



Mormons and Tolkien

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The article has a catchy title: “‘Is It Something in the Water?’ Why Mormons Write Science Fiction and Fantasy.” (Morris) In it, the authors are responding to another article by *The Boston Globe* about Mormon authors. One commenter came up with over fifty authors from Utah or who have passed through Utah who are known on the national market for their young adult books, many of which are works of speculative fiction. Not everyone on this list is a Mormon and not everyone on this list writes speculative fiction, but it is an impressive number. That list was written five years ago, and I am certain there would be more authors on it if the same list were made today.

Anyone who has lived in Utah knows how pervasive the Mormon culture is here – you are affected by it whether you like it or not. So what is it about Mormon culture that is so friendly to speculative fiction? As humans, we have a great desire to find meaning in things, and this seems particularly true when it comes to stories. We cannot seem to resist making stories about our stories, or in other words interpretation. As Martin Barker says, “The Desire to interpret texts—the structural examination of their formal organization, patterned associations, intertextual constructions and , thence, organized cultural meanings—is a pretty ineluctable one.”



(Barker 81) This is the case even if it is a subconscious process, and Mormons are no exception to wanting to find meaning in and through texts. Mormonism is an appropriate way in which to look at Tolkien, and Tolkien himself can shed light on Mormonism, particularly this observation on Mormons and speculative fiction. The example of creation mythology is a good place to start and will tie well into Tolkien's ideas of sub-creation as part of the thoughts he presented in "On Fairy-Stories". It will also tie well into the Mormon perspective on creation.¹

But first, let's backtrack a bit. Nelson argues in his manifesto, point eight, that:

"Taking a place within that [social and contextual] history means thinking of one's work in relation to cultural studies work on the politics of race. It means taking seriously the way feminism radically transformed cultural studies in the 1980s. And it also means positioning one's work in relation to the long, complex, and often contentious history of cultural studies' engagements with Marxism, from Raymond Williams to Stuart Hall." (Nelson 32)

Here he discusses the appropriateness of looking at race, gender, and class as a part of cultural studies.

I would argue that if these points of view are appropriate lenses from which to view a work, then so is religion. According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, part of the definition of religion is: "a cause, principle, or system of beliefs held to with ardor and faith." (Religion) This I take to mean a religion doesn't actually have to be a formal institution. It could even be atheism by this definition. Given how important belief (or non-belief) is worldwide, I would argue that it affects people as much as the other dimensions Nelson puts forward, and as such is worthy of consideration as a cultural lens.

¹ Several disclaimers: Tolkien was Catholic, not Mormon. There is no evidence that I am aware of that he was close to any Mormons. At best, he may have heard the term and been vaguely aware of several of the stereotypes commonly attributed to us. We can only speculate as to what his specific views would have been to these ideas. Also, I am a practicing Mormon, or member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and have been all my life. The views here expressed are my own opinion and should in no way be construed as church doctrine.

If I have not stayed with Tolkien's primary work, *The Lord of the Rings*, for this paper, Dr. Dimitria Fimi gives ample reason for this:

"New Tolkien research should also at least take into account that Tolkien's most well known work, *The Lord of the Rings*, belongs to a greater mythological creation. We are past the era of Tolkien criticism where *The Lord of the Rings* was seen in isolation from the rest of Tolkien's legendarium. It should by now be clear to all scholars and critics that any of Tolkien's works that are part of the Middle-earth cycle should be understood as part of that bigger picture, and cannot be treated as a self-sufficient entity." (Fimi 202)

The worldview which Tolkien painstakingly portrayed in *The Lord of the Rings* first found expression in *The Book of Lost Tales*, which was the first version of the first ages of Middle-earth which later found expression in *The Silmarillion*. As Fimi says, these works are all interrelated and it is impossible to consider one without at least keeping the others in the background.

In *The Silmarillion* we have Tolkien's creation story. In the beginning there was Ilúvatar, who created the Ainur, "the offspring of his thought". At one point he propounded to them a great theme. "Then Ilúvatar said to them: 'Of the theme that I have declared to you, I will now that ye make in harmony together a Great Music. And since I have kindled with you the Flame Imperishable, ye shall show forth your powers in adorning this theme, each with his own thoughts and devices, if he will.'" (Silmarillion 15) This theme, this music, ends up being the music of creation, and here Ilúvatar invites the Ainur to actively participate. Even after the Ainu Morgoth creates discord in the music, Ilúvatar still respects the music of the Ainur and speaks the word that will make all of their music reality: "Behold your Music! This is your minstrelsy; and each of you shall find contained herein, amid the design that I set before you, all those things which it may seem that he himself devised or added." (Silmarillion 17)

According to Mormon beliefs about creation, it too was not a solitary act: "And there stood one among them that was like unto God, and he said unto those who were with him: *We* will go down, for there is space there, and *we* will take of these materials, and *we* will make an earth whereon these may dwell." (Abraham 3:24) (Italics added.)

One that was like unto God would be Jesus Christ. We believe Jesus Christ created the earth under the direction of God. (Heb. 1:2; D&C 14:9) Here it is indicated that Christ did not work in this act of creation alone, but that he was aided by those with him: children of God - us.

Clearly, in both cases, creation was a planned activity. In *The Silmarillion*, Ilúvatar declared to the Ainur his theme of music. This implies thought and planning on his part. In *The Pearl of Great Price*, there was a counsel in heaven where creation was planned. (Moses 4:1-4; Abraham 3: 22-28) In both creation tales, there is a fall. In *The Silmarillion*, it is when Melkor creates discord in the music of the Ainur. In both the books of Moses and Abraham, it is when in the counsel of heaven when Lucifer presented himself as a possible savior of mankind and was rejected.²

Of course there are differences between these two views of creation and some of these will be addressed later, but these similarities are striking and explain why some Mormons who love Tolkien are attracted in particular *The Ainulindalë* and find a resonance there with their own faith. Ronan J. H. is a good example of this:

"Mormons love it. It's all there: a council in heaven, free will, a divine plan, God, demiurges (the Ainur), a rebellion and fall. It's not exactly the *Pearl of Great Price* — in Mormon cosmology the angelic demiurges are us; for Tolkien, they nearly always remain aloof from the world, or at least Middle Earth — and in these days of rigid monotheism, the near equality of Eru and the Ainur may not sound particularly Christian. However, let us remember that it was St. Augustine who first believed that when Elohim said, "Let there be light," he was bringing

² *The Pearl of Great Price* is a book of scripture used by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints along with other books of scripture (including *The Bible* and *The Book of Mormon*). For our purposes, *The Pearl of Great Price* is particularly interesting in providing creation accounts in addition to Genesis: Moses 2-3 and Abraham 3-5.

forth the angels, intellectual creatures such as Himself. Genesis was not a lonely creation, nor was the Music of Eru. (That Eru's plans are made known through music is particularly charming.)" (H)

As Ronnan points out, one huge difference is that while in Mormon theology we were the ones in that council of the heavens, in Tolkien's work the Ainur are quite distinct and are in ability greater than either of the Children of Ilúvatar. Traditional Christianity is very hierarchical, leading from the various orders of nature to man through the various levels of angelic beings to God. (Lewis 71-72) In Mormon theology, angels are men perfected.³ And as we are all the children of God, we all have this opportunity. In this way, it is very egalitarian.

Jessica Hooley was also struck by the communal nature of creation in *The Ainulindalë*, which matches with Mormon belief: "In the beginning, Iluvatar (God) and the Valar sang together in order to create Arda. All of their songs together produced the water, air, plants, etc. LDS theology teaches that countless priesthood holders (men with authority) worked together in the preexistence to create the Earth. Many other religions believe that only God created the world." (Hooley)

This communal act of creation would resonate strongly with Mormons, since Mormons are a very communal people. A good example of this is the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy. After the hurricane passed, wards (small local unit like a parish) in the affected areas organized teams to work together to help clean out damaged homes regardless of who lived there. (Ward) This type of communal activity is just a regular part of church membership. That creation too was a communal activity makes sense from a Mormon perspective.

³ There are two kinds of beings in heaven who are called angels: those who are spirits and those who have bodies of flesh and bone. Angels who are spirits have not yet obtained a body of flesh and bone, or they are spirits who have once had a mortal body and are awaiting resurrection. Angels who have bodies of flesh and bone have either been resurrected from the dead or translated. (Guide to the LDS Scriptures: Angels)

Of course, writing is often a lonely activity. But there are a number of avenues for community for the writer in Utah even so. There is LTUE (Life, the Universe, and Everything), a speculative fiction conference put on by Brigham Young University, a church sponsored school. There is LDS Storymakers specifically for authors of this faith. There is Writing for Charity and Writing and Illustrating for Young Readers. Salt Lake Comic Con was so successful last year that the planners have scheduled two events here for this year. Libraries and bookstores frequently have author signings. Online there is also the League of Utah Writers.

Tolkien himself was not immune to the effect of community. This is shown not only in his writings (there is a reason Frodo is given a fellowship in *The Lord of the Rings* after all) but in his personal life as well. Whatever their differences later in life, Tolkien knew he owed a huge debt to the Inklings generally and C.S. Lewis specifically in getting *The Lord of the Rings* published: "He [C.S.L.] was for long my only audience. Only from him did I ever get the idea that my 'stuff' could be more than a private hobby. But for the encouragement of C.S.L. I do not think that I should ever have completed or offered for publication *The Lord of the Rings*." (Carpenter 366) And Tolkien and community was not restricted to the Inklings, but started long before with the T.C.B.S. back in his own school days.

Bruce G. Charlton takes a slightly different look at creation, beginning actually with Tolkien's idea of subcreation, and relating that to creation:

"One of JRR Tolkien's deepest and most fertile ideas was that of subcreation, which he launched in the lecture/essay *On Fairy Stories*.

"The idea was that when an artist creates – especially when he creates an imaginative 'world' which has the quality of being real – he is acting in a God-like manner: honouring God's primary creative act.

"I think Tolkien is correct; but the idea does come into conflict with the idea from Classical Philosophy and Theology that God's primary creative act is creation *ex nihilo*, or creation-from-nothing. Because such an act is completely different-in-

kind from artistic creation, which is creation from pre-existing materials – creation from matter and proceeding according to the laws of nature. “So by *this* account artistic subcreation is actually *nothing like* God’s creativity – it does not resemble it in the slightest degree.

“*However*, if God’s creativity is conceptualized in terms of the organization of pre-existing matter according to eternal laws – in other words the conceptualization for Mormon theology – then there is a very precise, and indeed theologically-significant – equivalence between artistic subcreation and divine creation.” (Charlton)

Tolkien’s mythology follows more closely the traditional Christian approach: Ilúvatar speaks the word Eä and the world comes into being seemingly out of nothing. (Silmarillion 20) In Mormon theology, creation is not ex nihilo as it is in traditional Christianity, but rather it was a process that used pre-existing materials. (Abraham 3:24) This indeed matches up better with the theory of subcreation. Artists take clay or paint or lead and make their work with these materials. Musicians use their instruments or the instrument of the voice to make music. Authors of all stripes use ideas and then organize them using pen and paper or computers.

This creative impulse is in the end why there are so many Mormon authors. As the children of God, we have the traits of God within us. God is a creator, and therefor as the children of God we have creative impulses in us.⁴ Tolkien himself said, “Fantasy remains a

⁴ The most full treatment of this idea is in Tolkien’s poem “Mythopoeia”, of which the most relevant part is the following:

“‘Dear Sir,’ I said—‘Although now long estranged,
Man is not wholly lost nor wholly changed.
Dis-graced he may be, yet is not de-throned,
and keeps the rags of lordship once he owned:
Man, Sub-creator, the refracted Light
through whom is splintered from a single White
to many hues, and endlessly combined
In living shapes that move from mind to mind.
Though all the crannies of the world we filled
with Elves and Goblins, though we dared to build
Gods and their houses out of dark and light,
and sowed the seeds of dragons—‘twas our right

human right: we make in our measure and in our derivative mode, because we are made: and not only made, but made in the image and likeness of a Maker.” (Monsters 145) This idea is even more profound in Mormon theology and is best expressed by a couplet: “As man now is, God once was: as God now is, man may be.” (Children)

If God is the father of the spirits of all mankind, as Mormons believe he is, then as His children it follows that we must have His attributes and have the potential to become like Him just as a baby has the potential to become like their father when they grow up. If God is a creator as we have just discussed, and Mormons would agree with Tolkien that he is, then as His children we too have those same creative impulses in us. And someday if we do indeed become like God, then we too will use those creative impulses to create worlds of our own for our children. Given all of this, it is no wonder that in the mean time we exercise our creative impulses in subcreation of various kinds. And if we will someday be the creator of worlds, then it is no wonder that at least some desire to practice by subcreating secondary worlds now.

At this point of course, my reasoning is all speculation. Even if accurate, all of these thoughts may very well be operating on a sub-conscious level in the minds of Utah authors. Still, it would be interesting to devise a survey or conduct interviews with Mormon authors to find out more. If my reasoning is correct, it is no wonder that speculative fiction has a natural fit with Mormon audiences or that there are numerous Mormon authors who write speculative fiction today. They are practicing creating worlds, as they hope to do in reality someday. The friendly, supportive writing community also helps. There are no doubt other influences, but these are clearly large ones. So no, there isn't anything special in the water in Utah. The Mormon culture, however, does appear to currently be a very friendly environment for speculative fiction.

(used or misused). That right has not decayed: we make still by the law in which we 're made.” (Monsters 144)

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