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Gandalf and Guardini: A Fresh Look at the Theology of J.R.R. Tolkein's The Lord of the Rings

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Although well-educated readers have delighted in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* for decades, few scholars dare study it. This paradox occurs for a number of reasons. Primarily, academia has overlooked its value. As Brian Rosebury explains in *Tolkien: A Cultural Phenomenon*, "the predominant response to Tolkien in the academic world has not been hostility. It has been bemused silence, or tacit dismissiveness. At best, there has been a willingness to accept Tolkien's membership of one or other marginalized genre. . . . into which any presupposition of his importance could safely be dissolved" (3). As Rosebury makes painfully clear, most writers ignore *The Lord of the Rings* because they consider it unworthy of their attention.

Despite this impediment, a small but steady number have made efforts to write scholarly works about *The Lord of the Rings* since its publication. Although these contributions certainly help it gain acceptance, they create new difficulties too. Preoccupation with genre and the belief that current critical methods are unsuitable for it show two common ways well-meaning writers undermine the legitimacy of their arguments.

Finally, Tolkien's outspoken dislike of literary critics spooks many writers. Although Tolkien taught English at the University of Oxford for over twenty years, he focused mostly on philology. Consequently, he wrote little literary criticism himself. This fact, paired with the mixed treatment of his works by critics, understandably led him to distrust them. Tolkien was

never one to keep his opinions to himself. In his foreword to the second edition of *The Lord of the Rings*, he writes, "[a]s for any inner meaning or 'message,' it has in the intention of the author none. It is neither allegorical nor topical. . . . I cordially dislike allegory in all its manifestations and always have done so . . ." (xxiii-xxiv). Many writers cite this remark, along with various other disparaging remarks about critics, as warnings against prying too deeply into meanings of or inspirations for *The Lord of the Rings*.

Consequently, few have gone further than to claim *The Lord of the Rings* contains Catholic ideas or Christian imagery, positions vocally endorsed by Tolkien. While some more adventurous critics have gone so far as to suggest that an Augustinian theology underlies the work, this argument too seems quite conservative and in keeping with the self-imposed ban on unsanctioned exploration into *The Lord of the Rings*.

It is possible to move past the intellectual blockage troubling critics studying *The Lord of the Rings*. While its Augustinian theology and Christian imagery do give it deeper meaning, they do not fully encompass its theological depths. Furthermore, the Catholic theology of Romano Guardini helps readers gain a better understanding of the theological ideas present in *The Lord of the Rings* and why they matter in a wider intellectual context. This thesis springs from a deep respect for Tolkien and the wish to broaden appreciation of his work in a scholarly manner. This essay represents a very modest attempt to do so.

Since Tolkien's own thoughts on the theological value of fantasy dominate criticism of *The Lord of the Rings*, it seems only natural to begin by examining them. Fortunately, he made this task easy by publishing the essay "On Fairy-Stories," which accessibly lays out his opinions. Here, he explains that a meaningful work of fantasy should offer a sort of escape from the problems of human existence: the ugliness of the modern world, hunger, poverty, war, violence,

and even death (64-67). Although he claims fantasy should help us escape from our problems, he does not mean it should be escapist in a negative sense. In his own words, "[w]hy should a man be scorned if, finding himself in prison, he tries to get out and go home? Or if, when he cannot do so, he thinks and talks about other topics than jailers and prison-walls? . . . . In using Escape in this way the critics have chosen the wrong word, and, what is more, they are confusing . . . the Escape of the Prisoner with the Flight of the Deserter" (60). In this striking passage, Tolkien illustrates why he believes well-crafted fantasy should offer people a form of escape, not from reality but from the destructive aspects of life. Since all people experience the troubles of humanity and need relief, fantasy provides it temporarily, a worthy goal for any sort of literature.

Tolkien brings in theological ideas when he examines how fantasy provides this relief. In his opinion, a good work of fantasy contains a turning point made possible only by what he calls a "eucatastrophe":

> a sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur. 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. (68)

He expands this idea, adding, "[t]he Gospels contain . . . a story of a larger kind which embraces all the essences of fairy-stories. They contain . . . the greatest and most complete conceivable eucatastrophe. . . . The Birth of Christ is the eucatastrophe of Man's history. The Resurrection is the eucatastrophe of the story of the Incarnation." (71-72). As these statements show, Tolkien clearly believes that all fantasy, including his own, has a theological agenda. What he sees readers enjoying in fantasy is the possibility of good characters overcoming evil against all odds,

which reflects Christ's overcoming evil and death. Likewise, any joy readers experience echoes the joy Christians feel when they think about what they believe Christ did for them.

After publishing "On Fairy-Stories," Tolkien never wrote about *The Lord of the Rings* in light of it. However, he did claim it illustrated his ideas, and a close reading of it bears it out. Because *The Lord of the Rings* is such a long work, it will be useful to provide a summary to focus readers' attention on some key points. Although *The Lord of the Rings* is a unified work, it is broken into three volumes for the reader's convenience. In the first volume, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Frodo Baggins, an unassuming hobbit (a human-like creature shorter than a dwarf), learns from the wizard Gandalf that a ring he inherited from his uncle Bilbo is actually the One Ring lost by the evil lord Sauron. This ring bestows incredible powers on anyone with the knowledge and strength of mind to wield it and is being desperately sought by Sauron so he can become the supreme ruler of Middle-earth (the fictional world where the story takes place) and enslave all its inhabitants.

Once Frodo learns this fact, he determines to do what he can to prevent Sauron from ever getting it back. This task begins with Frodo and several of his closest friends (Sam Gamgee, Merry Brandybuck, and Pippin Took) taking the Ring to Rivendell, an Elvish retreat and seat of the elf lord Elrond. Elrond calls a great council, which decides that the only way to keep the Ring out of Sauron's hands permanently is to destroy it. This decision entails taking it to Mordor, Sauron's country, a truly risky move. Frodo accepts the challenge, and he and a group of eight companions, including: Gandalf, Aragorn (the king in exile of Middle-earth), Frodo's hobbit friends, and one representative each for men, elves, and dwarves (Boromir, Legolas, and Gimli respectively) set off to attempt the task.

On the way, Gandalf, the Fellowship's unspoken leader, appears to be captured and killed, and the rest of the company must decide what to do. They have two major options: to go to Minas Tirith, the greatest human city-state of Middle-earth and try defend themselves while devising a plan to take the Ring to Mordor, or to take the Ring directly to Mordor despite nearly insurmountable obstacles. Although Aragorn becomes the leader of the Fellowship, he allows Frodo to decide their course of action because he is the Ring Bearer. While Frodo takes time away from the group to make up his mind, Boromir corners him and attempts to force him into taking the Ring to Minas Tirith, where he erroneously believes that he could use it to defeat Sauron.

After this incident, Frodo decides that he must take the ring to Mordor and cannot wait to bring anyone else with him. He attempts to leave the Fellowship's camp unseen, but his loyal friend Sam realizes his plans and insists on going too. Frodo accepts Sam's companionship, and they leave for Mordor. Eventually, the others realize Frodo and Boromir are missing and suspect foul play. They scatter in all directions, trying to find them as quickly as possible, ending the first volume.

The second volume, *The Two Towers*, picks up with the search. Merry and Pippin find Boromir, but get attacked by a band of Orcs (malicious goblin creatures). Boromir tries to save them to atone for his treatment of Frodo, but gets killed. The Orcs kidnap Merry and Pippin before anyone can save them. Eventually, Aragorn, Legolas, and Gimli find the body of Boromir and realize what happened. They decide their best course of action is to allow Frodo and Sam to go to Mordor alone and to rescue Merry and Pippin themselves. In the process, they are reunited with Gandalf, who informs them the wizard Saruman has been beguiled by the thought of the Ring and has tried to convert his realm, Isengard, into a miniature version of Mordor. They then

defeat Saruman with the help of Gandalf, the people of Rohan, and the Ents (ancient tree creatures in charge of the forest who Merry and Pippin befriend when they escape the Orcs). Finally, they all press on towards Minas Tirith to attempt to guard Middle-earth from Sauron's eminent attack.

At this critical juncture, *The Two Towers* shifts focus to Frodo and Sam's experiences. After leaving the Fellowship, Frodo and Sam realize their journey to Mordor will prove far more difficult than they ever imagined. Over the course of their travels, they are forced to accept Gollum, a hobbit like creature who held the Ring for many years, as a guide. Although he helps by leading them along safe paths, he adds an element of danger because he clearly wants the Ring and may betray them to get it back. The volume ends with Frodo and Sam reaching Mordor after splitting from Gollum, who attempted to sacrifice Frodo and Sam to Shelob (an enormous evil spider) in order to get the Ring.

The final volume, *The Return of the King*, chronicles the fates of the members of the Fellowship during the War against Sauron. Although everyone ends up in Minas Tirith, they all arrive separately, revealing different aspects of the war's significance and Sauron's evil. After winning the initial battles, it becomes apparent that they will need to engage in a final, decisive battle. Although they are hopelessly out numbered, it provides their only means of distracting Sauron to give Frodo the best chance to destroy the Ring. At the same time, Frodo and Sam make their torturous journey through Mordor and eventually destroy the Ring. This happens at the moment the final battle is poised to take place, giving the defenders of Middle-earth the final victory. The rest of the work concerns itself with the later fate of the Fellowship. Most notably Frodo, who never quite recovers from the horrors he endured in Mordor, is granted eternal rest and happiness in the country of the elves across the sea.

Although this brief summary cannot give an idea of the beauty and complexity of Tolkien's work, it provides enough of a framework to show his theological ideas in action. By alluding to some of the beautiful places and intriguing characters that fill the work, readers get a glimpse of how Middle-earth provides the relief from the negativity of the world people so desperately crave. By examining the work's climax, when the Ring is destroyed and the armies of the good countries of Middle-earth prevail against long odds, readers get a tiny taste of how wonderful it would be if the worst forces of evil were defeated once and for all and of what Christian hope really feels like.

Tolkien's theology of fantasy clearly applies to *The Lord of the Rings*. By providing an enchanting place for people to escape to, threatening it with overpowering evil, and then saving it though a glorious eucatastrophe, *The Lord of the Rings* meets all of Tolkien's criteria for a theologically effective piece of fantasy. Even so, it seems applicable only in a broad sense, missing many of the nuances and intricacies that make *The Lord of the Rings* a superior piece of literature. In response to this problem, many literary critics argue that Augustinian theology better reveals its theological depths.

A good introduction to Augustine's view on evil comes from sections of his most famous work, *The Confessions*. Augustine declares evil is not an actual substance. If this statement were true, God would have had to create something evil, which seems unlikely since it would diminish him (46-47). Augustine extrapolates, writing, "You have made all things good, and that there are no substances not made by You. . . . To You then, evil utterly is not . . . there is nothing over and above Your creation that could break in or derange the order that You imposed upon it. . . . there are some things which we call evil because they do not harmonize with other things; and in

themselves they are good" (51). Here, Augustine clearly states that God made everything good. Something is only evil in so far as it turns away from what God intended it to be.

In addition to Augustine's conception of evil, many critics apply his ideas about free will to *The Lord of the Rings*. An examination of selections from his *City of God* yields some accessible insight. Augustine writes, "we assert both that God knows all things before they come to pass, and that we do by our free will whatsoever we know and feel to be done by us only because we will it" (54). Although this assertion seems paradoxical, he makes reasonable arguments to support this claim. As far as divine omniscience is concerned, Augustine claims that God must have knowledge of everything that will happen in the future because if he did not it would diminish his power (57).

Augustine further explains this line of reasoning in the essay "Grace and Free Will." In this treatise, he contends, "the commandments of God themselves would be of no avail to man unless he had the free choice of the will whereby by fulfilling them he could attain the promised reward" (251). In this passage, he shows that unless people have free will, it would be useless for God to create any sort of moral code. This claim is logical because if people have no free will they cannot control whether or not they obey God's rules. Building off this assumption, faith in God would mean nothing if people lacked free will because they would be destined to either believe or not believe in God regardless of what they did.

A final point of Augustine's theology relevant to writers' application of it to *The Lord of the Rings* is his beliefs concerning grace. In "Grace and Free Will," Augustine claims, "[w]e prove by similar testimonies of Sacred Scripture that God's grace is not given according to our merits. We see, in fact, that it is given, and continues to be given daily, not only where there are no good merits, but also where there are many previous merits that are evil. But it is when grace

is unmistakably given that even our own merits begin to be good, though only because of grace"

(265). This powerful statement shows Augustine did not believe people could be redeemed by

God for anything they did; only God's grace could grant people salvation. Indeed, Augustine

says that people cannot do anything good in the eyes of God until they have received his grace.

Although this belief may seem to encroach on his argument about free will and to go

against what many people consider to be good Catholic theology, Augustine fleshes out his

argument with this claim, which satisfies both caveats:

> it is through His mercy that we perform the good works for which a crown [of eternal
>
> life] is given us in return. And we must not suppose that when he said: "For it is God who
>
> of his good pleasure works in you both the will and the performance," he was doing away
>
> with free will. If such were the case, he would not have declared previously: "Work out
>
> your salvation with fear and trembling." For when they are given the command "to
>
> work," an appeal is made to free will, whereas the command to do this "with fear and
>
> trembling" is given so they will not take credit to themselves for their good works. . .
>
> (273-274)

Augustine did not think that what people did themselves could earn them salvation and eternal

life. Augustine stresses that only God can give salvation and that only he can inspire good works

acceptable to himself. However, Augustine realizes that this idea sounds both deterministic and

that people may see it as an excuse to ignore God's commandments. To correct these false

suppositions, Augustine explains that once people have received the grace of God and the

divinely inspired good works that come with it, it is their job to act on these impulses with their

own free will in order to obtain salvation.

Instances of writers spending more or less time examining the Augustinian nature of *The Lord of the Rings* abound; so much so that it would be difficult to provide examples for all of them. The best representatives are "Mythic and Christian Elements in J.R.R. Tolkien" by Clyde Kilby, *The Road to Middle Earth* by T.A. Shippey, *Tolkien: Man and Myth* by Joseph Pierce, and *Tolkien: A Cultural Phenomenon* by Brian Rosebury.

"Mythic and Christian Elements in Tolkien" provides a classic example of critics attempting to explore the theological implications of *The Lord of the Rings* more thoroughly without straying too far from the critical establishment. After restating that *The Lord of the Rings* illustrates Tolkien's theology as outlined in "On Fairy-Stories," Kilby entertains the idea that the work incorporates Augustinian theology. While Kilby makes few direct references to Augustine and quotes him only once, his focus on providence, free will, and evil clearly demonstrate his belief that Augustinian theology gives the work deeper meaning.

In keeping with the Augustinian idea that God works through people for the greater good, Kilby points out that in *The Lord of the Rings*, "some superordinating power over Frodo and his friends is often suggested. There is a force 'beyond any design' of Sauron, says Gandalf, as he explains the history of the Ring to Frodo. Bilbo, he says, 'was meant to find the Ring.' And therefore Frodo was also 'meant to have it' . . . Elrond tells those present at the Council that though they are seemingly there by chance, it is not actually so" (132). As Kilby's examples illustrate, although no God is ever mentioned, some supernatural force does appear to act on the characters. This force leads them to do things that, will eventually lead to the destruction of the Ring and Sauron.

Similarly, Kilby makes a point of showing that the characters all possess and act of their own free will even though they are subject to providence, just as Augustine stresses in his own

works. Kilby writes, "[Frodo and Sam's] whole way through Mordor is that of dedicated hearts careless of their own safety except as that safety pertains to the fulfilling of their purpose. . . . One of the clear evidences of Frodo's increasing greatness of character is his steady will to resist incredible temptation in the face of growing physical weakness. Saint Augustine's doctrine of the effective will is well illustrated by Frodo" (138-139). As Kilby shows, even though Frodo was seemingly ordained by providence to bring the Ring to Mordor and destroy it, and Sam willingly chose to go with him, their choices do not insure that they will complete their task. In order for them to do so, they must use the will power they have to take them to the very heart of Mordor without bowing to the temptation of using the Ring to aggrandize themselves and sidestep their task. As Kilby claims at the end of the passage these actions most certainly illustrates the Augustinian idea that providence and fee will operate simultaneously in all people.

Finally, Kilby explores the nature of evil in *The Lord of the Rings*. In all of his writings, Augustine makes clear that evil is not an actual thing, but the corruption of good things, and that because evil is corrupt, it cannot create anything. Kilby convincingly demonstrates that *The Lord of the Rings* illustrates these ideas. He points out Sauron is never presented as an actual being but a malignant and powerful presence, that his chief servants are Ring Wraiths that have no material substance, and that all of these characters started out good but were corrupted by their desire for power. In doing so, Kilby shows readers that evil in the work literally has no substance. He also highlights that all evil characters were once good, but through evil desires wasted away and lost nearly all vestiges of humanity (137-138). Likewise, Kilby reminds readers that although Sauron has many evil creatures in his service, he never created any of them but instead overpowered or seduced good ones to do his bidding. By making this argument, Kilby shows that Sauron did not create something new and evil but only perverted good (138).

Kilby's main contribution to the critical understanding of *The Lord of the Rings* was proving that it was indeed infused with Augustinian theology. This argument is useful because it shows that the work, despite its lack of obvious religious practices or beliefs, does indeed deal with theological arguments. While this contribution cannot be underestimated, Kilby did not attempt to demonstrate the importance of Augustinian theology to any of the themes of the work, or why the presence of this theology makes *The Lord of the Rings* a relevant or valuable piece of literature. He left these questions for future critics to answer.

While Kilby focused mainly on proving that *The Lord of the Rings* illustrates key aspects of Augustinian theology, Shippey goes a step further. Although Shippey's arguments are quite diffuse, his most significant ones examine how Augustinian theology contributes to the understanding of evil in the work, and why this understanding makes the work relevant. In doing so, Shippey presents one of the earliest scholarly voices in the debate over whether or not *The Lord of the Rings* should be considered a significant piece of modern literature.

According to Shippey, *The Lord of the Rings* indisputably illustrates the Augustinian ideas of the immateriality of evil, the goodness of creation, evil as a product of misused free will, and God's ability to set all things right (107). At the same time, Shippey also believes *The Lord of the Rings* deals with, "an alternative tradition in Western thought . . . which . . . arises spontaneously from experience. This says that while it may be all very well to make philosophical statements about evil, evil nevertheless *is* real, and not merely an absence; and what's more still *not* resisting it (in the belief that one day Omnipotence will cure all ills) is a dereliction of duty" (107). As Shippey's claim shows, he believes *The Lord of the Rings* incorporates both Augustinian and "heroic" ideas of evil, which while antipathetic to each other, do coexist in Western thought.

Shippey justifies this claim through a series of examples from *The Lord of the Rings* itself. His strongest support comes from the idea that the Ring embodies both forms of evil. Shippey explains, "[i]f evil were only the absence of good . . . then the Ring could never be anything other than a psychic amplifier. . . . However if evil were merely a hateful and external power without echo in the hearts of the good, then someone might have to take the Ring to the Cracks of Doom, but it need not be Frodo . . . whoever went would only have to distrust his enemies, not his friends and not himself" (111). This statement gets at the heart of Shippey's belief about the dual nature of evil in *The Lord of the Rings*. Because the Ring corrupts those who use it regardless of their morality, it appears to exert power over the user that an immaterial force could not. Despite this fact, anyone who comes into contact with the Ring can decide whether or not to use it and, through willpower, resist its allure. Through this paradox, Shippey shows just how *The Lord of the Rings* deals with the messy nature of evil.

Shippey culminates his argument claiming that by providing a better understanding of the dual nature of evil, *The Lord of the Rings* helps readers process the horrors of World War Two and the dangers of modern society, making it an important piece of modern literature (126-130). As important as this point is, Shippey also sees the work as a prime example of Tolkien's theory of eucatastrophe and believes this argument is its most important message (131-132).

The Road to Middle Earth provides an intriguing and highly original take on *The Lord of the Rings*. By examining the presentation of evil via Augustinian theology and a dazzling variety of historical sources, Shippey makes a reasonable claim for considering the work as an example of modern literature. Despite Shippey's achievements, his work leaves some important gaps that should trouble anyone studying the work's theology. Although Shippey identifies Augustinian theology at work in *The Lord of the Rings* and shows how it highlights the complex nature of

evil, he does not show how it contributes to any sort of a theological message. Similarly, although Shippey claims readers could apply the work's theory of evil to the specific evils of World War Two and the Cold War, he gives very few solid examples of such a reading. Finally, Shippey's reading does not suggest how better understanding evil can help people avoid or fight it, which is an oversight. While Shippey certainly advanced the critical discussion, he also left many key questions unanswered.

Pearce attempts to answer these larger questions. In a typical move, Pearce opens his discussion of the theology of *The Lord of the Rings* by asserting the influences of Catholic theology and Tolkien's theology on the work (100-108). Although Pearce makes the equally familiar move of turning to Augustinian theology next, he takes a surprising approach. He states, "[t]hroughout the years since its publication, many other writers have written of the Christian orthodoxy which breathes life into *The Lord of the Rings*. . . . However, the fact that Tolkien consciously spurned allegory and preferred instead to leave the Christianity in his work implicit rather than explicit has led to much misunderstanding" (109).

To get around this difficulty, Pearce contends the theology of the work is conveyed mainly through symbols, and that, "the religious element falls into three distinct but inter-relate areas: the sacrifice which accompanies the selfless exercise of free will; the intrinsic conflict between good and evil; and the perennial question of time and eternity, particularly in relation to life and death" (111).

Although Pearce investigates a variety of symbols, two stand out particularly. The first is the association of Frodo and Sam's journey to Mordor with Christ's journey to the cross. He writes, "[t]he parallels with Christ's carrying of the Cross are obvious . . . the parable of Frodo's burden may even lead the reader to a greater understanding of Christ's burden. All of a sudden

one sees that it was not so much the weight of the Cross that caused Christ to stumble but the weight of evil, symbolized by Tolkien as the Eye of Sauron" (112). Pearce furthers this thought in the passage, "[i]n many ways, however, Frodo's companion, Sam Gamgee, is an even greater hero, the more so because he is cast in the role of Frodo's servant, serving his master with a selfless love . . . . The character of Sam Gamgee is representative of another powerful sub–theme running through *The Lord of the Rings*: the exaltation of the humble" (112). Pearce uses these examples to show how the image of Frodo as a Christ figure and Sam as the embodiment of humility convey the Christian ideas of Christ-like self-sacrifice and the importance of humility powerfully and unencumbered by formal Augustinian theology.

The second image Pearce identifies is that of the ever present sense of the struggle between good and evil. He fleshes out this argument with the words, "[t]he spiritual warfare between the forces of dark and light in Tolkien's world forms the landscape within which the characters exercise their free will and make their sacrifices. Indeed, it is the knowledge of this conflict, and the response to it, which give meaning to the sacrifices that the heroes make" (116). Here, Pearce claims that the struggle between good and evil is present in nearly every aspect of *The Lord of the Rings*. This assertion leads readers to understand that none of the characters' moral actions would have any significance without it. As with humility, Pearce shows how *The Lord of the Rings* grapples with the Christian idea of the constant struggle between good and evil without relating it to Augustinian theology.

By focusing on the symbolism rather than the theology that informs it, Peace makes a convincing argument for why the work appeals to Christian and non-Christian readers alike. He shows that although the images in the text do tie nicely to Augustinian theology, they do not have to be interpreted via it, making them meaningful to a wider audience. In doing so, Pearce

makes it clear that the moral messages in the work should be accessible to all readers. However, Peace still fails to explain, like most critics before him, why the values of *The Lord of the Rings* should matter to today's readers.

The most recent and by far the richest inquiry into the theology of *The Lord of the Rings* is Rosebury's *Tolkien: A Cultural Phenomenon*. In it, Rosebury states in no uncertain terms that Augustinian theology is one of the major forces informing the work. He writes, "[t]hough God is not referred to in *The Lord of the Rings* . . . and though its world is pre-Christian, there is no doubt that we are in an Augustinian universe, in which all Creation is good, and evil conceived in terms of freely-chosen negation, of a wilful abdication from an original state of created perfection" (35). While this statement is in keeping with much former criticism, Rosebury does not link it to any sort of symbolic reading of the text. Instead, he shows how it informs the central themes of the work. He claims, "one of the underlying themes of *The Lord of the Rings* [is] 'the machine', a term which Tolkien used in an extended sense to signify the attempt to actualise our desires by coercing the world, and other wills into satisfying them" (180). Roseberry continues his argument:

> in Tolkien there is . . . [an] emphatic sense that the impropriety of the attempt to enforce one's will by means of the machine lies in the fact that it refuses submission to limitations that Nature (or the will of the Creator) imposes on human fulfilment. The machine is contrasted with the other characteristic product of human labor: art, which gives expression to those desires which transcend the possibilities of human life, but holds back for the hubris of seeking to realize them; God, it is implied, retains, and might exercise, the power to *realize* human, or mortal imagination. (180-181)

As this pair of statements shows, Rosebury sees Augustinian theology in *The Lord of The Rings*, serving a much more complex purpose than simply giving the work a Christian flavor. Rosebury demonstrates how Augustinian ideas concerning free will and the nature of evil help readers understand the atrocities of evil's dominance over people and the natural world as an affront to God. Rosebury also notes that these ideas are compatible with Catholic theology, but do not assume readers accept or agree with these doctrines, a distinctively modern approach (152-154 and 182). Despite identifying these ways *The Lord of the Rings* compellingly incorporates modern ideas and relevance to modern readers, Rosebury insists that it cannot be considered a piece of modern literature because it lacks irony, something he see as essential to all modern works (154-157).

At this point, any reasonable reader might ask, "if Augustinian theology does not encompass the full richness of the theology in *The Lord of the Rings*, then whose work does?" Romano Guardini seems a good candidate. A professor and Catholic theologian, Guardini gave a series of lectures from 1947-1949 that later became his masterpiece, *The End of the Modern World*. In this work, he explores the problems facing the post-modern world and how Christians should respond to them. These ideas harmonize with and enhance the theological ideas in *The Lord of the Rings*. They also show how it is truly has vital messages for readers today.

Guardini also seems like a natural choice because of his significance at the time *The Lord of the Rings* was written. Although he may be obscure now, Casarella identifies him as one of the most important Catholic theologians in the period from 1914-1978, the prophet of "the crisis of modernity," and the earliest theologian to deal with post-modernity (89). Guardini's prominence in the late 1940s, Tolkien's deep interest in Catholic theology, and the prevalence of avant-

guarde ideas in Oxford makes it seem likely that Tolkien at least knew about Guardini's ideas and that they could have been incorporated into *The Lord of the Rings*.

Guardini asserts that people of every era have a particular worldview that influences all their thoughts and actions. Giving brief looks at the views of classical, medieval, and modern people, Guardini focuses on how attitudes have shifted in the post-modern era, and how these views have radically changed the ways people think and act.

One area Guardini addresses is society's relationship with nature. According to Guardini, for post-moderns, "[n]ature is no longer experienced wondrously as a rich source bestowing harmony on all things, as wisely ordered of itself, as benevolent with its favors. Man today distrusts nature, he cannot speak of 'Mother Nature.' Nature has become alien and dangerous to man" (53). To explain this outlook, he states, "[t]he technological mind sees nature as an insensate order, as a cold body of facts, as a mere 'given,' as an object of utility, as raw material to be hammered into useful shape . . . Technological man will remold the world; he sees his task as Promethean and its stakes as being and non-being" (55). These statements reveal that instead of seeing nature as something sacred and deserving of reverence, post-modern society considers nature completely foreign and even frightening. This shift results from advances in technology, which allow people to understand how the different elements of nature work and think of it as nothing more than a source of materials to use for their own ends. These circumstances give people far greater control over nature than ever before.

After assessing the changes in society's understanding of nature, Guardini considers how its conception of human nature has changed as well. He sees people moving away from an individualistic culture to a mass culture. In his own words, "[t]he mass was fashioned according to the law of standardization, a law dictated by the functional nature of the machine. Moreover,

the most highly developed individuals of the mass, its elite, are not merely conscious of the influence of the machine; they deliberately imitate it, building its standards and rhythms into their own ethos" (59). As this statement demonstrates, Guardini sees a "massive" shift from the modern idea that people should develop their individual talents for the greater good to the post-modern idea that people should try to fit into society as much as possible so it can operate as effectively as a machine.

As Guardini's thoughts and arguments reveal, post-modern people have significantly more power than any of their predecessors ever did. Because people can isolate nature into its parts and use it purely for their own benefit and organize people into machine-like groups with a single purpose, they have the ability to do almost anything. Although Guardini firmly believes this sort of power is wrong, he also expresses the belief that humans should possess power. He writes, "[m]an's natural God-likeness consists in this capacity for power, in his ability to use it and in his resultant lordship. Herein lies the essential vocation and worth of human existence . . . Man cannot be human and, as a kind of addition to his humanity, exercise or fail to exercise power; the exercise of power is essential to his humanity" (133). Although this passage shows Guardini believes humans must have power, he also believed that it must have its limits. He explains, "[i]f human power and the lordship which stems from it are rooted in man's likeness to God, then power is not man's in his own right, autonomously, but only as a loan . . . Man is lord by the grace of God, and he must exercise his dominion responsibly, for he is answerable for it to him who is Lord by essence" (134). Although people should, and indeed must exercise power in order to be fully human, they must do so within the limits set by God, because all human power came from God in the first place.

Guardini also makes clear that unfettered and misused power have serious consequences. He warns, "[t]he greater a man's power, the stronger the temptation to take the shortcut of force; the temptation to nullify the individual and his freedom, to ignore both his creative originality and his personal truth; to achieve the desired end simply by force dismissing what cannot be forced as not worthy of consideration" (179). If people have the ability to exercise power without restraint, they become destructive and disregard human rights and dignity.

As horrible as these consequences are, Guardini claims there is an even more devastating side effect of using power, the complete corruption of the person exercising it. He warns, "[n]othing corrupts purity of character and the lofty qualities of the soul more than power. To wield power that is neither determined by moral responsibility nor curbed by respect of person results in the destruction of all that is human in the wielder himself" (179-180). Without restraint, power completely dehumanizes its possessors.

Guardini's thoughts on post-modernity appear quite grim. People seem to have an unprecedented amount of power, paired with significantly diminished reservations about using it, a combination likely to cause nothing less than the annihilation of humanity. He asserts, however, that there is hope for the future. He believes, the humility shown by Christ offers the best example for how people should use power. To elaborate on this idea, he says, "Jesus' whole existence is a translation of power into humility. Or to state it actively: into obedience to the will of the Father . . . . For the Son, obedience is nothing secondary or additional; it springs from the core of his being. . . . Not by succumbing to their demands, but in pure freedom. Jesus' acceptance of 'the form of a slave' signifies not weakness, but strength" (144-145). Because Jesus is both the son of God and a part of God himself, he has complete power and most certainly possessed it even when he was human. While Jesus was incarnate, he had the potential

to use his power however he wished, even for his own gain at the risk of corrupting himself. Even so, Jesus chose to live humbly and use all his power to fulfill the will of God, even to the point of dying on the cross (142-143).

In addition to offering the life and actions of Jesus as a means of confronting the post-modern world's problems, Guardini also introduces a less tangible but equally important idea. He writes, "a hope emerges which cannot be easily defined. . . it expresses itself in the confidence that God is greater than all historic processes; that these are in His hands, hence in His grace, and can at any time influence a world that was created not to function like a machine, but likewise to create in the living spirit" (197). No matter how long the odds against humanity are, God always has the capability to intervene when things go wrong in his creation, although he cannot be expected to do so in every instance. Much like Tolkien's eucatastrophe, Guardini's idea shows how hope is always possible for Christians, even in the bleak post-modern world.

While Guardini's theology is fascinating in the abstract, it takes on new dimensions when applied to *The Lord of the Rings.* Examining how Guardini's views of nature and society, as well as of the post-modern "hero" in *The Lord of the Rings* expose the work's true theological depths.

The soundest evidence that *The Lord of the Rings* illustrates Guardini's ideas about the nature of power is the Ring. Though critics have claimed the Ring represents many things, it makes the most sense to view it as the embodiment of absolute power. The text is rich with evidence to support this thesis. One such instance comes early in the work when Gandalf first proves that Frodo's ring is indeed the One Ring. Gandalf determines this fact by heating it in the fire to reveal its hidden inscription which reads, "One Ring to Rule them all, One Ring to find them, / One Ring to bring them all and in the darkness bind them" (50; bk. 1, ch. 2). As this verse

makes clear, the Ring exists for one reason, to give whoever uses it the power to bend all things and people to his or her will.

The Ring's purpose becomes even more apparent when Gandalf explain why Sauron originally made it. According to Gandalf, the fire writing on the inside of the ring is only a part of a longer verse that tells of all of the Rings of Power Sauron forged. Most significantly, Sauron created nine rings for humans that the One directly controls. Gandalf reveals, "[n]ine he gave to Mortal Men, proud and great, and so ensnared them. Long ago they fell under the dominion of the One, and they became Ringwraiths, shadows under his great Shadow, his most terrible servants" (51; bk. 1, ch. 2). Sauron's use of the Ring to enslave people and bend their wills to his demonstrates the sort of power the Ring possesses. As this statement, paired with Gandalf's previous assertion that the Ring was made to rule all Middle-earth shows, the Ring's power is not limited by respect for people, nature, or the greater good. It also has the capability to rob people of their identity and force them to operate as soulless dehumanized entities is service of the wielder's own desires. These facts make it clear that the Ring represents the sort of naked and unrestrained power Guardini presents as a real threat to humankind in *The End of the Modern World*.

Further evidence that *The Lord of the Rings* reflects Guardini's ideas comes from its portrayal of power as a corrupting force. The degradation of Saruman provides the strongest example. We first learn of the wizard Saruman near the beginning of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, when Gandalf describes him as, "great among the wise. He is the chief of my order and the head of the Council. His knowledge is deep, but his pride has grown with it, and he takes ill any meddling. The lore of the Elven-rings, great and small, is his province. He has long studied it, seeking the lost secrets of their making . . ." (48; bk. 1, ch. 2). This description provides salient

information about Saruman. First, it shows that Saruman was originally seen as a good wizard, so much so that he was placed in charge of the White Council of Wizards and was considered the first wizard of Middle-earth by everyone. Second, it reveals that he has extensive knowledge of ring lore, and therefore how to obtain and use power. Finally, it shows this knowledge and accumulation of power gnawing at his mind, setting the stage for what his increasing power does to him.

Later, at the Council of Elrond, Gandalf tells of a recent encounter with Saruman and the description he gives of him is far from favorable. When Gandalf visited Saruman to ask him for advice about what to do about the Ring, Saruman did not give him a warm welcome. Instead, he gives this disturbing, self-aggrandizing monologue:

> I am Saruman the Wise, Saruman ring-maker. . . . The Elder Days are gone. The Middle Days are passing. The Younger Days are beginning . . . our time is at hand: the world of Men, which we must rule. . . . A new Power is rising. Against it the old allies and policies will not avail us at all. . . . the Wise, such as you and I, may with patience come at last to direct its courses, to control it. We can bide our time, we can keep our thoughts in our hearts deploring maybe evils done by the way, but approving the high and ultimate purpose: Knowledge, Rule, order; all the things we have so far striven in vain to accomplish. . . (259; bk. 2 ch. 2)

Saruman's alarming speech reveals his deterioration from earlier times. Instead of being a wise and benevolent wizard who worked within the White Council's guidelines to use his power for good, he has become a grasping, domineering fool who believes he can use the power gained from studying ring lore, and possibly the power of the Ring itself, to refashion Middle-earth

however he chooses. As this passage foreshadows, Saruman's power is quickly consuming him and turning him into something evil, just as Guardini claimed it would.

Later, Saruman's power come into its own and illustrates the particular problems Guardini warns human power possesses now. A description of his powers by Treebeard, the chief of the Ents captures his "achievements," "[h]e is plotting to become a Power. He has a mind of metal and wheels; and he does not care for growing things, except as far as they serve him for the moment. . . . He has taken up with foul folk with the Orcs. . . . Worse than that: he has been doing something to them; something dangerous. . . . It is a mark of evil things that they cannot abide the Sun but Saruman's Orcs can endure it, even if they hate it" (473; bk. 3 ch. 4). Treebeard's speech shows Saruman freely using, and wasting, the resources of neighboring Fangorn Forest, breeding masses of Orcs modified to suit his purposes and subservient to him, and ignoring the ethics devised by the White Council to serve his own will. In doing so, Saruman exhibits control over nature, destructive use of technology, dictatorship over the masses, and complete disregard for the greater good. Saruman's outlook provides a concrete illustration of post-modern power and the inherent dangers Guardini sees in it.

Finally, Saruman's demise illustrates the dehumanizing effects of unrestrained power. Once Treebeard and the other Ents become fully aware of the danger Saruman poses, they decide to take action against him. This resolution entails going to Isengard, destroying the majority of his Orcs, and making him a prisoner in his own tower. At the same time, Gandalf arrives and removes Saruman from the White Council and the Order of Wizards (583 bk. 3 ch. 10). This leaves Saruman with almost none of his former power. Without his servants, technology, or status he has nothing left except his tower and the memory of his former might.

While this situation may sound dehumanizing enough, Saruman takes steps to make things even worse for himself. After living a pathetic existence in his tower for several months, Saruman convinces the Ents to release him on the grounds that he poses no danger to anyone anymore. The Ents take mercy on him, and allow him to leave Isengard with his final remaining servant. Instead of living a benign existence as a wandering hermit, Saruman makes one final attempt to restore his power and to seek revenge on the hobbits who inspired the Ents to take action against him. To this end, he and his servant go to the Shire, the country of the hobbits, and he establishes himself as its dictator. Although this action creates an unpleasant situation there for several months, his paltry regime is overthrown in under forty eight hours when Frodo and his friends return from their adventures in the east. When they reach Saruman and banish him from the Shire, Saruman's much abused servant finally snaps and stabs him. After this act, the assembled hobbits witness the following scene:

> about the body of Saruman a grey mist gathered, and rising slowly to a great height like smoke from a fire, as a pale shrouded figure it loomed over the Hill. For a moment it wavered, looking to the West; but out of the West came a cold wind, and it bent away, and with a sigh dissolved into nothing. Frodo looked down at the body with pity and horror, for as he looked it seemed that long years of death were suddenly revealed in it. . . (1020; bk. 6 ch. 8)

As this vivid scene reveals, Saruman's death literally exposes the filthy state of his soul and the a fact that his humanity died many years before he did. This haunting image echoes Guardini's belief that the exercise of naked power completely destroys the humanity of the wielder.

A final way *The Lord of the Rings* illustrates Guardini's theology comes from the characteristics of its heroes. Near the close of *The End of the Modern World*, Guardini explains

that the sort of people who can help right the wrongs of the post-modern age are those who see

and accept the problems they face as they are, in obedience to the will of God, and willing to

sacrifice him or herself for the greater good of society (191-195). If we take Guardini's ideas and

apply them to any of the major heroes of *The Lord of the Rings*, it becomes apparent that they all

live up to these standards. Frodo, the main hero of the piece, provides the strongest illustration of

Guardini's thoughts.

One of the major qualities of heroes for the post-modern era Guardini identifies is the

willingness and ability to see problems as they actually are. Frodo exhibits this quality

throughout the course of the work. Examples include when he first accepts that the Ring does

pose a danger to all the inhabitants of Middle-earth, and the various points on his journey to

destroy it when he reaffirms that he both understands the difficulty of his task and the necessity

of completing it.

A particularly clear example of this behavior comes when Frodo must decide exactly

what the Fellowship needs to do to destroy the Ring. After debating for some time he decides,

'"the evil of the Ring is already at work even in the Company, and the Ring must leave them

before it does more harm. I will go alone. Some I cannot trust, and those I can trust are too dear

to me: poor old Sam, and Merry and Pippin. Strider [Aragorn], too: his heart yearns for Minas

Tirith, and he will be needed there, now Boromir has fallen into evil. I will go alone. At once"'

(401; bk. 2 ch. 10). Here, we see Frodo look the problem of how to dispose of the ring squarely

in the eye, and come up with an equally honest, if difficult, answer. Instead of ignoring

Boromir's growing desire for the Ring and the particular needs of the other members of the

Fellowship, Frodo takes all of these factors into account and determines that the only way to

really destroy the Ring is by doing so himself, unaided. As stern as this decision is, it shows that

Frodo fully understands the task he faces and is willing to do what it takes to solve it.

The second major characteristic of heroes Guardini offers is that they are obedient to the

will of God. Although God is never overtly mentioned in *The Lord of the Rings*, it is implied that

destroying the Ring and defeating Sauron are in alignment with a will far greater than that of

anyone living in Middle-earth. Because of this situation, Frodo's accepting the position of Ring

Bearer and his journeying to Mordor to destroy the Ring illustrate his willingness to submit to

divine will. This stance becomes particularly clear when Sam finds Frodo after he has been

kidnapped by Orcs in Mordor and returns the Ring to him (Sam took the Ring from Frodo when

he believed he was dead and carried it for him until he rediscovered him alive in the Orcs'

prison). At first, Frodo is irrationally angry at Sam for having taken it, but he apologizes quickly

saying, "'[w]hat have I said? What have I done? Forgive me! After all you have done. It is the

horrible power of the Ring. I wish it had never, never, been found. But don't mind me, Sam. I

must carry the burden to the end. It can't be altered. You can't come between me and this

doom'" (912; bk. 6 ch. 1). As these lines show, even when Frodo knows the power of the Ring is

harming him and has the option of leaving it with Sam and freeing himself from it, he knows that

he has a divine mandate to destroy it himself, proving his submission to divine will even under

extremely difficult circumstances.

Guardini's final major characteristic of a hero is the willingness to suffer for the good of

others as Christ did. Frodo exemplifies this characteristic throughout much of the work. In his six

month journey from his home in the Shire to Mount Doom, he forsakes his comfortable life to

destroy the Ring at all costs, endures a poisoned knife wound, an attack by an enormous spider,

imprisonment and torture by Orcs, starvation and dehydration in the barren lands of Mordor, and,

not least, the growing temptation to use the power of the Ring for himself. In the face of all these challenges, Frodo complains little and keeps to his task of destroying the Ring in the hopes that it will protect Middle-earth, even though there are many occasions when he could have turned aside and abandoned his task. As this humble devotion to the greater good shows, Frodo did indeed accept the Christ-like willingness to suffer that Guardini insisted all true heroes have.

One caveat that arises from seeing Frodo as a hero in Guardini's terms is that when Frodo finally reaches Mount Doom, his ability to resist the power of the Ring fails him, and he claims its power for his own. Although the Ring is finally destroyed in the end, it is through Gollum's stealing it from Frodo and falling into the fires of Mount Doom rather that Frodo's free actions that bring it about. While some readers may think this occurrence makes it impossible for Frodo to be a hero according to Guardini's requirements, this is not the case. While Guardini said that the heroes of the post-modern era would take on Christ-like attributes, he never claimed they would become divine themselves or be freed of all of the problems that attend fallen humanity. Since heroes are still human, they sometimes fail to live up to their expectations, but still possess heroic qualities. At the same time, Guardini insists that God is always greater that his creation, and that he can intervene at any time, though this assistance cannot be counted on (197). When Gollum steals the Ring and then fortuitously falls into the fire, we see God intervening to protect his creation, providing the sort of eucatastrophe that both Guardini and Tolkien insist is possible.

The Lord of the Rings is a truly remarkable piece of literature. It explores rich theological questions and difficult ideological debates, all while entertaining and deeply moving readers. Because of this achievement, it is clearly a significant piece of literature that should be considered a classic and a masterpiece and be studied as such. By engaging with and illustrating complex theological ideas, such as but not limited to those of Guardini, *The Lord of the Rings*

distinguishes itself as a late modern or early post-modern text, rather than an odd exception to modern literature or an eccentric attempt to write an epic or medieval romance. With these ideas in mind, literary critics need to accept studying *The Lord of the Rings* as valid scholarly project, not a whimsical indulgence. Writers also need to treat the work as they would any other worthy text and stop apologizing for studying it or getting bogged down by irrelevant debates about genre. Nor should they worry about whether or not Tolkien world approve of their research, a consideration never given other authors. Only when these goals become a reality can a wider audience appreciate all the artistic and intellectual treasures *The Lord of the Rings* holds.

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