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"A difference of taste" The debate over allegory in C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien

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When Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia* were published, Tolkien declared his distance from this type of Biblical allegories. Now the question is: why is Lewis so fond of allegory and Tolkien profoundly dislikes it? In this paper we try to give an answer to this question by firstly looking at the two authors' cultural background, their academic and private lives in Oxford and their literary production. A first issue which emerges is that Lewis loves literature from Chaucer to his contemporaries, where the use of allegory abounds, whereas Tolkien feels more at ease with early English literature where myth strongly prevails. Moving to the two authors' production, Tolkien and Lewis certainly shared the idea that true stories of the imaginative type exist not to hide, but to reveal since they derive from reality and always point back to it, but Tolkien distances himself from religious allegory of Lewis' kind in *The Chronicles* as he believes that the author runs the risk of offering the reader a prepacked interpretation of reality which has nothing to do with experience. Lewis' distinction between "supposal" and "allegory" and Tolkien's between "applicability" and "allegory" finally enrich the discussion and offers new and interesting perspectives of interpretation.

Keywords: Religion, Allegory, Tolkien, Lewis, Inklings, Christianity, Fantasy, Myth, Supposal, Applicability.

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INTRODUCTION

Both profoundly Christian novels, Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia*, and Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* differ considerably as for the treatment of Good and Evil. In Lewis' masterpiece characters are clearly divided into good and evil and the Lion Aslan represents the Redeemer who takes human flesh and offers His life for the salvation of all human beings. In Tolkien's novel instead there is no such figure as the Good *par excellance* since all characters are seduced by the Ring of Power and therefore none of them can be allegorised. Tolkien declared his distance from Biblical allegories as those created by Lewis in the *Chronicles of Narnia* in a letter to Mrs Eileen Elgar, written on 24 December 1971:

> I am glad that you have discovered Narnia. These stories are deservedly very popular; but since you ask if I like them, I am afraid the answer is no. I do not like 'allegory', and least of all religious allegory of this kind. But that is a difference of taste, which we [Lewis and I] both recognized and did not interfere with our friendship. (qtd. in Long, 2013, p. 39)

Now the question is why is Lewis so fond of allegory and Tolkien profoundly dislikes it? This paper investigates the debate over allegory among the Inklings and, in particular, between Lewis and Tolkien by firstly looking at the two authors' academic and private lives in Oxford, their cultural and literary background and finally analysing a selection of their production. Before starting our analysis it is worth having a look at the term religious allegory. Allegory can be defined as "a figurative narrative or description which conveys a hidden meaning, often moral" (qtd. in Long, p. 54). In the case of religious allegory the meaning is always moral as it touches the religious sphere. Key examples in English literature are John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Edmund Spenser's *The Fairie Queene* and William Langland's *Piers Plowman*. These names were all well known to Lewis, who took inspiration from them to write his *Pilgrim's Regress*, *The Great Divorce* and *The Space Trilogy*, just to mention a few examples. But Lewis must also have had Dante's *Commedia* in mind when he wrote the story of the pilgrim John in *The Pilgrim's Regress* or that of a lost soul accompanied by "the modern Virgil" George MacDonald to Heaven in *The Great Divorce*. Although Tolkien was surely familiar with this literature, he had a preference for early English literature and had always valued myth above allegory.

"Lit. and Lang." (Shippey, 2003, p. 1): the roots of Lewis's and Tolkien's different approaches to allegory

Tolkien and Lewis shared the same fascination for Norse myths and sagas, which had always populated their imaginative lives since they were children, and it was the sharing of similar literary interests which soon drew them together as academics in Oxford:

> […] Pure "Northerness" engulfed me," he [Lewis] said; and he began a quest for everything "Northern". Books of Norse myths, a synopsis of the Ring operas, Wagner's music itself, all were food to his imagination. Soon he was writing his own poem on the Nibelung story […]. (Carpenter, 1981, p. 5)

However, within this "unity of interests" as Diana Glyer points out, "they held very different points of view" (2007).

In this respect, emblematic is the debate among Oxford academics on the changes to the Oxford English School's curriculum proposed by Tolkien not long after Lewis's first conversation with him in Oxford in 1926. Tolkien believed that the English syllabus ought to be based on "language", by which he meant ancient and medieval studies and philology, and he opposed the inclusion of "modern" literature, that is to say anything later than Chaucer. Humphrey Carpenter offers a clear explanation of the main reasons why Tolkien developed this attitude:

> First, he himself had never studied post-Chaucerian literature more than cursorily, for "English" had scarcely been taught at his school (King Edward's, Birmingham), and as an undergraduate he had concentrated on the "language" side of the English course. Moreover, although he had many favourites among later writers, he took an impish delight in challenging established values, saying that he found The Faerie Queen unreadable because of Spenser's idiosyncratic treatment of the language, and declaring that Shakespeare had been unjustifiably deified. But a deeper and more important reason was that his own mind and imagination had been captivated since schooldays by early English poems such as Beowulf, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, and Pearl, and by the Old Icelandic Völsungasaga and Elder Edda. These were all the literature that he needed. (p. 26)

The changes proposed by Tolkien literally split the School of English Language and Literature in two factions: one acknowledged the validity of Tolkien's ideas, whereas the other believed that the study of recent literature was just as important as reading Latin and Greek or other ancient writings. Lewis was among those who voted against Tolkien's proposal and it could be said that his view is based on his cultural formation:

> For him the great works of post-Chaucerian literature had, after all, been a source of joy since boyhood. Spenser was a particular favourite with him. He knew comparatively little Anglo-Saxon literature and, though he was deeply attached to Norse mythology, he did not know more than a few words of Old Icelandic itself. So the notion that the earliest part of the course was of special importance – or, as Tolkien put it, that "the language is the real thing" – seemed an exaggeration. There was thus every reason for him to vote against Tolkien. (Carpenter, p. 26)

However, Tolkien was determined to get the Faculty accept a remodelled syllabus and despite the resistance of many of the "literature" dons, the issue was ultimately settled in 1931. Lewis himself, who at the beginning was among the opponents of his friend's proposal, soon began to come round to Tolkien's side in the English School faction fight, especially after his regular meetings with the "Coalbiters"[1], which reawakened his love for "Northerness".

Lewis, Tolkien and allegory: *"a diversity of perspective"* (Glyer, 2007, p. 33)

As already said, allegory can be defined as "a figurative narrative or description which conveys a hidden meaning, often moral" (qtd. in Long, p. 54) and key examples in English literature are John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* and Edmund Spenser's *The Fairie Queene*. Both these works were known by Lewis and *The Fairie Queene* in particular, as well as other Spenser's works, represented a major source of inspiration for his fiction and academic writing. Lewis discovered Spenser quite early in his life and *The Fairie Queene* soon inspired him and took root in his thought and imagination:

> […] He had discovered most of the English poets by the time he was fifteen. He found The Faerie Queen in a big illustrated edition and loved it. (Carpenter, p. 5)

Works such as *The Allegory of Love*, *Spenser's images of Life*, his *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century Excluding Drama* and the collection of lecture essays in *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Literature*, can all be considered as a clear manifestation of the author's deep interest and understanding of Spenser's masterpiece (Hardy, 2007, p. 11).*The Allegory of Love* in particular, is among the most significant works of literary criticism of the last century (Duriez, 2002, p. 55). Here Lewis traced the concept of romantic love from the beginnings of allegory through Chaucer and Spenser.

As the critic Elizabeth Baird Hardy underlines, "scholars who want a closer look into Lewis's motivation and thought life often turn to *The Fairie Queene*" (p. 12). For instance Hardy mentions a scholar, named Jared Lobell, who, in *The Scientifiction Novels of C.S. Lewis: Space and Time in the Ransom Stories* (2004), uses Spenser's epic poem *The Fairie Queene* in the attempt to entangle Lewis's unfinished fantasy manuscript *The Dark Tower* on the strength of the parallel elements between them (Hardy, p. 12).

Another author who early impressed Lewis and later influenced his writing is John Milton:

> It is clear that in his [Lewis] mind as well as in his writing, he liked Edmund Spenser with John Milton. In a letter to his friend Arthur Greeves, Lewis uses Milton and Spenser rather as end of a spectrum for placing a recently read poem's difficulty and style. The Fairie Queene, the first three books of which were published in 1590, predated Milton's 1674 publication of Paradise Lost by nearly a hundred years, and it is quite certain that Milton himself was influenced by Spenser, but both authors clearly influenced Lewis in patterns that are often unique and separate from each other. (Hardy, p. 12)

Firstly published in 1942, Lewis's *Preface to Paradise Lost* represents an important piece of Milton Criticism and touches on all the important aspects of the book, starting from structural features to theological disputes and characterization. Moreover, critics have noticed the influence of *Paradise Lost* in the second volume of Lewis' Deep Heaven Trilogy, called *Perelandra*. Here Tor and Trinidil, the two protagonists, seem to reflect Milton's (and biblical) Adam and Eve, but, surprisingly, they ultimately succeed where our first progenitors had failed (Hardy, p. 12).

Tolkien's case is rather different. Firstly as a student and later on as an academic, he was mainly interested in English language and philology and his area of scholarship was confined to Anglo-Saxon and early Middle English, as well as related Germanic languages. Moreover, early English poems such as *Beowulf*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Pearl*, as well as the Old Icelandic *Völsungasaga* and *Elder Edda*, can be defined as "all the literature that he needed" (Hardy, p. 12). In this respect the critic John Warwick Montgomery writes: "Tolkien, an English philologist by profession, so carefully limits his imagery to the archetypal symbols of Celtic and medieval deep myth […]" (1974, p. 14). Although Tolkien was certainly familiar with literature later than Chaucer, he did not take much notice of it and he constantly "valued myth above allegory" (Duriez, p. 54).

Another member of the Inklings, namely Owen Barfield, early on expressed his preference for myth:

> Allegory [is] a more or less conscious hypostatization of ideas, followed by a synthesis of them, and myth the true child of Meaning, begotten on imagination. (Duriez, p. 54)

Barfield here refers to Greek philosophers who contaminate their original myths with allegory. He suggests that a successful modern myth-maker should be able to directly embody concrete experience in his work and not his or her idea of it. In this second case, he or she does not produce a myth, but he rather invents an allegory or makes an allegorical use of a myth (Duriez, p. 54). As Duriez and Porter point out, this distinction made

by Barfield between myth and allegory spoke deeply to Tolkien and ultimately led him to a profound dislike of allegory (Duriez, p. 54).

To sum up, the roots of such a difference of taste regarding allegory can be found in the Lewis's and Tolkien's different cultural formation and areas of scholarship:

> CSL's liking for allegory was part of his eclecticism. He was at home in the vast range of the pre-modern imagination, from the ancient Greeks through the entire medieval and Renaissance periods. JRRT's interests were much more narrowly focused around the period of Anglo-Saxon literature. (Duriez, p. 54-55)

We will now explore the specific approaches to allegory of the two core members of the Inklings by looking at a selection of their texts and essays.

C.S. Lewis and allegory: *the Pilgrim's Regress, the Great Divorce and the Chronicles of Narnia*

Lewis published extensively during his life and numerous are the sources which could be referred to when exploring the author's use and understanding of allegory. However, bearing in mind the purpose of this article, we have selected only those works which will prove most useful for our analysis, namely *The Pilgrim's Regress*, *The Great Divorce* and, last but not least, *The Chronicles of Narnia*.

We will start by discussing Lewis's first novel *The Pilgrim's Regress: An allegorical Apology for Christianity, Reason and Romanticism.* The author wrote it between 15 and 29 August 1932, while staying with his close friend Arthur Greeves in Belfast and the book was published a year later, in 1933. In a letter to Guy Pocock, an editor at the London publishing firm of J. M. Dent, Lewis refers to his work as "a kind of Bunyan up to date" (qtd. in McGrath A., 2013, *Eccentric genius. Reluctant prophet. C.S. Lewis, A Life,* p. 169) and he then makes an explicit reference to John Bunyan's classic *Pilgrim's Progress*. Lewis had known and loved this book since he was a child and, as Carpenter underlines, its example rose before him exactly when he was looking for the right method to write an account of his conversion to Christianity (p. 47).

The Pilgrim's Regress is the story of a young man called John who repeatedly has visions of a mysterious island which evokes a sense of intense yet transitory longing. Using Lewis's own terminology, we could refer to this feeling by using the term "joy", being it "an unsatisfied desire which is itself more desirable than any other satisfaction" (Lewis, 2012, *Surprised by Joy,* p. 18).Throughout the story, John is overwhelmed by this yearning and he struggles to understand it. For Lewis, the human attempt to understand this sense of intense longing is full of false turns and men constantly run the risk of being deceived or of making mistakes. In this light *The Pilgrim's Regress* becomes "an exploration of these false turns along the road of life" (McGrath, p. 171) and the protagonist could be defined as a sort of modern "Everyman":

> Like many before him, Lewis chose to describe this philosophical quest in terms of a journey. He uses the image of a road leading to the mysterious island, with badlands on either side. To the north lie objective ways of thinking based on reason; to the south, subjective ways based on emotion. The farther John departs from the central road, the more extreme these positions become. (McGrath, p. 171-172)

Carpenter suggests that "Lewis enumerates not only traditional and intellectual or emotional dangers that the pilgrim encounters during his journey, as for instance, Ignorantia, Superbia, Orgiastica, Occultia, and so on, but he also brings more contemporary enemies into the tale" (p. 48). These are: Freudianism and Marxism, as well as other symbolic characters such as "Mr Sensible", "Humanist", "Neo-Classical", and, last but not least, "Neo-Angular". "The first two profess no religion, but Neo-Angular is a believer in the "Landlord", the figure that stands for God in the allegory" (Carpenter, p. 49). Lewis explained the nature of this character in a letter to a friend:

> What I am attacking in Neo-Angular is a set of people who seem to me to be trying to make of Christianity itself one more high-brow, Chelsea, bourgeois-baiting fad. T.S. Eliot is the single man who sums up the thing I am fighting against. (Carpenter, p. 49)

As we approach the end of the book, John, "has no sooner become regenerate as a Christian than he is told to retrace his steps" (Carpenter, p. 49). He needs to pass again through the regions of the mind by looking at them from a new perspective until he finally arrives to his childhood home in Puritania, where he ultimately finds the City of God. To put it differently, John discovers that true "joy" resides in the religion of his childhood (Carpenter, p. 49).

The Pilgrim's Regress could therefore be defined as an allegory of men's deep desires and intense longing which can be fulfilled only by God. Therefore the protagonist's journey becomes a metaphor of each man's route to achieve this goal:

> So what is the ultimate object of Desire – this

> "intense longing"? […] Lewis opens up a line of thought originally employed by the French philosopher Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) – namely, that there is an "abyss" within the human soul, which is so great that only God can fill it. […] our experience of this desire both discloses our true identity and intimates our true goal. We initially understand this desire as a yearning for something tangible within the world; then we realise that nothing within the world is able to satisfy our Desire. John, the pilgrim, initially desires the island. Yet he gradually comes to realise that his true longing is actually for the "Landlord" – Lewis's way of referring to God. All other explanations and proposed goals for this sense of yearning fail to satisfy, intellectually or existentially. They are "false objects" of Desire, whose falsity is ultimately exposed by their failure to satisfy the deepest yearnings of humanity. (McGrath, p. 173)

We cannot conclude this section without citing Lewis's words, as reported in his *Afterword to The Pilgrim's Regress* (1992):

> […] it may encourage people to suppose that allegory is a disguise, a way of saying obscurely what could have been said more clearly. But in fact all good allegory exists not to hide but to reveal; to make the inner world more palpable by giving it an (imagined) concrete embodiment. […] But it remains true that wherever the symbols are best, the key is least adequate. For when allegory is at its best, it approaches myth, which must be grasped with the imagination, not with the intellect. (pp. 207-208)

This contribution is crucial to understand the author's thought. Here Lewis claims that "when allegory is at its best, it approaches myth" (pp. 207-208), where the latter is a story whose details are derived from the outer reality and always point back to it. This allows the reader to achieve a better understanding of the world and to grasp the truth embedded in the Christian belief. It is within this specific theory of mythology that Lewis writes his books and it is within the same theory that we should try to understand his use of allegory.

Another work we will take into consideration is *The Great Divorce* (2012). Although Lewis conceived the idea of the novel already in September 1931, the book was published only in 1944. This novel, divided in fourteen chapters, tells the story of a lost soul who has the opportunity to have an occasional holiday in Paradise. Lewis modelled his story, at least in part, on Dante Alighieri whose works he knew very well. For instance, during his journey, the protagonist meets George MacDonald, who will become his guide, as in the Divine Comedy Virgil and Beatrice were the guides of Dante. Numerous are the lost souls met by the hero in his adventure who gradually reveal to be ghosts and find themselves temporarily in Heaven. This idea is based on the medieval fancy of the *Refrigerium* by which souls have an occasional holiday in Paradise. They can decide to remain there and ultimately be saved only if they repent of the sins they have committed and reject their vices. In the Preface to *The Great Divorce*, Lewis writes:

> Blake wrote the Marriage of Heaven and Hell. If I have written of their Divorce, this is not because I think myself a fit antagonist for so great a genius, nor even because I feel at all sure that I now know what he meant. But in some sense or other the attempt to make that marriage is perennial. The attempt is based on the belief that reality never presents us with an absolutely unavoidable "either-or; […] that mere development or adjustment or refinement will somehow turn evil into good without our being called on for a final and total rejection of anything we should like to retain. This belief I take to be a disastrous error. […] We are not living in a world where all roads are radii of a circle and where all, if followed long enough, will therefore draw gradually nearer and finally meet at the centre: rather in a world where every road, after a few miles, forks into two, and each of those into two again, and at each fork you must make a decision. […] evil can be undone, but it cannot "develop" into good. (pp. vii-viii)

According to Lewis, each human choice is of crucial importance since it always leads to a determined result. Those who make the wrong decision and choose the wrong path can certainly be redeemed in the end, but the evil they create can never be destroyed:

> I do not think that all who choose wrong roads perish; but their rescue consists in being put back on the right road. A sum can be put right: but only by going back till you find the error and working it afresh from that point, never by simply going on. Evil can be undone, but it cannot "develop" into good. (p. viii)

The story of *The Great Divorce* serves therefore as a moral allegory of human freedom, but again, as in *The Pilgrim's Regress*, allegory "exists not to hide but to reveal" and to make "the inner world more palpable by giving it an (imagined) concrete embodiment" (Lewis, *The Pilgrim's Regress,* pp.207-208).

We will conclude this section by discussing Lewis's use of allegory in his masterpiece *The Chronicles of Narnia*.

Critics have often referred to the Chronicles as allegorical. In this respect Professor McGrath notes that "The seven Chronicles of Narnia are often referred to […] as a religious allegory" (p. 278). By now critics all agree that:

> The Chronicles of Narnia are an imaginative retelling of the Christian grand narrative, fleshed out with ideals Lewis absorbed from the Christian literary tradition. The basic theological themes that Lewis set out in Mere Christianity are transposed to their original narrative forms in Narnia […]: a good and beautiful creation is spoiled and ruined by a fall, in which the creator's power is denied and usurped. The creator than enters into the creation to break the power of the usurper, and restore things through a redemptive sacrifice. Yet, even after the coming of the redeemer, the struggle against sin and evil continues, and will not be ended until the final restoration and transformation of all things. This Christian metanarrative […] provides both a narrative framework and a theological underpinning to the multiple stories woven together in Lewis' Chronicles of Narnia. (McGrath, pp. 281-282)

But is the fact that "you *can* allegorise the work before you", a real "proof that it is an allegory"? (McGrath, pp. 281-282). The question is far more complicated than it appears. In 1958, Lewis made an important distinction between a "supposal" and an "allegory":

> A supposal is an invitation to try seeing things in another way, and imagine how things would work out if this were true. […] Lewis […] invites his readers to enter into a world of supposals. Suppose God did decide to become incarnate in a world like Narnia. How would it look like? Narnia is a narrative exploration of this theological assumption. Lewis's own explanation of how the figure of Aslan is to be interpreted makes it clear that The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe is a supposal – the imaginative exploration of an interesting possibility. […] (McGrath, p. 278)

Here we go back to Lewis' theory of *imaginative invention*:

> Like Tolkien, Lewis was deeply aware of the imaginative power of "myths" - stories that tried to make sense of who we are, where we find ourselves, what has gone wrong with things, and what can be done about it. […] Lewis realized that good and evil, danger, anguish, and joy can all be seen more clearly when "dipped in a story". (McGrath, p. 279)

In this light, it would be better to define Lewis's saga not as a mere allegory, but rather as a story of the *imaginative type* whose details are derived from the outer reality and always point back to it. This allows the reader to achieve a better understanding of the world and to grasp the truth embedded in the Christian belief. To use Lewis' way of speaking, we can see Narnia as "a pair of *spectacles*, something that makes possible to see everything else in a new way" (McGrath, p. 285):

> An imaginative engagement with Narnia prepares the way for, and helps give rise to, a more reasoned and mature internalization of the Christian grand narrative. (McGrath, p. 282)

J.R.R. Tolkien and allegory: *Leaf by Niggle* and *The Lord of the Rings*

Differently from Lewis, who read extensively among medieval and renaissance authors and took inspiration from their use of allegory, Tolkien always expressed a profound dislike for allegory.

Worth mentioning here is Tolkien's short story *Leaf by Niggle* written in the late 1938 and firstly published in the *Dublin Review* in January 1945. Today the book is most commonly issued as part of *Tree and Leaf*, which also includes *On Fairy Stories*, one of Tolkien's most important essays in terms of his creative principles and of their application to his own fiction. Many critics, as for instance Humphrey Carpenter and Tom A. Shippey, as well as Wayne G. Hammond and Christina Scull, have interpreted *Leaf by Niggle* as an allegory of both Tolkien's creative process and of his own life. In this respect, Tolkien scholar Marie Nelson in *J.R.R. Tolkien's "Leaf by Niggle": An Allegory in Transformation* puts forward an interesting interpretation of the story as a re-telling of the late fifteenth century play *Everyman*.

However, when engaging with Tolkien's approach to allegory, one of the main sources to refer to is *The Lord of the Rings*. When the novel firstly appeared in print, some interpreted the Ring of Power as a symbol of the atomic bomb. Apart from the fact that the Ring pre-dated the actual use of the atomic bomb of many years, as it firstly appeared in *The Hobbit* (1937), this interpretation is wrong in treating the work as an allegory. Tolkien was very much concerned with this issue. The numerous attempts made both by critics and by readers to ascribe symbolic or allegorical meanings to his work, ultimately led him to write a foreword to the second edition of the novel in 1966 which proves crucial for our analysis. Here Tolkien, referring to the nature of his saga, affirms:

> As for any inner meaning or message, it has in the intention of the author none […] I cordially dislike allegory in all its manifestations, and always have done so since I grew old and wary enough to detect its presence. I much prefer history, true or feigned, with its varied applicability to the thought and experience of readers. (pp. xvi-xvii)

In this passage the author explicitly states his thought and he reveals a profound dislike for allegory. Moreover, he affirms that he much prefers history to deliberate allegory and, if we look at the structure of the saga, as well as at the geography of Middle-earth, we can immediately notice that the stories are all supplied with extremely detailed maps and historical references. This is a key element in Tolkien's art of fantasy, as the author is always concerned with creating another world which has an inner consistency of reality:

> He disliked works of the imagination that were written hastily, were inconsistent in their details, and were not always totally convincing in their evocation of a "secondary world". […] Every loose end, every detail of the story – the chronology, the geography, even the meteorology of Middle-earth – had to be consistent and plausible, so that the reader would (as Tolkien wished) take the book in a sense as history. (McGrath, pp. 223-224)

In the foreword to *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien then continues by explaining the difference between the terms "applicability" and "allegory":

> […] I think that many confuse applicability with allegory; but the one resides in the freedom of the reader, and the other in the purposed domination of the author. An author cannot of course remain wholly unaffected by his experience, but the ways in which a story-germ uses the soil of experience are extremely complex, and attempts to define the process are at best guesses from evidence that is inadequate and ambiguous. […] (pp. xvi-xvii)

With allegory the reader is never left free to interpret in whatever fashion he or she pleases since the author imposes his or her own vision and ultimately transforms the readers' experience. On the contrary, a "story (especially of the mythical type) can in itself give nourishment without imparting abstract meaning." (McGrath, p. 223)
Tolkien then turns to the issue of possible symbolical meanings hidden in *The Lord of the Rings* and he writes:

> […] it has been supposed by some that The Scouring of the Shire reflects the situation in England at the time when I was finishing my tale. It does not. It is an essential part of the plot, foreseen from the outset, though in the event modified by the character of Saruman as developed in the story without, need I say, any allegorical significance or contemporary political reference whatsoever. It has indeed some basis in experience, though slender (for the economic situation was entirely different), and much further back. (Tolkien J.R.R., *The Fellowship of the Ring*, pp. xvi-xvii)

Any allegorical significance or contemporary political reference in *The Lord of the Rings* is here denied by Tolkien and "experience" is described as the only basis of his stories. As a matter of fact, it is nothing but the outer reality which the author wishes to bring into focus in his fiction and it is from the primary world that he draws all the material for the creation of his mythology.

In his book *The Inklings: C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, Charles Williams and their Friends*, Humphrey Carpenter makes an attempt at reconstructing the atmosphere of a typical Thursday evening among the Inklings and in an interesting passage he imagines a dialogue between Tolkien and his friends on the meaning of *The Lord of the Rings*:

> […] I should think, Tollers, you'd better prepare yourself for a lot of misunderstanding. I'm afraid some people will interpret it as a political allegory – you know, the Shire standing for England, Sauron for Stalin, and that kind of thing'.
> "Whereas of course the truth", says Jack, "is that no sooner had he begun to write it than the real events began to conform to the pattern he'd invented."
> "I know that Tolkien always remind us that it isn't allegory", Harvard says, "but I don't quite see why it's so silly at least to attempt to interpret it allegorically. I'm sure that some perfectly sensible people are bound to."
> "Of course they are", answers Tolkien. "And while, as you know, I dislike conscious and intentional allegory, it's quite true that any attempt to explain the purport of myth or fairy-tale must use allegorical language. And indeed the more "life" a story has, the more readily it will be susceptible of allegorical interpretation; while conversely, the better a deliberate allegory is, the more nearly it will be acceptable just as a story."[…]. (p. 140)

"The more 'life' a story has, the more readily it will be

susceptible of allegorical interpretation": here Tolkien seems to suggest that the more a story is rooted in the outer reality and shaped on the primary world, the more it becomes allegorical, in the sense that it reveals human experience and life. On the contrary, when the author deliberately tries to impose allegorical meanings to his stories, the latter can no longer be considered as true and they lose their capacity to cast a new light into the outer world. It is then that they become "just stories" but not "stories of the mythical type".

CONCLUSION

This paper tried to cast a new light on the debate over allegory among the Inklings and, in particular, between Lewis and Tolkien. In comparing *The Chronicles of Narnia* and *The Lord of the Rings*, an apparently simple question came to mind: why is Lewis so fond of allegory and Tolkien profoundly dislikes it? We found the roots of such a difference of taste in the two authors' different cultural formation and areas of specialisation. As a matter of fact Lewis, as a scholar of medieval and renaissance literature, was familiar with allegorical texts, such as those of Spenser and Milton, whereas Tolkien had a preference for ancient myths and sagas.

Moving to the literary production, Lewis and Tolkien agreed on the aim of their fantasy works which is "not to hide, but to reveal". They both state their fantasy worlds derive from reality and always point back to it. However Tolkien openly declared his distance from Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia.* As a matter of fact, the latter are a retelling of the Bible and according to Tolkien the more deliberate allegories are, the more they lose their capacity to point back to the readers' experience since the author imposes his or her vision and offers a prepacked interpretation of reality.

The article concludes with Lewis' distinction between "supposal" and "allegory" and that of Tolkien between "applicability" and "allegory". According to Lewis "supposal" is an invitation to try seeing things in another way, and imagine how things would work out if these were true. "Applicability", Tolkien affirms, differs from allegory as the former resides in the freedom of the reader, and the latter in the purposed domination of the author.These concepts not only enrich the discussion, but they also benefit literature and theology scholars alike as they seek to find new and interesting perspectives of interpretation.

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To my husband Marco, who always supported me with love and great devotion.

Notes

1. The "Coalbiters" are an informal club Tolkien had initiated at Oxford in the spring of 1926 to read Icelandic sagas and myths. The name refers to those who crowd so close to the fire in winter that they seem "to bite the coal".

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