



Beyond the Circles of the World: Death and the West in Tolkien's Middle-earth Legendarium

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Death may seem like a grim topic for a paper on Tolkien's mythology. However, the major idea I want convey is that, though the theme of death is woven deeply into the fabric of all of Tolkien's Middle-earth writings, it is not an entirely grim, nor hopeless idea. On the contrary, I would argue that the treatment of death, and the multiple perspectives from which we view it in Tolkien's works, is intended to impart the theme of ultimate hope to the reader. It is, in fact, a higher and nobler hope to which Tolkien calls his reader, as is the hope to which his characters are called. A hope beyond the circles of the World.

Dead and yet Victorious: Philosophy and the Good Death

In Norse culture, a good death could be achieved by dying in battle,¹ or dying with a sword in your hand, as per the popular video game *Skyrim*,² based loosely on Norse culture. Better still, the Socratic ideal of a good death relies upon living a good life and facing your death without fear. Socrates tells us, "To fear death, my friends, is only to think ourselves wise, without being wise... And what is this but that shameful ignorance of thinking that we know what we do not know?"³ Epicurus, in his Letter to Menoeceus, adopts a similar (if more dismissive) attitude, saying, "a right understanding that death is nothing to us makes the mortality of life enjoyable, not by adding to life an unlimited time, but by taking away the yearning after immortality."⁴ The perspective of the great Boethius, who, in addition to its brilliant solution to the issue of predestination

1 Sturluson, Snorri. *The Poetic Edda*. New York. Edwin Mellen Press, 1991.

2 *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*. Bethesda Softworks. Bethesda, MD, 2011.

3 Plato and Socrates. *Apology by Plato*. MIT, "Internet Classics Archive." <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/apology.html>.

4 Epicurus. *Letter to Menoeceus*. MIT, "Internet Classics Archive." <http://classics.mit.edu/Epicurus/menoec.html>.

vs. free will, is of particular value when assessing Tolkien's treatment of death, as we do know Tolkien was at least partly influenced by Boethius. From *The Consolation of Philosophy*:

Blest is death that intervenes not
In the sweet, sweet years of peace,
But unto the broken-hearted,
When they call him, brings release!⁵

Tolkien's view of death absorbs and refracts these philosophies, adding to them the principles of his faith. In one of his many letters he addresses this theme, saying, "Death: by the divine paradox, that which ends life, and demands the surrender of all, and yet by the taste (or foretaste) of which alone can what you seek in your earthly relationships (love, faithfulness, joy) be maintained, or take on that complexion of reality, of eternal endurance, which every man's heart desires."⁶

As is the case with his attitudes toward just about everything, his philosophy of death is almost entirely irreconcilable with the attitudes of modern Western culture, informed by a multitude of relativist philosophies, in which the idea of death is looked on with loathing and terror, and there is no model for it to be seen as a good thing. For this, the blame does not actually rest on the aforementioned philosophies, for they are symptoms, not causes. In the frustration of man's search for meaning, we have given up seeking outside of ourselves and made self the only god acceptable to worship. A culture in which the self is god and all else is relative cannot possibly be equipped to deal with the idea of Death (not death as plot device, but capital D Death, in the large sense, as inevitable end to all human life). This lack of ability to deal with (D)eath is reflected in our popular culture, and our storytelling suffers on all levels. Dichotomies between despair and hope, sorrow and joy, good and evil, remain unresolved, if not entirely unaddressed. In order to be palatable to film and television executives, every conflict must be reduced to the most banal basis it can have and still technically remain a conflict.

Thus, the actual goodness of the "good" must be diminished enough to explain why the "evil" could have arisen in the first place, therefore, the evil must be diminished in order to explain why it doesn't simply eradicate the comparatively weak and fragile good, and what we are left with are petty stories of competing interests in which one party that somewhat adheres to whatever bland standard of "good" society currently approves of, vies for its interests against another party which, though equally self-interested, appears to also want to harm others for no satisfyingly explained reason. Essentially, we are subjected to a battle between nice and mean.

⁵ Boethius, Anicius. *The Consolation of Philosophy*. Translated by Seth Lerer and David R. Slavitt. New York: Penguin Group (USA) Incorporated, 2000.

⁶ Tolkien, J.R.R., Christopher Tolkien, and Humphrey Carpenter. *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*. Boston, Mass.: Mariner Books, 2000.

Nothing approaching authenticity can survive in these atmospheres. So we are made to settle for stories that are either repulsive and gratuitous but meaningless, or pleasant and fun but meaningless. The deadly sharpness of joy and the crushing pain of sorrow, the perilous thrill of wonder and the cold terror of death; these require a deeper truth. Tolkien's work is singular, in that it is entirely untouched by the shallowness that has polluted most works of fiction, fantasy and otherwise. He confronts these things unflinchingly, and it is in the subtlety and depth of his treatment (not to mention his theological consistency) that his true brilliance as an author is revealed, and from which his works derive their longevity and evergreen relevance. When struck, his tales sound with the note of truth where others ring hollow. His characters suffer and they die, in hope or in despair, and it is in the way that they confront these things that we can see Tolkien's perspective most clearly.

As Wicked Fools I Scorned Them: The Estrangement of the Kindreds

One of the primary dichotomies informing the theological foundation of Tolkien's Middle Earth is the inherent discord between death and immortality. Forever at odds in his universe are the knowledge of Men that they must die, and their knowledge that the Elves, their kindred, do not die. This is, in fact the primary reason for the estrangement that has occurred between the kindreds. For, though both are called the children of Ilúvatar, their fates seem so irreconcilably different, that it causes a rift of misunderstanding to open between them. Like their own tower of Babel, the issue of death endlessly confounds interaction between them.

Finrod (brother of Galadriel and grandson of Finwe, the first high king of the Noldor) was the wisest of the exiled Noldor, and the first of the Elves to meet and befriend Men. He had a close friendship with Andreth, a wise woman of the Edain (and the great aunt of Beren). Their greatest debate, the *Athrabeth Finrod ah Andreth*, elegantly articulates the mortality/immortality issue, which underlies the stories of all of the human characters in Tolkien's Middle-earth works, but is not explicitly laid out elsewhere (Side note: I would strongly recommend the *Athrabeth* to anyone interested in more thoroughly understanding the depth and richness of the mythology of Middle Earth). In the *Athrabeth*, Andreth's words to Finrod concerning the Elves understanding of death are steeped in the bitterness of this discord. She says, "...what know ye of death? To you it may be in pain, it may be bitter and a loss—but only for a time, a little taken from abundance... For ye know that in dying you do not leave the world, and that you may return to life. Otherwise it is with us... Death is an uttermost end, a loss irremediable."

Finrod counters that the Elves do understand death, and know it well. He explains the nature of the life of the Eldar, whose time seems eternal to Men, but in truth is bound to Arda (the world) and destined to end when it ends. He asserts that the soul naturally leaves the body after its time on earth, and that if Men understood this, "Then 'death' would (as I said) have sounded otherwise to you: as a release, or return, nay! as going home!"

Andreth tells him, "...among my people, from Wise unto Wise out of the darkness, comes the voice saying that Men are not now as they were, nor as their true nature was in their beginning. And clearer still is this said by the Wise...that Men are not by nature short-lived, but have become so through the malice of the Lord of the Darkness whom they do not name."

She reasserts the argument that death itself is a corruption of the being of Men by Melkor, referring to the history she has learned from her kinswoman, Adanel (also counted among the wise). Briefly, Adanel's account describes the awakening of Men in Middle Earth, in which they were spoken to by a Voice, which said, "Ye are my children. I have sent you to dwell here. In time ye will inherit all this Earth, but first ye must be children and learn. Call on me and I shall hear; for I am watching over you."

Then someone (read: Melkor) appeared among them crowned and dressed in shining silver, gold, and gems. He told them he came out of pity and could help them learn to be like him. Instead of teaching them, though, he simply brought them anything they wished for, calling himself the Giver of Gifts. So they worshipped him and began to make human sacrifices to him and do all manner of evil things to please him. Thus he became their cruel and merciless tyrant. The Voice only spoke to them once more, saying, "Ye have abjured Me, but ye remain Mine. I gave you life. Now it shall be shortened, and each of you in a little while shall come to Me, to learn who is your Lord: the one ye worship, or I who made him."

"Thereafter," Andreth says, "we were grievously afflicted, by weariness, and hunger, and sickness; and the Earth and all things in it were turned against us. Fire and Water rebelled against us. The birds and beasts shunned us, or if they were strong they assailed us. Plants gave us poison; and we feared the shadows under trees." They knew then that the Voice had spoken the truth and the Giver of Gifts was the liar. But they had worshipped the deceiver, and they now fled both from him and from the anger of the Voice. They feel they are hunted by death and the shadow, and fear it always. Though the wise among them say there is no escape within the world, still the Men believe their hope lies in the west, and they travel relentlessly westward.

Finrod warns Andreth not to equate death with the shadow, for they are not the same, saying, "death is but the name that we give to something that [Melkor] has tainted, and it sounds therefore evil; but untainted its name would be good." He disagrees with the conclusions she has drawn, and argues that Melkor could not have the power to create a corruption so drastic as death, as he says, "to doom the deathless to death, from father unto son, and yet to leave to them the memory of an inheritance taken away, and the desire for what is lost: could the Morgoth do this? No, I say. And for that reason I said that if your tale is true, then all in Arda is vain... None could have done this save the One."

He then has a vision of Arda Remade. In it, the Men are the deliverers of the Eldar and they dwell together forever. He says, "even as did your heart when I spoke of your unrest, so now mine leaps up as at the hearing of good news. This then, I propound, was the errand of Men, not the followers, but the heirs and fulfillers of all: to heal the Marring of Arda, already foreshadowed before their devising; and to do more, as agents of the magnificence of Eru: to enlarge the Music and surpass the Vision of the

World! For that Arda Healed shall not be Arda Unmarred, but a third thing and a greater, and yet the same."

Andreth then reveals the Old Hope of Men, that Ilúvatar will one day enter into his creation and finally completely heal and amend it, but adds that Men no longer have any such hope. "What is hope," she asks, "An expectation of good, which though uncertain has some foundation in what is known? Then we have none."

Finrod's reply reaches the true crux of the issue: "That is one thing that Men call 'hope,'" he tells her, "Amdir we call it, 'looking up.' But there is another, which is founded deeper. Estel we call it, that is 'trust.' It is not defeated by the ways of the world, for it does not come from experience, but from our nature and first being. If we are indeed the Eruhin, the Children of the One, then He will not suffer Himself to be deprived of His own, not by any Enemy, not even by ourselves. This is the last foundation of Estel, which we keep even when we contemplate the End: of all His designs the issue must be for His Children's joy."⁷

Though Finrod and Andreth part without resolution to the matters presented by their debate, it is the introduction of these issues, not their unraveling that is most crucial to understanding the theological framework of Tolkien's universe. The *Athrabeth* is, in fact, the most profoundly theological discussion in all of Tolkien's Middle Earth works. The nature of death, and its connection to the longing of Men for the West, introduced by Andreth, become most crucial in the *Akallebêth*,⁸ the tale of the downfall of Númenor. Here, the concept of the West is woven most deeply into the Middle Earth mythology.

And Go We Know Not Whither: The Desire of Men for the West

The (capitalized) "West" in Tolkien's universe does not ever simply refer to the cardinal direction, nor does its apparent desirability constitute some sort of western European chauvinism on Tolkien's part. To deconstruct the concept properly, we must consider the fact that Valinor, the incorruptible home of the Valar, lies in the west, followed by Tol Eressëa, Elvenhome, which lies only a little less west of that, followed for a time by Númenor, the land of gift, a little less to the west than that. In Middle Earth, the Elves and the good Men make their homes as far to the west as possible, leaving the east, the far south, and far north to the evil Men and to Morgoth and Sauron respectively.

The Númenoreans live long lives untroubled by sickness and become wise and powerful beyond all other Men in the world. They have friendship with the Elves, who help them and bring them gifts, including the seedling of the White Tree, and teach them everything they wish to learn. And yet, as they grow ever more powerful and blissful, so their longing for the West grows. Thus the discord between the kindreds

7 Tolkien, J.R.R. *The History of Middle-earth Vol. X: Morgoth's Ring*. Edited by Christopher Tolkien. London: HarperCollins Publishers Ltd, 1995.

8 Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Silmarillion*. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1977.

surfaces again, on almost exactly the same terms as when they were argued by Finrod and Andreth. The Men long for the life of the Eldar, they feel that death is a punishment, and they fear death, for they have no idea what lies beyond it. Their argument has essentially devolved into "we want what you have," and "we are afraid to die." Let us not fault them too much for this, however, as that is basically still the core of human motivation up through the present day.

Again we reach the crux of the argument: "Eastward they must sail, but ever West their hearts returned. Now this yearning grew ever greater with the years; and the Númenoreans began to hunger for the undying city that they saw from afar, and the desire of everlasting life, to escape from death and the ending of delight." When the Eldar attempt to counsel them against this attitude, the underpinning of the theology established in the Athrabeth is unmistakable: "...you and your people are not of the Firstborn, but are mortal Men as Ilúvatar made you...The Eldar, you say, are unpunished, and even those who rebelled do not die. Yet that is to them neither reward nor punishment, but the fulfilment of their being. They cannot escape, and are bound to this world, never to leave it so long as it lasts, for its life is theirs... you escape, and leave the world, and are not bound to it, in hope or in weariness. Which of us therefore should envy the others?"

The Númenoreans rejoin that they envy the deathless because, "...of us is required a blind trust, and a hope without assurance, knowing not what lies before us in a little while. And yet we also love the Earth and would not lose it." The messengers from the Eldar reiterate what Finrod has told us in the Athrabeth, that death was a gift from Ilúvatar to Men, and that it became a grief to them because of the corruption of Morgoth, saying, "Beware! The will of Eru may not be gainsaid; and the Valar bid you earnestly not to withhold the trust to which you are called, lest soon it become again a bond by which you are constrained."

Though the Númenoreans live in sight of the undying land, theirs is a fate set apart and they may not enter it. Just as faith requires a trust without assurance, and a literal blindness on the part of the faithful, the sight of the undying realm becomes an obstruction in the vision of the Men of Númenor, beyond which they lose sight of their own path. As Tolkien says of it in his letters, reward on earth is more dangerous for men than punishment. Neither the Númenoreans, nor any Men, are given certainty concerning death and its purpose, but they are called to trust, nonetheless. As the messengers of the Eldar tell them, "the mind of Ilúvatar concerning you is not known to the Valar... But this we hold to be true, that your home is not here, neither in the Land of Aman nor anywhere within the Circles of the World..." They do offer them hope, however: "The love of Arda was set in your hearts by Ilúvatar, and he does not plant to no purpose. Nonetheless, many ages of Men unborn may pass ere that purpose is made known; and to you it will be revealed and not to the Valar."⁹

When Númenor eventually falls, it is due to the deceits of Sauron only secondarily. The primary reason for its fall is pride. The pride of the Númenoreans blinds them to the trust to which they are called and causes them to despair, believing that

⁹ Tolkien, *Silmarillion*.

they see the end beyond all doubt. Their salvation would not have been in certainty, but in doubt: the doubt of their own wisdom. Thus, the greatest act of *judgement* upon Men on by Ilúvatar is also his greatest act of *mercy*: the destruction of Númenor and the removal of the undying land from the sight of Men.

With great pain and loss is this accomplished, but so it is with all those things of greatest worth and meaning. As Tolkien says, "A divine 'punishment' is also a divine 'gift', if accepted, since its object is ultimate blessing, and the supreme inventiveness of the Creator will make 'punishments' (that is changes of design) produce a good not otherwise to be attained: a 'mortal' Man has probably (an Elf would say) a higher (if unrevealed destiny) than a longeval one."¹⁰

And so the West becomes a pure and unobstructed idea. It is not a metaphor for death, nor is it a metaphor for hope. Instead, it is a symbol of the natural order Ilúvatar has designed. The west is where the sun sets. To seek the east would be to seek the rising of the sun. The beginning of life and time. To attempt to unnaturally forestall the progression of existence toward its natural end. As Tolkien puts it, "To attempt by device or 'magic' to recover longevity is thus a supreme folly and wickedness of 'mortals'. Longevity or counterfeit 'immortality' (true immortality is beyond Eä) is the chief bait of Sauron—it leads the small to a Gollum, and the great to a Ringwraith."¹¹ More life cannot be gained this way, only the drawing out of the great struggle to the point where it is meaningless. The West is where time rests. It is where things progress to their natural end. The setting of the sun serves as a reminder to Men of the path they must follow, as Arwen says at the end of her tale, whether they *will or nill*.

Beyond the Circles of the World: In Sorrow We Must Go

After the removal of the faithful from the lost Númenor to Middle Earth, their strength fades and their lives shorten as they mingle with lesser men over many generations. This is not a *punishment*, but a consequence of their nature. It is the allotment of years that men of less strength are able to endure with their hope and will intact. To give more years to weaker men would doom them to weariness and loss of hope, and Ilúvatar does not give any a heavier burden than they are able to bear. Even the Elves grow weary of life, and their strength is much greater than that of Men, bound by their fate to the world, as part of its very being. How therefore, would a great lengthening of years benefit Men, whose true being is not of the world? For, as we have read in the *Athrabeth* and *Akallebêth*, Men are strangers in this world, fated to dwell within it only for a little while before they follow the sun West and depart, lest their love of Arda become a chain that binds them to it, and the desire to extend their time within it become an obstruction on the path to their true destiny. Thus, though it is the diminishing of Men that leads to their shortened lives, the shortening thereof is a *mercy*, not a punishment.

¹⁰ Tolkien, Tolkien, and Carpenter. *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*.

¹¹ Ibid.

The closest thing to a resolution of the death debate comes through the tale of one of these diminished Men, though he is the greatest man left alive: Aragorn, and his beloved, Arwen, of the Eldar. Aragorn and his people, the Dúnedain, are descendents of Elros, the brother of Elrond and first king of Númenor. Therefore, the closest in kinship and understanding between Men and Elves are those of the house of Elrond and the Dúnedain. Though the echoes of the old conflict between Men and Elves voiced in the *Athrabeth* and *Akallebêth* can be heard, it is also here that we come closest to a resolution of the strife between the two kindreds. Both are addressed in the last passages of the tale of Aragorn and Arwen in the *Lord of the Rings* appendices, in which Aragorn's time has come and he is preparing for death:

"Lady Undómíel," said Aragorn, "the hour is indeed hard, yet it was made even in that day when we met under the white birches in the garden of Elrond, where none now walk... I am the last of the Númenoreans and the latest King of the Eldar Days; and to me has been given not only a span thrice that of Men of Middle-earth, but also the grace to go at my will, and *give back the gift*. Now, therefore, I will sleep.

I speak no comfort to you, for there is no comfort for such pain within the circles of the world. The uttermost choice is before you: to repent and go to the Havens and bear away into the West the memory of our days together that shall there be evergreen but never more than a memory; or else to abide the Doom of Men."

"Nay, dear lord," she said, "that choice is long over. There is now no ship to bear me hence, and I must indeed abide the Doom of Men, whether I will or nill: the loss and the silence. But I say to you, King of the Númenoreans, not till now have I understood the tale of your people and their fall. As wicked fools I scorned them, but I pity them at last. For if this is indeed, as the Eldar say, the gift of the One to Men, it is bitter to receive."

"So it seems," he said. "But let us not be overthrown at the final test, who of old renounced the Shadow and the Ring. In sorrow we must go, but not in despair. Behold! we are not bound forever in the circles of the world, and beyond them is more than memory, Farewell!"

"Estel, Estel!" she cried, and with that even as he took her hand and kissed it, he fell into sleep... But Arwen went forth from the House, and the light of her eyes was quenched, and it seemed to her people that she had become cold and grey as nightfall in winter that comes without a star. Then she said farewell to Eldarion, and to her daughters, and to all whom she had loved; and she went out from the city of Minas Tirith and passed away to the land of Lórien, and dwelt there alone under the

fading trees until winter came. Galadriel had passed away and Celeborn had also gone, and the land was silent.

There at last when the mallorn-leaves were falling, but spring had not yet come, she laid herself to rest upon Cerin Amroth; and there is her green grave, until the world is changed, and all the days of her life are utterly forgotten by the men that come after, and elanor and nimphredil bloom no more east of the sea.¹²

Aragorn embodies the ideal of the Tolkienian good death for Men, by treating his own life as a stewardship, which he faithfully surrenders at the proper time. He departs at peace, by choice, telling his beloved: *in sorrow we must go, but not in despair*. Arwen, who chose humanity, now appears even more human than he. She embodies the reality of how most of us experience death. She pleads with him not to leave her. The light in her eyes is extinguished. She walks alone in the faded woods where she once dwelt in light and bliss with her beloved. At the end, she truly endures the fullness of the pain of human mortality. The loss and the silence. Aragorn and Arwen demonstrate the heart of the human struggle, and at the end of their long tale, we see it in its undiluted form. Both its joy and its sorrow as sharp as swords.

How then, are we to understand the paradox of Men's grand and terrible destiny in Tolkien's universe? If they are not of the world, and their fate is not bound to Arda, why place them within it and require that they traverse the path of life and grow to love it, only to die and be torn away from it? Perhaps, as Andreth suggests, Men must live in order to die. So that Death itself, through Man, may be defeated. This would track biblically with the theological foundation of Tolkien's universe.¹³ Perhaps Ilúvatar will enter into his own creation through man, and die as a man. And perhaps in dying just as they do, and in defeating *his* Death, they will defeat it together, and he will at last be fully united with his children and in one chord, deeper than the Abyss, higher than the Firmament, piercing as the light of the eye of Ilúvatar, the Music will cease.¹⁴

But Tolkien, with a master's touch, leaves it up to us to choose our understanding of his creation, and we are reminded that these are only a Hobbit's translation of the tales told to the Eldar by the Valar. Suggestions threaded throughout the Middle-earth mythologies, based upon what the Elves and Valar know (and more importantly, do *not* know) about the fate of Men. No proof is offered. After all, to tell us in definite terms would be to give assurance where it is better to give hope. All we know with absolute certainty is that in Tolkien's world, Men must die, and go *they know not whither*. That is all we know with absolute certainty of our own world as well. Men must

12 Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*. Vol. 3. (Appendix A: Part V) London: George Allen & Unwin, 1955.

13 1 Corinthians 15:21; "For since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead"

14 Tolkien, *Silmarillion*.

endure their going hence, even as their coming hither.¹⁵ We all must die. Whether we agree or disagree on what happens after, none can know for certain in his universe or ours. The final hope, the Estel, to which Tolkien calls his readers, as well as his characters, is this: in sorrow we must go, but we can choose not to go in despair.

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¹⁵ Shakespeare, William. *King Lear (Unabridged)*. New York: Start Media, 2013.