

**“BEING - TOWARDS - DEATH” AND  
“THE ESCAPE FROM DEATH” IN J.R.R. TOLKIEN’S  
‘THE LORD OF THE RINGS’  
PHILOSOPHICAL AND THEOLOGICAL ASPECTS**

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**Abstract**

The article deals with the theme of death in J.R.R. Tolkien’s epic ‘The Lord of the Rings’, which both the author himself and numerous researchers of the writer’s body of work recognize as key for understanding the entire religious and philosophical content of this work. This theme is analysed in the article within the framework of the semantic opposition, formulated by the concepts of ‘being-towards-death’ and ‘escape from death’. The first concept is borrowed from M. Heidegger’s philosophy, and the second is present both in Heidegger’s and Tolkien’s works. The study shows that a comparison of how Tolkien and Heidegger expound on the theme of death can be productive for a better understanding of their approaches - both in their similarities and differences.

*Keywords:* world, gift, belief, fairy story, eucatastrophe

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**1. Introduction**

After the publication of *The Lord of the Rings* (LotR), Tolkien was often asked: ‘what it was all about’ - a question that the writer had not been asked after the publication of ‘*The Hobbit*’ - a work that attracted the sympathetic attention of critics and the general public but still very recognizable in terms of genre. Tolkien’s answers varied, and the shortest form of the answer was, “It is not ‘about’ anything but itself” [1]. This was not an excuse, but, on the contrary, the most accurate wording of the meaning of the trilogy: if it were about ‘something’, it would rightfully be considered as an illustration or an allegory of this ‘something’ and would be judged in accordance with how similar it is to ‘original’. In his essay ‘*On Fairy Stories*’, Tolkien says that a real fairy tale must contain its own ‘*Secondary World*’, the authenticity of which is determined not

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by its similarity with the ‘primary world’ in which we write (tell) and read (listen) fairy tales - if that were so, the best fairy tales would probably be purely ‘realistic’ works. The criteria for the authenticity of the Secondary World are largely internal rather than external: it is such a creation of Fantasy, Tolkien writes, that can build “the inner consistency of reality” [J.R.R. Tolkien, *On fairy stories*, <https://archive.org/details/on-fairy-stories>, p. 23], sufficient to ensure the ‘Secondary Belief’ in it. Hence another, more detailed definition by Tolkien about the meaning of the LotR, “...Of course the book was written to please myself (at different levels), and as an experiment in the arts of long narrative, and of inducing ‘Secondary Belief’” [1, p. 448].

The creation of a fairy tale, according to Tolkien’s criteria, is creativity that contains internal tension, one could almost say ‘contradiction’: to become self-sufficient, a ‘Secondary World’ must ‘depart’ from the ‘primary world’ as far as possible, break as many semantic ties with it - Tolkien called this departure ‘Escapism’, inherent in a fairy tale. However, at the same time, the authenticity of the created world is determined by how much it will impact the reader from the ‘primary world’, and through them on this world itself. The reader who believes in the ‘Secondary World’ will be able to see things from the ‘real world’ around them, having, as Tolkien puts it, ‘a clear view’, adding, “I do not say ‘seeing things as they are’ and involve myself with the philosophers, though I might venture to say ‘seeing things as we are (or were) meant to see them’ - as things apart from ourselves” [<https://archive.org/details/on-fairy-stories>, p. 28].

The phrase ‘seeing things as we are meant to see them’ refers to the idea of the fullness of Creation lost by man, and the phrase ‘things that apart from ourselves’ indicates the cause of the loss. As Tolkien explains, we are surrounded by the banal and familiar, and this actually ‘is really the penalty of appropriation’: we ‘laid hands’ on the things we liked from the world around us, ‘locked them in our hoard’ and stopped noticing. It is thanks to fairy tales, Tolkien writes, “I first divined the potency of the words, and the wonder of the things, such as stone, and wood, and iron; tree and grass; house and fire; bread and wine” [<https://archive.org/details/on-fairy-stories>, p. 29]. Thus, the tales “open a door on Other Time” [<https://archive.org/details/on-fairy-stories>, p. 15], showing at the same time our own world as a different one.

## 2. LotR as a book on death

Tolkien gives other, more detailed, answers to the question ‘what’ the book ‘is about’. One appears in a letter to a publishing house where Tolkien hoped to publish the LotR along with *The Silmarillion*. “All this stuff”, Tolkien says, “is mainly concerned with Fall, Mortality, and the Machine” [1, p. 162], explaining the connection between these three concepts through the fourth - striving for secondary creativity, which is “at once wedded to a passionate love of the real primary world, and hence filled with the sense of mortality, and yet unsatisfied by it”. However, does this refer to different types of creativity?

Didn't Tolkien write in his essay 'On Fairy Stories' that the storyteller's creation of the 'Secondary World' "will probably require labor and thought, and will certainly demand a special skill, a kind of elvish craft?" [<https://archive.org/details/on-fairy-stories>, p. 23] If this refers to the same ability (and there is no reason to assume otherwise), then it turns out that Tolkien endows the creativity of creating the 'Secondary World' with ambivalence: both positive and potentially negative nature.

Later, in a letter from 1958 - again addressed to the publisher, this time to a German publishing house (in the English-speaking world, the LotR had already gained immense popularity by that time), Tolkien again writes that there is no 'key idea' /'message'/ in the book if this means "of preaching, or of delivering myself of a vision of truth specially revealed to me!" [1, p. 292] However, the absence of an idea does not mean the absence of a dominant theme, and, as Tolkien writes, "only in reading the work myself (with criticisms in mind) that I become aware of the dominance of the theme of Death", adding: "But certainly Death is not an Enemy!" [1, p. 292] 'The Work of the Enemy', that Tolkien refers to a little further, is confusion between 'true 'immortality' with limitless serial longevity' and then, recalling the death of Aragorn in comparison with the fate of the supreme Nazgul, Tolkien writes: "The Elves call 'death' the Gift of God (to Men). Their temptation is different: towards a fainéant melancholy, burdened with Memory, leading to an attempt to halt Time." [1, p. 292] In this rhetoric, Tolkien opposes human death to immortality, both 'bad' (Nazgul) and 'good' (elven), endowing both with the negative ability of 'clinging to time'. Indeed, Aragorn's death is a human death in the ideal case, analogues of which can only be found in hagiographic literature: the king "fell into sleep" and "a great beauty was revealed in him, so that all who after came there looked on him in wonder; for they saw that the grace of his youth, and the valor of his manhood, and the wisdom and majesty of his age were blended together" [2].

In the same year 1958, answering questions from a group of the LotR fans, Tolkien added a few words about the 'general meaning' of the work at the end of a long letter: first, Tolkien wrote the story "which is built on or out of certain 'religious' ideas" [1, p. 310]; second, "if the tale is 'about' anything (other than itself), it is not as seems widely supposed about 'power'"; and finally: "It is mainly concerned with Death, and Immortality; and the 'escapes': serial longevity, and hoarding memory" [1, p. 310]. The 'escape' that Tolkien refers to here should also be understood in the context of the opposition 'Death - Immortality'. In the essay 'On Fairy Stories', Tolkien speaks of the "the Escape from Death" motif characteristic of many fairy tales [<https://archive.org/details/on-fairy-stories>, p. 33], which Tolkien calls the 'fugitive spirit' inherent in the 'classic' fairy tale. Tolkien opposes the motive of 'Escape from Death' with a genuine and, in a sense, exemplary fairy tale, which the writer somewhat paradoxically equates with the Gospel narrative. In both cases (according to Tolkien), the atmosphere of "universal final defeat" [<https://archive.org/details/on-fairy-stories>, p. 33] is combined with "a fleeting glimpse of Joy"

[<https://archive.org/details/on-fairy-stories>, p. 33] - a transition that Tolkien called “Eucatastrophe” [<https://archive.org/details/on-fairy-stories>, p. 33].

### 3. Theme of death in LotR in critical reviews

Indeed, the theme of ‘escape from death’ is not difficult to identify in the LotR - primarily in the key behaviour of some of the characters. In Tolkien’s epic, different characters strive to overcome time - with different goals and results; in the ‘classic’ fairy tale, the ‘escape from death’ is expressed in the fact that the death of the main characters is moved to an indefinite future, and the narration is concluded with the words, ‘they lived happily ever after’. In his own work, Tolkien creates a kind of plot and ideological alternative to ‘escape from death’ in both senses - but does the writer succeed: what if his ‘secondary creativity’, according to his own definition, remains inside the circle of ‘escape from death’?

Immediately after publication, the LotR began to rapidly gain fame, one of the consequences of which were numerous reactions to the book, where, among the dominant enthusiastic assessments, there were some very critical reviews whose authors accused Tolkien of poor imagination, of having written not an ‘adult’ but still a children’s book, where the forces of evil only scare but in fact cannot do anything to the characters who can easily cope with all the obstacles [3]. Tolkien was aware of such reviews: mentioning in his letters the critics who “scoffed at The Lord because ‘all the good boys came home safe and everyone was happy ever after” [1, p. 331], the writer certainly did not agree with such an interpretation of the ending of his book, commenting on the above words with the exclamation, ‘(quite untrue)’. A contemporary author noted that while The Hobbit was praised as a children’s book, the LotR was disparaged as *merely* a children’s book [4].

It is easy to see that critics discovered the same ‘deserter spirit’ of escape from death in Tolkien’s book that the writer attributed to most ‘classic’ fairy tales and which the writer tried to overcome in the LotR. However, are the critics of Tolkien’s book right? To a certain extent, yes. Most of the key actors in the LotR’s story do ‘live happily ever after’ (Merry, Pippin, possibly Sam, Faramir, Aragorn, Éomer, etc.) and their death, if described, is heroic and majestic, and in any case, it is far removed from the events described in the trilogy. It is hard to say if the other characters who leave Middle-earth at the end of the book die or not (Bilbo, Frodo, not to mention Gandalf, Galadriel, and Elrond; the same can be said of Gimli and Legolas). According to the laws of the genre, the main characters, Frodo and Sam, cannot die without completing their mission, and even after doing so and expecting imminent death, the hobbits are miraculously saved. Tolkien’s fairy tale goes even further than the ‘classic’ fairy tale (whose characters must die sooner or later), demonstrating instead numerous ‘replacements’ for the natural ending of life: life can be sustained indefinitely by magic, different reincarnation options are possible (killed elves, Gandalf), there are also various forms of joining life and death, departure to Valinor, voluntary

death-sleep, finally, ‘just death’. Can it be said that the theme of death ‘dominates in Tolkien’s world’ if death itself seems to dissolve here, ceasing to mean anything definite?

All these considerations can be opposed by one argument: Tolkien’s book did not become, as its critics believed, a momentary whim of fashion, it remained readable and discussed decades later and firmly took its place in the list of the highest achievements of world literature. This alone already suggests that Tolkien managed to create a full-fledged ‘Secondary World’ and a ‘Secondary Belief’ in it. If the world is real, then death within is also real - as Tolkien himself said many times, one cannot be without the other.

Authors writing about the LotR in recent years (especially after the release of P. Jackson’s epic film adaptation, which once again revived interest in the book), speaking about the role of death in the LotR, are closer to Tolkien’s point of view rather than that of the writer’s early critics. The manifestation of the theme of death in the book which affects the reader the most is now seen not even in the plot but rather in the general atmosphere of the LotR, as many critics have recognized, a poignant note of sadness pervades much of Tolkien’s work: the motifs of decline, irreversible loss, and the withdrawal of past glory are present throughout ‘The Lord of the Rings’ [5]; “In ... a cosmos /Tolkien’s - M./, death is woven into the very fabric of everything, from the mortality of men to the entropic death of the energy system of the cosmos itself. More importantly, on the spiritual plane, death is present in the corrosive and corrupting effect of evil...” [6] “Everything good in Middle-earth is described in the novel as ‘fading’, ‘dwindling’, or ‘waning’.” [7, p. 142] “The ‘Lord of the Rings’, as history, is more than day-to-day ongoing history. It is the history of the end: it is eschatology.” [8, p. 104]

At the same time, the topic of withering and even the end of the world is far from the only aspect of the topic of death in the LotR that attracts researchers’ attention. For example, as one of the authors noted, already in the opening spell-verse “readers are told that they are defined by their mortality, by the fact that they are born and bound to die” [6, p. 31]. A monograph specifically dedicated to the theme of death in the LotR states that “Three great themes of death that pervade contemporary and medieval culture are united in ‘The Lord of the Rings’: the way we die, the need to remember the dead. and, above all, the lingering apprehension of what lies beyond the grave” [9], and the book itself reveals the features of the literary genre ‘ars moriendi’ popular in the Middle Ages, that is, a kind of guide to achieving ‘a good death’.

A separate aspect of the theme of death in the LotR is the problem of reconciling Tolkien’s understanding of death as Ilúvatar’s gift to people (and not as a consequence of the work of the devil and the human fall). The plot of the ‘fall’ in Tolkien’s cosmogony is still present in a certain sense - but it is inscribed in the history of the immortal elves - as their ‘rebellion’ and departure from Valinor. Tolkien did not see the problem in the absence of a literal coincidence of his myth of death with Christian doctrine, and many modern authors touching on this topic also believe that there is no deep contradiction

here. As one of the authors writes, in Tolkien's world, death, which gives a person the hope of participating in the divine life, is quite consistent with the anthropology of Thomas Aquinas [10, p. 20]. Such an interpretation makes the fate of the immortal elves, doomed to forever remain in the world and see it wither, rather a curse than a gift (for Tolkien, both death and immortality are Ilúvatar's gifts, respectively, to humans and elves). Indeed, as one researcher writes, "For men, the end of time comes at the end of their relatively short time on Earth, at which point, following death, the final victory may be theirs. For elves, however, doomed to deathlessness, the long defeat is seemingly interminable." [6] Naturally, in the context of this approach, the impossibility of death for Sauron's servants, the ringbearer kings, seems to be a curse associated with torment, in comparison with which death should seem like deliverance. As for ordinary mortals, "they accept death both because it releases them and because they expect that what comes next will also be a blessing" [11, p. 136].

#### **4. Heidegger's "being-towards-death" and Tolkien's "gift of death"**

However, do all of these interpretations of the theme of death in the LotR not reveal something opposite to what they want to say? Namely, not that "Tolkien's story looks death directly in the face" [9, p. 109] and "at its highest level, Tolkien's epic serves as a memento mori, a reminder of death ..." [6, p. 31], but rather as a large-scale project to "tame death", depriving it, as V. Jankélévitch [12] would say, of the status of the absolutely Other in relation to life. It is appropriate here to recall one of the most influential books in the Western philosophical tradition where the expression "escape from death" often occurs (in the wording of the English translation, "a fleeing in the face of death" [13], and which, like the LotR, is often perceived as a book about death, although the title of the book is different. This refers to Martin Heidegger's work 'Being and Time' where 'the escape from death' manifests itself mainly in relation to it in an impersonal form, as an incident with an 'abstract other' (the question of how much this 'escape from death' corresponds to Tolkien's will be discussed below).

At the same time, the modus vivendi opposite to 'escape from death' is designated by Heidegger as "being-towards-death" - and this is not just a 'classical' memento mori, which, by the way, has no moral or religious meaning. Being-towards-death for Heidegger is a determination directed towards one's destiny and escaping "from the endless multiplicity of possibilities which offer themselves as closest to one-those of comfortableness, shirking, and taking things lightly" [13, p. 435], "with an existential background" of guilt and a sense of horror, which Heidegger contrasted with 'banal' fear: "Anxiety springs from the future of resoluteness, while fear springs from the lost Present" [13, p. 395].

Although there is no wording of death as a gift in Heidegger's work, his concept of 'being-towards-death' might illustrate Tolkien's formula for death as a gift well, since for life subject to current needs, or, as Heidegger would say, convenience, frivolity, and evasion, a possible death is always marked by

ultimate alienation. On the one hand, death is mine but I refuse to recognize it as mine because death interrupts me in mid-sentence, takes away everything I have without warning or compensation. Only the acceptance of fate gives life a 'vector dimension', endowing it with purpose and, possibly, integrity. However, will such a death be anything other than what Jankélévitch called 'an insignificant end, a complete rout, crowning defeat'? [12, p. 102] Maybe it is so for the dying person, but for others who assess the ended life in terms of its outcome and achievements - probably not.

The duality of external and internal assessment of the outcome of 'purposeful life' indicated here is very well manifested in Tolkien's comments regarding the completion of the story and the role played in it by the protagonist, the hobbit Frodo. Tolkien strongly objected to those of his correspondents who interpreted the episode with the appropriation of the Ring as 'betrayal', believing that Frodo should be punished and not glorified as a hero. As Tolkien writes, "Frodo deserved all honour because he spent every drop of his power of will and body, and that was just sufficient to bring him to the destined point, and no further. Few others, possibly no others of his time, would have got so far." [1, p. 277] However, according to Tolkien, Frodo did not feel like a hero at all, representing "rather a study of a hobbit broken by a burden of fear and horror" [1, p. 206]. At the same time, Tolkien added, "it was not only nightmare memories of past horrors that afflicted him, but also unreasoning self-reproach: he saw himself and all that he done as a broken failure" [1, p. 357]. Frodo, Tolkien says, plagued by heavy thoughts, now wanted to forever leave the Shire which he had never wanted to leave.

Unlike the journey of Bilbo and the dwarves that constitutes the plot of 'The Hobbit', Frodo's voyage is distinguished by several characteristics. First, the impossibility of returning is emphasized - even to the place that Frodo just left. This is clearly conveyed already through the gate of the Shire fence, which slams behind the travellers and can only be opened from the inside. ("It shut with a clang, and the lock clicked. The sound was ominous." [2, p. 1, 144]) There are no long, unplanned stops on Frodo's journey - like the episode when the dwarves Bilbo travelled with were captured by the Mirkwood Elves. At the same time, Frodo's movement never accelerates. In 'The Hobbit' there are such episodes: flying on eagles and possibly swimming in barrels; in the LotR, the eagles appear and rescue the characters when their mission to destroy the Ring has been completed. Of course, any movement in space is also movement in time, but in the LotR movement in space is shown as a movement in time - it is unidirectional and irreversible. This is not a movement in infinite countable time, which, according to Heidegger, characterizes the modus of escape from death. It is a time marked by finality, which is conveyed in Tolkien's epic by narrative means. In 'The Hobbit' and the LotR, the goal of the journey is the mountain, and in the LotR it is a goal that no one will voluntarily aspire to.

At the same time, the entire journey in Tolkien's epic seems to be a path up the mountain, and with all the difficulty of which, the climber can observe ever wider horizons associated, as Tolkien says, with "a sudden sense of endless

untold stories” [1, p. 124]. Tolkien’s book shows that moving towards one’s own destiny, driven by determination, has nothing to do with fanatical stubbornness, noticing nothing but a goal. For Tolkien, the very determination of the characters is largely nourished by the expansion of horizons - after all, the characters begin not only to better understand the world but also to feel that they are the successors of the struggle against evil, which was once waged by the heroes of antiquity. Thus, Sam and Frodo are already on the borders of Mordor when they remember Beren and Lúthien who stole the Silmaril from the Enemy, a particle of light of which is in a phial presented to Frodo by Galadriel.

## 5. Theme of death in Tolkien’s and Heidegger’s work - similarities and differences

One can say that if Heidegger’s concept of “a fleeing in the face of death” [13, p. 298] clarifies and concretizes “death as a gift” of Tolkien’s ‘Secondary World’, then the LotR narration also clarifies and concretizes Heidegger’s “being-towards-death”. It does this by transforming this principle into what can be called character development within the logic of the literary narrative. The ideological similarity between a Christian writer and a philosopher who emphatically distanced himself from religious and theological issues is not so surprising. Here you can recall the words by J. Derrida from the work ‘The gift of death’ that “the ... Heideggerian thinking often consists, notably in *Sein und Zeit*, in repeating on an ontological level Christian themes and texts that have been ‘de-Christianized’” [14].

There is, however, an essential difference in the theme of death in Tolkien’s and Heidegger’s work. This difference concerns the modus opposite to ‘being-towards-death’, namely, ‘escape from death’. This expression itself is found in both authors’ works and it is this, we recall, that made us raise the question of more general analogies of their worldview. In some aspects, these analogies are very noticeable, and numerous researchers note, for example, the similarities in the views of Tolkien and Heidegger on technology in general and on the modern technological world in particular [15]. At the same time, both Tolkien and Heidegger more or less directly associate technology with ‘escape from death’, since technology and Science can be viewed as a way of postponing, and, in the extreme, overcoming death.

However, if Heidegger’s “fleeing in the face of death” is an attempt to find shelter in the realm of anonymity (what Heidegger calls ‘man’), a refusal of personal responsibility for one’s own destiny, a choice in favour of living along [Das Dahinleben] in a way which ‘lets’ everything ‘be as it is’ [13, p. 396], then Tolkien’s ‘escape from death’ is always connected in one way or another with the ‘temptation of exclusivity’, the desire to distinguish oneself from the general line, to receive special privileges. The rings around which the LotR plot is built are the most vivid ‘reification’ of such a desire, given the semantics of the rings, probably in all cultures of the world. In many ancient civilizations, signet rings could be used as facsimiles of the owner, and, therefore, were, as it were, the

owner’s personal sign, a trace of their personality. Tolkien could have invented any other magical object, but the writer invented rings, about each of which one can say what Gandalf said about the Ring of Power: “only one hand at a time can wield the One” [2, p. 1, 338]. In Tolkien’s ‘Secondary World’, the rings were created by Sauron in alliance with the High Elves for various purposes, good and bad, as a means of power or as a means of preserving the beauty of the world. However, even the three elven rings, carried by Elrond, Gandalf, and Galadriel, and which Sauron did not know about, nevertheless, being the result of his instructions “ultimately under the control of the One. Thus, as you will see, when the One goes, the last defenders of High-elven lore and beauty are shorn of power to hold back time, and depart” [1, p. 195].

## 6. Conclusions

Thus, ‘escape from death’ has a very wide range in Tolkien’s world, at one end of which there is creativity that avoids all might and power, and at the other end, there is a power devoid of any creative potential and, in essence, destructive. For Tolkien, both poles preserve not only a deep kinship with each other but also a kind of ‘common denominator’. The wise man in Tolkien’s ‘Secondary World’ cannot, like the philosopher in the ‘Secondary World’ of ‘Being and Time’, rise above the naive and short-sighted ‘escape from death’ inherent in the common people. On the contrary, the wise man is most affected by this flight, and this hopelessness he perceives gives his wisdom a touch of humility and the philosophy hidden in Tolkien’s narrative - that ‘play of light’ that is the subject of envy for many ambitious and famous philosophical projects.

Thus, to the question raised above - whether Tolkien manages to go beyond the limits of ‘escape from death’ - one can answer ‘yes’ at the plot level and ‘no’ at the meta-plot level (that is, at the level of the general structure of his ‘Secondary World’). Such an uncertain answer would probably not satisfy the philosopher but perhaps he is what makes Tolkien’s ‘Secondary World’ so magical and realistic.

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