

THE IMAGINATIVE POWER OF SUB-CREATION

Zak Schmoll on why we love Tolkien's
stories.

The brave things in the old tales and songs, Mr. Frodo: adventures, as I used to call them. I used to think that they were things the wonderful folk of the stories went out and looked for, because they wanted them, because they were exciting and life was a bit dull, a kind of a sport, as you might say. But that's not the way of it with the tales that really mattered, or the ones that stay in the mind. Folk seem to have been just landed in them, usually – their paths were laid that way, as you put it. But I expect they had lots of chances, like us, of turning back, only they didn't. And if they had, we shouldn't know, because they'd have been forgotten. We hear about those as just went on – and not all to a good end, mind you; at least not to what folk inside a story and not outside it call a good end. You know, coming home, and finding things all right, though not quite the same – like old Mr. Bilbo. But those aren't always the best tales to hear, though they may be the best

tales to get landed in! I wonder what sort of a tale we've fallen into?¹

The imagination possesses remarkable power. It is only in the created world, or perhaps one should say 'the discovered world', within the imagination that we can crown kings or queens or outwit dragons. In the physical world, such fantastical scenarios are impossible; in the imagination, almost anything can happen. J. R. R. Tolkien described having this type of power as being a sub-creator.² Bradley Birzer explained, "fairy stories and fantasy allow the writer to act as a sub-creator, an artist made and making in the image of the ultimate creator, God."³ Tolkien discovered *The Lord of the Rings*, a story that Peter Kreeft called, "a meaningful pattern, like threads on the back of the tapestry, deliberately, not randomly, arranged."⁴ Tolkien could create the heroes he wanted. Whereas he had no power to crown the Queen of England, he could put a king on the throne of Gondor.

¹ J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2002), 7110-712, Kindle Edition.

² J. R. R. Tolkien, "On Fairy-stories," in *The Tolkien Reader* (New York: Ballantine, 1966), 60.

³ Bradley J. Birzer, *J. R. R. Tolkien's Sanctifying Myth: Understanding Middle-earth* (Wilmington: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 2009), Kindle Location 1084, Kindle Edition.

⁴ Peter Kreeft, *The Philosophy of Tolkien* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), Kindle Location 1772, Kindle Edition.

Being a sub-creator through his imagination gave him that power.

Tolkien's imagined world was not subject to the same constraints that he saw around him in the physical world. Like G. K. Chesterton wrote, "The poet only desires exaltation and expansion, a world to stretch himself in."⁵ It is not only that the power of sub-creation lives in the mind, but it is wonderful to find a happy world where those abilities actually exist. Tolkien could create languages and beings in his mind and had powers that people dream of having in his imaginary world. While sub-creating may seem to be just a flight of fancy or an escape from cold, hard reality, this power of sub-creation resonates with the human heart. Tolkien shows this God-given, human desire through the interactions of Frodo Baggins and Sam Gamgee.

Frodo Baggins and Sam Gamgee find themselves in the middle of a rather terrifying story. To them, it is reality. They do not have the power to create a plot line. They cannot make themselves mighty heroes or instantaneously bring about a happy ending. Instead, they find themselves dehydrated, hungry, and venturing through the barren land of Mordor with the weight of Middle-earth on their shoulders. It is in this context that

⁵ G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2009), 31, Kindle Edition.

they begin to talk about stories and which stories matter to them. Sam shares that the stories that mean the most to him are the ones in which the heroes refused to give up. The road might have gotten dark, and there may have even been perfectly convenient opportunities to turn around, but the heroes persevered to the end, no matter what that end was.

Frodo responds to Sam by saying, “You may know, or guess, what kind of a tale it is, happy-ending or sad-ending, but the people in it don’t know. And you don’t want them to.”⁶ It is as though Frodo steps out of his own story and sits in our world reading *The Lord of the Rings*. He understands exactly why we love his story. Even if we have read *The Lord of the Rings* before and understand that everything turns out quite well for both Frodo and Sam, the fact that they do not know the future at this point in the story speaks to us outside of the story. The two hobbits are exactly the kind of heroes that Sam says he remembers from stories in his world. They are on the brink of disaster in Mordor, and it is at this moment that the reader admires their courage much like Sam admires the courage of others.

We, ourselves, may temporarily adopt the role of sub-creator by imagining a situation in which Frodo and Sam fail. In fact, in a letter to Eileen Elgar, Tolkien wrote

⁶ Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*. 712.

about what could have happened had Frodo failed. While considering the consequences of Frodo not throwing the Ring into Mount Doom, he wrote, “In any case a confrontation of Frodo and Sauron would soon have taken place, if the Ring was intact. Its result was inevitable. Frodo would have been utterly overthrown: crushed to dust, or preserved in torment as a gibbering slave.”⁷ There was always the possibility of failure, right up until the final moment as the Ring was melting in the heat of the volcano. Tolkien’s imaginative project would not be very interesting if there was no chance of failure that the characters themselves realized. Frodo and Sam were also aware that they could fail at this mission. As Frodo went on to say, “You and I, Sam, are still stuck in the worst places of the story, and it is all too likely that some will say at this point: ‘Shut the book now, dad; we don’t want to read any more.’”⁸

Yet we read on precisely because we do not want Frodo and Sam to fail. No one ultimately wants the hero to die tragically, short of achieving whatever mission he or she set out on. That is the imaginative power of sub-creation at play. There is a human desire for heroic perseverance. We want to see Frodo and Sam keep

⁷ J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, ed. Humphrey Carpenter (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2012), Kindle Location 7072-7074, Kindle Edition.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 713.

fighting through the darkness. In order for perseverance to be demonstrated, there must be trials. Overcoming these challenges makes the happy ending all the sweeter.

Tolkien himself realized this in his nonfiction writing. In his essay “On Fairy-stories,” he called it ‘eucatastrophe’. Etymologically understood as a good catastrophe, Tolkien wrote, “It does not deny the existence of dyscatastrophe, of sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance; it denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat and in so far is evangelium, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief.”⁹ The imagination refuses to accept ultimate defeat. It refuses to be fettered by inevitable doom. The imagination does what we want it to, so if we want to create a story where the hero triumphs, our mind can make that happen. It is our imaginary world. Tolkien was able to use his imaginative capacities therefore to bring victory out of the darkest times. Only by bringing Frodo and Sam into peril so calamitous that they wondered if they would survive was Tolkien able to bring about ultimate deliverance and triumph.

Tolkien made Frodo and Sam the heroes in his imagination and, by extension, in the imaginations of all

⁹ Tolkien, “On Fairy-stories,” 86.

of his readers by bringing them to the edge of disaster. They could have lost everything. They could have met their end in Mordor, Sauron could have recovered the Ring, and Middle-earth could have descended into another age of darkness. Though Tolkien and his characters knew it was possible, none of that happened. Exercising his power and imagination as sub-creator, Tolkien brought a eucatastrophic turn out of the darkest times to a joyful deliverance. The Ring was destroyed, and Sauron was defeated. This deliverance was not necessary, but it was welcomed. It was appreciated by Frodo and Sam, but also by the reader who, should he be unfamiliar with the role and power of a sub-creator, may find it difficult to articulate precisely why.

Tolkien brought his characters from despair to joy, and that journey resonates with the human heart. As Tolkien himself said,

“It is not difficult to imagine the peculiar excitement and joy that one would feel, if any specially beautiful fairy-story were found to be ‘primarily’ true, its narrative to be history, without thereby necessarily losing the mythical or allegorical significance that it had possessed.”¹⁰

¹⁰ Ibid., 89.

That's what the imagination can do. It creates a longing for the Great Story.

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