

# A PASSAGE TO SOMETHING BETTER

Annie Nardone on Tolkien's  
Approach to Virtue

He [Tolkien] folded into his work something fresh and unexpected, something vital and important: a tear drop from his own flesh and blood. From one perspective, the change was minor, almost negligible, but from another, it made a world of difference.

— Holly Ordway, *Tolkien's Modern Reading*<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps it is an easy path to tread when devotees of J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* repeatedly credit his medieval studies as his primary inspiration. Dr. Holly Ordway makes a key point regarding the true span of literary influence directing Tolkien's writing in her thoroughly academic and delightfully accessible text *Tolkien's Modern Reading*. She writes that "Yes, Tolkien was, above all things, a

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<sup>1</sup> Holly Ordway, *Tolkien's Modern Reading* (Park Ridge, IL: Word on Fire, 2021), 292.

medievalist" but proves that "his modern reading was both more far-reaching than people have realized, and more significant for his creative imagination than has been assumed."<sup>2</sup> Her research clearly supports the fact that the scope of Tolkien's reading enabled him to approach themes like death, loyalty, and bravery in a manner that speaks well to the 21st century mind.

For example, on the subject of heroism and death, which are core themes in medieval literature, author William Morris's influence on Tolkien's heroic character development is evident in the character of the shieldmaiden, Eowyn. Ordway writes,

Interestingly, Tolkien heightens the importance of Eowyn's role. Unlike Hall-Sun, Eowyn is explicitly and publicly assigned the role of homestead guardian because of her courage and spirit: "She is fearless and high-hearted. All love her. Let her be as lord to the Eorlingas, while we are gone," says Hama. "It shall be so." Theoden declares, and so it is. Eowyn is affirmed not only by the non-warriors left behind but by the warriors themselves; indeed, she is named as a leader in much the same way that Thiodolf himself, in

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<sup>2</sup> Ordway, *Tolkien's Modern Reading*, 292.

The House of the Wolfings, is chosen as head of the war-band by popular acclaim. In this way, Tolkien gives Eowyn a role similar to, but considerably more significant than, that of her Morrisian precursor.<sup>3</sup>

As Ordway notes, the subject of death in Tolkien's legendarium is connected to ancient as well as modern writing influences.

We moderns are uncomfortable with death; rather than engaging with our mortality, society looks away from the inevitable. J.R.R. Tolkien approaches the subject of death with truth and grace, confronting the subject and what lies beyond:

*But I might say that if the tale is 'about' anything (other than itself), it is not as seems widely supposed about 'power'. Power-seeking is only the motive-power that sets events going, and is relatively unimportant, I think. It is mainly concerned with Death, and Immortality; and the 'escapes': serial longevity, and hoarding memory.<sup>4</sup>*

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<sup>3</sup> Ordway, *Tolkien's Modern Reading*, 172.

<sup>4</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, ed. Humphrey Carpenter and Christopher Tolkien (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2000), 284.

*Here are beauties which pierce like swords or burn like cold iron; here is a book that will break your heart.<sup>5</sup>*

— C.S. Lewis, *Image and Imagination*

Tolkien, commenting on *The Lord of the Rings* in a letter of 14th October, 1958, stated that “It [*Lord of the Rings*] is mainly concerned with Death, and Immortality.” This theme is the warp upon which the story is woven. In fact, death in some manner appears subtly in many chapters; symbolically as a shadow or as a change of heart, physical death as a noble act, or a natural conclusion of life on earth that moves to immortal life. For the living, death is a pathway or a purpose, not an end. Tolkien writes from his Christian view, portraying death as a symbolic and noble passage and as a gateway to the hope of immortality. Death is necessary, not something to be reviled or feared.

A personality transition can be a symbolic death. Faramir and Eowyn are recovering after battle in the Houses of Healing. Faramir has fallen in love with this shieldmaiden of Rohan. When he asks for her love in return, she answers, “I wished to be loved by

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<sup>5</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Image and Imagination* (New York: HarperCollins, 2014), 100, Digital Edition.

another. But I desire no man's pity."<sup>6</sup> Faramir knows that she "desired to have the love of the Lord Aragorn . . . But when he gave you only understanding and pity, then you desired to have nothing, unless a brave death in battle."<sup>7</sup> The shadow of discontent over her mind is like a living death that she cannot shake. The only resolution that she sees as a cure is not to rest in the Houses of Healing, but a noble death in war. She "looked for death in battle. But I have not died, and battle still goes on" — not just for Middle Earth, but also for Éowyn's mind and heart.<sup>8</sup> She declares, "I do not desire healing. I wish to ride to war . . . like Théoden the king, for he died and has both honour and peace."<sup>9</sup> She believes that her only escape from the living death that traps her is a noble physical death in battle. Dying to our selfish desires requires a conscious decision and this proves difficult for the strong-minded Éowyn.

Faramir assures her that she already possesses what she desires to die for. He does not pity her, but

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<sup>6</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1994), 943.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 938.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 939.

tells her, “For you are a lady high and valiant and have yourself won renown that shall not be forgotten.”<sup>10</sup> What stands before her is the real fulfillment of her wishes — her true destiny, not the hollow desires based on pride that she believes in. “Then the heart of Èowyn changed, or at last she understood it. And suddenly her winter passed, and the sun shone on her.”<sup>11</sup> Èowyn laid down her dark “shield” forged of pride, defiance, and unrequited love to step into the light of her destiny. She transitioned from a war-like, masculine personality to a healing feminine nature. She tells Faramir “Behold! The Shadow has departed! I will be a shieldmaiden no longer, nor vie with the great Riders, nor take joy only in the songs of slaying. I will be a healer and love all things that grow and are not barren.”<sup>12</sup> Èowyn now rejoices in restoring life rather than death. Likewise, when we finally reconcile ourselves with our true purpose, we find peace.

Faramir’s transformation also presents a symbolic death. He transforms from a servant who lives in the shadow of his brother, Boromir, to

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<sup>10</sup> Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, 943.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 943.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

becoming Steward of the Realm of Gondor. His father, Denethor, commands Faramir to lead perilous charges that should end with certain death. He constantly reminds Faramir of Boromir's battle successes and Faramir's failures. People murmur, "They give him no rest. The Lord [Denethor] drives his son too hard, and now he must do the duty of two, for himself and for the one that will not return."<sup>13</sup> Humble and obedient, Faramir tells Denethor, "Since you are robbed of Boromir, I will go and do what I can in his stead — if you command it."<sup>14</sup> At Denethor's edict, Faramir nearly dies in a hopeless battle at Osgiliath. Prince Imrahil brings the wounded Faramir to the White Tower, but Denethor, under the dark influence of Sauron, tries to burn them both alive on a pyre and end the Steward's reign on his terms. Denethor perishes, but Faramir is rescued, healed and becomes the noble Steward of the Realm in his stead. One may wonder why Tolkien wrote of a violent death for Denethor; we are all given an opportunity to choose between humility or pride, repentance or evil. We see that the pride of one person and one decision can potentially bring down an entire kingdom. Denethor's mad

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<sup>13</sup> Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, 798.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

choice sets in motion the death of the decaying order of Gondor and its rebirth with Faramir as Steward.

The House of Gondor experiences a symbolic death and rebirth. Gimli and Legolas enter the city after the battle of the Pelennor Fields. Gimli studies the walls of the city and comments on “some good stone-work here.”<sup>15</sup> But Legolas observes, “They need more gardens. The houses are dead, and there is too little here that grows and is glad. If Aragorn comes into his own the people of the Wood shall bring him birds that sing and trees that do not die.”<sup>16</sup> When the citizens return to Gondor, they are “laden with flowers” and play all manner of instruments with the “clear-voiced singers,” bringing music, the “language of creation.”<sup>17 18 19</sup> Only growing things can bring life to cold stone.

The physical death and redemption of one member of the Fellowship early in the adventure is poignant because of its depiction of deceit, forgiveness, and sacrifice. Boromir attacks Frodo in

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<sup>15</sup> Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, 854.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 944.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Peter Kreeft, “The Lord of the Rings: Beauty and Language,” *YouTube*, accessed December 10, 2018, <https://youtu.be/Tku1r7tFE6I>.

his attempt to steal the ring for his father, Denethor, claiming that he only wants to borrow it. When Frodo refuses, Boromir accuses him of “running willfully to death and ruining our cause!”<sup>20</sup> But it is Boromir who has started down the path to his own death. He then feels convicted about what he has done and “for a while he was as still as if his own curse had struck him down” Boromir’s guilt leaves him helpless to explain what came over him.<sup>21</sup> When Aragorn finds him after battle, the dying Boromir confesses for absolution. Aragorn blesses and assures him that Minas Tirith and his people will not fall. This scene bears a similarity to Adam as he is questioned by God in the Garden. He blames, confesses, but brings death upon himself. Boromir’s sin has led to his death, but he also met with forgiveness. His mistakes lead to the Fellowship’s splintering, a move that was ultimately beneficial toward the final victory over Sauron. Even events that seem dire can be part of a grander plan for good.

Théoden endured not only a symbolic, nearly spiritual death and renewal but also a physical death with a glimpse into immortality. When Aragorn, Gimli, Legolas, and Gandalf come to Edoras to speak

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<sup>20</sup> Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, 390.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

with Théoden, they are met with a cold reception. Deceit and evil had already established a stronghold there through the treachery of Saruman and in the figure of Gríma Wormtongue. Gandalf calls him a “snake” and that image of the snake in the Garden of Eden describes Gríma perfectly.<sup>22</sup> As the snake whispered half-truths to Adam to bend his will to evil, Gríma’s words slowly destroyed the once noble king — all directed toward the dismantling of the goodness in Middle-earth. Aragorn and company walk into the hall and find not a king, but instead “a man so bent with age that he seemed almost a dwarf.”<sup>23</sup> A glimmer of the former mind could be seen in his eyes that “still burned with a bright light, glinting as he gazed at the strangers.”<sup>24</sup> Evil brings destruction and death. The great king has ‘died’ and the husk of an old man remains.

Not content to only twist Théoden’s mind, Wormtongue weaves in subterfuge about Gandalf and the others in the presence of the court, claiming that they are working “in league with the Sorceress of the Golden Wood.”<sup>25</sup> Gandalf, who has “passed

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<sup>22</sup> Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, 509.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 501.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 502.

through fire and death” in his battle with the Balrog, raises his staff and lifts the curse that has influenced Théoden’s mind, telling him, “Too long have you sat in shadows and trusted to twisted tales and crooked promptings.”<sup>26</sup> <sup>27</sup> Gandalf resurrects Theoden to his former strength, telling him to “look out upon your land. Breathe the free air again!”<sup>28</sup> His mind cleared by goodness and truth, he stands noble once again, brought back from a symbolic death.

Théoden experiences physical death but holds to a beautiful faith of a continuing life beyond death. Tolkien now gives us a vision of the restored King. He has rallied the Riders of the Mark, and Merry joins them in preparation for battle. Théoden’s bent figure springs up,

tall and proud he seemed again; and rising in his stirrups he cried in a loud voice, more clear than any there had ever heard a *mortal* man achieve before . . . “Ride now, ride now! Ride to Gondor!” . . . Fey he seemed, or the battle-fury of his fathers ran like new fire in his veins, and he was borne up on Snowmane like a god of old, even as Oromë the Great in the battle of

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<sup>26</sup> Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, 503.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 504.

the Valar when the world was young. His golden shield was uncovered, and lo! It shone like an image of the Sun.<sup>29</sup>

Tolkien's vivid imagery depicts a king and leader who was battle-ready and glorious, resurrected from rot — a stark contrast to the withered old man found by Gandalf.

On the Pelennor Fields, Théoden lies wounded and near death and at the mercy of the Dark Lord of the Nazgul. It seems that darkness has finally won. But as Merry looks at him, the King opens his eyes and bids Merry farewell, saying, "My body is broken. I go to my fathers. And even in their mighty company I shall not now be ashamed . . . a grim morn, a glad day, and a golden sunset!"<sup>30</sup> As he lay dying, he motions for the banner to be passed to Éomer, the new king and tells them "Hail, King of the Mark! Ride now to victory!"<sup>31</sup> Théoden passes, not in fear of the unknown or darkness of the end, but with anticipation to join the spiritual realm of the past kings for eternity.

The story's thread of life, near-death, and immortality is clearly depicted by Frodo, the brave

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<sup>29</sup> Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, 820.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 824.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 825.

“Ring-bearer” hobbit. Frodo nearly dies many times on his journey to destroy the Ring in Mount Doom. One night early in the adventure, the hobbits and Strider were encamped on Weathertop where Frodo was attacked and stabbed by a Wraith. Like a cry of fervent prayer, he exclaimed, “O Elbereth! Gilthoniel!” and the five Wraiths disappeared.<sup>32</sup> But the damage was done. Frodo's near-deadly wound to his shoulder was a physical curse he carried until his final voyage to the Grey Havens. Strider assures Sam that Frodo isn't dead — shouting the name of Elbereth was a dangerous spell against the Wraiths. Frodo remembered the names Elbereth and Gilthoniel from long ago when he left Hobbiton and heard the High Elves singing “Gilthoniel! O Elbereth! / Clear are thy eyes and bright thy breath! / Snow-white! Snow-white! We sing to thee / In a far land beyond the sea.”<sup>33</sup> The sound and melody “seemed to shape itself in their thought into words which they only partly understood.”<sup>34</sup> But at that critical moment, Frodo was compelled to call out the name of the star-queen when he was set for death at the hand of the Wraith. The knowledge that Frodo

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<sup>32</sup> Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, 191.

<sup>33</sup> Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, 78.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

needed to survive the attack was learned long before he needed it or understood the words. God intervenes in our own lives to provide us with experiences and memories to be hidden away in our minds, preparing us for future hardships.

Frodo's next brush with death is his encounter with the monstrous spider, Shelob. Accompanied by his ever-faithful Sam, they are lured into the spider's lair by Gollum's deceitful trickery. Frodo is stung, bound, and put into a deathlike trance by the spider. A long-buried memory of the elves comes to Sam's mind and he calls out to Galadriel when he finds the Phial of Light that she gave to Frodo. This time, it is Sam who sings out the same names that Frodo exclaimed on Weathertop, invoking the help of "Gilthoniel A Elbereth!"<sup>35</sup> He begins to sing the music of the Elves, a language he does not know, but remembers hearing in the house of Elrond. At first, Sam believes for certain that Frodo is dead, until he holds the Light of Galadriel over him and sees that "Frodo's face was fair of hue again, pale but beautiful with an elvish beauty."<sup>36</sup> The sight of Frodo gives him "bitter comfort" and a hope to continue with the

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<sup>35</sup> Tolkien, *The Two Towers*, 712.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 716.

mission.<sup>37</sup> Unsure if Frodo dies at this point, Sam takes the Ring on the chain and resolves to complete its destruction. Again, we see that the wisdom we are given throughout our lives can save us. Sam and Frodo never considered that Elven song as important to their journey, but Tolkien shows the reader that there is no experience wasted in life, and death is not the end if there is purpose in it.

At the conclusion of *Return of the King*, Frodo, Sam, Pippin, and Merry return to the Shire to live. Life has returned to a somewhat normal pace, with token pieces of the past still evident. Merry and Pippin wear their mail-shirts and tell tales, Sam falls in love and marries, but Frodo is restless. His old injuries from the Wraith and Shelob pain him and on the anniversary of receiving the stab wound on Weathertop, Frodo grows “very pale and his eyes seemed to see things far away.”<sup>38</sup> He feels the ache and longing for something else that the Shire cannot give. He tells Sam, “I am wounded; it will never really heal.”<sup>39</sup> So after two years, Frodo decides that it is time to take the opportunity to gather his papers and writings, especially the “big book with plain red

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<sup>37</sup> Tolkien, *The Two Towers*, 716.

<sup>38</sup> Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, 1002.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

leather covers; its tall pages were now almost filled” with wisdom gathered, the history of Bilbo’s experiences and the story of the Fellowship’s quest.<sup>40</sup> Sam remarks that it was nearly finished, but Frodo explains that as his part in the story comes to an end, Sam’s begins. Thus, Frodo leaves his story, added to Bilbo’s, for the next generations, providing a timeline for Sam to continue. This written story, like a great epic or the Bible narrative, shows purpose in the good and bad events in life and how they play a part in a grander plan. Bilbo and the Fellowship may not have understood the purpose in an isolated tragedy like Boromir’s death, but in the broad sweep of their history, events begin to fit together.

As they journey to the boat that will take Frodo to the Grey Havens, Sam hears Frodo singing the old walking song, but he has changed the words slightly. The last line has a finality to it. Rather than “And take the hidden paths that run / Towards the Moon or to the Sun,” Frodo sings softly to himself, “Shall take the hidden paths that run / West of the Moon, East of the Sun.”<sup>41</sup> The destination of this final journey will go past what they know, to a place

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<sup>40</sup> Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, 1003.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 1005.

beyond “the grey rain-curtain turned all to silver glass.” Frodo will see “white shores and beyond them a far green country under a swift sunrise.”<sup>42</sup> He is on his way to what lies beyond our world and the mortal life, to something better that promises rest and release to something, or some place, better and lasting.

The Lady Galadriel and Elrond, who lived several lifetimes, choose to diminish into the West because their work in Middle Earth was completed. There must be an end to living to begin the next life. As Sam watched the boat sail away across the grey sea, “he saw only a shadow on the waters that was soon lost in the West.”<sup>43</sup> He couldn’t see anything beyond his world because it was not his time to leave. Sam still has a purpose in the Shire.

Frodo tells Sam, “I tried to save the Shire, and it has been saved, but not for me. It must often be so, Sam, when things are in danger: someone has to give them up, lose them, so that others may keep them.”<sup>44</sup> Dear, brave Sam is now at the helm. Merry and Pippin are once again blessing the Shire with their joy and storytelling. Their perilous journey

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<sup>42</sup> Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, 1007.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 1006.

gave them the courage and knowledge they needed to build up the Shire. When our “age” ends, we will also pass away, but as we read about the departure of Frodo to the Grey Havens, we must inspire others who can step in to carry on for us, and then we will, like Frodo, see the “grey rain-curtain turned all to silver glass” and we will behold the “white shores and beyond them a far green, country under a swift sunrise.”<sup>45</sup>

Like Frodo, we are inevitably brought to our own Grey Havens — heaven — as a forever cessation from the difficulties that we experience in life. Passage to an eternal, heavenly home as depicted by the Grey Havens should be sweetly anticipated. Death is not the end, just a gateway to a new realm where we join the loved ones who have gone before us. Tolkien's storytelling about redemption, death, and eternity in *The Lord of the Rings* can encourage the believer, reminding us that there is something beyond what we can physically see. It can also challenge the seeker to think, “What if there is an ending to this life that is even better than anything we could experience here?”

Tolkien stated in his letter to Miss Rhona Beare, 14 October, 1958, that *The Lord of the Rings* “is

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<sup>45</sup> Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, 1007.

mainly concerned with Death, and Immortality.”<sup>46</sup> Indeed, the epic is rife with symbolic and physical death and near-death with recovery. Immortality can be gained by renown that is written and retold in stories, or like Théoden who joins the past Kings of Rohan after he dies. Frodo, Bilbo, Gandalf, and the Elves leave Middle Earth because “the Third Age was over, and the Days of the Rings were passed and an end was come of the story and song of those times.”<sup>47</sup> Frodo, Bilbo, and Gandalf are older, weary, and their legacy with the ring is complete. The heroes of the story who died never feared death because they knew that something better waited for them. As Tolkien read through *The Lord of the Rings*, he “became aware of the dominance of the theme of Death.”<sup>48</sup> He writes in a letter, dated 10 April 1958, “But certainly Death is not an Enemy!”<sup>49</sup> This epic tale encourages us to face our eventual mortal end with hope — the trust in a high calling and an eternal home.

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<sup>46</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, ed. Humphrey Carpenter and Christopher Tolkien (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2000), 284.

<sup>47</sup> Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, 1006.

<sup>48</sup> Tolkien, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, 267.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*



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