

The Reluctant Pilgrim: Allusions to Spiritual Images and Themes in J. R. R. Tolkien's "Leaf by Niggle."

Suellen Alfred, Professor, English Education, Tennessee Technological University

Abstract

All good children's literature can be read through a stratification of layers lying just beneath the surface of the literal. J. R. R. Tolkien's modest story, "Leaf by Niggle," is no exception. This story about a simple man who becomes obsessed with completing an enormous painting contains implicit allusions to Christian images and themes such as the Tree of Knowledge, the importance of the parable of the good Samaritan, preparation for eternity, the effects of sin on the soul, and the idea that God can perfect humans' imperfection. This paper explores those allusions and themes as they emerge within the story.

Introduction

All good children's literature can be read through a stratification of layers lying just beneath the surface of the literal. *Harry Potter*, *Alice in Wonderland*, *the Narnya stories*, and others have multifaceted religious, cultural and philosophical implications for the reader who is of a mind to mine them. J. R. R. Tolkien's "Leaf by Niggle" is no exception. Although the story has long been overshadowed by *The Lord of the Rings*, it is worthy of attention for any Tolkien scholar who wishes to become familiar with all of Tolkien's fiction.

Like almost all good children's literature, J. R. R. Tolkien's "Leaf by Niggle,"¹ can be read on a stratum of religious layers. In this fairy-story of an odd little painter who tries to do his duty before going on a mysterious journey, Tolkien never once mentions religion; but a reader familiar with the Christian paradigm can find there an abundance of Christian images and themes. Because the limitations of this paper prevent my exploring each of those images and themes, I will concentrate on only five. Of particular interest in "Leaf by Niggle" are two images: the tree that Niggle paints and the destination to which Niggle arrives at the end of a mysterious journey. In addition to those images are the themes of preparation, or lack thereof, for eternity; the "Parable of the Good Samaritan," as found in the tenth chapter of the "Gospel of Luke";² and the implication that God can perfect humans' imperfections. In this paper I explore those images and themes as they emerge within the story. Thus, I shall proceed sequentially, beginning with the Tree of Knowledge and ending with the perfect realization of Niggle's Painting.

J. R. R. Tolkien. "Leaf by Niggle" in *Tree and Leaf Including the Poem Mythopoeia*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1988, pp. 75 – 96.

² "The Gospel of Luke" 10:25-37. *The Bible*, King James Version

Important Sources

In preparing this paper, I have leaned heavily on two sources: Richard Purtill's excellent book, *J.R.R. Tolkien: Myth, Morality, and Religion* (originally published by Harper Collins in 1984 and later reissued by Ignatius Press in 2003), and Humphrey Carpenter's comprehensive collection, *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien* (originally published in the United Kingdom in 1981 by George Allen & Unwin and reissued in 2000 by Houghton Mifflin.) The contents of these books along with ideas gleaned from a variety of scholars from Karen Armstrong to W. A. Senior have been invaluable in the development of my exposition.

Myth, Allegory, and Religion

In his 1951 letter to publisher Milton Wadman, Tolkien writes, "Myth and fairy-story must, as all art, reflect and contain in solution elements of moral and religious truth (or error) but not explicit, not in the known form of the primary 'real world.'"³ In 1954 he referred to "Leaf by Niggle" as "my 'purgatorial' story."⁴ In 1953, his letter to Robert Murray contains these lines: "*The Lord of the Rings* is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision...the religious element is absorbed into the story and the symbolism."⁵ Such an approach is supported by Patrick Grant's assertion that "...Tolkien faces, therefore, the crucial problem for the Christian writer—the problem faced first by Milton in a modern context—of formulating a vision in which Christian assertion, history, and imagination can coinhere..."⁶

Regarding Tolkien's ideas about allegory, in that 1951 letter to Milton Waldman referred to above, Tolkien writes, "I dislike Allegory [upper case is Tolkien's]—the conscious and intentional allegory—yet any attempt to explain the purport of myth or fairytale must use allegorical language (And of course, the more 'life' a story has the more readily will it be susceptible of allegorical interpretations; while the better a deliberate allegory is made the more nearly will it be acceptable just as a story.)"⁷

Later, however, in a letter to Peter Hastings in 1954, Tolkien implies that "Leaf by Niggle" is a purgatorial allegory.⁸ Yet nine years later in 1962 he writes to his aunt, Jane Neave, that "Leaf by Niggle" "is not really or properly an 'allegory' so much as 'mythical'. For Niggle is meant to be a real mixed-quality *person* [italics Tolkien's] and not an 'allegory' of any single vice or virtue" (p.321). The last sentence is telling in its revelation of Tolkien's rather narrow view of allegory - a one-to-one correspondence between a given character or image in a story

³ Humphrey Carpenter, ed. *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), p. 144.

⁴ Ibid, p. 175

⁵ Ibid, p. 172

⁶ Patrick Grant. "Tolkien: Archetype and Word." *Cross Currents*, Winter 1973, pp 365-380.

⁷ Carpenter, p. 145

⁸ Ibid, p. 321

and the abstract principal that the character or image represents. Even more telling is his statement about *Silmarillion*. He writes, “There is *no* [italics Tolkien’s] ‘symbolism’ or conscious allegory in my story. Allegory of the sort ‘five wizards = five senses is wholly foreign to my way of thinking” (p. 262). Such a view is a bit too narrow for Richard Purtill, who states that “...not all allegories feature personified vices and virtues.”⁹

In Tolkien’s defense, however, he goes on to say in the same passage about *Silmarillion*, “That there is no allegory does not, of course, say there is no applicability. There always is...there is I suppose applicability in my story to present times.”¹⁰ “Tolkien “did not deny that [his stories were] applicable to contemporary affairs .”¹¹ Tolkien’s “applicability” is more subtle than allegory because absent a direct corollary of character and/or symbol with specific realities in the every day life, readers must discover for themselves how they can apply the images and themes in fairy stories to their own lives. Such is true of almost every good piece of literature. The discussion of allegory and applicability, then, informs my discussion of the images and themes in “Leaf by Niggle.” Thus, Tolkien’s ideas about applicability are clearly relevant to the image of the tree, the most prominent image in story. It is a major symbol.

The Image of the Tree

“In the introductory note in an early edition of *Tree and Leaf*, Tolkien explains one of the major influences for the story “Leaf by Niggle.”

One of its influences was a great-limbed poplar tree that I could see even lying in bed. It was suddenly lopped and mutilated by its owner, I do not know why. It is cut down now, a less barbarous punishment for any crime it may have been accused of, such as being large and alive. I do not think it had any friends, or any mourners except myself and a pair of owls.¹² Tolkien writes of the tree almost as if it is a sensate being.

Thus, it is no surprise to find other references to Tolkien’s fascination with leaves and trees. “Each leaf, of oak and ash and thorn, is a unique embodiment of the pattern, and for some this very year may be *the* [italics Tolkien’s] embodiment, the first ever seen and recognized, though oaks have put forth leaves for countless generations.”¹³ Such a comment implies the eternal variation that can descend from one ancient form; it is almost Platonic in its implication, one that applies very nicely to the ending of “Leaf by Niggle.” Certainly in the Judeo-Christian

⁹ Richard Purtill. *J. R. R. Tolkien: Myth Morality and Religion*. (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2003), p. 33.

¹⁰ Carpenter, p. 262.

¹¹ Stratford Caldecott. *The Power of the Ring: The Spiritual Vision Behind The Lord of the Rings*. (New York 2005) p. 47.

¹² W. A. Senior “Loss Eternal in J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle-earth” in George Clark & Daniel Timmons, eds. *J.R.R. Tolkien and His Literary Resonances: Views of Middle-Earth*. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2000), p. 181.

¹³ Tolkien, “On Fairy-Stories,” p. 52

tradition when one thinks of the image of a tree, more than likely the Tree of Knowledge from the book of “Genesis” comes to mind.¹⁴ That symbol carries a weight of implication for Jews and Christians around the world. The symbol of the tree is not peculiar to Christianity, however. Other groups besides Christians have regarded the tree as a sacred entity. Witcombe finds sacred trees in the iconography of the Egyptians, Jews, Celts, and Native Americans.

From the earliest times, trees have been the focus of religious life for many peoples around the world. As the largest plant on earth, the tree has been a major source of stimulation to the mythic imagination. Trees have been invested in all cultures with a dignity unique to their own nature, and tree cults, in which a single tree or a grove of trees is worshipped, have flourished at different times almost everywhere. Even today there are sacred woods in India and Japan, just as there were in pre-Christian Europe. An elaborate mythology of trees exists across a broad range of ancient cultures.¹⁵

James Frazier in *The Golden Bough* illustrates the long history throughout the United Kingdom and northern Europe of beliefs about the spiritual nature of trees. He writes,

“...amongst the Germans the oldest sanctuaries were natural woods....tree worship is well attested for all the great European families of the Aryan stock. Amongst the Celts the oak-worship of the druids is familiar to every one, and their old word for a sanctuary seems to be identical in origin and meaning with the Latin *nemus*, a grove or woodland glade...”¹⁶

According to Frazier, some cultures believe that tree spirits give rain and sunshine to make the crops grow and to bless all females including humans with offspring (p. 118–119). Some ancient cultures believed “the life of a person is so bound up with the life of a plant” that the plant will wither after that person’s death (p. 681). A number of cultures believe that certain trees have curative powers. In England and Scotland even as recently as the early twentieth century, children were “sometimes passed through a cleft of an ash-tree as a cure for rupture or rickets” (p. 682.). Even Native Americans in the northwest region of the United States are said to have consulted an ancient sacred tree for guidance.¹⁷

As Stanford Caldecott observes, “The way a *tree* [italics Caldecott’s] grows—slowly, incrementally, organically—is the way myths and legends grow, the way a tradition grows....but at all times there is a sap and a spirit that runs through it and makes it a living thing. It is more than the soil and minerals and the sunlight and water that compose it.”¹⁸ In many cultures, the tree represents growth. The tree is the only living thing that continues to grow throughout its

¹⁴ “The Book of Genesis” 2.9, 16-17. *The Bible*. King James Version

¹⁵ Christopher Witcombe. “The Sacred.” <http://witcombe.sbc.edu/sacredplaces/sacredness.html>. Accessed February 2, 2011.

¹⁶ James Frazier. *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*. (Hertfordshire, UK: Wordsworth Editions, 1994), pp. 110, 118-119, 681-682.

¹⁷ Jeremiah Curtin. *Native American Creation Myths*. (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2004), p. xvi.

¹⁸ Stratford Caldecott, *The Power of the Ring: The Spiritual Vision Behind the Lord of the Rings*. New York: Crossroad, 2005, p. 14.

lifetime.¹⁹ So it is clear that the image of the tree has captured the imagination of people across the globe and across the centuries.

In the case of the Christian and Jewish traditions, the forbidden Tree of Knowledge attracts Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. They are unable to resist the temptation to eat of that tree and are then cast out of the Garden of Eden. This story has puzzled theologians for centuries, but Karen Armstrong's interpretation serves our purposes quite well. Armstrong tells us, "What Adam and Eve sought from the tree of knowledge was not the philosophical or scientific knowledge desired by the Greeks but the practical wisdom that would give them blessing and fulfillment."²⁰

So it is with Niggle who becomes intensely focused on his effort to paint a tree and the meadow and mountains around it. He becomes so obsessed with his painting that he neglects other parts of his life, especially his relationships with his friends and neighbors. Like Armstrong's Adam and Eve, he wants to pursue his own desire for blessing and fulfillment by completing his painting. In his effort to paint a tree and all its surroundings, Niggle is seeking a kind of deep satisfaction, a sort of enlightenment that drives so many creative people to produce great works of art.

Lack of Preparation for the Journey

In the days before Niggle begins to paint he knows he has a long journey to make "but he did not hurry with his preparations...he was sometimes just idle and did nothing at all."²¹ As Jane Chance writes, "He niggles away his life (as his name suggests) and does not even complete his canvas..."²² This failure to prepare for his journey costs him dearly in the long run. His idleness turns to energy when he becomes obsessed with painting a large tree. Even so, he continually neglects to prepare for his trip.

Niggle's Leaf and Tree

When he first begins to paint, Niggle is not sure he has the skill to paint a whole tree, so he begins with just a single leaf. "He was the sort of painter who can paint leaves better than trees. He used to spend a long time on a single leaf, trying to catch its shape, and its sheen, and the glistening of dewdrops on its edges."²³ Yet as is the case with most of us whose reach often

Sondra Crane "Tree of Life Symbol." <http://www.catalogs.com/info/spirituality/Tree-of-life-symbol.html>. Accessed December 22, 2010.

²⁰ Karen Armstrong. *In the Beginning: A new Interpretation of Genesis*. (New York: Ballentine, 1996), p. 27.

²¹ Tolkien, "Leaf by Niggle," p. 75

²² Christine Chism. "Middle-earth, the Middle Ages, and the Aryan Nation: Myth and History in World War II." In *Tolkien the Medievalist*, ed. Jane Chance (London: Routledge, 2003). P. 69

²³ "Leaf by Niggle, p. 75

exceeds our grasp,²⁴ his initial effort to paint one leaf grows when he wants to place the leaf in context. Niggle wants to paint a whole tree, “with all of its leaves in the same style, and all of them different”²⁵ Undeterred by his limitations, Niggle presses on with his desire to paint a tree. Tolkien shows us his own philosophy about limitations. “We do not, or need not, despair of drawing because all lines must be either curved or straight, nor of painting because there are only ‘primary’ colours [sic].”²⁶

Swept along by this curious situation, Niggle increasingly feels the need for solitude to work on his ambitious painting. His painting becomes so large that in order to accommodate it, he has to build a tall shed on the spot where he ordinarily grew potatoes. To reach it he needs a ladder; “and he ran up and down it, putting a touch here, and rubbing out a patch there.”²⁷

Tolkien wrote “Leaf by Niggle” at a time when he himself was struggling with his own opus that seemed to take on a life of its own. As he states in a 1962 letter to his aunt, Jane Neave, “I was anxious about my own internal Tree, *The Lord of the Rings*. It was growing out of hand, and revealing endless new vistas—and I wanted to finish it, but the world was threatening. And I was *dead stuck* [italics Tolkien’s], somewhere about Ch. 10...in Book III...”²⁸

Neglect of Friends and the Story of the Good Samaritan

Niggle’s project also grows out of hand. Like Adam and Eve he wants to find blessing and fulfillment; but Niggle allows that desire to hamper his civic obligations. His obsession grows beyond his power to control it. He appears to have lost his judgment; as a result he cannot contain his painting within realistic bounds.

During all his efforts to finish his painting Niggle is frequently interrupted by his neighbors, among whom is Mr. Parrish, a disabled and very needy man with a leaking roof and a serious case of learned helplessness. Parish is highly skilled at taking advantage of Niggle’s inability to say no to Parish’s frequent requests for assistance. As Tolkien tells us, Niggle “was kind-hearted, in a way. You know the sort of kind heart: it made him uncomfortable more often than it made him do anything...All the same, it did land him in a good many odd jobs for his neighbour [sic], Mr. Parish, a man with a lame leg.”²⁹ And yet, Niggle unsuccessfully makes an effort to avoid helping Parish, or any other neighbor, for that matter, who seeks his assistance, even when a flood damages Parish’s property. The balance between self fulfillment and responsibility to others tilts toward self. This lack of balance

²⁴ Robert Browning. *Poems of Robert Browning, 1833 – 1865*. (London: Cassell and Company, Ltd., 1910), pp. 444-445.

²⁵ “Leaf by Niggle,” p. 75.

²⁶ J. R.R. Tolkien. “On Fairy Stories” *Tree and Tree and Leaf Including the Poem Mythopoeia*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1988, pp. 52 - 53

²⁷ Tolkien, “Leaf by Niggle,” p. 76

²⁸ Carpenter, p. 321.

²⁹ Tolkien, “Leaf by Niggle,” p. 75

leads us into another very interesting religious theme—the story of The Good Samaritan as found in the New Testament Gospel of Luke, the tenth chapter.³⁰ One of the parables told by Jesus, the story illustrates the moral requirement for helping a person in need, regardless of that person’s ethnic or religious identity. Niggle does not quite live up to that Christian example.

Following Tolkien’s preference for “application” rather than allegory, Purtill discusses the moral application of “Leaf by Niggle.” “Niggle is Everyman, and the application is to a person’s work and to the individual’s relation to others and to society.”³¹ The theme of the story according to Purtill is a moral one in that “our relations to other human beings . . . are morally more important than our careers, our life work, our ‘projects’ for ourselves and for our lives.” He goes on to say that society’s demand that we heed this order of priorities, are legitimate. However, we all fail to live up to such demands and need to have “strict justice, ‘tempered with mercy’” (pp. 25–26).

Neighbors Neglect Niggle

Purtill’s statement about “legitimate demands” leads me to wonder how legitimate the demands of Niggle’s neighbors are. Purtill has an answer: “....if society goes beyond these just demands and tries to make us subordinate to social forms, it is unjust and detestable.”³² In their failure to help Niggle with his project, his neighbors also fail to live up to the moral ideal. It seems rather unfair to paint Niggle as the only villain in the complicated equilibrium between desire and duty. It is important to remember that Niggle does respond to “tremendous crop of interruptions.”³³ He serves on jury duty, he helps a sick friend, he even becomes ill after going out in the rain to fetch the doctor for Parish’s sick wife and to find a builder to patch Parish’s leaky roof during a flood. There is no evidence in the story that the neighbors are any better at following the example of the Good Samaritan than Niggle is. As a result, with every good deed he does, Niggle’s resentment grows because of the time each deed takes away from his painting. The doctor comes, but the builder never shows. And the clock is ticking. Niggle knows that he will be required to go on a mysterious journey; he does not know when, but he feels a great burden to finish his enormous painting before that time arrives.

In regard to Niggle’s dilemma, Purtill states that the conflict in the story between career and personal demands is “illusory. It is our weaknesses and failings that lead us to situations in which we must neglect one obligation to fulfill another, and if we give due place to personal relations, it will be the better for our careers and ourselves.”³⁴ These are hard

³⁰ The Gospel of Luke 10: 25-37” *The Bible*. King James Version.

³¹ Richard Purtill, pp. 25 – 26.

³² Ibid.

³³ Tolkien, “Leaf by Niggle,” p. 77

³⁴ Purtill, pp 24-25

words for millions of us who are driven perhaps to a fault by our work. Niggle would no doubt agree with Purtil's observation. Although he sees his visitors as a nuisance, "he could not deny that he had invited them himself, away back in the winter, when had not thought it an 'interruption.'"³⁵

Pragmatism Verses Art

Then comes a monumental interruption that forces him to abandon his painting altogether. Quite unexpectedly, The Inspector of Houses shows up and scolds Niggle acerbically for neglecting to help Parish repair his leaky roof. "You should have helped your neighbor to make...repairs...hat is the law," he says (p.81). The Town Council has not been able to help. Emergency services are too busy with worse flooding disasters, and Parish is unable to help himself. Niggle is now the victim not only of his procrastination and of his obsession with his painting, but also of an infrastructure that is not prepared to meet so many needs. In spite of such circumstances, the Inspector of Houses criticizes Niggle severely for his neglect of his neighbors.

His dilemma is compounded by yet another arrival, The Driver, who tells him and the Inspector of houses that it is time for Niggle to go on his journey. "There now!" said the Inspector. "You'll have to go; but it's a bad way to start on your journey, leaving your jobs undone. Still, we can at least make some use of this canvas now" (p. 82). As the Inspector looks around for something with which to patch Parish's roof, he finds the very large canvas of Niggle's painting. To Niggle's horror, the Inspector rips the canvas from the wall and uses it to patch Parish's roof. . "But" says the Inspector, "houses come first. That is the law" (p. 82).

Here we have yet another dilemma that is all too apparent in a modern community, the conflict between pragmatism and art. Unfortunately in Niggle's case, as it often is in real life, pragmatism wins. Utilitarianism destroys the aesthetic. Now, not only is his painting unfinished; it is destroyed. As Niggle prepares to enter the carriage for the ride to the train station, we read this interesting dialogue:

"Oh, dear!" said poor Niggle, beginning to weep. "And it's not, not even finished!"

"Not finished?" said the Driver. "Well, it's finished with, as far as you're concerned, at any rate. Come along!" (p. 82).

The Driver's phrase "finished with" will come to take on an ironically different meaning at the end of the story.

³⁵ "Leaf by Niggle," p. 77

Tolkien himself said the story was an allegory about Purgatory³⁶ Stratford Caldecott expands on that idea noting that the story is a description of “the after death state known as Purgatory.”³⁷ Before proceeding any further, a brief review of the Roman Catholic belief in is in order. According to the Catholic Encyclopedia:

Purgatory (Lat., "purgare", to make clean, to purify): in accordance with Catholic teaching is a place or condition of temporal punishment for those who, departing this life in God's grace, are, not entirely free from venial faults, or have not fully paid the satisfaction due to their transgressions....God requires satisfaction, and will punish sin, and this doctrine [of Purgatory] involves as its necessary consequence a belief that the sinner failing to do penance in this life may be punished in another world, and so not be cast off eternally from God.³⁸

When Niggle arrives at the first stop on his journey, just as he gets off the train, he faints on the platform after which he is taken by ambulance to the Workhouse infirmary where he has time to reflect on his past behavior. He expresses regret for not being kinder to Paris, but those thoughts are put aside when, after his recovery, he is asked to do numerous chores ...that give him little time for reflection. “He had to work hard...at digging, carpentry, and painting bare boards on one plain colour [sic]...” Apparently Niggle is doing the penance required of him to gain God’s favor; being condemned to paint boards using only one plain color could indeed be a serious punishment for an artist like Niggle.

“...he used to worry aimlessly about the past...repeating to himself as he lay in the dark, ‘I wish I had called on Parish the first morning after the high winds began. I meant to.’”³⁹ This hard work and reflection seem to be the very purpose of Niggle’s stay in the hospital and the Workhouse. Soon, however, he becomes so fatigued that the doctor orders complete bed rest in the dark.

Going to the “Next Stage”

During this time Niggle overhears two voices that seem to be a “Court of Inquiry...in an adjoining room” arguing about whether he has done enough work to earn being transferred. The first Voice is skeptical, critical, and judgmental. The second Voice is more gentle and forgiving. At the end of the conversation, the Second Voice says, "I think it is a case for a little gentle treatment now." At that point the owners of the Voices discover that Niggle has been listening to them. When the First Voice asks, “Well, what have you to say?” Niggle

³⁶ Carpenter, p. 145

³⁷ Caldecott, p. 26

³⁸ Catholic Encyclopedia. <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/12575a.htm>
Accessed February 26, 2011.

³⁹ Tolkien, “Leaf by Niggle,” p. 89

redeems himself when he asks ““Could you tell me about Parish?” His concern about Parish seems to convince the Voices that Niggle can “go to the next stage.”⁴⁰

Caldecott states it nicely: “[] is a kind of healing process...the point of the Workhouse is [not] to punish Niggle, but rather to teach him to do one thing at a time until he feels quieter inside...Niggle’s fundamental good will, despite all the imperfections of his bad temper and grudging , resentful attitude, is what finally counts in his favor. In Catholic teaching , is the state of those who have been judged worthy of Heaven,”⁴¹ but who have more work to do and more lessons to learn before they get there. Niggle’s efforts have earned him the right to move from the Workhouse, or Purgatory , to the next stage, which is presumably, heaven.

Niggle’s Work Perfected

When he gets to the next stage, Niggle finds himself in a lovely setting. “He seemed to remember having seen or dreamed of that sweep of grass somewhere or other. The curves of the land were familiar somehow.”⁴² He has arrived at the scene he attempted to paint before he left his house, and in that scene he sees that his Tree is, “alive, its leaves opening , its branches growing and bending in the wind that Niggle had so often felt or guessed, and had so often failed to catch...all the leaves he had ever laboured [sic] at were there as he had imagined them rather than as he had made them....the Forest was there too....The Mountains were glimmering in the distance”⁴³

God Perfects Imperfection

So here we have a mystery. Niggle has worked hard on a product that is not really very good. He encounters people who really do not value his artistic impulse. Niggle has dedicated heart and hand to the production of an enormous piece of art, only to have it destroyed by an insensitive bureaucrat who was blind to the value of Niggle’s effort. His painting is destroyed to patch a neighbor’s roof. And now, to his amazement, his niggling effort to paint a tree has been “realized” in a literal sense. His painting has been resurrected. Art has become life. The Driver’s ironic comment was correct; the painting is, indeed, finished with.

Tolkien wrote to Milton Wadman about his state of mind as he created his stories, “always, I had the sense of recording what was already ‘there,’ somewhere: not of ‘inventing.’” As Christine Chism observes, Tolkien was “subsuming his obsessive,

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 87.

⁴¹ Caldecott, p. 26.

⁴² Tolkien, “Leaf by Niggle,” p. 89

⁴³ Ibid.

painstaking, futile artistry into the work of the Creator itself,”⁴⁴ an idea that would no doubt appeal to Tolkien, who believed that the only creator was God and all our human efforts are merely “subcreations.”⁴⁵

Plato’s Forms

The perfect tree that Niggle encounters in Paradise calls to mind Plato’s ideas about invisible forms made up of unchanging products, perfect prototypes, if you will, of their imperfect counterparts in the visible world. As S. Marc Cohen writes, “Forms are mind-independent entities: their existence and nature are independent of our beliefs and judgments about them...they do not **become**, they simply **are** [bold font Cohen’s].”⁴⁶ For example, the “Form” or “Idea” of a horse is intelligible, abstract, and applies to all horses; it never changes. This perspective fits nicely with the idea that the tree Niggle tried to paint did indeed exist in heaven in a form more perfect than the one he could illustrate. Only when he earned his right to enter heaven could he see his work in its perfect “form.”

God Blesses Imperfect Effort

Returning to the Judeo/Christian view, I am reminded of a passage from the first the first Psalm in The Old Testament of the Bible: “And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season; his leaf also shall not wither; and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper.”⁴⁷ Probably the most comforting scripture for a Christian is this passage from “St. Paul’s Second Letter to the Corinthians”: “As [the Lord] said unto me, ‘My grace is sufficient for thee; for my strength is made perfect in weakness.’”⁴⁸ Perhaps Niggle’s discovery of his living tree points to the faith among some Christians that whatever they attempt in this life will be perfected in the next. No doubt such a faith was a great comfort to Tolkien as he struggled to complete his *opus magnum*, *The Lord of the Rings*.

Conclusion

“Leaf by Niggle” is rich with Christian images and themes. The images of the tree and of the afterlife and the themes of the good Samaritan, preparation for eternity, and perfection in heaven I have discussed in this paper are only a few. Any reader with an understanding of basic Christianity will certainly find many more threads of Christian ideas in this rich and engaging story.

⁴⁴ Chism, p. 69

⁴⁵ Carpenter, p. 145

⁴⁶ S. Marc Cohen. “Theory of Forms. <http://faculty.washington.edu/smcohen/320/thforms.htm> Accessed February 26, 2011.

⁴⁷ Psalms 1:3 The Bible King James Version

⁴⁸ “St Paul’s Second Letter to the Corinthians.” The Bible King James Version

References

- Armstrong, Karen. *In the Beginning: A new Interpretation of Genesis*. New York: Ballantine, 1996.
- Browning, Robert. *Poems of Robert Browning, 1833-1865*. London: Cassell and Company Ltd., 1910.
- Caldecott, Stratford. *The Power of the Ring: The Spiritual Vision Behind the Lord of the Rings*. New York: Crossroad, 2005.
- Carpenter, Humphrey, es. *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000.
- Catholic Encyclopedia. “.”
<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/12575a.htm> Accessed February 26, 2011.
- Chism, Christine. “Middle-earth, the Middle Ages, and the Aryan nation: Myth and history in World War II.” in Jane Chance, ed. *Tolkien the Medievalist*, London: Routledge, 2003.
- Cohen, S. Marc. <http://faculty.washington.edu/smcohen/320/thforms.htm>, 2006. Accessed 2/27/11.
- Crane, Sondra. “Tree of Life Symbol.” <http://www.catalogs.com/info/spirituality/Tree-of-life-symbol.html>. Accessed December 22, 2010.
- Curtin, Jeremiah. *Native American Creation Myths*. Mineola, NY: Dover, 2004.
- Frazier, James. *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*. Herfordshire, UK: Wordsworth Editions, 1994. (Originally published in London in 1922.)
- “Gospel of Luke” 10: 25-37” *The Bible*. King James Version.
- Grant, Patrick. “Tolkien: Archetype and Word.” *Cross Currents*, Winter 1973, pp 365-380.
- Psalms 1: 1-3 *The Bible King James Verion*
- Purtill, Richard. *J. R. R. Tolkien: Myth, Morality, and Religion*. San Francisco: Ignatius, 1984.
- Senior, W. A. “Loss Eternal in J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle-earth.” Clark, George Clark & Daniel Timmons, eds. *J.R.R. Tolkien and His Literary Resonances: Views of Middle-Earth*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2000.
- “The Book of Genesis” 2.9, 16-17. *The Bible*. King James Version
- “The Second Letter of St. Paul to the Corinthians” 12:9 *The Bible King James Version*.
- Tolkien, J. R. R. *Tree and Leaf Including the Poem from Mythopoeia* Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989.
- Witcombe, Christopher. “Trees and the Sacred.”
<http://witcombe.sbc.edu/sacredplaces/trees.html>. Accessed February 2, 2011’

Published by the Forum on Public Policy

Copyright © The Forum on Public Policy. All Rights Reserved. 2011.