

TREATMENT OF SUB - CREATION: A MYTHOPOEIC READING OF J R RTOLKIEN'S SHORT STORIES

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Abstract

In classical Greek 'mythos' signified any story or plot whether true or invented. The Oxford English dictionary refers to Mythology as "A traditional story, especially one concerning the early history of a people or explaining a natural or social phenomenon, and typically involving supernatural beings or events, is one such disengaging narrative". In its central modern significance, however, a myth is one story in a mythology -a system of hereditary stories which were once believed to be true by a particular cultural group and which served to explain why the world is as it is and things happen as they do, to provide a rationale for social customs and observations, and to establish sanctions of rules by which people conduct their lives.

Keywords:- traditional story, significance, however, a myth.....

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JRR TOLKIEN

John Ronald Reuel Tolkien was a much acclaimed English writer and poet who is best known as fantasy maker and also popular as the author of the classic, high fantasy works such as *The Hobbit* , *The Lord of the rings* etc. This paper is an attempt to narrate the evolution of understanding of myth making and how this myth making functions as a 'sub- creation' in Tolkien's view. It is imperative here to note that, the vitalities of even scientific literature and laboratory experimented theories lead to awe inspiring insights into constructs where the border line between proven science and mythical metanarratives are slim. Milestones in the development of human civilization marked significant changes in our perception towards myths, its beliefs and their structural impacts. The advent of the rational era brought about enormous changes in the understanding of philosophy and mythology so much so that large chunks of the academia advocated the notion that people didn't believe in myths, fantasy and fairy anymore.

Tolkien in his essay on "On Fairy Stories"(1938) challenges the notion of the rationale mind that fairy is designed exclusively for children and is also a result of the notion that fairies are for children as milk is to babies. But, Tolkien says that it's the

adults who read fairies more than children do. Throughout his essay, constructed mythology is used in a broad sense while Mythopoeia in a specific sense where he argues in favour of the fallacies imposed on fairies stressing on the need for approving the mythical world as much as the real world. Tolkien also points out that it is the advent of strong rationalism that has paved way for the degradation of the value of fairies as shown in his words as follows:

Yet I suspect that this flower-and-butterfly minuteness was also a product of "rationalization," which transformed the glamour of Efland into mere finesse, and invisibility into a fragility that could hide in a cowslip or shrink behind a blade of grass. It seems to become fashionablesoon after the great voyages had begun to make the world seem too narrow to hold both men and elves... (2)

There are many things that are incompatible to the rationale of modern man when it comes to such aspects as myths especially when attributed to the real world of mortals. Further explaining the concept of 'Faeries', Tolkien goes on to state the realities of their possible existence, again, incomprehensible to the rationale of the modern day logical evaluator.

...but stories about Fairy, that is Faerie, the realm or state in which fairies have their being. Faerie contains many things besides elves and fays, and besides dwarfs, witches, trolls, giants, or dragons: it holds the seas, the sun, the moon, the sky; and the earth, and all things that are in it: tree and bird, water and stone, wine and bread, and ourselves, mortal men, when we are enchanted....

... Naturally so; for if elves are true, and really exist independently of our tales about them, then this also is certainly true: elves are not primarily concerned with us, nor we with them. Our fates are sundered, and our paths seldom meet. Even upon the borders of Faërie we encounter them only at some chance crossing of the ways.

At one point in the essay, Tolkien also tries to project to us- the mortals, as being more supernatural in the strict terms of the word, than fairies themselves. The conditional statements that Tolkien refers to make us- the readers, wonder his emphasis on the narratives of the constructed myths which he calls mythopoeia being far beyond stories.

MYTHOPOEIA

JRR Tolkien brings about a notion of 'myth making' in his poem of the same name. The poem takes a position opposed to rationalism and materialism. Tolkien calls mythos as myth and poeia as creator. Tolkien also emphasizes that this concept of myth making is 'creative'. So together the terms constitute the meaning 'myth making'. Tolkien addresses Man as a 'little maker or sub creator' and God as creator and that He is in the ideal world of perfection. Tolkien talks about his concept of sub creation in this poem and also in his essay "On Fairy Stories", published for the Andrew Lang lecture series in the University of St Andrews in Scotland, as well. Sub-creation which Tolkien says is to refer to the process of world building and creating myths. In his essay "On Fairy Stories" he talks about how rationality curtails the possible reality of fairy stories. He says that this fundamental aspects of fairy as being diminutive and also as an outcome of rationalization.

Mythopoeia, on the other hand, acts an active ingredient of human hand that drives and manipulates the discourse. Therefore the paper analyses how mythopoeia functions in two of Tolkien's short stories namely "Leaf by Niggle" and "Smith of Wootton Major".

Something absolutely interesting is the concept of what Tolkien calls 'recovery'. In fantasies and mythical meta-narratives, what is interesting is the fact that it transcends the reader into a parallel world and from where he or she might be able to look upon his reality in a different perspective. Tolkien opines that the rationale of humans hinders him to attain the so called phase which he himself calls recovery. Recovery, is explained in Tolkien's words as follows.

This triteness is really the penalty of "appropriation": the things that are trite, or (in a bad sense) familiar, are the things that we have appropriated, legally or mentally. We say we know them. They have become like the things which once attracted us by their glitter, or their colour, or their shape, and we laid hands on them, and then locked them in our hoard, acquired them, and acquiring ceased to look at them.

This, in the author's opinion, is vital when related to modern man. In a nutshell, it is the general attitude of any human being to reject outright any misappropriation of reality and falsehood especially when it comes from a mythical narrative which is incomprehensible to rational mind. For people's unrivalled assumption and prejudiced

mindset may be altered or challenged by a mythical perspective. Only then one can understand what Tolkien means by recovery from that different frame of reference, to comprehend the underlying principles of these narratives and appreciate them accordingly. This would help transform from works of falsehoods (myths) to possible realities that remains incomprehensible yet to the human mind.

As evident from the works of Tolkien, his ideas of myth-making and perception shaping among the public did indeed inspire a new genres of literature. However, after discussions with Tolkien on narratives of sub-creation and myth-making, C. S. Lewis, who liked **it** but was skeptical of mythology, took the position that myths were “lies and therefore worthless, even though 'breathed through silver’”. It is these competing dialogues that gave Tolkien the appropriate energy to broadly fathom the avenues of constructed mythology.

These concepts of mythical narratives can be descriptively found in the concept of ‘faery’ as emphasized in the short story titled “Smith of Wootton Major”. The village of *Wotton Major* and the *faeries* in the story should be looked upon, not as metanarratives of fiction, but as mythopoeia. As Tolkien categorically argues in his essay, the reality about ‘faeries’ and ‘elves’ are not to be regarded with a filter of modern-day rationale. The possible existence of God’s *creations* in a parallel universe, counter interacting with other universes on a significant basis, could be as a real as a belief in any scientific narrative of a physical phenomenon. Tolkien brings about his concept of (Tolkien’s own) sub-creation as ‘faery’ here. Smith of Wootton major is blessed with a silver star on his birthday as a sign of key to the faery land resulted in the blessings of king and queen of the faery land. Smith is able make a lot of adventurous journeys to the faery land and there by is enabled to add special powers and beauty to his work. Tolkien’s attempt is here to make the smith travel to the faery land and enable him to know about the reality inside the faery. Smith could experience both the worlds. Tolkien says that its only when we go out of a reality (that is from) where we are, we can approve of the other world too. Smith’s experience in the faery land and his hesitance to hand over the ring to Alf shows this clearly. Nokes, the newly elected cook fails to agree with Alf’s opinion that the silver star belongs to the faery land, owing to his rational mind set, which Tolkien vehemently criticizes as not being rational but being only negative instead.

"...Bless me!" said the Cook. "Then it can't have been made of silver after all; it must have melted. Or perhaps Mr. Prentice was right and it was really magical, and it's just vanished and gone back to Fairyland. Not a nice trick to play, I don't think." He looked at Prentice with a smirk, and Prentice looked at him with dark eyes and did not smile at all."

This description of asserting what is real and magical, being falsehood in other terms, is descriptive of man's nature to negate things that he cannot comprehend. In the essay, Tolkien introduces the concept of 'sub-creation' to denote the works of his constructed mythology:

"...Not all are beautiful or even wholesome, not at any rate the fantasies of fallen Man. And he has stained the elves who have this power (in verity or fable) with his own stain. This aspect of "mythology" —sub-creation, rather than either representation or symbolic interpretation of the beauties and terrors of the world—is, I think, too little considered..."

For Tolkien, the concepts of creation and sub-creation is central to the idea of constructed meta-narratives. God's ideal creation is unique and omnipresent in all dimensions of scaling. Man, however, though a perfect creation of its own, can only create what Tolkien (and others like C. S. Lewis though they differ in depth of the meaning per se) refers to as the sub-creation. It is the limitation of man, or any other creator for the matter, to attempt to attain the perfect sublime symmetry in any of his creation. Tolkien expresses this vehemently across a series of his works in varying degrees, all substantially asserting his ground and arguments.

"Leaf by Niggle" for instance, takes the reader on a breath-taking journey fortifying the ideas of creation and sub-creation. It narrates the tale of Niggle, who wanted to paint the 'perfect' leaf. The perfect in itself is the ultimate beauty of creation. The semantics of the 'perfect' itself is debatable. Of paramount importance to the argument of sub-creation is the fact that it cannot be perfect. Perfect, and all superlative derivatives of all qualitative aspects, amounting to the predominant representation is idealistic and cannot be achieved by a mortal hand. In other words, a sub-creator cannot create a creation.

Niggle was not a successful painter partly due to his disengagements and his introvert behavior at times. He dreamt about the beautiful leaves and branches of the

tree in a scenic landscape surrounded by mountains. His sub-creation of the ultimate tree offered a place for birds to perch on thereby becoming the beacon of hope and aspiration for all creatures. Niggle started to paint his tree with meticulous attention to details of a single leaf on it. He started to paint and fulfil his dream vision but was interrupted by his neighbour Parish to help in his household issues. The laws in the country were also a bit strict because of which, before he could finish the painting, he had to undertake a journey to the countryside and work for the state. He was only given enough time to gather a few of his pictures when he left for the country but still he had the aspiring vision of his tree in his mind that kept him kicking. After a long time, he happened to hear two voices discussing his case. This encounter opens a new country for him and soon he recognises the realisation of his true vision there. Niggle wanted to finish the realization of his painting but was reminded of his old neighbour Parish who wanted to complete the painting. After Parish arrives, together they finish the work on the landscape realize, with awe, that it is the most near-to-perfect sub-creation they could ever achieve. With that note, Niggle leaves reluctantly again from the scene and is remembered only as a minor painter. The travelers named the beautiful piece of sub-creation as Niggle's Parish. (The word sub-creation is used here in the plot summary to denote the true representation from the author's viewpoint.)

Throughout the work, the narration refers to self-contradicting ideas in its own. Talking about the leaf, the author refers

"Actually it seemed to him wholly unsatisfactory, and yet very lovely, the only really beautiful picture in the world..."

The idea of being a truly beautiful picture of the tree, yet unsatisfactory at the same time sheds light on the limitations of man to achieve the superlative quality in anything. The tree being a sub-creation of a sub-creator (Niggle), will justify that limitation, These negating concepts juxtaposing on the ideas of creation and sub-creation are evident throughout the story.

Another interesting aspect of the story is the introduction of inhibitions and how these notions affect the scheduling of a mortal life.

"...Hard uninterrupted work, to finish the picture, even at its present size. He rolled up his sleeves and began to concentrate. He tried for several days not to bother about other things. But there came a tremendous crop of interruptions..."

Time, in the narrative is so precious, as a work of perfection is time-consuming. In an ideal world, without inhibition, Niggle would work on his painting day in and day out. Nothing would essentially bother him, neither the neighbor nor the limitation of funds to sustain his life. He wouldn't have to bother about his duties nor his travels and would concentrate exclusively on the leaf to deliver the almost perfect sub-creation. That, nevertheless, is impossible.

Parish, Niggle's neighbour, is a gardener. The style of the narration beautifully draws a conflict of interest between the two - the worlds of aesthetics and of labour. It is so stimulating to note the art of manipulation the practical world exert on artists. Apart from the social normalizations, Parish persuades Niggle to bring a doctor for his sick wife and help him with his works in a rather unique manner. He leaves Niggle no room to deny help in the way when he contextualizes his requests, even though Niggle would absolutely want to avoid any acquaintance with this neighbour if at all.

Later when they work in the countryside, they accomplish together building up the landscape. When about to finish, Parish asks a shepherd what the name of the country is when, to his amusement, the boy replies *"This is Niggle's country. It is Niggle's picture."* To which he replies,

"Niggles' picture! Did you think of all of this Niggle? I didn't think you were so clever.... But it did not look like this then, not real"

It is very much evident in the above quote as uttered by Parish that in order to attain an appropriate perfection to Niggle's original vision of the leaf one needs an entry in to the mythical world of aesthetics which takes us akin to Tolkein's view which reiterates the point about the need for a complementary existence of the world of myth and reality (without which neither of it would exist).

These concepts of sub-creation and reality as being a perception of human mind is pictured with admirable precision throughout the work. This beautiful demonstration of how creation and sub creation are quite different and cannot infringe the authority of the creator is ultimate to Tolkien's idea of mythopoeia.

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