewhat outdated as several elements from the version of Húrin story as found in *The*

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[13] See, for example, Tolkien's *Beowulf: A Translation and Commentary* (2014)
[14] Gergely Nagy. "The Great Chain of Reading: (Inter)Textual Relations and the Technique of Mythopoesis, p. 241.
[15] Ibid.

Silmarillion were expanded significantly in *The Children of Húrin*. Be that as it may, other elements of the article are useful, especially the considerations concerning whether a text is meant to create a context, or to retextualize. The premise is simple: in Tolkien's legendarium the function of a text is to either create a context for the events of the story, or to 'retextualize', that is, "serve as the basis of authentication […] and thematizing exactly the status and use of (background) traditions[16]". When faced with an obscure reference in *The Lord of the Rings*, readers are faced with a dilemma of comprehension. If a reader is unfamiliar with the story that is being referenced then understanding the reference is either difficult or entirely impossible. If comprehension may be attained through reading a paratextual story that explains the first allusion, then the storyworld is expanded upon by extension, and that creates context and depth. For example, there are two references to Túrin in *The Lord of the Rings*. The first occurs in the *The Council of Elrond* chapter of *The Fellowship of the Ring* in which Elrond, commenting on Frodo's willingness to carry the Ring, says that Frodo should be counted among, "the mighty elf-friends of old, Hador, and Húrin, and Túrin, and Beren himself[17]". *The Council of Elrond* is set in the Third Age which means that Elrond's memory reaches back several thousand years, making him act as a bridge to what would otherwise be a time of unreliable or even inaccessible myth. Because of his memory, the events referenced are history even if the details and much of the knowledge he imparts is esoteric. The other reference occurs when Sam tries to pierce Shelob's spider hide at the end of *The Two Towers*: "[her hide] could not be pierced by any strength of men, not though Elf or Dwarf should forge the steel or the hand of Beren or of Túrin wield it[18]". A reader cannot learn anything about the story of Túrin through these references, but their very existence creates depth and a (sense of) history and an expanded storyworld beyond what is presented in the plot itself. Were a reader afterwards to delve into *The Children of Húrin*, the text may then be understood in a different light because the references are suddenly not obscure or confusing anymore. There are, however, two sides of this coin, both equally important. According to Nagy, a text may gain depth both by having actual texts explain obscure references (as with *The Children of Húrin* and *The Silmarillion* explaining references in *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*), or a text may employ allusions as a device in order to create a *feeling* of incomprehension. "Allusions could also serve to create depth by just this

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[16] Ibid., p. 241.
[17] J. R. R. Tolkien. *The Fellowship of the Ring*. London: HarperCollins, 2007, p. 353
[18] J. R. R. Tolkien. *The Two Towers*, London: HarperCollins, 2007, p. 953

feeling of incomprehension […][19]". It is an interesting thought, though in the case of Tolkien's Middle-earth the actual presence of a work such as *The Silmarillion* creates a more meaningful context, more depth, and offers a deeper understanding of the worldbuilding process simply by virtue of its existence.

Turning again to the issue of textual allusions, which play a big part in Tolkien's authorship, Nagy argues that they may either be *contentless* or *genuine*:

> […] allusions might only be employed to create a sense of depth like that which is accessible for us in *Beowulf*; the context they imply is a *pseudo-context*, created by these very allusions. This might conceivably be their function in the text, and even if the reader does not understand them, the effect of a "yet darker antiquity" is achieved. […] *Genuine* allusions, on the other hand, would be expected to have content and point to an existing context. Depth is just as well created this way, but it is not confined to the readerly "sense of unknown story"[20].

Nagy's argumentation reveals the complexity inherent in producing a sense of depth and expansiveness in storyworlds. As it turns out, both contentless *and* genuine allusions may positively influence worldbuilding precisely because their impact on readerly perception of the storyworld (and consequently on immersion) differs. Tangible examples include the Túrin ones we highlighted already (genuine) on the one hand, and enigmatic characters with uncertain origins and influence such as Queen Berúthiel[21] on the other (contentless).

In the case of Tolkien, most (if not all) references are genuine as there are mostly both context and content behind his references and allusions. In contemporary fantasy it is not an uncommon literary device to refer to events that a reader cannot read about elsewhere as they simply do not exist in the authors' body of literature. Their function, as noted, is to create depth and a sense of antiquity and this is still achievable even without a readily available book detailing the wider context of a given reference. What is noteworthy at this stage is the fact that *The Silmarillion* was written as a compilation of 'old texts' that seem to derive from a mythological tradition. Several stories feel as though an unreliable narrator wrote them, or at least some details are omitted or altogether unavailable which produces somewhat of an ancient-book atmosphere. This, too, adds depth not least because, "depth is in the relation of the two texts, the way they supplement each other in terms of comprehension"[22]. While initial

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[19] Nagy."The Great Chain of Reading: (Inter)Textual Relations and the Technique of Mythopoesis, p. 241.
[20] Ibid., p. 242.
[21] From *The Fellowship of the Ring*: "He [Gandalf] is surer of finding the way home in a blind night than the cats of Queen Berúthiel" (405). This passing reference is the only one available on Queen Berúthiel in *The Lord of the Rings* and thus serves well as an example of contentless allusions although slightly more information on her is available in Appendix A and *Unfinished Tales*.
[22] Nagy. "The Great Chain of Reading: (Inter)Textual Relations and the Technique of Mythopoesis", p. 242.

incomprehension of allusions in *The Lord of the Rings* is dispelled by reading *The Silmarillion,* the profound vastness of the storyworld remains immense. Nagy further adds:

> One readerly consequence is that, knowing the content, one sees how the context adds to the meaning of the allusions, or how the allusion, not wholly appropriate, produces further depth on another level by simulating the effects of the transmission of stories over great periods of time and many generations[23].

This eloquently underlines the above point about allusions as a powerful literary device, and if they are coupled with archaic stylistics, such as what Tolkien did in *The Silmarillion*, the sense of distance and depth is increased.

Concerning Elrond's mention of Túrin as one of the "mighty elf-friends", one may wonder how that exactly happened. The story exists in one version in *The Silmarillion* but was expanded in *The Children of Húrin*. Túrin was a hero of great martial prowess who won many battles. He was an elf-friend, but his tragic journey includes the killing of two elves, Saeros and Beleg, and his involvement with the downfall of Nargothrond seems peculiar. Túrin was the cause of several other disasters as well, but we must appreciate the fact that Túrin's deeds happened several thousand years before *The Council of Elrond* and, as Nagy asserts, "only Túrin's prowess in arms in the defense of Doriath and Nargothrond, along with his slaying of Glaurung, were remembered[24]". This is significant because it gives a history *within* the textual world and:

> [implies] a transmission where the unfavorable details were dropped and Túrin became assimilated to the stereotype of the "great hero" and the "elf-friend" – something that also happens in preliterate cultures when historical material […] is exploited in a variety of ways[25].

Again we are reminded of the influence of old texts in Tolkien's writings and the memory of Túrin is clearly more positive than was the reality. The great tragedy of Túrin's life morphed over time to a well-remembered story of a great man whose life became interwoven with the lives of the Elves; this is the reason he is still remembered alongside great figures such as Beren and it matters little that the finer points of the story become hazy in an intradiegetic re-telling.

Tolkien's storyworld functions in great part because of the interconnected texts of Tolkien's numerous narratives. There are three levels on which the text functions, and each level is interconnected with the next level which results in enhanced coherency and a sense of shared

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[23] Ibid., p. 242.
[24] Ibid., p. 243.
[25] Ibid., p. 254.

history amongst inhabitants of Middle-earth. Nagy explains that *The Silmarillion* is a 'precursor' that provides context:

> From a philological point of view, the *Silmarillion* text is a precursor of and a context for *The Lord of the Rings*, which makes the allusions philologically genuine in an objective primary world sense. Second, on a readerly/critical level, the relation between the texts is genuine and meaningful, since it both supplies comprehension […] and facilitates interpretation […]. Third, the relation is also functional *within the textual world*, as the lore of the Elder Days contextualizes the whole story and the allusions *for the characters themselves*, for whom the *Silmarillion* tradition is accessible, quite regardless of the reader in the primary world[26].

This is immensely interesting and important. The significance of *The Silmarillion* in relation to *The Lord of the Rings* is here pointed out and Nagy stresses how the allusions objectively are genuine. What is useful for a reader, of course, is the fact that *The Silmarillion* is merely a precursor and not actually required reading. The same relationship is present with *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*; they are independent works but complement each other and enrich the reading experience if both are read. Whether engaging with this level of involvement and detail is worth the time will depend heavily on what exactly a reader hopes to gain by reading these narratives. Both *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* function perfectly well as stand-alone experiences. *The Silmarillion* and its numerous stories can also be read by itself, but its archaic language and the lack of an overarching plotline makes it a challenging book by itself. If readerly interest is primarily focused on entertainment then it may seem unnecessary to familiarize oneself with *The Silmarillion*; if readerly interest in Middle-earth goes deeper, then the context-creation texts become valuable and appreciated as they enhance the storyworld and its worldbuilding. Concerning the second level Nagy establishes, comprehension attained by a thorough reading of the legendarium 'supplies comprehension'. This is meaningful exactly because of the numerous allusions and references in Tolkien's writings from the Third Age. The third level separates the primary world from the secondary world and makes the secondary world a place of its own. The simple function of the third level is here to create context on a character-level and work within the secondary world itself. It is a complicated but useful way of creating coherency and depth, not least because readers are not part of the equation. This harkens back to Tolkien's inner need; the Elder Days were mapped out and written about because he wanted to, not because potential readers as such needed the information in order to engage meaningfully with Middle-earth. The fullness of the experience of reading *The Lord of the Rings* is not lessened

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[26] Ibid., p. 243.

by neglecting to read texts from the Elder Days and had it been any other way the effect would have been detrimental. As both contemporary worldbuilding theory as well as possible worlds theory point out, though, this type of engagement with storyworlds is an effective and popular way of enhancing a reading experience[27]. Another aspect concerning the reading experiences of the different books is their very length in terms of storyworld time-span. *The Lord of the Rings* spans a few years at best (if we permit ourselves the luxury of ignoring the multiple years Frodo waited between learning that the Ring must go until he actually left the Shire), while *The Silmarillion* details the events of several thousand years.

The Silmarillion is noteworthy because the texts within the book are both *about* Middle-earth and *of* Middle-earth. This creates an interesting situation because the texts in the primary world are *stories* but in the secondary world they are part of *history* and *mythology*. This may seem unsurprising given how *The Silmarillion* operates, yet the point must be explored. Nagy states:

> But the most intriguing detail is not that Tolkien, in texts that create their own textual world, alludes to and uses other texts of his about the same world; it is that these same texts, *just as they are*, are claimed to be not only representations of the textual world but also *texts inside it*, creating a "secondary philological level" of inquiry[28].

The texts exist and function the same way in the primary and the secondary world. They are, indeed, a mythology, and what a reader gains by reading them – knowledge of the history of Middle-earth – is the same regardless of whether a reader is from the primary world or a hobbit in the secondary one. Why, then, is this important? The answer to that question is twofold: first, for a reader, coherence, interconnectivity of texts, and depth of the secondary world are the primary focus. Depth is a defining characteristic of Tolkien's writings and undoubtedly one of his work's biggest strengths. This influences immersion significantly and permits heavy involvement on part of the reader beyond a simple reading. The storyworld may be explored, understood, and analyzed based on the worldbuilding information Tolkien provides in

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[27] See, for example: Michael T. Saler. *As If: Modern Enchantment and the Literary Pre-History of Virtual Reality*. Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2012; Alice Bell and Marie-Laure Ryan, eds. *Possible Worlds Theory and Contemporary Narratology*. Frontiers of Narrative. Lincoln, London: University of Nebraska Press, 2019; Dimitra Fimi, Thomas Honegger, and J. R. R. Tolkien, eds. *Sub-Creating Arda: World-Building in J.R.R. Tolkien's Work, Its Precursors and Its Legacies*. Cormarë Series, No. 40. Zürich, Jena: Walking Tree Publishers, 2019.
[28] Nagy."The Great Chain of Reading: (Inter)Textual Relations and the Technique of Mythopoesis, p. 245.

The Silmarillion[29]. Secondly, for the academic, the issue of 'depth' is one of relations; how one text fits in with the whole text corpus and what effect the entirety is meant to convey. This all means that the standpoint of a reader is of some importance and an earlier point must be reiterated: it all depends on what one hopes to gain by reading *The Silmarillion*. While the texts are different in nature, what links them together are the stories found within them. What this means for *The Silmarillion* as a mythological work is the following: a myth is a re-telling of stories first and foremost, and a story is granted myth-status by a readership and not the genre it presumes to be part of. Nagy phrases it thus:

> […] *no text is myth by genre*. The texts are *mythological*, and together they form a *mythology*, the "*telling* of myths" contained in the background mythological system. They are assigned this status by the user community's relation to them, their cultural (/religious/political) use as such, and the relation they are supposed to have to their base-text: […] there will always be a base, a source. The texts are just the *telling* of the myth – they are not the *myth itself*.[30]

This 'user community' is in our case both the primary world readership and the readership within Middle-earth for whom the texts are history. It is true that *The Silmarillion* was meant to be a mythology from the beginning, but it is a combination of the two relationships' acknowledgement of its use and validity that enables it to gain status as a working mythology for Middle-earth.

Tolkien as a maker of myth is also discussed by Margaret Hiley in the essay "Stolen Language, Cosmic Models: Myth and Mythology in Tolkien"[31]. Hiley's essay focuses on placing Tolkien firmly in the company of other modernist writers such as T.S. Eliot and James Joyce. She argues that the apparent authority of myth, world-formulaic character, and its timelessness and universality was what made it appealing for modernists[32]. With the rise of technology and industry and the burden of a world war, modernists sought new ways to rationalize the world in which they lived and new ways of expressing how they felt about a rapidly changing world. While new forms of literature and new literary devices were brought to the scene, some authors, like those named above, turned to myth in search of authority and a universal moral backbone. As

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[29] The information provided in the maps, appendixes, genealogies and so forth exists in the same information-category.

[30] Nagy. "The Great Chain of Reading: (Inter)Textual Relations and the Technique of Mythopoesis", p. 252.

[31] Margaret Hiley. "Stolen Language, Cosmic Models: Myth and Mythology in Tolkien". *Modern Fiction Studies*. Winter 2004, pp. 838-860. Proquest Research Library.

[32] Ibid., p. 841.

Hiley argues, what people thought they knew about religion and culture had collapsed and myth provided a way of "[…] artificial reasserting a kind of authority in artistic work […]"[33].

Hiley's goal in her essay is to provide an examination of how myth functions in Tolkien's works. One of her arguments is that myth in Middle-earth functions on two levels: it both operates within the fictional world of Middle-earth and in the real world. This is the same point Nagy makes with his notion of a "secondary philological level of inquiry" mentioned above. However, Hiley goes further, noting that Tolkien's myth serves as a history in Middle-earth. It has both a mythological character but also a historical one. Hiley calls this "overlapping" history, using Elrond as an example[34]. In *The Fellowship of the Ring*, we see an example of a mythological and historical convergence. The chapter *The Council of Elrond* features an exchange of words in which Elrond, who is thousands of years old, reminisces about events in the First Age — the period in which the majority of *The Silmarillion* is set. Concerning how the mythological influence in the real world, Hiley notes the importance of Tolkien's phrasings and choice of words in the creation myth in *The Silmarillion*. She compares these to the phrasing in Genesis, arguing that this gives Tolkien's creation story "[…] a strength and authority similar to that of the Creation in the Bible"[35]. The foundation of *The Silmarillion*, and the rest of the stories set in Middle-earth, are thus heavily inspired and influenced by both Judeo-Christian thought but also, in the case of *The Silmarillion*, borrows the archaic stylistics from the Bible which lends the work an air of far-removed myth and an expansive atmosphere that broadens the scope of Tolkien's storyworld considerably. The role that faith and the Bible played in the creation of Middle-earth is hard to dispute but, famously and importantly, the works are not meant to be read allegorically[36].

Fate and Free Will

In this part of the article we explore the concepts of fate, doom, and free will in Tolkien's legendarium, while also commenting on the aspects of prophecy and foreknowledge in

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[33] Ibid., p. 842.
[34] Ibid., p. 844.
[35] Ibid., p. 848.
[36] In the Foreword *The Fellowship of the Rings* Tolkien wrote: "I cordially dislike allegory in all its manifestations, and always have done so since I grew old and wary enough to detect its presence. I much prefer history – true or feigned– with its varied applicability to the thought and experience of readers. I think that many confuse applicability with allegory, but the one resides in the freedom of the reader, and the other in the purposed domination of the author." (Tolkien, *Fellowship*, 2007, xxv.)

relation to these concepts. These concepts are tied closely to the topics we have discussed so far, particularly the mythopoeic quality of Tolkien's work and the Judeo-Christian foundation of his worldbuilding. The issue of free will is particularly significant in Tolkien's posthumous works. If we consider Tolkien's knowledge of mythological texts, such as the Finnish *Kalevala* and the Scandinavian *Elder Edda* and *Prose Edda,* along with his Catholic background and the overall mythological character of his texts, it seems reasonable that we ought to find something about cosmic order, fate, free will, and the relationships between these concepts. Fimi notes that "[t]owards the end of his life Tolkien became increasingly pre-occupied with the 'spiritual' themes of his mythology"[37]. Tolkien's texts treat themes and concepts associated with Christian "teachings", but his texts themselves are not meant to convey heavy-handed lessons about these same topics. The Christian underpinning that informs Middle-earth serves a foundational role in the same way that Taoism functions in Le Guin's *Earthsea*; not necessarily full of allegorical lessons but simply used as a starting point for further worldbuilding[38]. One aspect that in this context is worth examining more closely concerns predestination as this topic often plays a role in mythological and religious texts. The question of whether or not predestination is a part of Tolkien's mythology is an obvious one to ask because of Tolkien's varied and frequent use of the words "doom" and "fate" in his works, especially the *The Silmarillion*, *Unfinished Tales* and *The Children of Húrin*. These texts were arguably closer to his heart (to use Tom Shippey's wording), as much of what ended up being published posthumously was both written as the first building blocks in his legendarium and were texts he worked on continuously until his death. The posthumous texts were thus written before, during, and after the publication of *The Lord of the Rings*. At the same time, the largely unfinished state in which Tolkien left the texts presents us with a problem of coherence. Several things are left unresolved and there can be doubt as to which versions are authoritative. However, in this instance we choose to rely on Christopher Tolkien who, as Tolkien's appointed literary executor, compiled the texts in the versions he considered to be authoritative. For a discussion of differences in versions, readers may turn to *The History of Middle-Earth* by Christopher Tolkien, which deals much more with different unfinished versions of Tolkien's texts[39]. As we shall see, predestination in *The Silmarillion* dictates the course of several narrative strands as major characters are bound by their fates and

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[37] Dmitra Fimi. *Tolkien, Race and Cultural History: From Fairies to Hobbits*. Palgrave Macmillan. 2009, p. 61
[38] See, for example: Dennis Friedrichsen: "Aspects of Worldbuilding: Taoism as Foundational in Ursula K. Le Guin's Earthsea Saga," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*. Vol. 39, 2 (2021), Article 1, pp. 11-25.
[39] Christopher Tolkien. *The History of Middle-earth*. Boston, MA: Mariner Books, 2020.

the will of powerful entities. For example, Túrin's tragic story is one of hopelessness and the impossibility of him avoiding his doom. The issue of predestination is not present in such a tangible manner in neither *The Hobbit* nor *The Lord of the Rings*; this underscores the religious and mythological nature of *The Silmarillion*. The major powers from *The Silmarillion*, such as the Ainur and Eru Ilúvatar, are not directly present in *The Hobbit* or *The Lord of the Rings* which highlights a major tonal, aesthetic, and structural difference.

Through various studies of Tolkien's works, numerous sources have been identified as inspiration for Tolkien's fiction. We can as such note a few places where Tolkien was influenced or inspired by other texts. Noting that Tolkien was influenced or inspired by Old Norse mythology is not conjecture very tangible proof exists that he was. For instance, several names of dwarves from the *Völuspá,* a poem in the *Elder Edda*, such as "Gandalf", "Durin", and "Thrain" are reused in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. We therefore know that Tolkien's familiarity with these texts was not cursory but rather in-depth. Tolkien even admits his legendarium owes much to the "[…] Norse vision of Ragnarök […]" though it is different from it.[40] This underlines what we already know about the inspiration behind *The Silmarillion* and the creation of Middle-earth. It should come as no surprise, then, that Tolkien's texts are characterized by a relation to these mythological texts. In Norse mythology, ragnarök is a concept which outlines how the end of the world will come to pass. In this mythology, the events are predetermined as norns weave the skein of every living person thereby determining their fate. That everything is predetermined is also evidenced by the very specificity of the foretelling: the wolf Fenrir will swallow the sun and the ship Naglfar will carry with it the fire giants from Muspelheim. The influence of the apocalypse story in the form of ragnarök is perhaps more directly seen in Tolkien's idea of the *Dagor Dagorath*, which is an all-consuming battle which will reshape the world. However, this idea is not fully developed, and exists only as a passing reference in *The Silmarillion* where the human king Ar-Pharazôn and his army were buried for setting foot on the blessed realm, which was forbidden: "[…] there it is said that they lie imprisoned in the Caves of the Forgotten, until the Last Battle and the Day of Doom"[41]. This idea of an apocalyptic battle in Tolkien's legendarium was never fully developed and eventually became an unfinished or incomplete narrative strand in *The Silmarillion*.

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[40] Humphrey Carpenter (ed.). *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1981, p. 149.
[41] Tolkien. *The Silmarillion*. Random House: Del Rey Books 2002, p. 334

Given that *The Silmarillion* begins with a literal story of creation, we can look there for some indication of the rules that govern Middle-earth with regards to its cosmic order, fate, free will, and doom. *The Silmarillion*'s first chapter, *Ainulindalë*, describes the creation of the world (called Ëa). The omnipotent creator-god, Ilúvatar, created the Ainur[42], a group of divine spirits, one of whom, Melkor, eventually became the main antagonist in *The Silmarillion*. Along with the Ainur, Ilúvatar began creating the world through music (an idea also seen in other creation myths). However, Melkor seeks to magnify his own part which creates disharmony and discord in the music. The first theme began by Ilúvatar and the Ainur is abandoned because of this. A second theme is begun but is ultimately abandoned because Melkor again creates disharmony in the theme. The third and final theme contains two themes, one sorrowful and the other violent (Melkor's theme). The sorrowful theme eventually incorporates the other theme's notes into its own. The music then halts and Ilúvatar scolds Melkor for his discord and disharmony. Ilúvatar then bids the Ainur look upon their creation by showing them a sort of vision:

> And as they looked and wondered this World began to unfold its history, and it seemed to them that it lived and grew. […] And many other things Ilúvatar spoke to the Ainur at that time, and because of their memory of his words, and the knowledge that each has of the music that he himself made, the Ainur know much of what was, and is, and is to come, and few things are unseen by them. Yet some things there are that they cannot see, neither alone nor taking counsel together; for to none but himself has Ilúvatar revealed all that he has in store, and in every age there come forth things that are new and have no foretelling, for they do not proceed from the past.[43]

Upon entering the world, Melkor proclaimed himself master of it in front of the other Ainur before fleeing to remote parts of the world. The seeds of evil are sown by Melkor from the very beginning and he mirrors a fallen angel antagonist. The capacity for evil is present from the beginning of the world's existence, as Melkor's vainglory and desire to dominate are showcased both in the themes of the Ainur and once he enters the world. This deals with the theological concept of theodicy which is an explanation of why evil can exist in a world with an omnipotent god.

The quote above raises some interesting questions about free will and fate. The theme of fate is introduced at the very beginning of *The Silmarillion* and becomes a recurring theme throughout. In the vision shown to them by Ilúvatar, the Ainur see the future. If Ilúvatar shows them the future of the world, does that mean it is a fixed future? Even then, the last part

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[42] For all intents and purposes, "Valar" and "Ainur" are interchangeable.
[43] Tolkien. *The Silmarillion*, p. 6-7

of the quote about "things that are new and have no foretelling" also sows seeds of doubt as to the workings of the world. The question of a fixed future becomes further complicated when Tolkien introduces the race of Men:

> he [Ilúvatar] willed that the hearts of men should seek beyond the world and should find no rest therein; but they should have a virtue to shape their life, amid the powers and chances of the world, beyond the Music of the Ainur, which is as fate to all things else […].[44]

This further complicates matters. With the music being "as fate to all things else", Men seem to have a valued position with free will. But the wording itself, especially "amid the powers and chances of the world" is worthy of some consideration. The race of Men seems to have some degree of autonomy but only "amid" these other powers. These powers and chances, then, also have an effect on Men despite their otherwise privileged position. On the other hand, Men's virtue trumps these powers and chances by their ability to act according to their own wishes and desires. It is precisely these desires, and their inherent corruptibility, that becomes a central topic in *The Lord of the Rings*. The hobbits are able to show great strength of character and surprising resistance to the Ring's overpowering influence whereas Men lack this resilience. The problematic wording and use of the words "fate" and "doom" make for a complicated reading of *The Silmarillion* and Tolkien's other posthumous texts set in Middle-earth. This is especially the case in the story of Túrin, whose fate and doom is often referenced, as we shall see later.

We turn first to the idea of fate, specifically how it pertains to prophecy or foreknowledge. The very idea of fate suggests that things are planned by a divine being and can therefore be foreseen. The Ainur were shown the history, as it were, of the world in a vision but because their direct dealings with characters in *The Silmarillion* are cursory at best, the question concerning foreknowledge in the context of the Ainur's power is difficult to answer adequately. Julaire Andelin identifies three types of prophecy in Tolkien's legendarium: Prophecies by Ainur or seers, prophecy in death, and forebodings[45]. There are cases of foresight both in *The Silmarillion* as well as *The Lord of the Rings*, but they are interestingly enough never uniform. There are varying degrees of foretelling both with regards to accuracy and certainty. For instance, in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Aragorn warns Gandalf before venturing into the mines

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[44] Ibid., p. 35-36.
[45] Michael C. Drout. *J.R.R. Tolkien Encyclopedia: Scholarship and Critical Assessment.* London, New York: Routledge. 2007, p. 544-545.

of Moria: "It is not of the Ring, nor of us others that I am thinking now, but of you, Gandalf. And I say to you: if you pass the doors of Moria, beware!"[46]. As readers of *The Lord of the Rings* are aware, Gandalf does fall to his apparent death after entering Moria. After exiting the mines, Aragorn directly references his warning: "'Farewell, Gandalf!' he cried. 'Did I not say to you: *if you pass the doors of Moria, beware*? Alas that I spoke true!'"[47]. What is interesting about this case of foresight or prediction is both the puzzling vagueness of Aragorn's warning and his subsequent repetition of it. On the surface, one would be tempted to interpret his warning as just a "bad feeling" on account of its vagueness. But it is vague yet at the same ting strangely specific. It reads as a vague premonition but it is also specific because Aragorn only warns Gandalf. Aragorn is not expressing any concern over the rest of the fellowship – his "bad feeling" only pertains to Gandalf. Julaire Andelin classifies this foretelling as a "foreboding of the heart"[48].

An instance of "prophecy in death" occurs in *The Children of Húrin* where the character Húrin tells the elven king Turgon: "This I say to you, lord, with the eyes of death: though we part here for ever, and I shall not look on your white walls again, from you and from me a new star shall arise"[49]. This is a curious case; on the surface it would appear that this prophecy is caused by some degree of foresight in the eyes of death (Húrin even says so quite specifically), but it is complicated by the fact that Húrin does not die until many years after making this prophecy. It does hold true, but given these complications we cannot fully rely on the three types of prophecies given by Andelin. It is certainly not the case that every character in Tolkien's legendarium is gifted with foresight, but it is remarkable just how many of the central characters are seers or are able to perceive that something meaningful is about to occur. This should be compared to the way magic works in Tolkien's secondary world – it is always quite vague.

In *Unfinished Tales of Númenor and Middle-Earth* upon meeting a group of elves in the mountains, the man Tuor is gifted a vague glimpse of his future: "[…] a great doom is written upon your brow, and it shall lead you far from Middle-Earth, as I guess"[50]. We are not given any indication as to how the elf in question, Gelmir, is able to know

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[46] J.R.R. Tolkien. *The Fellowship of the Ring*. HarperCollins, 2007, p. 387.
[47] Ibid, 433
[48] Drout. Ed. *J.R.R. Tolkien Encyclopedia: Scholarship and Critical Assessment*. Routledge. 2007, p. 545.
[49] J.R.R. Tolkien. *The Children of Húrin*. London: HarperCollins, 2007, p. 58.
[50] J.R.R. Tolkien. *Unfinished Tales of Númenor and Middle-Earth.* London: HarperCollins, 1998, p. 29.

this, but it is one of many places where Tolkien uses the word "doom", further implying things are not fully left up to chance or free will. The amount of times "fate" or "doom" are used is enough to make us doubt that everything is happening as a result of the characters' free will. While these words are often uttered by characters in dialogue, the narrator also uses them quite frequently. In this regard, there are subtle indications that sometimes an Ainu is guiding things behind the scenes. These are rare, as the Ainu in general do not interfere in the lives of Men and Elves, but because they sometimes do act it opens the possibility that they are acting according to a plan. Tuor, for example, follows a herd of swans to an abandoned city where he discovers a hauberk, a helmet, a shield, and a sword. These artifacts were left by the Elven king Turgon years before at the behest of Ulmo (one of the Ainur). It appears that the swans were directed by Ulmo. We then see that doom and/or fate are also woven into artifacts – as is also the case with the crucial Silmaril. Upon acquiring the armor and weapons, Tuor exclaims: "[…] I will take these arms unto myself, and upon myself whatsoever doom they bear"[51]. Here Tuor seems aware that his discovery of the artifacts is significant in some way and he feels a sense of foreboding. Tuor is aware of some significance behind his discovery but Tolkien remains vague about the specifics.

Before we venture further into Tolkien's posthumous works in search of doom, we must note that the word "doom" often takes on different meanings. For instance, after having accidentally caused the death of an elf, Túrin flees king Thingol's realm. Thingol then calls for witnesses to be heard, after which he "[…] lifted up his hand to pronounce his doom"[52]. In this case, "doom" means a legal sentence of sorts and not a force that determines the actions of characters' lives. This sentencing can make a difference in the world. Tom Shippey points out that if it was a death sentence it could lead to the death of the character over which it was pronounced[53]. But it is not a "force" as such in this instance but rather a judicial sentence passed by someone in power. This power can mean that the "doom" does come to pass, but it remains a possibility, not a fact set in stone. We must also consider the voice of the narrator when discussing the word "doom". In the chapter *Of Beren and Lúthien* in *The Silmarillion*, the elf-king of the Elven realm Doriath, Thingol, presents the man Beren with a daunting quest for his daughter Lúthien's hand in marriage in a tale similar to

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[51] Ibid., p. 36.
[52] J.R.R. Tolkien. *The Childfren of Húrin*, p. 93.
[53] Tom Shippey. *The Road to Middle Earth: Revised Edition*. London: HarperCollins, 2005, p. 288.

many folktales of a prince who must endure many ordeals to finally win his bride. Thingol challenges Beren to acquire a Silmaril — an artifact the Elves desire greatly but which are now in the possession of Melkor. Just as Thingol has challenged Beren, the narrator remarks: "Thus he wrought the Doom of Doriath, and was ensnared within the curse of Mandos"[54]. The narrator uses "doom" in this context because of the predestined path which cannot be avoided – similarly to how Túrin cannot avoid his tragic fate in *The Children of Húrin*. There is no indication that Thingol himself is aware that he "wrought the Doom of Doriath" in this instance, meaning that the wording signifies that "this is where it all went wrong for Thingol". We should note the difference, then, between "doom" as we discussed above, where it is used to describe a sentencing or judicial decision, and here, where it describes the more popular sense of the word. The latter describes the downfall of Doriath rather than Thingol pronouncing a specific fate of the realm. We shall return to this issue of "doom", but first we must turn to a central event in *The Silmarillion* which comes to impact much of the narrative.

The overarching narrative (to the extent that a single narrative exists) in *The Silmarillion* concerns possession of the Silmarils. The Silmarils are gems crafted by the elf Fëanor. These artifacts contained within them the light of the Two Trees of Valinor, Laurelin and Telperion, which brought light into the world. Melkor eventually corrupted and destroyed the trees but they did flower into the sun and the moon. Melkor's corruption of the trees is aided by the giant spider Ungoliant – a distant and more terrifying forefather to Shelob from *The Lord of the Rings*. This event is referred to as "the darkening of Valinor". The creation of the Silmarils is connected to fate both by the narrator and the Ainu called Yavanna: "[…] Fëanor, being come to his full might, was filled with a new thought, or it may be that some shadow of foreknowledge came to him of the doom that drew near […]"[55]. This is somewhat vague, and Yavanna's claim carries on in the same vein: "The Light of the Trees has passed away and lives now only in the Silmarils of Fëanor. Foresighted was he"[56]. We must ponder if Fëanor truly did perceive a threat to the Two Trees of Valinor. Another explanation is that Yavanna's wording is not meant to convey any foresight on the part of Fëanor, but to instead convey that they are fortunate that Fëanor did create the Silmarils. Given that

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[54] J. R. R. Tolkien. *The Silmarillion*. The Random House Publishing Group: Del Rey Books 2002, p. 197.
[55] Ibid., p. 69.
[56] Ibid., p. 83.

on two instances Fëanor's creation of the Silmarils is said to be connected to fate in the text, this gives an indication that there is some degree of fate present. However, as the narrative unfolds, Fëanor's possessiveness which ultimately leads to his own downfall also opens up the possibility that his own pride and skilled artisanship was the *primus motor* for his creation of the Silmarils. This highlights the complexity in Tolkien's mythopoeic worldbuilding as surety with regards to the forces at play is precarious at best. Was it just Fëanor's gift in artisanship that prompted him to create the Silmarils, or did he foresee the end of the Two Trees? Tolkien cleverly avoids leaning too close to one or the other but instead lets attentive readers draw their own conclusions based on the inner workings of Middle-earth and its mythology.

Another point in the intersection between free will and fate concerns oaths. A philologist by trade, Tolkien placed a great deal of weight on the meaning of words. In Tolkien's legendarium, the utterance of words, particularly by characters that are knowledgeable about the history and mythology of Middle-earth, is significant. Oaths play a big part in his writings, and when they are sworn they seem to set down a course in life for those who swore it. The oath of Fëanor is in *The Silmarillion* often referred to as having great influence on the course of the world, as both characters and events are influenced by it. When Melkor slays Fëanor's father and steals Fëanor's Silmarils, he and his sons swear an oath to retrieve the Silmarils and wage war on anyone not of his house that hold the Silmarils. Naming Ilúvatar as a witness, the oath is described as having great future consequences: "For so sworn, good or evil, an oath may not be broken, and it shall pursue oathkeeper and oathbreaker to the world's end"[57]. The wording used here indicates that upon swearing an oath, the future is set for those who swore it. This places restrictions on the free will of those swearing the oath as a particular course has been set from which involved characters cannot deviate. In *Return of the King*, Aragorn summons an army of undead men who did not fulfill their oath to Aragorn's ancestor, who then cursed them. This is but another example of the importance of spoken oaths. This example can be used to further highlight how Tolkien clouds the relationship between the forces that govern lives. While Men are said to have free will, this free seems to be limited by a curse, when Aragorn's ancestor Isildur cursed a group of men who would not fulfill their oath. Men (with free will) who have sworn an oath only to break it are then on top of that cursed as well.

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[57] Ibid., p. 90.

One can see the complexity at work here, as three independent "forces" or "powers" are present.

In relation to oaths, what guides much of the story in *The Silmarillion* is the so-called "curse of Mandos". After Fëanor swears the oath mentioned above, a herald from the Valar (or Ainur) arrives. Further showing that some characters within Tolkien's legendarium possess foresight, the herald warns Fëanor and his Noldor kin: "Go not forth! For the hour is evil, and your road leads to sorrow that you do not foresee"[58]. Fëanor and the Noldor, his kin, refuse to heed this warning and continue towards the coast where they encounter another clan of Elves called the Teleri. After Fëanor requests that they give him their ships, the Teleri king Ölwe refuses: "For this I say to you, Fëanor son of Finwe, these are to us as are the gems of the Noldor: the work of our hearts, whose like we shall not make again"[59]. Fëanor's violent reaction further underlines his fall from grace, as he of all Elves should understand their reluctance to give up their most prized creations. His violent reaction escalates as swords are drawn and he and the Noldor begin slaying the Teleri in order to acquire their ships. After this event, known as the kinslaying, the Noldor come upon a dark figure. The follow lengthy quote illustrates the severity of the Prophecy of the North and the Doom of Noldor:

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

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[58] Ibid., p. 92.
[59] Ibid., p. 94.

> Mandos shall grow weary of the world as with a great burden, and shall wane, and become as shadows of regret before the younger race that cometh after. The Valar have spoken'.[60]

This haunting passage showcases the unforgivable nature of the crime committed by the Noldor; Elves slaying Elves is a horrifying outcome for which the Noldor will shed 'tears unnumbered' and be excluded from the grace of the Valar. The biblical similarities are clear and are here further employed to support Tolkien's worldbuilding as this curse on the Elves has stayed relevant throughout all the Ages of Middle-earth — 'by weapon' and 'by grief' may Elves die.

We may juxtapose this with what happened to Beren. In challenging Beren to acquire a Silmaril, Thingol was "ensnared within the curse of Mandos" when he "wrought the doom of Doriath". This happens because Thingol in that moment desires a Silmaril. Beren eventually acquires the Silmaril which then passes to Thingol. He is then drawn into the struggle for possession of the Silmarils and thereby becomes embroiled in the Doom of Mandos. The reason for Thingol ultimately bringing doom to Doriath then starts at the moment he challenges Beren to acquire a Silmaril, as his challenge is a result of his desire for the possession of a Silmaril. This accounts for how he comes to be ensnared by the doom of Mandos.

As we can thus see, there is a complicated relationship between powers such as doom and fate in Middle-earth. These powers are not clearly defined but nevertheless exist as an influential force that may direct the lives of the inhabitants of the storyworld. Directly employing these powers in the narratives within *The Silmarillion* is a significant aspect of its mythopoeic quality; one that is lessened somewhat (but not gone entirely) in both *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. With regards to free will in a world with an omnipotent creator, Edmund Fuller notes that:

> It is a premise of Christian theology that man must cope with certain of his problems with all his own resources. There are things in which it is up to him to succeed or fail. Yet the Will of God, if not completed through one option, will complete itself through another […].[61]

Does this mean that we must perceive free will as forks in the road that may go in different directions, but ultimately they all end up in the same place through fate and providence? If we go by the *Ainulindalë*, the Ainur saw the history of the world in

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[60] Ibid., p. 95-96.
[61] Edmund Fuller. "The Lord of the Hobbits: J.R.R. Tolkien". In: Rose A. Zimbardo and Neil D. Isaacs (ed.): *Understanding The Lord of the Rings*. Houghton Mifflin. 2005, p. 23

Ilúvatar's vision which would therefore make the conclusion that everything is already "planned" an appealing one. However, this is problematic because of the gift given to Men by Ilúvatar: the virtue to shape their lives even beyond the Music of creation. Are these two concepts not at odds? Edmund Fuller's statement can also be expressed metaphorically where fate is a stream of water. If a character then is a leaf, fate governs that leaf's ultimate destination in that the stream of water even if it ultimately will end in the same pool. But the stream can spread and a leaf can take a different path. Free will can then decide which path is taken, but fate still governs the overall destination. Fëanor's metaphorical leaf in the stream travels by a much more restrictive path than the metaphorical leaves of Men as they have free will. While Edmund Fuller draws on Christian theology to explain Tolkien's legendarium, others have argued that Tolkien's background as a medievalist serves as a better lens through which to understand the inner workings of his legendarium. One example is Kathleen Dubs, who uses the philosophy of Boethius, a 6th century philosopher. If we for the sake of argument consider that Tolkien's works are not overtly Christian, as no direct god-worship appears in his works (in fact there is just about no religion present), it seems is fitting to draw on Tolkien's background as a medievalist. This is also the case because of the numerous inspirations from early works we have covered. Kathleen Dubs uses Boethius' *The Consolation of Philosophy*[62] as a way of illuminating the seemingly contradictory relationship between fate and free will. *The Consolation of Philosophy* is useful as it provides us with definitions that make us able to distinguish between the terms that would seem to be two words for the same idea: providence and fate. In her essay, Dubs claims both that Tolkien would have been aware of *The Consolation of Philosophy* and that it serves as a useful range of ideas for Tolkien who was writing his own mythos. She also argues that Boethius thus became essential as Tolkien was writing an independent mythos and history[63]. This is a point highlighted by other academics as well, namely Verlyn Flieger, who tackles the interesting dynamic between fate and free will serves to separate Tolkien's legendarium from other mythologies[64]. Dubs uses Boethius to separate the terms providence and fate:

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[62] Boethius & Watts. *The Consolation of Philosophy*. Penguin Classics Series, London; New York. 1999
[63] Kathleen E. Dubs. "Providence, Fate and Chance: Boethian Philosophy in The Lord of the Rings". In: *Tolkien and the Invention of Myth: A Reader*, p. 134
[64] See Verlyn Flieger. "The Music and the Task: Fate and Free Will in Middle-Earth". In: *J. R. R. Tolkien Encyclopedia: Scholarship and Critical Assessment* ed. Michael C. Drout (2009).

> Providence is the divine reason itself, the unfolding of temporal events as this is present to the vision of the divine mind; fate is this same unfolding of events as it is worked out in time, as we perceive it in the temporal world. We as humans are unable to know providence. All we can know is fate.[65]

She further notes that: "[…] providence, which rules all things, also governs fate, which is the earthly manifestation of that rule"[66]. Fate, then, is what we or characters in a story are able to perceive. We are not able to perceive the great pattern (providence), but fate we are able to identify. There is a strong link between this line of argumentation and the vision Ilúvatar shows the Ainur. The overarching plan or order, as it were, is known to Ilúvatar and the Ainur. We may call this providence. The events as they unfold to the characters in Tolkien's legendarium, then, we may call fate. But where does free will fit in? Dubs argues that Boethius' and Tolkien's view on free will are the same. She quotes Boethius' view on free will:

> You can indeed alter what you propose to do, but because the present truth of Providence sees that you can, and whether or not you will, you cannot frustrate the divine knowledge any more than you can escape the eye of someone who is present and watching you, even though you may, by your free will, vary your actions.[67]

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

> […] providence, which orders the universe; fate the temporal manifestation of that order; chance, that "fate" which occurs not according to our expectations, and for causes of which we are unaware; and, of course, freedom of will, which operates as part of this providential order.[68]

This description of free will as operating as a part of "providential order" is similar to Verlyn Flieger's interpretation. Flieger summarizes the Boethian philosophy well, noting that it "[…] reconciled human free will with God's foreknowledge by postulating God as the foreknowing spectator of events whose vision takes in the future quality of man's actions"[69]. In Tolkien's texts, the question of free will becomes particularly relevant in the story of Túrin as a curse is brought into play. Túrin's father, Húrin, was captured by Morgoth and his children cursed. The fact that Morgoth uses the capitalized Doom indicates that a greater power is a work; one

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[65] Kathleen E. Dubs. "Providence, Fate and Chance: Boethian Philosophy in The Lord of the Rings". In: Jane Chance (ed.). *Tolkien and the Invention of Myth: A Reader*. Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2004, p. 135.
[66] Ibid., p. 135.
[67] Ibid., p. 141.
[68] Ibid., p. 141.
[69] Verlyn Flieger. *Splintered Light: Logos and Language in Tolkien's World – Revised Edition*. Kent State University Press, 2002, p. 179.

against which Húrin is defenseless and powerless. It becomes part of his ultimate punishment that he must watch the ruin of his loved ones without any hope of interfering:

> "The shadow of my purpose lies upon Arda, and all that is in it bends slowly and surely to my will. But upon all whom you love my thought shall weigh as a cloud of Doom, and it shall bring them down into darkness and despair. Wherever they go, evil shall arise.
> Whenever they speak, their words shall bring ill counsel. Whatsoever they do shall turn against them."[70]

This is undoubtedly a curse and as such further complicates the problem of fate and free will. As we have already identified, curses are a force which may govern events in Middle-earth but the underlying mechanisms are unclear. The question is very much at the forefront of the Túrin story and is even referenced by the characters; Túrin calls himself "Túrin Turambar", meaning "Master of Doom". Believing him dead, Túrin's sister Niënor calls him "A Túrin Turambar turún ambartanen" meaning "master of doom by doom mastered"[71].

In his posthumous works, Tolkien achieved depth through the way the texts were presented, as they appeared as tales that were handed down or compiled through the Ages and therefore did not contain every detail. This is one of the reasons the *The Silmarillion* takes the form of a compendium of narratives. The structure of the collection is deliberately open, not only because it remained unfinished, but also in the sense of Umberto Ecos notion of the 'opera aperta' (the open work) leaving scope for interpretation and imaginative additions.[72] This openness is also in line with contemporary understanding of the issue of completeness in storyworlds and the degrees to which this both promotes and enhances active engagement and immersion[73]. In regards to morality, Tolkien's inspiration unsurprisingly comes from the Bible, as evidenced by the tale of Aulë; he was a Vala with a mind much like

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[70] Tolkien. *The Childfren of Húrin*, p. 64.
[71] Ibid., p. 244.
[72] See Umberto Eco. *The Open Work*. Translated by Anna Cangogni. Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard University Press, 1989.
[73] See also: Lubomír Doležel. *Heterocosmica: Fiction and Possible Worlds*. Parallax Re-Visions of Culture and Society. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009; & L. Dolezel. 'Mimesis and Possible Worlds'. *Poetics Today* 9, no. 3 (1988), p. 475; & Lubomír Doležel. 'Porfyry's Tree for the Concept of Fictional Worlds'. In: *Possible Worlds Theory and Contemporary Narratology*, edited by Alice Bell and Marie-Laure Ryan, 47–61. Frontiers of Narrative. Lincoln ; London: University of Nebraska Press, 2019.
Additionally, the issue of completeness is tackled at some length in the following texts: Mark J. P. Wolf. *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation*. New York: Routledge, 2013; & Wolf, Mark J. P. (ed). *The Routledge Companion to Imaginary Worlds*. New York: Routledge, 2018.

Melkor's, and he created the Dwarves as he was too impatient to wait for the Children of Ilúvatar (the Elves) to appear. This caused grief and strife. Morality in itself is a difficult concept, but what Tolkien's stories do is to show how immoral actions have specific, often negative, consequences. Naturally this approach is rather romanticized and almost simplistic; contemporary authors tackle the issue of morality in a more complex manner. The point is, though, that this moral backbone serves as a foundational force in Tolkien's legendarium and the presence of a Judeo-Christian worldview is evident in how powers such as fate, free will, doom, and fate function in Middle-earth. This is an important point because it supports the argumentation that Tolkien's mythopoeic worldbuilding is tied closely to a particular school of thought and as such the form, function, and structure of *The Silmarillion* has specific starting points and mechanisms which influence the more widely-read texts such as *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. We must reiterate that knowledge of the inner workings of *The Silmarillion* may not be strictly required in order to neither understand nor appreciate Tolkien's other works, but it stands to reason that one may obtain a heightened sense of the complex nature of Middle-earth by delving into its history and mythology. This article showcased this by honing in on particularly the characters Túrin and Feanor.

On a textual level there are few moral surprises as no character switches alignment in dramatic ways. While characters such as Fëanor do commit morally questionable actions, he is still not part of "the Shadow" or the "Enemy"; he remains part of the moral camp despite several of his actions becoming increasingly immoral. There is a fall from grace but no intrinsic evil. As readers, we are not in doubt with regards to his descent into moral downfall. This means that a character may act immorally in the grand scheme of things and a character may serve the forces of Evil; these two are not necessarily one and the same.

Fate, free will, and morality are existential in nature. These existential topics rest at the core of Tolkien's texts set in Middle-earth; given what we know of Tolkien's life and the structure of *The Silmarillion* this is unsurprising. When we consider the mythological character of the works it seems logical that these existential themes are present. But, as we have shown, his treatment of fate and free provide no clear-cut answers. While the moral component in Middle-earth is evident and apparent, there is no moral lecturing or deliberate attempts at allegorical moral lessons. There are many instances of right-or-wrong options in *The Silmarillion*; fate and doom play out

according to the choices characters make and the consequences are often far-reaching and severe. Tolkien's legendarium as a whole ultimately has a strong mythopoeic foundation which has directly influenced the structure and nature of *The Silmarillion.*[74]

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[74] This article is a revised and expanded version of parts of the MA Thesis (University of Aalborg) by Dennis Friedrichsen and Niels Rubæk Nielsen entitled *Exploring the Legendarium: Myth, Morality and Free Will in Middle-Earth*. See: https://projekter.aau.dk/projekter/en/studentthesis/exploring-the-legendarium(9d8756a4-3c8e-4bd7-8097-75115c12ecf3).html.

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