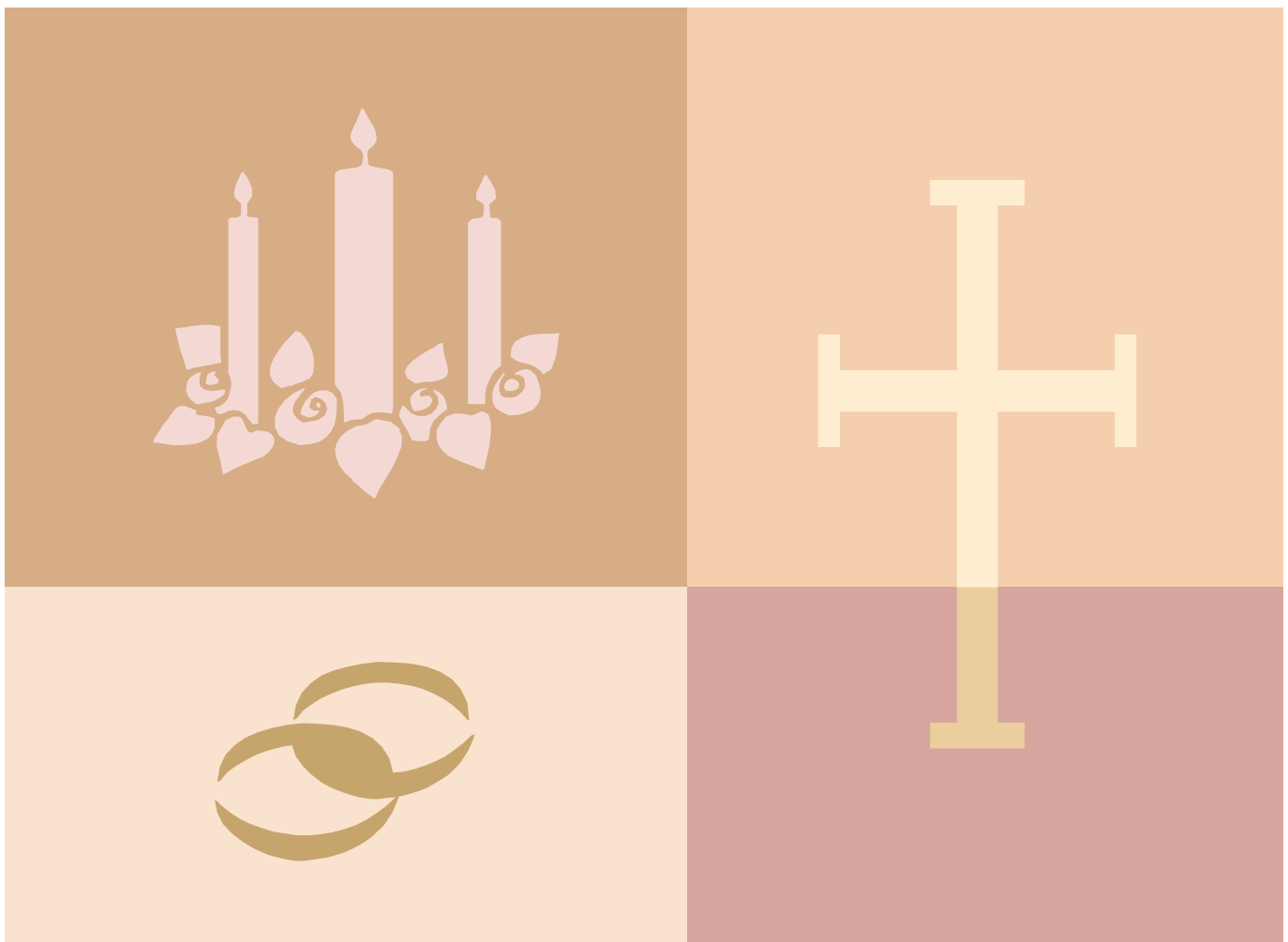


# Symbolism: Have They Told you Everything you Need to Know

(Religious Allegory in *Lord of the Rings*)



Written by Brian Cobb

## Symbolism in *Lord of the Rings* By Brian Cobb

When the topic of *Lord of the Rings* is brought up, one can have many images that pop up in their head. Usually the person thinks “that it was an awesome movie” or for those who like to read, “it was the best fantasy story of our century!” However there is another response one can have and it is a less frequent reaction than the usual image. This response entails thinking of *Lord of the Rings* from an allegorical or symbolic perspective. First off, I personally relate to and can see some of the dual meanings in *Lord of the Rings*. Tolkien, however, said that these books were in no way allegorical, at least not intentionally. In fact in his letter to Herbert Schiro he was quoted as saying: "There is no 'symbolism' or conscious allegory in my story. Allegory of the sort 'five wizards = five senses' is wholly foreign to my way of thinking. There were five wizards and that is just a unique part of history. To ask if the Orcs 'are' Communists is to me as sensible as asking if Communists are Orcs."<sup>1</sup>

So as we can see, J.R.R. Tolkien never intended his works to be an allegory. Conversely, it is important to note that he states that there was no “conscious allegory” in his story. This is interesting because while he “cordially dislikes the allegory in all its manifestations,”<sup>2</sup> he chose to use the word conscious in his explanation. The reason this is important is because it leaves a crack in the door for someone to state that while it may not have been a “conscious allegory,” what is to say that it wasn’t a subconscious one? Tolkien was an interesting man to say the least, because while he denounced that there was ever any direct connection between the *Lord of the Rings* and his beliefs, he never denied that his beliefs had their part to play in his books. So then, this could very well bring up a new category in the world of symbolism. Is it possible for people, with faith like Tolkien, to have such faith and have it be such a part of who they are that they cannot help, but put certain elements of their Christianity in their stories? There are some people who believe that there are no elements of Christianity whatsoever in Tolkien’s books. This is fine, because through my research I have realized that the power to decide what a book means in our own lives is completely up to us, the reader. However there are many examples of other readers taking away symbolic references. I will share just a few of the more common themes, some of which Tolkien himself has spoken about.

There are many different theories on the different facets of his trilogy, but one famous theory is that “Frodo, Gandalf and Aragorn constitute the Priest, Prophet and King, the three offices of Christ.”<sup>3</sup> The way this can be

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<sup>1</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, “Letter to Herbert Schiro. November 17, 1957

<sup>2</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of The Rings*. Foreword

<sup>3</sup> Kurt D. Bruner and Jim Ware. *Finding God in Lord of the Rings*. (Tyndale House Publishers, Inc. 2001)

explained is that Frodo is the ring-bearer (the ring is of course sin) so he is leading his people away from sin, thus he fulfills the duty of a priest. Gandalf can be explained as a prophet, because he brings news of the evil, and what the good people must do in order to rise up and defeat those of Mordor. Then for those who have read the trilogy, they know that Aragorn ends up being crowned King of Gondor, so that is pretty self-explanatory. Now, for those who are not familiar with Catholicism the leaders of our Church teach that Christ was a Priest, Prophet, and King all in one. He was a Priest because He directed and taught the Church, and He gave the very first ever Homily. He was a Prophet because He told the people of Israel what was to come, namely predicting His own death, and He is the King, because He is the leader of our faith.

Another example of symbolism in the trilogy is in the figure of lembas, which "had a potency that increased as travellers relied on it alone, and did not mingle it with other foods. It fed the will, and it gave strength to endure..." (The Return of the King, p. 262). This sounds much like the vast literature on the Eucharistic miracles, and of such people as St. Lydwine, St. Francis Borgia, and Theresa Neumann, who lived off only the Blessed Sacrament.

Even more symbolism is the unique feature of Catholic life which distinguishes it from that of other Christians is the veneration of the Blessed Virgin Mary. As an example, one looks to a letter to Robert Murray, S.J., in which Tolkien speaks of "...Our Lady, upon which all my own small perception of beauty, both in majesty and simplicity is founded."<sup>4</sup> This could possibly be seen through the character of Galadriel, for she is the elf who gives Frodo her Star. In which she is acting as a "mother-like" figure, helping out Frodo in a dark time for him. There are also rumors of Arwen being this mother-like figure to Frodo. This can be seen in the first Lord of the Rings book The Fellowship of the Ring when Frodo got stabbed by the King of the Ringwraiths, and he was rapidly declining in health. She took him into her arms, led him away from danger, and when they were free of danger, she ministered to him medically. Both of these example don't seem to be completely sound, but they are just more instances of where a reader could pick up on symbolism by reading the texts themselves.

However, if we remember that Frodo was rumored to be one of the three offices of Christ, this mother-like role for Galadriel, or Arwen, does not seem to be that far of a stretch. The reason I say this is because the way the way Frodo needed these two women, could be said to be similar to the way Jesus needed his mother. As well, in the same letter to Robert Murray, Tolkien writes "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 symbolism."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, "Letter to Robert Murray. 1953

<sup>5</sup> Humphrey Carpenter, The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien. (Houghton Mifflin, New York: 1981)

Kurt D. Bruner is quoted from his book Finding God in Lord of the Rings in support for Christian elements, as saying “from the epic battle between good and evil to the redemptive power of self-sacrifice, the transcendent truths of J.R.R. Tolkien’s deep faith are revealed in the adventures of his hobbits and other fictional creatures.”<sup>6</sup> I believe that what this author states is completely true. Tolkien was a man of incredible faith, and it is through that faith he came to understand all of the aspects of Christianity such as sacrifice, faith, and even persistence through what seems like imminent doom.

In fact, Bruner states throughout his entire book that Tolkien’s fantasy books *were not* allegories, however if one were to completely discount them from having any elements of Christianity, it would be just as absurd as saying that they were allegorical in the first place. Bruner has also been quoted before as saying that this trilogy “reflects the Christian understanding of providence, that we are all part of a story being written by the creator of all that is.”<sup>7</sup> This book by Bruner is an amazing book. It takes quotes from The Lord of the Rings, and compares them to quotes from the Bible.

There are numerous more examples that can be pulled from this book, so if one would like to read them, just pick up a copy by Kurt Bruner.

In the beginning of this paper, Tolkien does clearly state that he did not put anything political in his books, at least not on purpose. There are a few symbolic references in his books no doubt, but just as Dawes Williams from Stones of Summer<sup>8</sup> would never give you a straight answer on how to change the world, J.R.R. Tolkien would never give a straight answer on the question of political symbolism in Lord of the Rings. With that said one can see just like the religious aspect, that there is definitely a subconscious of political examples to draw from. The first most obvious one is that the Orcs might have represented Communists, or Nazis. One might make this parallel on the simplest of terms that because the Orcs were bad, and so were the Nazis and Communists, that the Orcs represented the Nazis.

Another political symbol was that the “one ring to rule them all” was a reference to some sort of nuclear bomb. The idea here is that if it got into the wrong hands, the whole world could be destroyed. Another theory is that the trilogy as a whole represented World War I, and II. As for WWII Tolkien would most whole-heartedly disagree that it was written for that because as he puts it: “it was written long before the foreshadow of 1939 had yet become a threat of inevitable disaster, and from that point the story would have developed along essentially the same lines, if that disaster had been averted.”<sup>9</sup> Tolkien has historically spoken out against the political aspect to the Lord of the Rings, more so than he has with the Religious one. The reason is because

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<sup>6</sup> Bruner & Ware, xi

<sup>7</sup> “Finding God in LOTR”, [http://www.tolkientown.com/shop/product\\_info.php?products\\_id=328](http://www.tolkientown.com/shop/product_info.php?products_id=328)

<sup>8</sup> Dow Mossman, Stones of Summer. (The Overlook Express, New York: 1972)

<sup>9</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, <http://www.kirjasto.sci.fi/tolkien.htm>

he wanted these books to be more applicable to people beyond his generation. Thus there are more broad concepts that one can take away from these books, such as the greed and the power.

Now that the question of whether Christian or political elements were in the Lord of the Rings has been answered, one must examine Tolkien's life, for as Joseph Pearce put it in his book Tolkien, Man and Myth, "It is therefore not only legitimate but necessary to examine an author's life if we are to attain a greater understanding of his work."<sup>10</sup> With that in mind, it is of even greater importance we understand Tolkien so we can understand why he wrote the way he did.

If one reads up on Tolkien's beginnings, they can see that his father died when he was very young, and so he had only his mother to take care of him for the beginning of his life. It was because of this situation that she worked harder at educating her boys, and making them read when she had to work around the house. It was through this reading that young Tolkien began his journey of a fantasy writer. He was enthralled with books like The Fairy Books, by Andrew Lang, or Curdie, by George MacDonald, but unimpressed with books such as Treasure Island, or The Pied Piper. The first two books were both fantasies and in fact the second book ends "where Christian morality prevailed."<sup>11</sup> When he was about twelve years old, his mother passed away because of a severe case of diabetes. On her death bed she made Ronald and his brother Hilary promise her that they would continue in their faith, and remain in the Church so that one day she would see them again. This is all brought up because this promise to his mother might be the only reason a series of books like Lord of the Rings came about. For it is especially tough to lose one parent when one is just a kid but to lose both before even becoming a teenager would be very difficult indeed.

With all of these examples stated, the best and most conclusive evidence we have that these books were in fact allegorical, subconsciously at least, comes from J.R.R. Tolkien himself. "'The Lord of the Rings' is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision."<sup>12</sup> Upon reading this quote, the tendency for a person to jump back to the very beginning where Tolkien states there was "no 'symbolism' or conscious allegory in my story," is high, but first consider this, I said earlier as well that there was another possible explanation for the clear symbolism in the book, the subconscious allegory!

It is quite clear that he says it was one unconsciously at first, but in revision it was. It would not be an uncommon reaction at this point to show confusion, or even mild disbelief at what one is reading. For through all my research the one thing I have noticed is that the subject of the subconscious allegory or subconscious symbolism is not written about enough, if at all.

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<sup>10</sup> Joseph Pearce, Tolkien: Man and Myth,. (Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 1998), 12

<sup>11</sup> Pearce, 15

<sup>12</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, "Letter to Robert Murray. 1953. <http://www.kirjasto.sci.fi/tolkien.htm>

Nevertheless "as with any artistic effort, what Tolkien believed was part of him, and that belief became part of what he created."<sup>13</sup> This should in my view be by itself in a completely separate category.

I think that now it is appropriate to state the full intent and purpose of the research. Undoubtedly, after reading this far into the paper, the reader may see that there is at the very least some sort of symbolism in Lord of the Rings. With that said, the greatest thing I have learned from this research is that symbolism always was and always will be up to the reader. The author is not the one who decides what the reader gets out of a book, the reader is. I could lace this entire paper with all the symbolism I wanted to, and I could even go a step farther and tell all my readers that there is symbolism in this paper. However, if the reader chooses not to see the symbolism, or see the allegorical connections behind the work of the author, then the entire point of a "symbolic reference" is completely and totally lost. So what does any of this have to do with the subconscious allegory? After all that I've been through to figure out what I was trying to say, and what was worth saying, I've developed this opinion: the subconscious allegory/symbolism, is the best way to write a novel, paper, or anything worth putting symbolism into. Before I explain further, one should ask themselves this question first: does knowing that a work is symbolic or allegorical, take away from its potential or does it limit the story in any way? I know that it does inhibit the book's creativity to a certain extent. Certainly for me reading the Lord of the Rings, my enjoyment of the book would not have been as great if someone had told me that it was an allegory before hand.

With that said, the urge for symbolic books, and allegories, is something that I still yearn for when I read books. It is part of human nature to be curious, and especially so when reading books. We naturally want something out of a book, some deeper implication to take from it. So when one reads a book, they cannot help but wonder whether the book has some hidden meaning behind it. The only problem is that if they know what that hidden meaning is, then it once again limits the potential for the book. This brings me to the pinnacle of my research on this English project. We face a serious problem, how can we both want to have a hidden meaning behind a book, and yet still want the book to not be limited? I hope the answer has hit home for the reader by now, because the answer is, for me, the subconscious allegory.

The next step after this realization is to show why this solves our seemingly unsolvable problem. The subconscious allegory does quite a few things for us. The first thing it does is it frees the reader from any chains that the author might place on them by not being limited in their imagination. Basically meaning that the author can freely say "There is no 'symbolism' or conscious allegory in my story," (see Paragraph 1 for full quote) and the

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<sup>13</sup> Bruner & Ware, p. xiv

reader can read the story with the understanding that whatever symbolism in the book there may be is completely and totally up to them to decide.

The next thing this subcategory does for us is it allows the reader to dream up whatever scenario they want. For example, if I want to believe that Arwen is a representation of Frodo's mother then through the subconscious allegory, I am allowed to do that. However if Tolkien comes right out and says Arwen doesn't represent Mary, but in fact represents someone else, then I no longer have that creativity and power a book should give me.

Coincidentally, this may be one of the largest contributors as to why everyone loves the Lord of the Rings the way they do. It allows them to take whatever they want from it, and believe in whatever they want. If a person doesn't necessarily believe in the Christian side of the trilogy, they can look at it in a political aspect. If they don't like the political or Christian aspect they can at very least take away good triumphing over evil, which for most human beings evokes some kind of emotion, which is generally a positive one. The point is that we are allowed to be creative. When we are allowed to do this truly amazing things happen. We feel enlightened, and most of all we feel like we can contribute to this world. Whether it is through an opinion to a friend, or writing a letter to a magazine stating our thoughts, we feel our worth to society. I truly believe that all of this stems from that ability to think freely without the chains of an author upon us.

Perhaps the greatest thing this take from having a subconscious allegory is the understanding that there is some hidden meaning behind the book, but it is left up to the reader to decide exactly what that is. This is the way it should be. The power always should be with the reader, because that is the wonderful thing about books. They give us the power to dream, to think creatively, and most of all the power to decide what they mean in our lives.