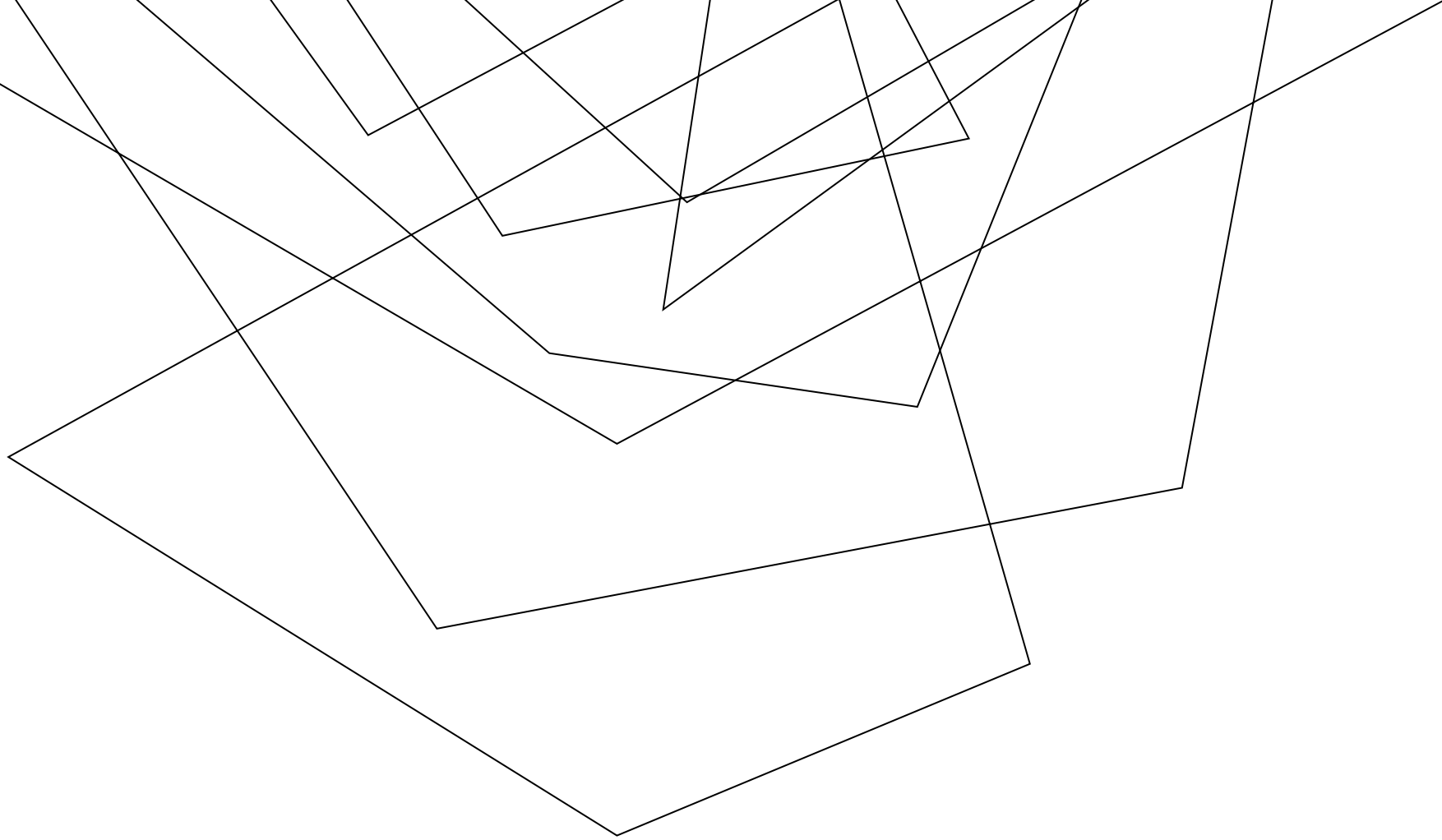




THE MYTHMAKERS VS. THE
MADE MYTHS: EXPLORING A
READER'S LEVELS OF
RELIGIOUS ALIENATION AND
CONNECTION IN WORKS
ABOUT AND BY J.R.R. TOLKIEN
AND C.S. LEWIS

ACHARIYA REZAK

Image: Nina Paley



A CRITICAL READING AND PRIMARY SOURCE REINTERPRETATION OF
DOCUMENTS THAT CONTRIBUTED TO JOHN HENDRIX'S *THE MYTHMAKERS*

INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS “THE MYTHMAKERS”?

John Hendrix’s *The Mythmakers: The Remarkable Fellowship of C.S. Lewis & J.R.R. Tolkien* (2024), is a graphic novel conversion narrative that centers around the impact of C.S. Lewis’s friends, especially J.R.R. Tolkien, on his conversion to Christianity.

Image credit: John Hendrix, *The Mythmakers*





INTRODUCTION (CONT.): I SHOULD LOVE THIS, WHY DOES IT ALIENATE ME?

Connection

Initially this graphic novel ticked many boxes for me: the book jacket promised a better understanding of the friendship between Tolkien and Lewis.

And much of the book delivers on this promise, except for the central theme, the *conversion narrative*.

Alienation

The backbone of the book is about Lewis's conversion to Christianity. As a non-Christian, my encounter with this conversion caused me to experience such an intense feeling of alienation that I had to pause and interrogate this reaction.

Which led to my research questions...



QUESTIONS

- Why was my reading of *The Mythmakers* so immediately uncomfortable, when I felt so connected to the creative works of both these authors?
- Does biographical or philosophical writing from Tolkien and Lewis point to why and how the worlds that they built feel welcoming to a non-Christian?

A NOTE ABOUT THE ART IN THIS PRESENTATION

Paley has given blanket
permission for the use of
her art on the website:
<https://www.sitasingstheblues.com/>



Eärendil and Elwing on Vingilot vibes



METHODOLOGY

I researched the text's primary sources:

- “First...[A]ll written history reflects an author's interpretation of past events. Therefore, [we] can recognize its subjective nature. Second, through primary [we] directly touch the lives of people in the past” (Archive.gov’s History in the raw, n.d.).

I performed a critical reading:

- “Avoid approaching a text by asking ‘What information can I get out of it?’ Rather ask ‘How does this text work? How is it argued? How is the evidence (the facts, examples, etc.) used and interpreted? How does the text reach its conclusions?’” (Knott, n.d.).



METHODOLOGY (CONT.)

Data collection spreadsheet:

- I organized my dissection of *The Mythmakers* by creating a spreadsheet that compared quotations from Hendrix's book with the original sources, and added my analysis notes to the fourth column.
- Example of one row of the spreadsheet:

Mythmakers	Original source - Surprised by Joy	Original source - On Fairie Stories/Tolkien's Letters	Interpretation
8. "Tolkien believed that the magic of the myth opened a window into a truer picture of reality. Great myths allow us to slip through the clouds of everyday life and glimpse something divine." (p. 124)		<p>them. How they spread is a different matter, and what matters more is what they give us now.</p> <p>O see ye not yon narrow road So thick beset wi' thorns and briers? That is the path of Righteousness, Though after it but few inquire. And see ye not yon braid, braid road That lies across the lily leven? That is the path of Wickedness, Though some call it the Road to Heaven. And see ye not yon bonny road That winds about yon fernie brae? That is the road to fair Elfland, Where thou and I this night maun gae.</p> <p>Letters: There is an interesting discussion on p. 205 about magic. Magic in the Elven sense is sub-creation - it exists to make creation better, to bolster it and bring out its beauty. It is not power which destroys or dominates, which is the power of the Ring. "It is the mark of a good fairy-story, of the higher or more complete kind, that however wild its events, however fantastic or terrible the adventures, it can give to child or man that hears it, when the "turn" comes, a catch of the breath, a beat and lifting of the heart, near to (or indeed accompanied by) tears, as keen as that given by any form of literary art, and having a peculiar quality."</p>	<p>Ah! Again he says that the road to fairyland is "NOT the road to Heaven, nor even to Hell" — drawing a distinction between the natural magic of the land vs. the religion of man.</p> <p>He quotes a Scottish sounding poem that describes three roads - one to heaven, one to hell, and one to Elfland. He argues that language invented magic. The second you could put together adjectives and nouns, you want to make it be real.</p>

LITERATURE REVIEW

- Primary sources
 - Autobiography
 - Letters
 - Essay
 - Author website
- Methodology
 - Primary sources
 - Critical reading
- Secondary source
 - Biography

Reference	Purpose
Althusser, L., & Etienne Balibar. (1979). <i>Reading Capital</i> .	Methodology
Hendrix, J. (2018). John Hendrix Illustration. John Hendrix Illustration . https://www.johnhendrix.com/about	Primary source, interview with the author
Hendrix, J. (2024). <i>The Mythmakers: The Remarkable Fellowship of C.S. Lewis & J.R.R. Tolkien</i> . Abrams Fanfare.	Secondary source, biography
Herodotus. (2003). <i>Herodotus: The Histories</i> . Penguin Classics.	Methodology
Knott, D. (n.d.). <i>Critical reading towards critical writing writing advice</i> . University of Toronto.	Methodology
Lewis, C. S. (2017). <i>Surprised by Joy: The shape of my early life</i> . HarperOne.	Primary source, autobiography
McGinty, A. M. (2009). <i>Becoming Muslim : Western Women's Conversions to Islam</i> . Palgrave Macmillan.	Interpretation
National Archives and Records Administration. (n.d.). <i>History in the raw</i> . National Archives and Records Administration. https://www.archives.gov/education/research/history-in-the-raw.html	Methodology
Tolkien, J. R. R., Carpenter, H., & Tolkien, C. (2023). <i>The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien</i> . William Morrow, an imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers.	Primary source
Tolkien, J. R. R., Flieger, V., & Anderson, D. A. (1947/2014). <i>Tolkien on Fairy-stories</i> . HarperCollinsPublishers.	Primary source, essay



FINDING 1:
LEWIS'S IDEA OF
"JOY" CRACKS THE
ARC OF THE
CONVERSION
NARRATIVE




THE MYTHMAKERS AND SURPRISED BY JOY ARE BOTH CONVERSION NARRATIVES.

WHAT IS A CONVERSION NARRATIVE?

Definition

- Anna Mansson McGinty in *Becoming Muslim : Western women's conversions to Islam* (2009) explains that the structure of a conversion narrative is to document “a sudden and fundamental shift in worldview, which changes the individual in considerable ways” (p. 33).
- This is expressed through writing that explains how “the old reality [can] be interpreted within the apparatus of the new reality” (p. 33), and results in “a fundamental denial of their previous life or self” (p. 33).



HOW DOES LEWIS TROUBLE A MORE SIMPLISTIC CONVERSION NARRATIVE?

The Mythmakers

1. Shows signs of a straightforward Conversion Narrative by paraphrasing *Surprised by Joy*, but not Lewis's more complicated philosophical journey.
2. Depicts one moment of complexity which gave me the impetus to explore more:
 - a. Lewis's reluctance to convert

Surprised by Joy

1. Lewis expands upon this resistance to his conversion, calling himself “a prodigal who is brought in kicking, struggling, resentful, and darting his eyes in every direction for a chance of escape,” (Lewis, Ch. XIV)
2. Lewis is unwilling to rewrite his previous life in the light of his conversion, and unwilling to write his “enlightened” self as happier or worthier than his previous self.

TABLE: 1: A FISSURE IN THE CONVERSION NARRATIVE

<i>The Mythmakers</i>	<i>Surprised by Joy</i>
<p>“It felt as though he were encased in a suit of heavy armor, almost like a lobster. Yet at the same time... ..somehow Lewis also knew he could choose to take it off. But it almost felt like dread. In his quarters at Magdalen college, as the concerns of the day faded into the quiet evening, he could sense God's pursuit drawing ever closer. Finally, Lewis yielded. He knelt and prayed to God. Lewis called himself 'the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England.'" (pp. 84-85)</p>	<p>“I became aware that I was holding something at bay, or shutting something out. Or, if you like, that I was wearing some stiff clothing, like corsets, or even a suit of armour, as if I were a lobster. [...] The choice appeared to be momentous but it was also strangely unemotional. I was moved by no desires or fears. In a sense I was not moved by anything. [...] That which I greatly feared had at last come upon me. In the Trinity Term of 1929 I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England.”</p>

WHAT IS LEWIS'S "JOY" AND HOW DOES IT POINT TO A PATH FOR NON-CHRISTIANS TO ENJOY HIS WORK?

1. The "Joy" Lewis uses as his autobiography title has nothing to do with his wife Joy Davidman, nor does it have anything to do with Christianity.
2. Instead, the "Joy" that Lewis discusses at length is his relentless longing for what he calls "Northernness," or the experience he had when first reading Beatrix Potter's *Squirrel Nutkin*, or H.A. Guerber's *Myths of the Norsemen*.
3. Throughout his autobiography, Lewis mentions his search for the feeling of joy, and all the different forms it took.
4. By the end of his narrative, after his conversion, Lewis explains that his acceptance of a Christian deity has nothing to do with his quest for "Joy". Instead, "Joy" functioned in retrospect as a signpost that caused him to look outward for ways to find and chase it, but Christianity did not give it to him or fulfill it.
5. Joy remained something that Lewis found in good fiction (specifically like *Lord of the Rings*) or mythology (specifically Norse), and good music (specifically Wagner's Ring cycle)—in short, from creative works that resonated with him.

TABLE 2: EVOLUTION OF “JOY” FROM *SURPRISED BY JOY*

<i>Chapter I</i>	<i>Chapter V</i>	<i>Chapter XV</i>
<p>The second glimpse came through Squirrel Nutkin; through it only, though I loved all the Beatrix Potter books. [...] It sounds fantastic to say that one can be enamoured of a season, but that is something like what happened; and, as before, the experience was one of intense desire. And one went back to the book, not to gratify the desire (that was impossible—how can one possess Autumn?) but to re-awake it. [...] It was something quite different from ordinary life and even from ordinary pleasure; something, as they would now say, ‘in another dimension’.</p> <p>[...] I call it Joy, which is here a technical term and must be sharply distinguished both from Happiness and from Pleasure. Joy (in my sense) has indeed one characteristic, and one only, in common with them; the fact that anyone who has experienced it will want it again. Apart from that, and considered only in its quality, it might almost equally well be called a particular kind of unhappiness or grief. But then it is a kind we want. I doubt whether anyone who has tasted it would ever, if both were in his power, exchange it for all the pleasures in the world. But then Joy is never in our power and pleasure often is.</p>	<p>Pure ‘Northernness’ engulfed me: a vision of huge, clear spaces hanging above the Atlantic in the endless twilight of Northern summer, remoteness, severity . . . and almost at the same moment I knew that I had met this before, long, long ago (it hardly seems longer now) in Tegner’s <i>Drapa</i>, that Siegfried (whatever it might be) belonged to the same world as Balder and the sunward-sailing cranes. And with that plunge back into my own past there arose at once, almost like heartbreak, the memory of Joy itself, the knowledge that I had once had what I had now lacked for years, that I was returning at last from exile and desert lands to my own country; and the distance of the Twilight of the Gods and the distance of my own past Joy, both unattainable, flowed together into a single, unendurable sense of desire and loss, which suddenly became one with the loss of the whole experience, which, as I now stared round that dusty schoolroom like a man recovering from unconsciousness, had already vanished, had eluded me at the very moment when I could first say It is. And at once I knew (with fatal knowledge) that to ‘have it again’ was the supreme and only important object of desire.</p>	<p>But what, in conclusion, of Joy? For that, after all, is what the story has mainly been about. To tell you the truth, the subject has lost nearly all interest for me since I became a Christian. I cannot, indeed, complain, like Wordsworth, that the visionary gleam has passed away. I believe (if the thing were at all worth recording) that the old stab, the old bitter-sweet, has come to me as often and as sharply since my conversion as at any time of my life whatever. But I now know that the experience, considered as a state of my own mind, had never had the kind of importance I once gave it. It was valuable only as a pointer to something other and outer. While that other was in doubt, the pointer naturally loomed large in my thoughts. When we are lost in the woods the sight of a signpost is a great matter. He who first sees it cries ‘Look!’ The whole party gathers round and stares. But when we have found the road and are passing signposts every few miles, we shall not stop and stare. They will encourage us and we shall be grateful to the authority that set them up.[...] Not, of course, that I don’t often catch myself stopping to stare at roadside objects of even less importance.</p>



SUMMARY OF FIRST FINDING:

- Lewis's words trouble the arc of a straightforward conversion narrative by emphasizing that his life did not completely change during or after the conversion.
- The most important concept of Lewis's book (so important that it is part of the book title), "Joy", has nothing to do with Christianity.
- But what of Tolkien?



FINDING 2:
TOLKIEN REJECTS
EXPLICIT OR
ALLEGORICAL
CHRISTIANITY IN
“SUB-CREATION”



TOLKIEN FAILS TO BE AN UNCOMPLICATED ASSISTANT IN THE CONVERSION PROCESS

Complicating the conversion narrative

- In *The Mythmakers*, Tolkien is characterized as being a foil to Lewis's quest for belief who finally contextualizes Christianity in such a way that Lewis understands and recognizes it:
 - “Tolkien gave Lewis a unified vision of art-making. It is too simple to say that he 'converted' Lewis to Christianity. Rather, Tolkien was a living illustration of fantasy and faith intertwined. This was the keystone that allowed the two sides of C.S. Lewis's personality to finally be at rest. Scholar Alan Jacobs says it best: 'Lewis became a Christian not through accepting a particular set of arguments but through learning to read a story the right way’” (p. 186).
 - However, the connection between art-making and Christianity is not as uncomplicated as this implies.



‘ART-MAKING’ AS A ‘SUB-CREATOR’ DOES NOT TIDILY FIT THE CONVERSION NARRATIVE

Sub-creation is not entirely a Christian act

- Tolkien’s vision of art-making was that because the Great Creator had made humans, humans were in turn inspired to create, as lesser ‘sub-creators’.
- Tolkien takes as a given the fact that humans are inspired to create by a Christian God. However, he believes that “mythology is in itself almost devoid of religious significance,” (Tolkien, 1947/2014), but states in letter 131 that the *Silmarillion* is “cosmogonical drama ... [with] beings of the same order of beauty, power, and majesty as the ‘gods’ of higher mythology...” (Tolkien, 2023).
- The *Silmarillion*, according to Tolkien, is a mythology, and devoid of religious significance.



TOLKIEN'S WORKS ARE VERY INTENTIONALLY NOT MEANT TO BE CHRISTIAN

Tolkien places importance upon not explicitly writing religion into sub-creation, because sub-creators are a “poor reflection” of the Deity.

- Tolkien takes pains to say that although his mythology as written in the Silmarillion reflects “elements of moral and religious truth” (Tolkien, 2023), they are absolutely “not explicit, not in the known form of the primary ‘real’ world” (Tolkien, 2023),
- Tolkien’s sub-creation is already finite and a failure, because it provides “only one facet of a truth incalculably rich: finite only because the capacity of Man for whom this was done is finite” (Tolkien, 1947/2014).

TABLE 3: TOLKIEN ON 'SUB-CREATION' AND RELIGION

Tolkien's <i>Letters</i> (#131)	<i>On Fairy-stories</i>	Tolkien's <i>Letters</i> (#131)	<i>On Fairy-stories</i>
<p>Myth and fairy-story must, as all art, reflect and contain in solution elements of moral and religious truth (or error), but not explicit, not in the known form of the primary 'real' world. (I am speaking, of course, of our present situation, not of ancient pagan, pre-Christian days.</p>	<p>Andrew Lang said...that mythology and religion (in the strict sense of that word) are two distinct things that have become inextricably entangled, though mythology is in itself almost devoid of religious significance.</p> <p>The peculiar quality of the "joy" in successful Fantasy can thus be explained as a sudden glimpse of the underlying reality or truth.</p> <p>So the sub-creator really wants to create something that is True and Real; if they provide a good Eucatastrophe, they provide a 'brief vision that the answer may be greater - it may be a far-off gleam or echo of evangelium in the real world.'</p>	<p>They are 'divine', that is, were originally 'outside' and existed 'before' the making of the world. Their power and wisdom is derived from their Knowledge of the cosmogonical drama, which they perceived first as a drama (that is as in a fashion we perceive a story composed by some-one else), and later as a 'reality'. On the side of mere narrative device, this is, of course, meant to provide beings of the same order of beauty, power, and majesty as the 'gods' of higher mythology, which can yet be accepted – well, shall we say baldly, by a mind that believes in the Blessed Trinity.</p>	<p>It is a serious and dangerous matter. It is presumptuous of me to touch upon such a theme; but if by grace what I say has in any respect any validity, it is, of course, only one facet of a truth incalculably rich: finite only because the capacity of Man for whom this was done is finite.</p>




SUMMARY OF SECOND FINDING:

- Tolkien drew a strict line between Christianity and what could be depicted in sub-creation. The realm of sub-creation had to be explicitly NOT religious.
- The creations of sub-creators are destined to be limited and fail because humans are not the Deity.
 - If Melkor isn't an allegory here, then I don't know what allegory means.
- This troubles the notion that Tolkien could draw an easy parallel for Lewis between the Christian creator and sub-creators of fantasy.
- And Tolkien's "mythology for England" has nothing at all to do with Christianity, and exists in a different space entirely. But where?



FINDING 3: SUB-
CREATIONS EXIST
NOT IN HEAVEN,
NOT IN HELL, BUT
IN THE PERILOUS
REALM



IF TOLKIEN'S SUB-CREATIONS ARE NOT ABOUT CHRISTIANITY, WHERE DOES HE LOCATE THIS REALM?

The Perilous Realm

- For Tolkien, fairy-stories integrated the human realm with what he called the Perilous Realm, identified by its location in a surreal and liminal space:
 - “The realm of fairy-story is wide and deep and high and filled with many things: all manner of beasts and birds are found there; shoreless seas and stars uncounted; beauty that is an enchantment, and an ever-present peril; both joy and sorrow sharp as swords. In that realm a man may, perhaps, count himself fortunate to have wandered, but its very richness and strangeness tie the tongue of the traveller who would report them. And while he is there it is dangerous for him to ask too many questions, lest the gate should be shut and the keys be lost” (Tolkien, 1947/2014).



TOLKIEN PROVIDES US WITH A ROAD MAP TO THE PERILOUS REALM

O see ye not yon narrow road
So thick beset wi' thorns and briars?
That is **the path of Righteousness**, (1)
Though after it but few inquires.
And see ye not yon braid, braid road
That lies across the lily leven?
That is **the path of Wickedness**, (2)
Though some call it the Road to Heaven.
And see ye not yon bonny road
That winds about yon fernie brae?
That is **the road to fair Elfland**, (3)
Where thou and I this night maun gae.

(On Fairy-stories, 1947/2014)



THE THIRD PATH

Elfland is not found by the road to heaven, nor the road to hell, but by a third path

- Hendrix writes in *The Mythmakers* (2024) that “Tolkien believed that the magic of the myth opened a window into a truer picture of reality. Great myths allow us to slip through the clouds of everyday life and glimpse something divine” (p. 124).
- Hendrix conflates “something divine” with Christianity, when it is about a glimpse of this third path.
- This third path is NOT a “truer picture of reality”, it is about a liminal space in which everything is surreal, strange, and Other.



SUMMARY OF THIRD FINDING:

- Where is the road to Elfland? It is not the road to the Christian heaven. It is not the road to the Christian hell. Tolkien presents Elfland, and his entire sub-created realm as a third space separate from Christianity.
- The simplified conversion narrative of *The Mythmakers* ignores the fact that C.S. Lewis's "Joy" has nothing to do with religion, and that Tolkien's sub-creation takes place in a realm that has nothing to do with Christian heaven or hell.
- Primary source material proves that the realms of Tolkien's creations, and Lewis's greatest desires, are different from and apart from religion; they exist in a third, liminal space that invites all of us to enter—but at our own risk.



IMPORTANCE



THE ROAD TO FAIR ELFLAND

Finding Christianity in the works of CS Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien is easy.

- After all, Tolkien says, “[t]he Gospels contain a fairy-story, or a story of a larger kind which embraces all the essence of fairy-stories [...] The Birth of Christ is the Eucatastrophe of Man's history. The Resurrection is the Eucatastrophe of the story of the Incarnation” (Tolkien, 1947/2014).
- But my purpose here today is to point out that there is enough evidence in his contradictions, in his sly poetry, and in his Melkorean sub-creative ways, to point to another path.



WHERE THOU AND I THIS NIGHT MAUN GAE

The complexity of the primary source narratives are the crack in the veneer of this Christian interpretation of their works.

- Lewis spoke of turning away from the known and the ordinary to seek his unexpected joy.
- Tolkien might have reminded everyone that the Christian religion is a type of fairy-story, but he cannot take back the map he gave us—and show us by example that when the horns of Elfland called him to follow, he walked past both the path to heaven and the path to hell to follow.



A REALM BOTH FAIR AND FREE

Tolkien made room for all of us to hear the horns of Fairy, calling to us from under the eaves of the forest, just off the roads we know.

- The Christian God is not in this place, but He does not need to be—this realm is strange enough and fair enough and **LARGE** enough for us all to build our fair fortresses in our own corners of it.
- And because Tolkien has pointed us down the third path, the rest of us have found our way in. And maybe, in the haunting and half-heard phrase of music beyond the hill, we will find our own paths to joy.



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