

Eucatastrophe and the Redemption in J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Silmarillion*

A Eucatástrofe e a Redenção na obra *The Silmarillion* de J. R. R. Tolkien

Rodrigo Ramos

Universidade de Aveiro
rodrigoramos@ua.pt

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1. Introduction

John Ronald Reuel Tolkien (1892-1973) wrote constructed a mythopoeic world called Arda, in *Ëa*. The author's creation comprises all that he imagined as fairy tale along with different perceptions of good and evil, where Northern European myths and legends would be kept alive and reinvigorated forever with sense of redemption and a happy ending¹. In this context, it is significant to speak about one of Tolkien's least known books, *The Silmarillion*. This work was posthumously published in 1977 by his son Christopher Tolkien, who edited and organized the book. The work was incomplete and there were lots of gaps in between the different stories. Tolkien first began working on the stories that would later become *The Silmarillion* in 1914, intending them to become an English collection of myths that would enlighten the roots of English history and culture (Carpenter, 1995, p. 144) and simultaneously became a sketch of the history of Middle-Earth known as *The Book of Lost Tales*.

This mythopoeic book is divided in five chapters: *Ainulindalë* and *Valaquenta* (the music of the Ainur), *Quenta Silmarillion* (the history of the Silmarils and the war of the Noldor against Morgoth), *Akallabêth* (the downfall and destruction of

¹ This expression refers to the so called eucatastrophe, a concept created by Tolkien himself to enhance the events related to the life changing situations and obstacles that the Children of Ilúvatar (Valar, Maiar, Elves, Men and Dwarves) had to face and defeat to redeem themselves to achieve happiness and fulfilment.

Númenor) and *Of the Rings of Power and the Third Age* (the creation of the rings and their influence until the end of the Third Age). If *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* are the top of an iceberg above sea level, *The Silmarillion's* information is three times as great and it is the part underneath the surface. The book's values are traceable not only to Northern European mythology, but to the Gospels. The present paper endeavours to present an analysis of how the elder days of Aman and Middle-Earth influenced the future events in *The Hobbit* and in *The Lord of the Rings*. In this light, an analysis of the elements of eucatastrophe and redemption in *The Silmarillion* may be helpful.

2. The Elder Days of the Creation of Arda

Eru Ilúvatar, the omnipresent, omnipotent and omniscient god, created the world of Arda in Ēa with the precious assistance of the Valar and Maiar, his sons and daughters, whom “he created with the Flame Imperishable of his own spirit” (Wood, 2003, p. 12). Together, they made up *Ainulindalë*, the music of creation in harmony with all the good things and thoughts of Ilúvatar's spirit.

Unfortunately, not everything could be perfect. Dissonance is always potentially possible. There was one Vala named Melkor² who tried to create a counter-melody to manipulate the world on his own. Fortunately, the other gods including Eru Ilúvatar sensed it and reinforced their melody, so the discord was prevented from breaking the harmony of the beautiful composition previously played.

Melkor became so enraged that he turned against the rest of the Ainur and became the most powerful dark lord ever to exist in Arda. Before Melkor, now called Morgoth, fled to Middle-Earth to start his dominion, he joined forces with Ungoliant³ and they were able to destroy the two trees of Valinor in Aman, Telperion and Laurelin, the Silver Tree and the Gold Tree that brought light to the Land of the Valar.

Melkor claimed the Earth for himself. His younger brother, Manwë and several other Valar decided to challenge him. The conflict between the Valar and Morgoth marred much of the world. The Valar and Maiar with the aid of the Tulkas, who entered the *Ainulindalë* last, succeeded in exiling Morgoth into the Void, though his terrible and dark influence remained deep-rooted in the making of the world and of balance.

All his doings influenced the existence of all sorts of dark creatures such as the Balrogs, Orcs, the dark lord Sauron, the Ring wraiths, and so on.

These assumptions resemble the description of the creation of the world presented in the *Old Testament*. In the book of the *Genesis*, the Jewish god Yahweh is also omnipresent, omnipotent and omniscient and he alone created the world full of wonder and beauty while the angels were singing in Heaven. There is also an evil being that fell from grace due to his malevolent deeds. The fallen angel named Lucifer was mighty in wisdom, but not in terms of forgiveness. Because of

² The Greatest of the Ainur in terms of power.

³ An evil spirit in the form of a gigantic spider.

his anger and sins, he was expelled from Heaven forever. Just like Melkor that fled to Middle-Earth after his evil deeds, Lucifer fled elsewhere, to the Underworld, for trying to corrupt other angels, who rebelled against God. This was just what Morgoth did to the Maiar Sauron and the Balrogs, who were taken by the dark powers of anger and revolt against what was pure and beautiful in Aman. Sauron was spellbound by Morgoth and as Gorthaur he became his lieutenant in Wars of Beleriand. From his base of Tol-in-Gaurhoth, Sauron was directly responsible for the death of Barahir and later the Noldorin king Finrod during the Quest for the Silmarils (Tolkien, *Letters*, pp. 243-244).

Tolkien's world is thus definitely theocentric, and the parallels with the biblical *Genesis* are constant. The first seventeen pages of *The Silmarillion* contain the author's account of Eru Ilúvatar's creation and sustenance of the universe. It also serves as a foundation for everything else.

Just like the Christian / Jewish God, Ilúvatar refuses to vanquish evil by force. He redeems the world by the uncoercive workings of providence. It operates only according to the laws of the natural order of things and constant involvement of the divine mind and will (Wood, 2003 p. 11). Tolkien elaborates that Elves and Men must portray the part they were designed to play in what the author would have called the "Oienkarmë Eruo"⁴ which might be rendered "as God's management of the Drama" (Tolkien, 2015, p. 329).

In the words of Ralph Wood, "the universe as Tolkien conceives it is hierarchical", but there is still some space for development and change. There is also room for choice and fate and thus for the tragedy and inconsolable grief endemic to mortal life. *Èa* is grandly designed to feature the possibility of growth and the opportunity of alteration, all prompted by free acts of the good or evil will (Wood, 2003 p. 11). In Tolkien's world, he presents every single being in Arda as able to choose to stand between good and evil or to just live according to their fate based on thoughts of and beliefs in a better world. Events will happen in accordance to the essential themes and motifs of Ilúvatar's great *Ainulindalë* creation that was carried out communally.

Tolkien has mentioned that he was using the religious element unconsciously at first in his works, but when he was revising them, he was using religion consciously. In his *Letters* he says that his works are:

... fundamentally religious and Catholic [...]; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision. That is why I have not put in, or have cut out, practically all references to anything like 'religion', to cults or practices, in the imaginary world. For the religious element is absorbed into the story and the symbolism. However, that is very clumsily put, and sounds more self-important than I feel. For as matter of fact, I have consciously planned very little; and should chiefly be grateful for having been brought up (since I was eight) in a Faith that has nourished me and taught me all the little that I know; and that I owe to my mother, who clung to her conversion and died young, largely through the hardships of poverty resulting from it [...]. (Tolkien, *Letters*, p. 172)

⁴ In modern English it can be translated as god-given ordering of the universe.

Tolkien also states that the Gospels are fundamentally a fairy-story, because “it is not a human invention or discovery” but “a fallible human attempt to tell the Story that only the triune God can tell perfectly” (Wood, 2003, p8). According to Genesis, because God is creative in all his magnificent power, he made us humans as creative, because “we were made in the image of the creator” of all things in the universe (Williams, 2018, p. 52). Nevertheless, life is in constant motion and some things cannot be undone, even by God.

Gandalf⁵, during the Fellowship of Ring’s stay in Moria, explains that is always something beyond good and evil. One must always follow his/her intuition. Every human being has this tremendous gift and therefore one must embrace it to improve the world. In *The Return of the King*, Gandalf explains that evil will still exist after Sauron’s demise, but it will not be represented by a single entity in the future, until, perhaps, the end of the world:

Other evils there are that may come; for Sauron is himself but a servant or emissary. Yet it is not our part to master all the tides of the world, but to do what is in us for the succour of those years wherein we are set, uprooting the evil in the fields that we know, so that those who live after may have clean earth to till. What weather they shall have is not ours to rule. (Tolkien, 2007, p. 1150)

Tolkien also confirms that even after a defeat and a break, the shadow takes another form and rises again. It is surmised that Tolkien saw this things in this way, because he had lived through the horrors of the World Wars. Whereas the Men of the West were able, for the most part, to unite in the face of the singular physical evil presence called Sauron, in the future, evils would be at all sides, and they would fracture and quarrel amongst themselves rather than uniting to confront their enemies.

According to Paul Kocher, due to the characteristics of Tolkien’s medieval and Christian and Catholic values, one cannot speak about *The Silmarillion’s* connections with the Gospels without speaking about “Tolkien’s sophisticated metaphysical sensibility” applied to the Ainur and the Eldar (Kocher, 1974, p77). This metaphysical trait was influenced by Thomas Aquinas’ “nature of evil and it seems quite congruent” with those which Tolkien implies “in laymen’s terms in *The Lord of the Rings*” (McIntosh, 2017, pp. 8-9). Aquinas defines good as what all things strive for. As all things have a function, all real things are good. Therefore, evil is nothing but the absence of good.

3. Eucatastrophe⁶: The Silmarils and the War against Morgoth

The neologistic term eucatastrophe derives from the Greek ευ – “good” and καταστροφή “destruction”. Tolkien explained in *Letter 89* that this concept was

⁵ Olorin, a Maiar sent to Middle-Earth to help the Free Peoples in the fight against Sauron.

⁶ The first evidence of Tolkien’s use of the term eucatastrophe was in a 1944 letter to his son Christopher (*Letters*, pp. 100-101). Therefore, this essay has a limitation in that it assumes that Tolkien unconsciously shaped his earlier written works according to the notion of eucatastrophe.

created to give substance to the happy ending of each character's journey, his/her resurrection. He further explains that:

I coined the word 'eucatastrophe': the sudden happy turn in a story which pierces you with a joy that brings tears (which I argued it is the highest function of fairy-stories to produce). And I was there led to the view that it produces its peculiar effect because it is a sudden glimpse of Truth, your whole nature chained in material cause and effect, the chain of death, feels a sudden relief as if a major limb out of joint had suddenly snapped back. It perceives – if the story has literary 'truth' on the second plane [...] – that this is indeed how things really do work in the Great World for which our nature is made. And I concluded by saying that the Resurrection was the greatest 'eucatastrophe' possible in the greatest Fairy Story – and produces that essential emotion: Christian joy which produces tears because it is qualitatively so like sorrow, because it comes from those places where Joy and Sorrow are at one, reconciled, as selfishness and altruism are lost in Love. (Tolkien, Letters, p. 100)

Tolkien also mentions that the greatest happy ending produces a powerful emotion: Christian joy⁷, a mixture of sorrow and happiness, mingled in love. (Tolkien, Letters, p. 100). The connection with the Gospels are always present. One can perceive that Gandalf's resurrection, after he vanquished the Balrog of Moria, was indeed a redemptive reward given by Eru Ilúvatar. He was meant to sacrifice himself for the cause of freedom of the Free Peoples of Middle-Earth. He was sent back until his task was finally done.

John Davenport says that Tolkien chose the term:

eucatastrophe to emphasise that sudden "turning" or unexpected deliverance at the end of a true tale of Faërie must be experienced not as an achievement of triumphant revenge, but rather as a divine gift. (Davenport, 2003, p. 210)

Tolkien substantiates that the Gospels contain a fairy-story, or a story of a larger type which brings altogether the essence of fairy-stories. The resurrection appears as the eucatastrophe of The Bible stories because it is the ultimate absolution when all appears to be lost. Hope becomes implied in fairy-stories that include happy endings. For Christians, the resurrection is the beginning of a new reality that promises eternal life with God in the world that will come. In fairy-tale eucatastrophes, such eschatological hope is only indirectly hinted at.

The Noldor as the one the First-Born children of Ilúvatar, alongside with the Vanyar and Telerin were awakened by Eru Ilúvatar near the bay of Cuiviénen, during the Years of the Trees in the First Age. They awake under the starlit sky, as the Sun and Moon have yet to be created by the Valar. They were given immortality and they were requested to live in Valinor with the Ainur, the Holy Ones. They were the chosen people of the Gods of Arda. Nevertheless, there some of who were scattered and were captured by Morgoth, who tortured and mutilated them and so they became the first Orcs (Tolkien, 2015, pp. 359-424).

⁷ A fruit of the Holy Spirit, produced by God's work in us, and it is part of God's will for us.

This assumption is related to the chosen people of Yahweh, the Hebrews that were freed from the slavery in Egypt by Moses and that were given a promised Land of bounty in Israel.

The Noldor were accomplished in general knowledge, arts, crafts, languages, and literature. The High king of Noldor Fëanor created three jewels that he named as Silmarils. These objects kept the light of the two sacred trees Telpeiron and Laurelin. Morgoth stole them, enraging the Noldorin king, who swore an oath to recapture them no matter the cost. Elves were naturally good at heart, though capable of using free will and swerving towards evil as well; they also could return to goodness once again they learned their lesson. Their goal is to achieve redemption (after vanquishing Morgoth, Sauron and their allies), the so called happy ending that is continually postponed for thousands of years.

Laura Măcineau describes Elves as “highly skilled with blacksmith work, woodcraft, sculpture, music and other arts, as they appreciate above all else the beauty of the world and they are skilful artists” (Măcineau, 2016, p. 277). They are devoted to the Valar and they preach their values and teaching to the High Men of Númenor and to the Silvan⁸ Elves of Middle-Earth. They have a profound love for the start light provided by Elbereth, the wife of Manwë, the highest of the Valar. Tolkien refers that:

eucatastrophe to emphasise that sudden “turning” or unexpected deliverance at the end of a true tale of Faërie must be experienced not as an achievement of triumphant revenge, but rather as a divine gift. They sing hymns dedicated to Elbereth, the Valar who made the brightest stars in the heavens and whom they worship. The description of their realms, their constructions, their music and verse and above all, the creation of the nine Rings of Power – all these bear testimonies to their creative powers. They are also very keen on preserving their stories, the memory of their people. (Tolkien, 2008, pp. 20-22)

In his essay *On Fairy Stories* (2008, pp. 20-22), Tolkien claims that to create a “Secondary World, one that would be believable and valid by its own rules, a certain “Elvish craft” would be required. He calls this special skill Enchantment and states that man-made Fantasy must aspire to it, although it is a very difficult endeavour. The Elves are sub-creators; they are the real artists in Middle-earth, working with the tools nature provides to preserve and enhance the beauty of the realm” (Măcineau, 2016). Nevertheless, the frailty that even Tolkien sees in his Elves is their exaggerated bound to the past, when everything was beautiful and enchanting, before the Flight of the Noldor led by Fëanor to Middle-Earth to recover the Silmarils.

In a letter to his publisher, Tolkien describes the Elves as “embalmers”, emphasising their concern with the past and struggle to move on (Carpenter, 1995, p. 212). They wish to remain indefinitely in Middle-earth, until their pledge to fight against the Evil is fulfilled, which they consider as their home. One the

⁸ They are considered as the Lower Elves, who did not travel to Aman and they did not see the light of the Two Trees of Valinor.

other hand, they want to stop its progress and preserve an ideal past, what is not at all lost, but it can only be found in West.

The comfort of fairy-stories, the joy of a happy ending or a good catastrophe, the sudden cheerful chance: this gladness, which “is one of the things which fairy-stories can produce extremely well, is not escapist, nor ‘fugitive’. In its fairy-tale, it is a sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to be repeated” (Carpenter, 1995). It does not contradict the presence of *dyscatastrophe*⁹: the possibility of these is essential to the joy of liberation; “it repudiates the general and final downfall and in so far is Gospel, giving a brief hint of joy, happiness beyond the walls of the world, emotional as sorrow” (Carpenter, 1995).

4. Akallabêth: The Downfall of Númenor

The uprising of Morgoth stirred with and festering the original perfect equilibrium of Arda, and marred all the works of the Ainur, but his major works of darkness fell upon the souls of the tree kindreds of the Children of Ilúvatar: Elves, Men and Dwarves.

After Morgoth's downfall, his successor Sauron continued his horrible deeds until he was utterly defeated. Of all the races in Arda, Men were the easiest to corrupt and drive into temptation and thus were most tormented by the seducing powers of darkness. Not long after they awoke, Morgoth appeared before them as a black rider on a black steed and he tried to convince them to worship him as their god instead of Eru Ilúvatar, but some escaped and repented, becoming the Númenoreans (Edain), the ancestors of the Dúnedain, but most of them remained in darkness deep down in their hearts. This issue is going to be discussed on this paper.

The Second Age began with the defeat of Sauron and Morgoth. As a reward for their faithfulness, the High Men of Middle-Earth were given a large star shaped island in the middle of the sea. They came to be known as Númenóreans. Although they were highly skilled in arts, languages, literature, weaponry and building marvellous cities, they were not as wise as the Eldar. Moreover, they wanted to become immortal like the Elves. During Ar-Pharazôn's reign, the King's Men, those were revolting against the Valar and the Eldar, captured Sauron in Middle-Earth and took him to Númenor. There, he allured and deceived them by means of dark teachings and worship of Morgoth. They were also told to sail to Valinor. They consistently rebelled against the ban of the Valar. Númenóreans were not allowed to travel across the sea and to set foot on the Undying Lands of Aman. They pledged their loyalty to the king Ar-Pharazôn, who thought that if he reached Valinor, he would become immortal like the Eldar and the Valar. He ordered a huge fleet of powerful ships to be built and he sailed to Aman. As a punishment for their treason, Eru Ilúvatar destroyed the Island of Númenor and sealed the shores of Aman forever, that were only open to immortal beings

⁹ It brings sorrow and catastrophe.

such as the Ainur, the Eldar and to the chosen ones like the Hobbits Frodo Baggins and Samwise Gamgee, and dwarf Gimli, son of Glóin.

Nevertheless, not all of them were deceived by Sauron; those who were faithful to the Valar, the Elendili managed to sail to Middle-Earth before the cataclysm crushed the Island of Elenna situated half way in between Middle-Earth and Aman.

The Akallabêth episode resembles the world engulfing floods' narrative in the *Genesis* book (2007, chapters 6-9). The flood myth is perhaps one of the most enduring myths throughout the world. Noah foresaw this cataclysm and he built a vessel to protect his family and the remnant of all the world's animals:

For in seven days' time I shall make it rain on earth for forty days and forty nights, and I shall wipe every creature I have made off the face of the earth.' (Genesis 7:4) [...] ¹⁰ Seven days later the waters of the flood appeared on earth. (Genesis 7:10) [...] ¹⁷ The flood lasted forty days on earth. (Genesis 7:17)

A parallel Greek myth is that of Deucalion and Pyrrha, the last two surviving human beings after the world was flooded by Poseidon on the orders of Zeus, the father of gods:

He [Zeus/Jupiter] called to his brother Poseidon (Neptune), lord of the sea. Poseidon commanded all the rivers and streams of the world to flood, and then he struck the surface of the earth with his trident [...] Gigantic waves smashed across the land. [...] There was no more boundary between earth and water, nowhere to take refuge on solid land, and when people tried to outride the storm by taking refuge in ships, they ended up starving to death on the ocean [...] Only two people, Deucalion and Pyrrha, were still alive afloat on the ocean in a small boat, and Zeus knew that if the human race were to survive, he would have to let these two live. (Parker, 2003, p. 32)

Possibly, the closest myth to the Akallabêth is that of Atlantis, a hint of this is that the name in Quenya for the tale detailing the downfall of Númenor is the *Atalentë*.

Elendil, descendent of Silmariën¹⁰, foresaw the destruction of the Island of Elenna and death of the people and he ordered his son Isildur to take a sampling of Nimloth, the white tree which grew in the King's Court in Armenelos in Númenor, with the risk of his life. It was brought as a gift by the Eldar from Tol Eressëa, in the form of a seedling from Celeborn as a symbol of friendship between the two kindreds of the Children of Ilúvatar. Soon after S.A. 3262, it was cut down at the instigation of Sauron and its timber was used to light the first flames in the fire of the cult which worshipped Morgoth. Soon after, Elendil took his family, his fellow noble friends and a fleet of loyal Númenóreans and

¹⁰ She was the eldest daughter of Tar-Elendil, the fourth king of Númenor and she did inherit the throne and the royal sceptre due to the primogenitary law that prevent any female heir to rule the kingdom.

they sailed back to Middle-Earth, where he founded the Kingdoms of Dúnedain in exile, Arnor and Gondor.

5. Conclusion

The eucatastrophe¹¹ is Tolkien's word for a catastrophe in reverse, for the *help unlooked-for* (my italics) that saves when all hope is lost.

In *The Silmarillion*, the eucatastrophe comes when Eärendil bears a Silmaril to Valinor and the Valar finally have mercy on the disobedient and rebellious Noldorin Elves, who were expelled from Aman never to return until they had their redemption.

Eärendil Peredhil is the son of Tuor and Idril, and Elwing's husband, who is the granddaughter of Béren and Lúthien, who together liberated a Silmaril from Morgoth. Elwing brings the Silmaril to Eärendil, which enables him to travel to Valinor.

The supreme and ultimate eucatastrophe, in the story of *Béren and Lúthien*, is their return from the Halls of Mandos. After Béren dies, Lúthien once again comes for him unexpected. Among the dead, Lúthien has beauty "more than their beauty and sorrow deeper than their sorrow" (Tolkien, 2008, p. 186) and can move the Vala Mandos to pity. It is from this combination of grief and beauty that the boundless eucatastrophe of Béren and Lúthien happens: they are free from Mandos and Lúthien can choose to live a mortal life with Béren. Thus, Béren's closing prodigious eucatastrophe is twofold: not only does he come back to the living world to be with Lúthien, but he and Lúthien are no longer to be separated by their race. One is told, "whatever grief might lie in wait, the fates of Béren and Lúthien might be joined, and their paths lead together beyond the confines of the world" (Tolkien, 2008, p. 187). Here is a perfect illustration to Tolkien's description of eucatastrophe as a Joy "poignant as grief" (Tolkien, 2008, p. 153). Lúthien's death is sorrowful, but it is similarly wonderful and joyous because she is ultimately able to live and love with Béren.

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¹¹ It is also a good word for grace.

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Abstract

This paper proposes to analyse the elements of eucatastrophe and redemption in *The Silmarillion* by J.R.R. Tolkien, in terms of values derived from the Christian Gospels. In the novel, it is made apparent that from the beginning of the creation of *Ēa* (the world), dark and evil forces have assailed the peace and harmony maintained by the forces of good (Eru Ilúvatar, the Valar and Maiar). To maintain this cycle of harmony, the Valar entrusted all races with this tremendous task. These so-called races are given distinct histories and abilities. Elves were naturally good at heart, though capable of using free will and swerving towards evil as well; they also could return to goodness once again they learned their lesson. Their goal is to achieve redemption (after vanquishing Morgoth, Sauron and their allies), the so called happy ending that is continually postponed for thousands of years. Despite the narrative and symbolic density of the invented races, genealogies and histories laid down by Tolkien in *The Silmarillion*, this paper will argue that ultimately values traceable to the familiar New Testament Gospels lie behind the book's modulations of good and evil.