

Faith, Hope, and Despair in Tolkien's Works

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Faith, Hope, and Despair in Tolkien's Works

Tolkien's Middle-earth stories provide readers with a strong sense of morality consisting in the main characters' endeavour for virtuosity; that is doing the right thing. His positive characters display a whole range of virtues—wisdom, courage, loyalty, and mercy being the most important ones. In this paper I will focus on two theological virtues that permeate the story, faith and hope and their opposing vice, despair. I will analyze how Tolkien's depiction of these virtues has been treated in literary research so far and to what extent do they match Christian teaching about virtues and vices.

Faith

Since faith and hope are interrelated, they are often examined together, sometimes even mistaken for each other when their definitions are not properly understood. Faith is defined as the substance of things to be hoped for, evidence of things that appear not, a certainty about the present unseen (Aquinas, 1999, p. 2671, 2680). Some philosophers, such as Kincaid (2005), argue that faith is an indiscriminate belief in something or someone, often characterized by an absence of verifiable empirical justification or logical proof, thus implying that reason does not play any role in the development of faith. On the contrary, Aquinas, while not thinking it necessary to scientifically justify the object of faith, claims that this virtue pertains to intellect, on account of which man decides whether or not to believe the information about the object proposed to him. True faith does not exclude questioning the credibility of its object; conversely, it is arrived at by resolving one's doubts either through knowledge or experience.

In the narrow sense, faith is associated with religion and understood as belief in God and truths revealed by Him, what Aquinas (1999, p. 2623) terms as the First Truth. In a broad sense, it can be understood as belief in the universal truths, the ultimate victory of good over evil, the existence of eternal happiness, or the existence of some powers beyond our comprehension that help the world to attain it.

Although Tolkien deliberately removed all references to religion and god from *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Silmarillion* reveals that Middle-earth has its creator-god and even angelic beings, the Ainur, so faith in its narrow sense is not absent from it. However, the fictional history shows how the divine beings are slowly forgotten and faith in their power

diminished throughout the ages. By the end of the third age, in which the former book is set, the greatest faith can be observed among the Elves, some of whom still have vivid memories of personal encounters with the Ainur (e.g. Galadriel). A faith almost equalling that of the Elves is found among the descendants of the faithful Númenoreans, the Dúnedain and the Gondorians. These nations might have had some influence on the belief system of the Rohirrim, but the published stories do not provide any information about it. Other human tribes are described as more savage and heathen, this implying they worshipped their own gods, with no specification provided. Likewise, little to nothing is said about the belief systems of Hobbits and Dwarves. Certain is only that the latter ones showed reverence to Aulë, the Vala who made their forefathers. Any other articles of faith these races might have held were probably taken over from Men. Particularly hobbits seem to have no knowledge of or interest in any divine beings. What is more, they have a deep mistrust towards all supernatural, “magical” actions. However, there are many, mainly Gandalf’s, remarks that point out that there is some power, even greater than Sauron, operating in the background and directing everything to its proper end, what Tolkien in his letters named the Providence. By observing its working in their lives, the central quartet of hobbits develops the virtue of faith. Concerning Gandalf, he is one of the Istari, who are Maiar (lesser Ainur) but whose true nature is only known to few. Thus they are living objects and at the same time a proof of faith. As objects of faith, they combine in themselves the narrow and the broad sense of faith, because they can be believed in both as divine beings and as individuals with special helping powers.

While it would be interesting to explore the extent of each race’s faith in the narrow sense, no Tolkien scholar, the work of whom I have researched for this paper, has done so. And of those who engaged themselves in analysing its broad-sense application, all but one fused it with the analysis of the virtue of hope. The only one to treat these two virtues separately is Smith (2002), but even his interpretation does not follow the proper definitions. He presents faith as a belief in the helping powers of others, specifically Tom Bombadil and Varda. Frodo’s faith in Tom’s powers is based on experience; he saw him save his friends from Old Willow and resist the invisibling effect of the Ring, so when captured in the Barrow Downs, he has the confidence to trust that Tom would help them again as promised. The matter with Varda is rather complicated. While it may seem that Frodo’s or Sam’s belief in her power is an evidence of faith in the narrow sense, because she is a Vala (the higher Ainu), it is not so. Unlike Elves who call to her for help out of true faith, whenever the hobbits do so, it is rather an unconscious exclamation, as if some other voice was calling through their

mouths and they do not fully understand what they are saying. However, Smith's third example of faith is the most unfortunate of them all—he presents trust in a foul-looking guide (Strider) as evidence of his faith. But trust is a distinct virtue. Frodo's belief in the honesty of Gollum's intentions and his suppressed goodness would be a better example in this case.

Hope

While faith is a belief in the existence of some present good or evil, hope is a belief in and a certain expectation of some future good that is hard, yet not utterly impossible to attain. Hope pertains to the appetitive faculty as it is incited by desire of particular good and directed by will. The root of hope is faith, and its intensity depends on all that increases man's power, such as experience, strength, and riches, and all that makes him think he can obtain the object of his hope, that is, teaching or persuasion (Aquinas, 1999).

Out of the scholars concerned with the examination of hope in Tolkien's work, Dickerson (2003) follows this definition most closely. Both he and Manni (2014) refer to the discussion between Andreth of the race of Men and Finrod the elf published in *The History of Middle-earth* (2017) as a proof that Tolkien's conception of hope was Thomistic. This story reveals that Elves distinguish two kinds of hope: *amdir*, that is an expectation of good which, though uncertain, has some foundation in what is known; and *estel*, a trust that is not defeated by the ways of the world because it is rooted in their awareness that they are the children of the creator-god and thus will ultimately be saved. Such understanding rather recalls the virtue of faith and links back to Smith's interpretation of faith as trust which it validates. Estel was also the name given to the child Aragorn in Elrond's care as a token of his right for kingship (Tolkien, 2011b, p. 1057). It presaged that he was the last hope for his diminishing people but also that he was to become a significant figure in the game that was to determine the fate of the whole world. Yet as the name signifies, it was not an unreasonable looking for a better future, but a trust that what should be would be.

Smith's and Markos's explanations of the nature of hope present in Tolkien's work also seem to be confused with the definition of faith. The latter describes it as "a certainty, to know with one's whole being, that good will come out of evil," and a "deep, heartfelt understanding that though we may fail in our mission," evil will be conquered and goodness will triumph (Markos, 2012, p. 124, 128). In other words, hope for him is a conviction that sets one's mind in a state unsusceptible to being defeated by any pain or peril. Similarly, Smith (2002) sums it up as a choice to carry on even in the midst of despair. They both illustrate it with Sam's unbreakable spirit; Markos (p. 127) particularly focuses on Sam's song

in the tower of Cirith Ungol which reflects the development of his attitude from despair to hope. Sam's hope lies in his belief that, like there is always sun beyond the darkest clouds, so there is always good beyond any evil. Where Smith gets it wrong is that hope and despair cannot exist in a person concurrently because they are opposites. If a man despairs, he cannot see anything but the clouds; therefore, he has no reason to carry on. Yet his despair can easily be turned into hope if even the smallest sunbeam pierces them and gives him certainty that something better exists. One first needs to be convinced of the existence of the sun to be able to believe in and hope for its rise. And this conviction is the substance of things to be hoped for, that is, the faith that incites hope.

The only scholar who questions the absolutism of belief in *The Lord of the Rings* is Kath Filmer-Davies, probably because her book on hope is not focused solely on Tolkien but aims to provide a complex picture of the virtue's use in 20th century fantasy literature (1992). She is right in claiming that hope in Tolkien's novel is not a dogmatic assertion of faith, definitely not in its narrow sense. But faith in the broader sense permeates the whole story. As I proposed in an article on the meaning of suffering in Tolkien's work (Juričková, 2018b), the hope that good will always win over evil is presented also in Tolkien's nature imagery. Smith (2002) provides the example of flowers growing on the fallen head of an ancient king's statue at the Crossroads, giving him a floral crown. An even better example is the thorn bushes thriving amongst the deadliness of Mordor.

According to Filmer-Davies (2002, p. 25-31), hope in this novel surpasses the boundaries of the fictional world and extends to the reader, providing him with a spiritual comfort, but which does not consist only in the knowledge that big deeds are not needed to change the world because that is done by the small people and their constant exercise of virtues such as humility, pity, and mercy. More than that, the spiritual comfort comes from the philosophy of escapism and eucatastrophe, which Kreeft (2005, p. 142) terms also *the philosophy of Hope*¹. As both Markos and Filmer-Davies identify, this provides the characters as well as readers with hope of better future in which good overcomes evil and holding to the right moral values is rewarded even though those who contributed to it may not be destined to see and enjoy it. Moreover, hope along with mercy are virtues that are most essential for the attainment of eucatastrophe, for the happy end is granted only to those who believe and hope in its happening. If somebody does not have hope, like Denethor who succumbs to despair, he does not get to experience personal or global eucatastrophe. The logic is simple and derives

¹ This philosophy will be discussed in depth in a later chapter.

from the definition of hope: if one hopes, on account of that hope he works for the attainment of the thing hoped for and his hard work is rewarded by divine mercy and help; if one does not hope, he does not work for the attainment of a better conditions and his idleness cannot be awarded.

There is even a whole race (so to say) in Middle-earth whose special task was to rekindle the hope of its inhabitants. They are the Istari, the Wizards. Unfortunately, in the end, all but one failed their mission, turning to their own business or, what is worse, to evil. The last missionary who remained true to it was Gandalf, and for that reason Dickerson (2003, p. 139) claims him to be the embodiment of hope. However, as has been already noted, the nature of his existence and mission in Middle-earth is such that he is better identified as the embodiment of faith. Dickerson is right when he says that the mere presence of Gandalf gives people around him hope and courage, but the hope does not consist of him. He radiates this hope and comfort because he is himself a living object of faith. It can be paralleled to the feeling of comfort Jesus's disciples felt radiating from him on account of him being a divine being even when they did not recognize him (Luke 24: 13-35). But again this personalization is not allegorical, and neither Gandalf nor Aragorn mentioned before, takes the role of Jesus, though they show some qualities similar to him. In both cases it points to the roles they have to play rather than viewing them as the object of hope or faith as someone to be worshipped the way saints are. Gandalf can be viewed as the embodiment of hope figuratively as the one who incites hope in others. More so then, Sam is an embodiment of hope as the one who never loses it.

Final word on the virtues

So to sum it up, faith in the religious sense is only depicted in the opening part of *The Silmarillion*, due to it being an artistic retelling of the Judeo-Christian myth of creation. Religious understanding of both faith and hope are also somewhat evident in the following part of the book, which describes events from the first age of Arda, that is, a time when the angelic beings Valar were still present in the stories as physical characters capable of directly altering the events in the world—unlike in *The Lord of the Rings* where there is just an echo of their worship. In *The Hobbit* the virtue of faith is nearly entirely absent, unless we consider the dwarves' belief in the dragon's existence (who has not been seen for ages) and lasting inhabitation of their former realm and the old prophecy or the side mention of the Necromancer as some evil power rising in Dol Guldur can be viewed as the characters' expressions of their faith considered in its broader sense. The absence of religious

interpretation of faith in this novel results from the fact that *The Hobbit* is one of Tolkien's books in which the religious symbolism is overall the subtlest, probably due to it never originally being intended to be incorporated into his legendarium and written only to amuse his children at bedtime. On the contrary, *The Lord of the Rings*, which intentionally incorporates theological elements, depicts faith in both its senses.

It is also interesting to see how often and in what contexts the actual word *faith* was used in the texts. In agreement with the above-stated observance, it was never used in *The Hobbit*, nor were its derivative adjectives *faithful* or *faithless*. In the other two books, it was used only a couple of times, almost always denoting a sense synonymous to *loyalty* and *trust*, whence the adjectives derive their meaning as well. Only once in *The Silmarillion* does the word *faith* acquire theological meaning, when it refers to Sauron's ability to show reverence to the other Valar (Tolkien, 1992, p. 341), and twice in *The Lord of the Rings*—once in reference to Sauron and once in a saying: “Faithless is he that says farewell when the road darkens,” (Tolkien, 2011b, p. 891, 281).

The situation is likewise with the depiction of hope. Again, in *The Hobbit* it is depicted mostly in its non-religious sense. The working of some higher power is only hinted at in the form of a lucky coincidence when Bilbo found the Ring—but the full significance of this event is only grasped in context of the events in *The Lord of the Rings*. Hope in *The Hobbit* takes rather the form of a stubborn hanging onto one idea (reclaiming the gold by the dwarves) without any specific plan in mind. Characters rely more on some accidental resolution of their problems; they just go and believe that somehow the luck will be on their side, without expressing any conviction about the existence of higher powers. Most of the instances when the interpretation of hope pertains to its theological understanding are either in the form of sayings (e.g. while there's life there's hope) or have a negative connotation in phrases that point out the lack of hope in a successful end. Only once does it have a strictly theological interpretation: when referring to Gollum's miserable life (Tolkien, 2011a, p. 81).

In the later parts of *The Silmarillion*, hope has almost the same quality as in *The Hobbit*. Characters' attitude, even in the stories from the first age, to conflicts or problems is more matter-of-fact, and they rely on their own powers, which is explainable by the mythology—they have been abandoned by the Valar and forbidden from the holy land Valinor, so they don't trust them. However, such depiction serves a specific purpose. Through this Tolkien teaches one of his moral, religion-incurred lessons: when the Elves, particularly Fëanor's descendants, renounce the Valar and try to battle their enemy Morgoth (a representative of Satan) on their own, they are unsuccessful and suffer great peril for

millennia, so in the end they have to swallow their pride and go seek the help of the Valar which is then ultimately effective in defeating the Dark Lord. With this example, Tolkien wants to show that without divine help and mercy, Man is incapable of fighting his inner or outer demons on his own, but needs to humble himself in front of God (or his other kind worldly benefactors I considered in the broad sense) and hope in his (their) mercy and goodness.

The Lord of the Rings is the only one of the three books which stresses the theological understanding of hope as a virtue and its importance again and again, which is proved by the use of the word in the text.² Indeed, hope is not used only as a colloquial phrase devoid of deeper meaning (e.g. I hope that such and such happens/is true) but is actually one of the few virtues discussed and considered by the characters as a virtue. Often this virtuous hope is mocked and ridiculed by less good characters and referred to as a “fool’s hope” or “hope against all hopes”. *The Lord of the Rings* is also the one in which the word is used the most numerously: almost 500 times! and about half of that denoting the sense of a virtue. In comparison, the ratio of colloquial or broad meaning of hope to the virtuous meaning of hope in the other two books is more than double. Hence it follows that *The Lord of the Rings* presents hope equally in its theological as well as non-theological understanding, while *The Hobbit* and *The Silmarillion* promote its non-theological understanding.

Despair

A vice that opposes hope in terms of lacking confidence in future good is despair. Aquinas (1999, p. 1733) explained that despair “implies not only privation of hope, but also a recoil from the thing desired, by reason of its being esteemed impossible to get.” This loss of hope results in resignation, giving up on the good things because, on account of their faltering faith, one thinks the (maybe apparent) evil associated with it insuperable. This is the problem with Denethor, who misinterpreted the images he saw in the palantír and let himself be deceived by the illusion of Sauron’s power. He refused to see the light at the end of the tunnel, and his despair grew so big that he only saw a chance of escape in death and even wanted to take his fever-suffering son with him. Sadly, his plotline reflects a situation somewhat common in real life when people despairing under the burden of their problems opt for suicide.

Exemplifying it in the case of Théoden and Éowyn, Dickerson (2003, p. 144) asserts that death is almost an inevitable result of the loss of hope, without it we die. The king of

² Its importance is also well depicted by the movies.

Rohan withered because he was manipulated by Gríma, resulting in his loss of hope in himself as well as his nation. It was only when Gandalf showed him that there was still hope that he revived. Similarly, Éowyn succumbed to despair when, being told by her brother and uncle that her place was in keeping the household, she saw no prospects of it ever changing; and on top of that, Aragorn could not reciprocate her crush. So she sought death on the battlefield. If she had been unable to reconsider the purpose of her life and to have her hope rekindled by Faramir's love, she would certainly have died of despair rather than her physical wounds, as Aragorn remarked (Tolkien, 2011b, p. 867).

Another character who loses hope in the course of his journey, yet does not entirely yield to despair, is Frodo. Smith (2002) notes that there is only one moment when he despaired, at the gates of Morannon, seeing there was no way he could get through it to Mordor undetected. But his despair only lasted until Gollum told him of a different way in. I would add another moment when he possibly despaired—when captured in the tower of Cirith Ungol he learnt somebody had taken his Ring, thinking the orcs had done it and taken it to Sauron. But that is disputable. It can be argued that if he had believed the Ring had already been handed to Sauron at that time, he would have gone totally crazy about his failure, considering how guilty he felt later about his failure to throw the Ring into the Cracks of Doom. That itself is quite surprising, taking into account the fact that, as he claimed, he never had much hope in the success of his quest and lost it all by the time they reached Mordor (Tolkien, 2011b, p. 918). But he was determined to accomplish what he was chosen for. And later, when he was all too focused on resisting the Ring's will to think about anything else, least of all of despair and abandoning the quest, it was only due to Sam's hope and help that he kept going. Also, he was already too addicted to the Ring to be able to separate from it.

Speaking of Sam, he is a character who seems to overcome any nascent despair the most easily. Actually, the growing misgivings about the success of the quest have the exact opposite effect on him—normally doubts tempt other characters to give up, but in his case, they give rise to new hope incited even by the tiniest flicker of good he is able to see beyond that, as exemplified by the scene in Cirith Ungol (Tolkien, 2011b, p. 908). So the beginning despair prompts him to new action rather than halts it. Plus, in a sense, something similar can be observed in Gollum, when the despair of the Ring's loss prompts him to leave his hiding place and actively search for it. But unlike Sam's, his motivation is negative and results in doing evil as a revenge.

Another thing to mention here is Dickerson's idea (2003, p. 140) that, just like Gandalf is the embodiment of hope, the embodiment of despair are the Nazgûls. They

represent the evil that is seen as an obstacle in gaining some good—that threatens and scares to death—so they are the object, the source of despair, just like the wizard is the source of hope. And just like him, they have the ability to incite despair by their mere presence. The Nazgûl and Gandalf represent antipoles, archnemeses whose primary conflict is the fight for peoples' hearts, whether they will succumb to despair or cling to hope.

This shows that the vice of despair and its effects are not as much explored as the virtue of hope in *The Lord of the Rings*. Subsequently, it is not much researched by the scholars either. As the above cited works prove, they mostly focus on the depiction of despair only in this novel, not the other two. But that does not imply it is not present in them as well. In *The Hobbit* there are several moments of growing despair, for example, when the dwarves are captured by the goblins or journeying through Mirkwood, but it never reaches the point of giving up due to their stubbornness and determination to reclaim their possession. The situation is likewise in most of the minor stories in *The Silmarillion*. Out of the stories in it, despair is depicted as one of the most prominent vices in the stories of Beren and Túrin Turambar. However, while the first mentioned overcomes it due to the power of love (a typical romance resolution), the second one succumbs to it. His story is a good example of when despair, in combination with other vices such as pride and imprudence, reverts the attainment of personal eucatastrophe and leads to a catastrophe instead. But while this conforms to my assumption that according to Tolkien's theory of sub-creation, the exercise of vice would inhibit eucatastrophe (as opposed to the exercise of virtue enabling it), it must be noted that it was not wholly Tolkien's idea to depict it in such a way. A great deal of it is just the effect of the source he was inspired by in writing this particular tale, the tragic Finnish legend of Kullervo.³ Apart from his family, no other characters submit to utter despair in the same manner as characters in *The Lord of the Rings*.

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³ The tale of Túrin Turambar is in fact Tolkien's rendition of the story of Kullervo (Tolkien, 1992, p. 150).

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