

ABSTRACT

Breathed Through Silver: Four Modern Writers and Their Approaches to Christian Fiction

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In this thesis, I address the use and appeal of fiction as a medium for exploring Christian ideas by analyzing and comparing how four influential writers from the last hundred years particularly approached exploring Christian ideas in their own fictional works. The four writers I have chosen for this comparative analysis are J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Walker Percy, and Marilyn Robinson. I have selected these four particular writers first of all, because they all address Christian concepts or themes in their fictional stories to one degree or another, while also having widespread recognition both within and without religious circles. In this manner, each of the writers addressed in this thesis have distinguished themselves as representatives of how fiction as a medium can be uniquely used to present or explore Christian ideas in a manner which feels natural and does not alienate nonreligious readers.

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BREATHED THROUGH SILVER:
FOUR MODERN WRITERS AND THEIR APPROACHES TO CHRISTIAN FICTION

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INTRODUCTION

In his article entitled, “The Witness of Literature: A Genealogical Sketch,” Dr. Alan Jacobs describes an enlightening encounter he had with author Fredrick Buechner at a Christian writing conference where fan after fan approached Buechner and expressed roughly the same sentiment: “Your writing has meant everything to my Christian faith. I don’t think I could be a Christian without your books.”¹ Jacobs then explains that these individual testimonies are not merely isolated experiences but rather represent a new, broader phenomenon in the literary and religious worlds in which “literary writers have come to be seen by many as the best custodians and advocates of Christian faith.”² By pointing to a work of fiction as playing a foundational role in sustaining religious faith, modern readers of Christian fiction, such as those described by Jacobs, reflect that a new relationship between fiction and Christianity has begun to develop, one in which fiction is viewed as a uniquely compelling medium for introducing or exploring Christian ideas.

While storytelling has been a medium for exploring religious ideas since the very beginning of human religion, almost no one would have pointed to a work of religious fiction as the being the primary reason they accepted or maintained a religious faith until roughly the last one hundred years. For example, it would have been utterly out of place to regard the works of Dante or Milton as the reason one held Christian faith, yet over the last hundred years these exact claims have been made about the works of modern

¹ Alan Jacobs, “The Witness of Literature: A Genealogical Sketch,” (*The Hedgehog Review*, 2015), 66.

² Ibid., 66.

Christian writers, such as Fredrick Buechner or C.S. Lewis. Additionally, a significant amount of secular and non-religious readers have also been uniquely drawn to the works of Christian writers, such as C.S. Lewis and J.R.R Tolkien, during this time, as demonstrated by these authors' continued popular recognition decades after their deaths. Therefore, based on Christian fiction's spiritual meaning for many religious readers and its broader appeal even among non-religious readers, one can reasonably conclude that Christian fiction has in fact taken on some kind of new significance or function over the last century, at least for some groups of people.

When addressing this new function or significance of Christian fiction over the last hundred years, it is important to first recognize the cultural context of increased secularization and religious pluralism during this time period. In an era when there is no longer an assumed religious position and there are increased religious options, it makes sense that more religious participants would feel the need to provide reasons for their religious faith, which would also naturally increase the potential likelihood of people pointing to works of fiction as such explanations. Therefore, one could reasonably argue that the nature and appeal of Christian fiction has remained the same from previous eras to this one, since the new function of Christian fiction is simply a result of changing circumstances. However, while secularization might explain the total increase in religious explanations over the past hundred years, this type of explanation does not specifically address why many people have particularly found fiction to be a compelling medium for understanding faith instead of just relying on more traditionally recognized mediums such as preaching or apologetics. Therefore, regardless of whether the new significance and function of Christian fiction in the modern world is the result of modern writers using

the medium in new ways or simply the result of a changing cultural context, the last hundred years still prove to an intriguing and insightful time period for exploring the nature of fiction as a communicative medium and analyzing the appeal of exploring religion through fiction, due to the broad appeal and heightened impact of Christian fiction during this time period.

In this manner, the unique appeal and impact of Christian fiction over the last hundred years poses two fundamental questions regarding the relationship between fiction and religion: (1) how can fiction be used as a medium for exploring religious ideas, particularly over the last hundred years and (2) why do some people find fiction to be a particularly compelling medium for exploring Christian ideas? In this thesis, I will address these two overarching questions by analyzing and comparing how four influential writers from the last hundred years have approached exploring Christian ideas in their fictional works. The four writers I have chosen for this comparative analysis are J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Walker Percy, and Marilynne Robinson. I have selected these four particular writers first of all, because they all address Christian concepts or themes in their fictional writing to one degree or another, while also having widespread recognition both within and without religious circles. In this manner, each of the writers addressed in this thesis have distinguished themselves as representatives of how fiction as a medium can be uniquely used to present or explore Christian ideas in a manner that feels natural and does not alienate nonreligious readers.

Additionally, I have selected these four particular authors, because they share enough commonalities that an effective comparative analysis is possible, while also having enough differences such that more than one background and more than one

literary approach are represented. For example, all four authors lived in the English-speaking world during roughly the past hundred years, but they did not all come from the same country or cultural context and did not write in exactly same time period. On this matter, it is important to note that while there possibly could be some connections between the writers' different backgrounds and their different literary approaches, determining whether such connections exist is beyond the scope of this thesis. Therefore, while the British writers discussed in this thesis might use a more fantastical approach and the American writers might use a more realistic approach, this overlap in background and style is not intended to imply causal relationships, such as British writers being inherently more inclined towards fantasy or American writers being inherently more inclined to realism. Instead, this thesis will primarily address and analyze each of these four writers not as representatives of certain literary or cultural traditions but rather as representatives of different approaches to understanding storytelling and using it as a communicative medium.

In this comparative analysis, each chapter will be devoted to addressing how one of these four writers uniquely approached exploring Christian ideas in their fictional works, beginning with the earliest writer, Tolkien, and concluding with the latest writer, Robinson. In each chapter, I will address three important aspects of the writer's approach to exploring Christian ideas: how they understand the nature of storytelling, how they balance any religious authorial intent with the interpretive freedom of the reader, and how they craft and utilize a unique type of fictional world. I will then compare the different strengths and weaknesses of each writer's approach to exploring Christian ideas and reflect on how they provide insight into the power and limitations of fiction as a

communicative medium. Overall, therefore, by analyzing and exploring in this manner the different approaches of Tolkien, Lewis, Percy, Robinson to exploring Christian ideas in their fiction, I will ultimately argue in this thesis that fiction can be an effective medium for exploring religious ideas because it can present them in refreshing, imaginative ways and because it allows readers the freedom to personally engage with these ideas without feeling a demand to accept them.

CHAPTER ONE

J.R.R. Tolkien and Sub-Creative Participation

J.R.R. Tolkien is a natural writer to begin with in this exploration of Christian fiction, since he is the oldest of the writers that will be discussed, is commonly considered the “Father of Modern Fantasy,” and has written extensively in the fantasy genre and on the fantasy genre as an artistic medium. While any attempt to determine whether one writer is more “successful” than others would largely be a subjective enterprise, J.R.R. Tolkien has reached a rather unprecedented level of popularity as an author, even when compared to the other authors discussed in this work. Having written *The Lord of the Rings*, a work that is considered by many to be “the best-loved work of fiction of the twentieth century” and that has been made into a multi-billion-dollar film franchise, Tolkien and his fantasy worlds have become near universally recognized features of the modern, popular consciousness.³

Due to his widespread success and recognition within an era of supposedly increasing secularism, therefore, it is rather interesting that Tolkien is a Christian writer who consistently integrates Christian ideas, images, and themes into his fictional works. This seeming contrast between the viewpoints of Tolkien and the world that has heralded him invites one to question both how Tolkien specially approaches the presentation of Christian ideas in fiction and whether this religious element is related to what has made

³ Tom Shippey, “Lord of the Rings, Book of the Century,” Accessed July 17, 2019. <https://www.tolkienestate.com/en/learning/specific-works/the-lord-of-the-rings-book-of-the-century.html>.

Tolkien's works so compelling. In this chapter, therefore, I will address how Tolkien utilized fiction as a medium of exploring Christian ideas by analyzing Tolkien's concept of sub-creation, his preference for application over allegory, and his presentation of how fantasy worlds convey both the human desire for escape and consolation.

Sub-Creation

Tolkien's unique approach to exploring Christian ideas in fantasy is first informed by his understanding of the creative and artistic process, which for Tolkien revolves around a concept he referred to as "sub-creation."⁴ Tolkien is a particularly compelling author to study when analyzing the nature of storytelling and fiction because in addition to writing the works that would eventually define the modern fantasy genre he also wrote extensively on the nature and formation of fantasy writing. While one need not have a comprehensive philosophy of the nature of storytelling to be a compelling writer, such theoretical explanations, however, do provide unique insight how an author approaches storytelling and why he or she found it to be a particularly compelling medium. Therefore, by examining Tolkien's conception of storytelling as sub-creation, one is able to more fully understand the framework in which he approached exploring Christian ideas in his actual fictional works and thus be more equipped to address whether the Christian elements of his work actually contribute to what makes them compelling to readers.

In his landmark essay, "On Fairy Stories," Tolkien explains that sub-creation is the unique ability of humans to craft "secondary worlds" into which the minds of others

⁴ J. R. R. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, (Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1965), 46-47.

can enter.⁵ In this manner, sub-creation allows those who practice it to have sort of “freedom from the domination of observed ‘fact’” such that they could creatively imagine how things could be changed or altered to produce a new sort of reality that still maintains an “inner consistency of reality” that provides a level of believability.⁶ A successful sub-creator, therefore, not only imagines a Secondary World that is different from our own but also ensures that this world consistently follows its own internal laws or rules so that readers are able to experience legitimate “secondary belief” such that they “believe it while [they] are inside it.”⁷ In this manner, the work of sub-creation allows one to enter a powerful, nearly enchanted state in which “you are in a dream that some other mind is weaving.”⁸

For Tolkien, this process of sub-creation has a profound impact not only on the reader but also on the artist because sub-creation is not primarily the product of humanity’s proclivity towards falsehood but rather a greater creative process at work in the universe in which humanity can participate. While many consider acts of creativity to simply be pleasant falsehoods used for enjoyment or escape, Tolkien presents acts of sub-creation as fundamentally spiritual or religious in nature.⁹ Tolkien describes the human creative process and endeavor as “sub-creation,” because he believes it is the result of humanity reflecting the higher nature of God as the original and ultimate Creator. Tolkien

⁵ Ibid., 37.

⁶ Ibid., 47.

⁷ Ibid., 37.

⁸ Ibid., 53.

⁹ Ibid., 54.

unpacks this concept of the spiritual origin of human creativity in his poem, “Mythopoeia,” stating, “man, sub-creator, the refracted light / through whom is splintered from a single White / to many hues, and endlessly combined / in living shapes that move from mind to mind.”¹⁰ In this poetic description, Tolkien intentionally links humanity’s creative potential to the Christian understanding of the nature of humanity based on the doctrine of *imago dei* found in the Genesis account of creation.¹¹ In referring to humanity as the “refracted light,” Tolkien is referencing the Christian belief that humanity is created in the *imago dei* or image of God and thus refracts certain aspects of the nature of God to a lesser degree in its own nature.

For Tolkien, humanity was created in this manner to reflect the nature of God who is the ultimate source of all things and also the ongoing creative process that animates the universe.¹² Therefore, when humans as “image bearers” of God are involved in acts of sub-creation, they are not only utilizing God’s original creation to present something new and beautiful but are also pointing others to God who is the origin or “white” light from which all these human creative endeavors emanate. Because of this understanding of sub-creation, Tolkien ultimately presents storytelling as an inherently spiritual act, since the author is already reflecting the nature of God by participating in the ongoing creative work without necessarily needing to explicitly mention Christian ideas or doctrines. Therefore, Tolkien’s conception of sub-creation provides valuable insight into why Tolkien eventually integrated religious symbols and themes into his

¹⁰ J. R. R. Tolkien, “Mythopoeia,” AGH, Accessed July 17, 2019. <http://home.agh.edu.pl/~evermind/jrrtolkien/mythopoeia.htm>.

¹¹ Gn 1:27

¹² Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 55.

fictional, since storytelling is an inherently spiritual enterprise, and why he very rarely explicitly mentioned religion, since this religious nature is already present and need not be explicitly evoked to exist.

Tolkien also explores how this spiritual dimension of sub-creation impacts both author and reader in his imaginative story about the creative process, *Leaf by Niggle*. *Leaf by Niggle* follows the titular Niggle who feels compelled to paint a particularly engrossing and seemingly unnecessary painting of a tree. Niggle ultimately fails to complete this seemingly insignificant artistic work during his life time yet eventually discovers that his creative work was in some way reflected or perfected in the spiritual realm.¹³ *Leaf by Niggle* is a particularly intriguing work because it is an autobiographical work in many ways for Tolkien as he describes his own experience with the process of sub-creation. Niggle, as the stand-in for Tolkien, does not experience his creative work as a task he approaches with an intentional or explicit purpose but rather more as an experience that happens to him or is drawn out of him.¹⁴ Despite Niggle's not having an explicit agenda for his painting of the tree, however, the unique creative vision that seeded the painting eventually ends up blossoming into a grand, beautiful reality and actually helps point people to the greater spiritual realities represented as majestic mountains in the story.¹⁵

Through this imaginative depiction of Niggle's creative attempts, Tolkien both communicates his own personal experiences of producing spiritually infused art and his

¹³ Ibid., 103-104.

¹⁴ Ibid., 88-89.

¹⁵ Ibid., 109, 112.

hope for how that work might impact others. As Niggle demonstrates, Tolkien envisions the work of sub-creation in its highest form as motivated not by some explicit agenda on the part of the author but rather by a “glimpse” of some deeply true or beautiful aspect of reality and a simple desire to artistically express this glimpse of this reality, regardless of what the response might be.¹⁶ Tolkien’s hope for these works of sub-creation is that that they, as artistic expressions, might then refract some important aspect of reality or might like Niggle’s painting point those who enjoy these artistic expressions to the greater spiritual reality of which they are only a reflection.

Tolkien’s conception of the nature of sub-creation, therefore, provides significant insight into how Tolkien personally approaches exploring Christian ideas through the medium of fictional storytelling. First, Tolkien’s concept of sub-creation reflects how Tolkien personally experienced the creative process in which he primarily strove to craft a compelling and artistic rendering of a Secondary World instead of seeking to communicate some conscious spiritual message. While a focus on sub-creation is certainly not incompatible with the desire to communicate an intentional message, Tolkien, much like Niggle, largely viewed such external purposes as distractions, both for himself and for his readers, from his primary focus and desire: simply creating a compelling and artistic work of sub-creation.

Second, by shifting the focus from communicating a message to crafting a compelling story and world, Tolkien’s understanding of sub-creation also indicates how Tolkien believed storytelling could be a spiritual enterprise without needing to have an explicitly spiritual agenda. By reflecting the nature of God as creator, participating in

¹⁶ Ibid., 110-112.

God's ongoing creative work, and pointing readers to greater spiritual realities through a creative expression of some important aspect of reality, a compelling work of fiction, as a work of sub-creation, can be embedded with deep spiritual meaning without needing to ever mention religion. Therefore, in writing from this concept of sub-creation, Tolkien would ultimately approach fictional storytelling as an enterprise embedded with the potential to be spiritually meaningful for the author and reader who both participating in the creative process and thus are in some way connecting to the true Source of creativity even before any explicit Christian ideas are expressed.

Application Not Allegory

While Tolkien's concept of sub-creation helped shape his approach to storytelling, Tolkien's approach to exploring Christian ideas in his fiction was also highly influenced by his preference for spiritual application over allegory in his works of fantasy. On the whole, Tolkien's primary works of fiction, such as *The Lord of the Rings*, lack any overt mention of organized religion. They have no churches, temples, priests, or liturgies and have little real "sense of worship."¹⁷ However, they do fairly clearly employ Christian themes, symbols, and paradigms, such as Gandalf's resuscitation which mirrors the resurrection of Christ and Aragon's return as King which resembles the doctrine of the Second Coming.¹⁸ Because of Tolkien's use of Christian symbols, some have suggested that portions of Tolkien's works serve as allegories in which character or

¹⁷ Ibid., 193-194.

¹⁸ J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, (New York, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2004), 501-502, 847-849.

events are really representations of some Christian doctrine or convey some spiritual message.¹⁹

Such speculation of allegory was apparently prevalent even in Tolkien's own day, as he devoted the forward to the work's second edition of *The Lord of the Rings* to clarifying his intentions for writing the work and how his use of Christian symbols should be understood. According to Tolkien, his motive for writing *The Lord of the Rings* was not the desire to communicate a message but rather "the desire of a tale-teller to try his hand at a really long story that would hold the attention of readers, amuse them, delight them, and at times maybe excite or deeply move."²⁰ Tolkien then further expressed this same sentiment in a letter to W.H. Auden, explaining, "I had very little particular, conscious, intellectual, intention, in mind at any point...most people that have enjoyed *The Lord of the Rings* have been primarily affected by it as an exciting story; and that is how it was written."²¹ In this manner, therefore, Tolkien insists that he primarily approached writing *The Lord of the Rings* with the mindset of an artist to create a compelling story and world which readers could enter into rather than approaching it with the mind of a preacher striving to communicate a message.

Tolkien then explains that because of his love for this pure form of sub-creation and storytelling he "cordially dislikes allegory in all of its manifestations."²² When authors wish to explore some deeper theme or idea in their works of fiction, they must

¹⁹ Ibid., xxiii.

²⁰ Ibid., xxiii.

²¹ J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, (Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1981), 211-212.

²² Ibid., xxiv.

balance communicating this vision with preserving the freedom of the reader to interacting with their work. Therefore, Tolkien has significant qualms with allegory as a method of exploring Christian concepts in fiction because it entirely subjugates the “freedom of the reader” to the “purposed domination of the author.”²³ In this manner, Tolkien argues that allegory compromises the integrity of storytelling in two important ways: by subjugating the story to some “higher” message and by subjugating the reader to the agenda of the author. First, in forcing a one-to-one correlation of meaning onto a fictional story, allegory often ends up flattening or reducing the story such that it no longer portrays the fullness of a complex world but instead merely communicates one simple message. No longer is the story allowed to exist and be enjoyed for its own intrinsic worth as a unique, beautiful, or compelling work of sub-creation since the story is primarily utilized for its instrumental value in communicating a message pertaining to the real world not the fictional one. In this manner, allegory, in Tolkien’s mind, undermines the inherent beauty of storytelling and robs both the author and reader of the full joy and enchantment that comes from experiencing a fully developed work of sub-creation.

Second, by defining the work by one simple meaning or message, the author of an allegory gives the reader little freedom to interact with the story and explore his or her own interpretations of what it means. This intentional and explicit message compromises the readers’ secondary belief. As Tolkien explains when addressing sub-creation, much of the joy of reading fiction is the ability to enter into a created world with enough

²³ Ibid., xxiv.

credibility that one can suspend disbelief and become “enchanted” by this world.²⁴ The explicit agenda of allegory, however, breaks the enchantment of this secondary belief and pulls the reader back to the primary world by reminding the reader that this is not a fully realized world but rather just the vehicle for the author to communicate a message. This domination of authorial intent also runs the risk of limiting the ability of the reader to fully enter into the world of the story and personally engage with ideas and themes present in the world such that they can be deeply internalized and personally reflected upon. Therefore, while he occasionally wrote small works of allegory, such as *Leaf by Niggle*, Tolkien predominantly chose to avoid allegorical methods of writing, because they risk flattening the story and pulling the reader out of the sub-created world simply to provide a clear spiritual message.

Because of his dislike for these shortcomings of allegory, Tolkien instead chose to write in a manner that provides readers the freedom to draw application from the characters and events of his created world. Tolkien envisions this “application approach” as producing similar affects as the study of real history in which there is no conscious agenda yet students can draw conclusions on how to live and what really matters in life by reflecting on the people and events described.²⁵ Therefore, instead of consciously communicating some religious message in the *Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien instead embeds his work with Christian imagery and ideas by simply pulling from his own understanding of the world and how it functions spiritually.²⁶ As a Christian, Tolkien understood the

²⁴ Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 48, 49.

²⁵ Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, xxiii.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, xxiii.

world as a place where there is both a cosmic and personal battle between good and evil with good ultimately achieving a surprising and redemptive victory.²⁷ Therefore, it is not surprising that this fundamental conception of the spiritual reality of the world would then be expressed in Tolkien's work through characters, such as the conflicted Sméagol; symbols, such as the tempting Ring; and events, such as the revival and transformation of Gandalf. In fact, Tolkien, himself, described *The Lord of the Rings* in a letter to a family friend as a "fundamentally religious and Catholic work."²⁸

In each of these cases in which Christian ideas are expressed in Tolkien's work, however, the freedom of the reader to engage with and explore these deeper themes is preserved. For instance, the reader can choose to view Gandalf as a type of Christ-like figure or simply as a compelling mentor figure, since there is not explicit authorial intention or one-to-one correlation that would demand a singular interpretation.²⁹ As Ralph Wood explains, "The religious significance of *The Lord of the Rings* thus arises out of its plot and characters, its images and its tone, its landscape and point of view—not from any heavy handed moralizing and preachifizing."³⁰ In this manner, *The Lord of the Rings* functions as a sort of "baptized art" in which it is infused with and inspired by the Gospel story without every needing to explicitly mention Christian doctrine or intentionally aim at communicating the Gospel message. Therefore, Tolkien's approach of emphasizing application over allegory allows him to avoid the "heavy handed

²⁷ Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 71-73.

²⁸ Tolkien, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, 172.

²⁹ Ralph C. Wood, *The Gospel According to Tolkien: Visions of the Kingdom in Middle-Earth*, (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 5-6.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

moralizing” that often compromises the storytelling experience in many works of Christian fiction while also providing readers with the freedom to still personally explore any implicit Christian ideas found within the works. Overall, this often can be a more effective way to connect readers with spiritual truths than laying out some explicit religious message.

Disconnected Fantasy Worlds

Finally, in order to fully understand J.R.R Tolkien’s unique approach to exploring Christian ideas in fiction one must also understand how Tolkien crafts disconnected, fictional worlds to connect with humanity’s desires for escape and consolation. In contrast with the other authors explored in this work, Tolkien centers his primary fictional works around fantasy worlds completely separated or disconnected from our own. Tolkien’s description of *The Lord of the Rings* as taking place during the “Third Age of Middle Earth” does theoretically leave open the possibility that the events of the fantasies could occur in our own world at some distant point in the past.³¹ However, the lack of any intentional effort to connect Middle Earth to our own world and the drastically different cosmology and make up of Middle Earth indicate that Tolkien’s crafted world is, for all intents and purposes, a world of fantasy entirely separate from our own.³²

Tolkien’s approach of crafting disconnected worlds of fantasy in this manner is a natural outworking both of Tolkien’s previously described understanding of sub-creation and of his understanding of the role fairy stories play in human life. For Tolkien, the

³¹ Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 2.

³² Tolkien, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, 235.

imaginary worlds of fantasy and its earlier tradition of fairy stories are based on some of the purest form of secondary world-building, as they involve the difficult yet immensely rewarding task of even further disentangling one's self from the Primary World.³³ In fact, near the beginning of "On Fairy Stories," Tolkien actually criticizes common literary mechanisms and devices, such as time machines, that allow the characters to travel from our own world to far off or fantastical worlds, as such devices serve only to weaken the full enchantment of secondary belief.³⁴ Therefore, by instead placing his stories within a separate fantasy world from the very beginning, Tolkien ultimately aims to preserve the purity of his secondary world and thus enable readers to become full immersed in an imaginative experience without needing "distracting" literary devices to arrive there.

Therefore, any Christian themes or ideas embedded in Tolkien's work are ultimately presented to the reader through the medium of a fantasy world disconnected from our own world. This use of a disconnected world in his fiction has several immediate strengths and weakness for allowing his reader to constructively explore Christian ideas in his works. First, the setting of a totally disconnected world allows the reader to avoid unnecessary confusion in determining what is a serious religious proposition in the books. If Middle Earth were clearly connected to our own world, the reader might become confused about how the complex cosmology of Middle Earth should be understood as connecting to the Christian cosmology held for the real world and thus wonder which of the religious constructs Tolkien presents are supposed to be taken as fanciful and which are to be taken as real. By setting his works in a disconnected

³³ Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 48-49.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

world, however, this confusion is avoided, since the reader can more clearly distinguish between the fictional nature of the characters and events described and the real spiritual themes and ideas they represent. In fact, Tolkien, himself, actually explained that the reason he “cut out all references to anything like ‘religion’, to cults and practices, in the imaginary world” was to avoid this type of confusion and preserve the deeper “fundamentally religious and Catholic” nature of the story and world conveyed implicitly in their symbols.³⁵

Additionally, this disconnected world of fantasy can also be quite powerful in conveying the Christian ideas of the wonder and mystery of transcendence, since such worlds often revolve around natural or supernatural powers and forces that in some way transcend the human.³⁶ As Ralph Wood explains in *The Gospel According to Tolkien*, Tolkien’s fantasy worlds have the “mythic character of the supernatural world as well as the historical consistency of the natural world,” which enables readers to grapple with the idea of transcendent experiences without overwhelming their modern sensibilities and destroying believability.³⁷ Therefore, by maintaining a clear distinction between reality and fantasy, Tolkien’s separate worlds prove to be effective at limiting the chances of confusion regarding literal interpretation while also giving readers the freedom to explore ideas of spiritual transcendence and wonder free of a strict materialistic framework through the imaginatively and mythic elements of the world.

³⁵ Tolkien, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, 172.

³⁶ Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 26.

³⁷ Wood, *The Gospel According to Tolkien*, 7.

The separate or disconnected nature of Tolkien's fictional worlds, however, also entails some obstacles for presenting or exploring Christian ideas in his works. Much like his use of application over allegory, Tolkien's use of a disconnected world provides the opportunity for readers to entirely miss any of the deeper truths or Christian ideas embedded in the work. Since the world in which Tolkien's Christian ideas are presented is imaginary, a reader may approach Tolkien's work with little expectation to encounter deeper truths that could be applied to the real world or may conclude that the ideas explored are just as disconnected from our own world as the imagery world in which they are presented. For example, a reader of *The Lord of the Rings* can primarily regard the One Ring as just an interesting magical device in a fantasy world that plays a central role within story plot, never really ever consider how the ring symbolizing the spiritual danger of coercive power and total domination in reality, and still have an enjoyable experience with the books simply as compelling fictional stories.³⁸ Therefore, if a writer's primary agenda is to introduce or help the reader engage with deep spiritual truths, Tolkien's medium of a disconnected world does involve some inherent risks that such truths may be completely missed or ignored.

Tolkien himself addresses this tension between exploring other worlds and providing insight into the nature of our own world in his own approach to fiction by examining how escape and consolation interact in fantasy. According to Tolkien, escape and consolation are both inherent qualities of fairy stories and fantasy and are important parts of what make these forms of storytelling so compelling for people.³⁹ Tolkien

³⁸ Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, xxiii, xxiv.

³⁹ Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 46.

recognized that fantasy certainly qualifies as a genre of escape, as it allows the reader to leave behind the real world with all its rules, limitations, and pains by partaking in an imaginative endeavor.⁴⁰ For this reason, escapism is often regarded with “scorn or pity” in the modern literary world, as it is primarily understood as a flight from the harsh nature of reality and thus more a feature of entertainment than “true art.” Tolkien, however, refused to regard all forms of literary escape in this patronizing manner, since some forms of escape are based on a recognition of the false assumptions of our particular age or on a desire to actually address to certain evils and injustices, thus proving to be a “heroic” forms of escape.⁴¹ Despite endowing literary escape with a deeper meaning than typical presentations, however, Tolkien’s recognition of the role escape plays in his fantasy is still an admission that much of the appeal of his works of fantasy is their ability to transport one out of reality not their ability to convey deeper spiritual realities.

For Tolkien, though, fantasy is compelling as a form of storytelling not only because it connects with the fundamental human desire for escape but also because it articulates the fundamental human desire for consolation. By inviting the reader into a disconnected, imaginary world, works of fantasy enable readers to satisfy ancient or fundamental human desires such as “[surveying] the depths of space and time,” communicating with animals and “other living things,” and “[escaping] from death.”⁴² Therefore, by allowing these fundamental human desires to actually be satisfied, stories

⁴⁰ Ibid., 60.

⁴¹ Ibid., 60, 61.

⁴² Ibid., 13, 66, 67.

of fantasy enable readers to experience some form of consolation from the pain and limitations of experienced reality. For Tolkien, however, the most fundamental and spiritually pertinent form of consolation in fantasy is the happy ending or *eucatastrophe* in which there is a “joyous ‘turn’” and “a sudden miraculous grace” at the point in the story where all hope seems to be lost.⁴³ For Tolkien, this feature of *eucatastrophe* at the center of his own works of fantasy as well as the larger genre is not just the product of the fundamental human desire for wrongs to be made right but is actually a reflection of the deeper spiritual truth present in the Christian story of *evangelium* or good news.⁴⁴ Tolkien explains this spiritual dimension of *eucatastrophe*, stating, “The ‘joy’ of successful Fantasy can thus be explained as a sudden glimpse of the underlying reality,” because “the Gospels contain a fairy story, or a story of a larger kind which embraces all the essence of fairy story.”⁴⁵ For example, when the reader experiences a deep feeling of relief at the surprising rescue of Frodo and Samwise by the eagles at the conclusion of *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien would argue that the reader’s sense of joy and consolation is testament to the deeper human desire for *eucatastrophe*, that we would all somehow be miraculously rescued from our own unavoidable deaths.⁴⁶ Therefore, Tolkien ultimately believed that works of fantasy, such as his own, proved to be so compelling for people not only because they provide escape or consolation from the limitations of reality but

⁴³ Ibid., 68.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 71.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 70-73.

⁴⁶ Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 947, 950-951.

also because they reflect and connect readers to a greater spiritual reality that underpins all such stories.

In this manner, it is not surprising that Tolkien felt the freedom to communicate through spiritual application rather than allegory, since he believed sub-creation to be an inherently spiritual act in reflecting the Creator and fantasy to be an inherently spiritual enterprise in reflecting the Gospel story. However, the simultaneous tension and overlap between escape and spiritual consolation illustrate both the strengths and weakness of Tolkien's approach to exploring Christian ideas in fiction. Some might argue that Tolkien's extensive and ongoing success as a writer validates his understanding of fantasy as inherently spiritual in conveying the deeper reality of *eucatastrophe*. While some readers have, as Tolkien suggests, have been deeply impacted by *The Lord of the Rings* because they believe it reflected to them some deeper spiritual reality, other readers of at least equal amount, however, have found *The Lord of the Rings* compelling not because it contains inherent Christian elements but because it allows them to enter into a fantastical world and briefly escape the confines of reality. Overall, therefore, because of Tolkien's approach of embedding religious ideas in a disconnected world and of emphasizing the freedom of the reader, both the religious and non-religious readings of *The Lord of the Rings* are equally valid ways to engage the story.

Inspired by his philosophy of sub-creation, his preference for application over allegory, and his understanding of the relationship between escapism and consolation in fantasy, Tolkien subtly integrated Christian concepts and symbols into his work by conveying his own understanding of reality and the deeper nature of story instead of attempting to communicate some overt spiritual message. Overall, both of the two

primary distinct features of Tolkien's approach, his use of a disconnected world and his emphasis on storytelling over agenda, reflect a desire to provide readers with the freedom to personally enter into his imaginative world and apply any spiritual ideas found within it as they choose. Additionally, because Tolkien's understanding of storytelling sub-creation emphasizes its inherently spiritual nature, Tolkien is able to write free of the pressure to intentionally integrate religious messages into his stories, which only enhances the reader's experience of freely engaging with any Christian ideas implicit in the story and world. Therefore, Tolkien's approach to Christian fiction ultimately proves successful in providing an engaging and compelling medium for readers to gradually become introduced to Christian symbols or personally explore deeper spiritual reality, yet it also risks the possibility that the spiritual elements of his writing could be entirely missed or ignored.

CHAPTER TWO

C. S. Lewis and Imaginative Experience

Following a discussion of Tolkien and his literary worlds, it seems only natural to then address C.S. Lewis and his approach to religion in fiction due to the two authors' status as sort of the twin saints of popular Christian fiction in the twentieth-century. While sometimes the relationship between Tolkien and Lewis is overstated or overanalyzed, the connection between Tolkien and Lewis was certainly a substantial one that had an impact on both of their lives and work. Not only were Lewis and Tolkien alive in the same era and employed at the same academic institution, they also were friends bonded by a similar love of storytelling and how it can impact people. However, despite some of the common ground Lewis and Tolkien shared, it would be a mistake to assume that Lewis approached exploring Christian ideas in fictional writing in exactly the same way as Tolkien did. Both Lewis's essays on fantasy and his stories of fantasy testify to a unique and robust understanding of how fictional storytelling functions and how it connects with people, particularly when it comes to religion and spirituality. Therefore, in order to provide insight into Lewis's unique approach to exploring Christian ideas in fiction, I will analyze Lewis's understanding of story as a portal for deeper experience, his style of suppositional presentation, and his use of connected fantasy worlds.

Imaginative Experience

In order to understand how Lewis uses fiction as a medium for exploring Christian ideas, one must first have an understanding of how Lewis conceptually viewed

the nature of storytelling and its deeper appeal for people. Throughout many of Lewis's essays on writing, such as "On Stories," there is an underlying and recurring question regarding what exactly the intrinsic appeal and value of story is, apart from being used as an instrumental vehicle for exploring characterization or social criticism.⁴⁷ In following this line of inquiry, Lewis often engaged with the ideas of other prominent writers and scholars who similarly questioned the fundamental nature of story. Therefore, it is first necessary to explore the literary and scholarly influences on Lewis in order to provide a more holistic presentation of Lewis's own understanding of the nature of story, particularly as it relates to religion and spirituality.

As one might expect based on their friendship, Lewis commonly cites J.R.R. Tolkien as being a considerable influence on how he understood the relationship between mythopoetic storytelling and Christianity. As was previously mentioned, part of what makes the comparison between Lewis and Tolkien as writers so compelling is that they both had a profound influence on the formation of the other's understanding and approach to writing. In fact, without the influence of Tolkien, Lewis likely could not even have been included in this analysis of Christian fiction writers, as Tolkien played an important role not only in Lewis's acceptance of writing as a spiritual task but also his acceptance of Christianity in general.⁴⁸ Early in his life and career, Lewis viewed stories of myth and fantasy "as lies breathed through silver," since they evoked powerful

⁴⁷ C. S. Lewis, *On Stories: And Other Essays on Literature*, (New York, HarperOne, 1982), 1-2.

⁴⁸ Lewis, *On Stories*, xvii.

C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life*, (New York, Harcourt, Inc., 1966), 216, 225.

emotion yet ultimately had no relation to reality.⁴⁹ From this perspective, fantastical stories of this kind are at best forms of entertainment and could only really relate to religion by propping up religion's equally fictitious claims.

When Tolkien heard that Lewis held this view, he offered an alternative perspective on the nature of both myth and religion, based on the idea that myth was not ultimately based in falsehood but truth. Foreshadowing what he would eventually describe in "On Fairy Stories," Tolkien explained to Lewis that "just as speech is invention about objects and ideas, so myth is invention about truth. We have come from God, and inevitably the myth woven by us though they contain error, will also reflect a splintered fragment of the true light, the eternal truth that is from God."⁵⁰ In this manner, Tolkien introduced Lewis to the concept of sub-creation which both provided an explanation for the nature of storytelling and how these creative endeavors might point to deeper, spiritual truths about the nature of reality. As someone who had felt a powerful connection myth from quite a young age yet had always been suspicious of that attraction, Lewis was profoundly impacted by Tolkien's account of how myth is connected to a deeper spiritual reality through sub-creation. In response to this conversation, Lewis would eventually accept the Gospel story central to Christianity as a sort of "true myth," in which it is a "myth working on us in the same way as the others, but with this tremendous difference that it really happened."⁵¹

⁴⁹ Lewis, *On Stories*, xvii.

⁵⁰ Humphrey Carpenter, *Tolkien: A Biography*, (Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1977) 147.

⁵¹ Lewis, *On Stories*, xvii.

Carpenter, *Tolkien: A Biography*, 148.

From that point, Lewis would then continue to point to Tolkien's presentation of storytelling as sub-creation, in which the creative act reflects God as ultimate Creator and thus "delights naturally," as one of the most important influences on his own understanding of the spiritual dimension of storytelling and as one of the most viable theories for why fiction connects with people.⁵² In this manner, therefore, Tolkien's influence and interactions with Lewis illustrate how storytelling and religion were integrally connected both in Lewis's writing and in his own personal life. Not only was Lewis's understanding of storytelling connected to his Christian beliefs, as demonstrated by his recognition of Tolkien's idea of sub-creation, but also his understanding of religion was connected to his view of storytelling, since Tolkien's presentation of "true myth" influenced Lewis's acceptance of Christianity. Therefore, it is not surprising that Lewis, much like Tolkien, viewed art and storytelling as inherently containing a spiritual element without needing to explicitly mention religion, since Lewis, himself, personally experienced fiction as an important medium for connecting to transcendence.

However, while Lewis found valuable insight in Tolkien's concept of sub-creation and how it connected myth to deeper spiritual truths, Lewis, himself, was quite skeptical towards any theory or philosophy that claimed to provide a comprehensive explanation of the nature of story. Lewis regarded such theories, like Carl Jung's theory of archetypes or even Tolkien's theory of sub-creation, as capable of illuminating certain aspects of the storytelling experience but also as ultimately flawed if they attempted to reduce storytelling to a single type of psychological or spiritual phenomenon.⁵³

⁵² Lewis, *On Stories*, 53.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 100-101.

Ultimately, for Lewis, “Making up is a very mysterious thing,” as art and stories often affect both those who create them and those who experience them in ways that cannot really be put into words.⁵⁴ Therefore, while he might draw from certain conceptions of storytelling, such as Tolkien’s idea of sub-creation, Lewis ultimately has his own unique approach to illustrating the nature of story, one that relies on metaphors or symbols for the deeper appeal and mystery of story instead of comprehensive theories.

On the whole in his essays, Lewis presents storytelling at its core as functioning as a sort of “net” for briefly capturing or encountering deeper experiences or emotions that could not be communicated in any other way.⁵⁵ To illustrate what he means by story functioning as a net, Lewis in “On Stories” describes the difference between two different types of enjoyment people find in stories: excitement and imaginative experience.⁵⁶ In the first type of enjoyment, a reader is entertained by the “sheer excitement” of the plot and how it creates “alternate tension and appeasement of imagined anxiety.”⁵⁷ While he recognizes the value of enjoying a story simply on the level of excitement, Lewis also argues that there is second, perhaps deeper sense, in which a story may impact someone by connecting them to a powerful imaginative experience. In this second sense, a story will induce in a reader a powerful sense of some nearly transcendent idea or emotion, such as “giantness” or “otherness,” by engaging the reader in a “mode of imagination

⁵⁴ Ibid., 80.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 28-29.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 2-4.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 5, 6.

which does something to us at a deep level.”⁵⁸ These deep emotions and imaginative experiences are nearly impossible to translate into words and often are fleeting when experienced either in the midst of the events of real life as well or in the midst of the events of a fictional plot.⁵⁹ Therefore, Lewis argues that by mirroring the linear progression of real life while also providing a level of relief from the immediate demands of reality, story serves as a sort of net in which these powerful emotional experiences can be briefly captured and deeply experienced in a way that is often not provided through other mediums.⁶⁰

While Lewis recognizes that the emotions caught in the net of story are often easier to experience than to describe, he still offers several potential ideas for what these imaginative experiences are or at least why they can be so influential for readers. First, Lewis explains that the imaginative experiences can serve as sort of a recovery of the deeper truths of reality which are often overlooked or forgotten. In this manner, a story might deeply connect with readers, because it creatively invites the reader into a deeper sense of reality and thus restores the rich significance of overlooked truths which have been hidden by the “veil of familiarity.”⁶¹ Second, Lewis proposes that these imaginative experiences induced by stories affect readers by “[presenting] in palpable form not concepts or even experiences but whole classes of experiences.”⁶² In this manner, a story

⁵⁸ Ibid., 15, 101-102.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 28-29.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 28-29.

⁶¹ Ibid., 138.

⁶² Ibid., 72.

will describe an experience in an imaginative manner, such as an encounter with a giant, and thus connect the reader with the core idea or class of experiences being represented by that particular encounter, such as the whole class of “giantness.”⁶³ Finally, Lewis argues that these imaginative experiences contained in stories can be so powerful, because they can “give us experiences we have never had before and thus, instead of simply ‘commenting on life’ can add to it.”⁶⁴ In this manner, therefore, the idea caught in the net of story can actually be a sort of transcendent experience, in which the reader encounters something outside their previous field of understanding or even outside of the set of experiences typically regarded as reality.

While I have presented these imaginative experiences, involving a recovery of familiar truth, a communication of a class of experience, or a connection to a deeper ideal, as three distinct types, Lewis likely would not have viewed them as strictly distinct from each other. On the contrary, when Lewis describes imaginative experience caught in the net of story, he seems to be describing an encounter by the reader with all three types of deeper truths described in the previous paragraph connected and intertwined with each other.⁶⁵ For Lewis, therefore, storytelling can be such a powerful medium, because, through its artistic and creative expression, it can connect a reader with deeper truth, whole classes of emotion, and transcendent experiences all at once. However, much like the transcendent experiences occasionally induced by reality, these imaginative

⁶³ Ibid., 9-10.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 72.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 28-29.

experiences of storytelling often defy attempts to be fully grasped or understood, which is part of what makes them so compelling and intriguing for Lewis.

Therefore, by defining storytelling as a type of net capturing imaginative experiences, Lewis presents fictional storytelling as a form of artistic expression with an intrinsic connection to spirituality not only because it is a form of sub-creation but also because it connects people to unique transcendent experiences. Then, in his essay, “On Stories,” Lewis eventually draws a connection between this transcendent element of the imaginative experience and spirituality. Lewis explains that while storytelling is a net that cannot capture these experiences in a lasting manner, perhaps there will be a “doctor” who can teach us to fully connect with these transcendent realities and help us become “so changed that we can throw away our nets and follow the bird to its own country.”⁶⁶ In this subtle allusion to Christ as the “doctor,” Lewis masterfully connects his conception of story with his vision of spirituality, since storytelling allows one to briefly glimpse or connect with transcendent truth that can only be fully experienced in the higher realms of divinity and the spiritual. Based on this understanding of the nature and appeal of story, it is not surprising that Lewis would eventually approach storytelling as a medium in which readers could be introduced to spiritual ideas and encounter transcendent experiences. Therefore, Lewis’s understanding of storytelling as an expression of imaginative experience indicates why Lewis naturally integrated Christian ideas into his fiction, since stories for Lewis inherently communicate the experiential elements of transcendent and spiritual experiences.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 29.

Supposal Not Allegory

In addition to his understanding of story as a medium of imaginative and transcendent experiences, C.S. Lewis's unique approach to exploring Christian ideas in fiction is also distinguished by his more allegorical and suppositional style in integrating Christian themes into his fictional works. On the surface level, many of Lewis's more recognizable works, such as *The Chronicles of Narnia* series, seem to contain even more straightforward allegorical elements than Tolkien's do. For instance, any reader with an understanding of basic Christian doctrine will recognize that the portrayal of Aslan's death and resurrection at the stone table intentionally parallels the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ.⁶⁷ Once this connection has been made, it is difficult not to view Aslan as having some ongoing, literary correlation with Christ throughout the rest of novels. However, while many readers might view examples, such as the character of Aslan, as clear evidence that Lewis uses an allegorical approach to communicate Christian ideas, it is important to understand whether Lewis actually viewed his own work as allegorical if one is to understand how he approached exploring Christian ideas in fiction.

Therefore, it is first necessary to determine how Lewis, himself, understood and viewed allegory, particularly in relation to the more symbolic aspects of his own fictional works. In *Allegory of Love*, Lewis's scholarly work on medieval literature, Lewis describes allegory as the natural practice of the human mind to invent "*visibilia*" to

⁶⁷ C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe*, (New York, Macmillan, 1950), 131-132.

represent or express “immaterial fact.”⁶⁸ In this definition, Lewis connects allegory to the representative function at the core of human language, which seems to provide a broad enough definition to encompass some of the more symbolic aspects of his works, such as the death of Aslan. However, when explicitly asked by several fans whether his fictional works should be understood as allegories, Lewis consistently responded by explaining that his stories and in particular the character of Aslan are not allegories but instead “suppositions.”⁶⁹ In a letter to Sophia Storr, Lewis described this suppositional nature of his writing process, explaining, “I don’t say, ‘Let us represent Christ.’ I say, ‘Supposing there was a world like Narnia, and supposing, like ours, it needs redemption, let us imagine what sort of Incarnation and Passion and Resurrection Christ would have there.’”⁷⁰

In this manner, Lewis makes a very specific but important distinction between works of allegory and works of supposition, like his own, based on the relation between the real and the unreal within them. For Lewis, allegory starts with a fact about reality, such as “despair can capture and imprison a human soul,” and then imaginatively portrays this reality through aspects of a fictional story that are not literally real, such as “Bunyan’s picture of Giant Despair” with his castle and dungeon.⁷¹ Supposition, however, begins with a supposal that is not literally true, such as the “Incarnation of

⁶⁸ C. S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition*, (London, Oxford University Press, 1938), 44-45.

⁶⁹ C. S. Lewis, *The Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis*, (San Francisco, HarperSanFrancisco, 2004), 1004.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 1012.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 1004-1005.

Christ in another world,” and then imaginatively portrays what would literally follow if this supposition were taken as true.⁷² In this manner, therefore, Lewis argues that his fictional works should not be regarded as allegories since they do not aim to imaginatively portray a fact about the world but rather imaginatively explore how a supposed question might be answered in a fictional world.

Lewis’s suppositional approach, however, does still bear some similarities to allegory in that it enables readers to reflect on a deeper truth about reality through an imaginative portrayal. For example, while Aslan might not be an allegory or direct imaginative stand-in for Christ, Aslan does allow Lewis to imaginatively portray the death and resurrection of Christ and allow readers to explore the nature and meaning of Christ, since the character is a supposition regarding what spiritual redemption would look like in another world. For example, in the *Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, when Aslan sacrificially dies on behalf of Edmund and then rises from the dead at the stone table to defeat the White Witch, therefore, he is serving both as a compelling literary character furthering the plot of the fictional story and as an imaginative depiction of the religious significance Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection hold for Christians.⁷³

Because of this strong suppositional connection, one probably could not fully understand the character of Aslan without in some way engaging with he relates to Christ and the Christian doctrines of incarnation and redemption.⁷⁴ In fact, Aslan even references in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* how the Pevensie children could learn to

⁷² Ibid., 1005.

⁷³ Lewis, *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe*, 125-126, 131-132.

⁷⁴ Wood, *The Gospel According to Tolkien*, 5.

know him “by another name” outside of the world of Narnia, thus communicating how readers could similar transition from encountering the literary figure of Aslan to actually have an encounter with Christ in their actual lives.⁷⁵ Therefore, despite not being allegorical representations of spiritual truths, the suppositional aspects of Lewis’s fictional works, such as the character of Aslan, still provide readers the freedom to imaginatively explore Christian concepts themes such as atonement or resurrection though the medium of a compelling fantasy story.

At other times in his fictional stories, however, Lewis does seemingly create the type of dual levels of meaning typically associated with allegory where the characters and events described can be read simply regarding how they relate to the fictional stories or be read regarding how they connect to deeper spiritual truths found in the real world. For example, Lewis’s portrayal of Eustace shedding his dragon skin in *Voyage of the Dawn Treader* serves as symbolic illustration of the Christian understanding of repentance and baptism, and Lewis’s portrayal of Orual’s veil in *Till We Have Faces* serves as a symbolic illustration of the danger of refusing to acknowledge one’s true nature and the need to humbly and honestly come before God.⁷⁶ Therefore, one could argue that some of the symbolic aspects of Lewis’s fictional works resemble or approximate allegory based on Lewis’s own definition in *Allegory of Love* and thus could be described as “allegorical” even if they are not full-fledged allegory. Overall, however, since Lewis intentionally and clearly distinguished his fictional work from allegory, it is probably

⁷⁵ C. S. Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, (New York, HarperCollins, 1994), 247.

⁷⁶ Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, 108-110.

C. S. Lewis, *Till We Have Faces: A Myth Retold*, (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1966), 228-229, 294.

more accurate and more charitable to utilize Lewis's own language and thus refer to his unique approach of integrating Christian ideas in fiction as suppositional not allegorical.

Lewis further explains how he develops and utilizes this suppositional aspect of his approach when describing how he balances authorial intent with the freedom of the reader in his writing process. In his essay, "Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What's to Be Said," Lewis acknowledges that his fictional works are popularly assumed to be the products of a writing process in which "[He] began by asking [himself] how [he] could say something about Christianity to children; then fixed on fairy tale as an instrument...then drew up a list of basic truths and hammered 'allegories' to embody them."⁷⁷ Lewis argues, however, that this depiction of him starting with a message and then only later crafting "allegories" to communicate does not actually represent how his writing process worked. In fact, Lewis pretty regularly voices his distaste for when story is treated "merely as a means to something else," such as preaching a religious message, presenting social criticism, or solely exploring characterization.⁷⁸ For Lewis, beginning with an external message in this manner is ultimately problematic because it compromises the purity of the story to achieve some external aim and because such "messages" often tend to appear shallow or forced to engaged readers.⁷⁹

Instead of beginning with messages, Lewis explains that his writing process, particularly in regards to works of fantasy or science fiction, begins with powerful mental

⁷⁷ Lewis, *On Stories*, 69.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 1-2.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 63.

pictures or images that seem to bubble up from within him and grip his mind.⁸⁰ For these mental images to eventually develop into a story Lewis considers worth telling, however, they must eventually connect with and incorporate what Lewis's refers to as the "Author's reason" for writing and the "Man's" reason.⁸¹ The "Author's" impulse is a product of the pure creative desire and involves shaping the naturally arising imaginative images into the proper literary form to craft a compelling story and evoke an imaginative experience.⁸² However, because the authorial impulse is simply a desire and thus not inherently constructive or destructive, Lewis asserts that the writer must also evaluate the burgeoning story from a different perspective, that of the "whole Man" or person, to determine how "the gratification of this impulse will fit in with all the other things he wants, or ought to do and be."⁸³ During this process of exploring the story through various lenses outside the purely artistic, the author might discover that a moral has begun to naturally arise out of the images or that the story has taken a shape that would be particularly effective for exploring a certain religious idea or theme.⁸⁴

According to Lewis, therefore, fictional stories might naturally begin to take on suppositional elements as the author integrates religious themes and ideas into the imaginative world, even if the stories did not necessarily begin as intentionally

⁸⁰ Ibid., 79-80.

⁸¹ Ibid., 67.

⁸² Ibid., 69.

⁸³ Ibid., 68-69.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 63.

communicative or religious.⁸⁵ As was previously mentioned, the character of Aslan from *The Chronicles of Narnia* series is one of the most commonly cited examples of how Lewis utilizes a suppositional approach to exploring Christian ideas. However, it is important to note that Aslan originally had no suppositional connection to Christ when he was first imagined. For Lewis, Aslan first began as simply a powerful, almost dream-like, image of a Lion which “bounded” into the burgeoning fantastic world of Narnia he was creating before eventually becoming the figure who would “[pull] the whole story together.”⁸⁶ By the time Lewis’s stories were completed, however, Aslan was no longer just a powerful mythic character in a fantasy world but also was bestowed with a deeper significance as a suppositional representation of what the divine incarnation might look like in another type of world. Therefore, many of Lewis’s fictional works can in fact be regarded as containing some intentionally communicative elements, even if the stories are not based on a Christian message, since Lewis did develop any spiritual meaning that natural arose from the imaginative images at the core of his stories.

For Lewis, this particular approach of beginning with imaginative images and then integrating significance is particularly effective not only because it preserves the sanctity of the story but also because it allows Christian ideas to be present in the story in ways that are not overly aggressive or overt. Lewis recognized, as many people have, that whenever a religious message is communicated in overly preachy or domineering manner people, and particularly children, begin to stop listening, because they feel as though

⁸⁵ Ibid., 69.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 80.

someone is forcibly trying to tell them what to do or think.⁸⁷ This aversion to “being preached at” is then compounded in storytelling where many readers have come simply to experience a compelling story or world and not to have their reading experience dominated by an external message from the author. For Lewis, however, a fictional story when naturally integrated with deeper significance can actually help bypass this religious inhibition by removing some of the baggage around these ideas and presenting “their full potency” in a new light.⁸⁸ Lewis, therefore, described his suppositional approach as allowing one to “steal past those watchful dragons” of religious inhibition, because it allowed him to still engage some of his readers with Christian concepts and themes without making them feel as though the story is simply a well disguised ploy for getting them to accept some Christian message or doctrine.⁸⁹

Overall, therefore, these examples of supposal in Lewis’s fictional works serve to demonstrate both the distinctive features of his approach to exploring Christian ideas and how he specifically balanced authorial intent and the freedom of the reader. First, these examples demonstrate how Lewis consciously integrated Christian ideas into his works of fantasy. Unlike Tolkien who claimed any Christian themes were unconsciously integrated into his work in the crafting of his world, Lewis recognizes that he did have a conscious desire to help readers encounter Christian ideas in a new way, and it is unlikely such a suppositional connection between Christ and Aslan would exist without a conscious authorial intent. Second, these examples point to the fact that Lewis still

⁸⁷ Ibid., 70.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 70.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 70.

prioritized good storytelling over preaching. Lewis tried to only incorporate the suppositional or allegorical meanings that arose naturally from the nature of his imaginative images, which is largely proved by the fact that these ideas are largely creative or compelling and very rarely come across as preachy or forced.

The strength of this intentional story-oriented approach to exploring Christian ideas is that it does often allow Lewis to “sneak past the watchful dragons” and genuinely connect readers to Christian ideas in an imaginative manner. Lewis’s suppositional and allegorical approach is explicit enough that it allows readers to connect the images and themes to their own lives and understanding of spirituality, even if they do not come from an overly religious background. However, this more explicitly religious dimension to Lewis’s approach, however is also one of its weakness. While Lewis strives to prevent an allegorical meaning from compromising the story, some readers might interpret the overtly symbolic or suppositional elements of his works as the disguised sort of preachy, Christian message Lewis wished to avoid. Therefore, Lewis’s suppositional and allegorical approach to exploring religious ideas in fiction ultimately provides a greater role for authorial intent than Tolkien’s approach and thus a greater opportunity for intentional exploration of Christian ideas but also a greater risk that the freedom of the reader to experience a pure imaginative experience might be compromised.

Connected Fantasy Worlds

Finally, in order to more fully understand Lewis’s approach to Christian fiction one must explore how Lewis uniquely uses connected fantasy worlds to explore these ideas of imaginative experience and symbolic religious significance. Like Tolkien, Lewis most often pulled from the mythopoetic tradition and used “other worlds” of fantasy as

the medium through which he explores Christian ideas.⁹⁰ For Lewis, stories of fantasy which revolve around “other worlds” prove to be uniquely compelling to people because they tap into the human desire “to visit strange regions in search of a such beauty, awe, or terror as the actual world does not supply,” a desire Lewis himself possessed.⁹¹ As previously discussed, Lewis found the unique ability of storytelling to connect people to these experiences of “beauty, awe, or terror” to be particularly compelling and thus chose to center many of his works around the types of fantasy worlds that would evoke such imaginative experiences.

Additionally, Lewis held that setting stories in other worlds of fantasy created a natural link to the spiritual, because crafting such worlds often requires writers to “draw on the only real ‘other world’ we know of, that of the spirit.”⁹² Unlike the fairy tales and myths of the past which could believability set these lands of fantasy within our own world, Lewis had to either set his other world in outer space or a distinct realm of fantasy in order to believably evoke a sense of wonder in this modern landscape of “increasing geographic knowledge.”⁹³ In this manner, Lewis, much like Tolkien, does have a profound proclivity for utilizing fictional worlds of fantasy to help connect readers to experiences of the transcendent or spiritual.

However, despite the works of Lewis and Tolkien both being classified as fantasy, the worlds of fantasy that Lewis crafts in his fictional works differ in some quite

⁹⁰ Lewis, *On Stories*, 16.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 95.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 16.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 95.

substantial ways from Tolkien's. While Tolkien largely uses disconnected worlds of fantasy where the story just immediately starts in this distinct, other world, Lewis, on the other hand, largely crafts worlds of connected fantasy where the story begins in a realistic world mirroring our own and only later travels to the fantastical one. For instance, in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, the story almost always begins in the realistic world of "modern" England before the protagonists are transported to the fantastical world of Narnia which exists in a sort of other dimension. Lewis also uses this medium of the connected fantasy world in his works of science fiction where the characters travel from our own world to other parts of the solar system or universe and have fantastic experiences. In fact, in his Space Trilogy, Lewis inserts himself as a character who is told the stories by the protagonist in order to increase the simulation of realism in the works' primary world.⁹⁴

Lewis is largely able to craft these connected worlds in a manner that is compelling to readers, due to his adept use of literary devices that allow one to transverse fantasy worlds. For Lewis, these literary "machines" which allow a character to travel to realms of fantasy provide the "most superficial appearance of plausibility" which enable the reader to experience a greater suspension of disbelief.⁹⁵ While Tolkien largely regarded the "superficial" explanation of such devices as compromising the full power of the sub-created world and its experience of enchantment, Lewis, however, did not regard it as an entirely negative quality that their value is largely in what they achieve not in what they explain.⁹⁶ For Lewis, these literary devices can actually enhance the fantastic

⁹⁴ C. S. Lewis, *Out of The Silent Planet*, (New York, Macmillan, 1952), 166-167.

⁹⁵ Lewis, *On Stories*, 96.

⁹⁶ Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 13.

nature of the literary world instead of comprising it, since they enable the reader to participate more fully in the wondrous and seemingly miraculous feeling of being transported to another world.⁹⁷

In fact, Lewis is largely able to avoid Tolkien's concern regarding the arbitrary nature of such devices by portraying these literary devices as compelling images of fantasy in their own right. In *The Chronicles of Narnia*, the magical objects of travel, such as the titular wardrobe in *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe* and the painting in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, embody their own sense of mystery and thus ensure that one's introduction to Narnia is just as wondrous as the land itself.⁹⁸ For this reason, Lewis explains that he largely prefers "supernatural methods" over "pseudo-scientific" ones, despite using both methods in his various works of fantasy and science fiction, since a supernatural mechanism often conveys a greater sense of "wonder, beauty, or suggestiveness" in its function.⁹⁹ Lewis would literarily express this preference for supernatural mechanisms in the Ransom Trilogy, in which he changed from using a space-ship as the device of connection in *Out of the Silent Planet* to angelic transportation in *Perelandra*.¹⁰⁰ Therefore, Lewis's use of literary mechanisms of fantasy ultimately contribute to his unique approach to fantasy, despite not have having complex

⁹⁷ Lewis, *On Stories*, 96.

⁹⁸ Lewis, *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe*, 4-6.

C. S. Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, 9-12.

⁹⁹ Lewis, *On Stories*, 96-97.

¹⁰⁰ Lewis, *Out of The Silent Planet*, 19-20.

C. S. Lewis, *Perelandra: A Novel*, (London, Bodley Head, 1943), 28.

explanations of their functions, since their primary purpose is to connect the world of reality to the world of fantasy and convey the sense of wonder that should accompany traveling between.

Overall, Lewis's unique approach of crafting connected worlds of fantasy does have some substantial implication for the manner in which he explores Christian ideas in his fiction. First, Lewis's use of connected worlds is particularly effective for communicating the experience of encountering the transcendent or wondrous for the first time. By beginning his works of fantasy in the "real" world, Lewis grounds his works in at least a certain level of believability and enables an instant relatability between the reader and the primary protagonist who usually is a native inhabitants of earth as well. In this manner, Lewis's connected world approach not only enables more hesitant readers to gradually become inundated with the more fantastical elements of the story but also allows readers to travel alongside the protagonist in experiencing a new world of wonder for the first time. For example, compare the experiences of following Samwise Gamgee as he encounters Rivendell for the first time and of following Lucy Pevensie as she encounters Narnia for the first time.¹⁰¹ Both examples involve a character encountering a wondrous new world of fantasy for the first time. However, the reader more naturally relates to the perspective of Lucy, since Sam is himself already a character of fantasy, while Lucy is a traveler from earth who provides a shared point of view. Therefore, Lewis's approach of connected worlds can create a more palpable sense of experiencing an "other world," since a clearer distinction is drawn between the worlds of fantasy and

¹⁰¹Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 80-81.

Lewis, *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe*, 6-7.

reality and since readers are able to more readily relate to the protagonists as they encounter the fantastical. In this manner, Lewis enables the reader to explore the imaginative experience of encountering the spiritual or transcendent for the first time in this fictional journey between worlds.

Additionally, Lewis's connected worlds approach more clearly indicates that the deeper spiritual themes and ideas present in the world of fantasy might be applicable to a reader's real life and experiences. While in a disconnected world of fantasy, any spiritual themes addressed might be disregarded as purely imaginary, a connected world clearly indicates the ideas and themes addressed are understood by the author as in some way pertaining to the real world. For instance, in the same manner that the Pevensie children might return from Narnia with a new understanding of the spiritual forces and realities at work in their own world, readers might return from their own literary journey in Narnia and recognize that many of the Christian ideas discussed in the books might apply to their real experiences. However, exploring Christian ideas in the context of connected worlds also has the potential to confuse the reader, since it might become difficult to determine which Christian ideas are intended to be understood as symbolically applying to the fantasy world and which are intended to be understood as literally applying to our own world. Therefore, much like his use of allegory, Lewis's use of connected worlds has the potential for making it more accessible for readers to engage with Christian ideas yet also contains the potential of distorting the enchantment of the secondary world for the reader by so radically connecting it to our own world.

Overall, therefore, Lewis's unique approach to exploring Christian ideas in his fiction is defined by his understanding of storytelling as a medium of imaginative

experience, by his more suppositional and allegorical approach to conveying significance, and by his use of connected fantasy worlds. Much like Tolkien, Lewis understood the core nature of storytelling as inherently containing a spiritual or transcendent dimension, so it is not surprising that Lewis intentionally integrated Christian themes into his fictional works while also not feeling the need to overly emphasize or assert them. In this approach, Lewis hoped to craft creative and compelling worlds of fantasy that would evoke imaginative experiences in readers and provide them with the opportunity to explore Christian ideas free of the baggage and preachiness that might typically be associated with overbearing religious presentations in the real world. By using more allegorical and connected worlds, therefore, Lewis integrated Christian ideas into his fictional stories often in a more intentional and more easily accessible manner than Tolkien. However, Lewis's more overt religious approach also contains more of a danger of frustrating non-religious readers or compromising the full power of the sub-creative, imaginative experience, since it more intentionally integrates Christian ideas into the story. Therefore, both the strengths and the weakness of Lewis's approach to exploring Christian ideas in fiction are both defined by his desire to balance creative expression and religious meaning.

CHAPTER THREE

Walker Percy and Restorative Connection

As the focus of this analysis of Christian fiction transitions from Lewis and Tolkien, the earlier Oxford Christians, to Walker Percy and Marilynne Robinson, the later American writers, it is important to note that this is an important shift both in the background of the writers and the genres of fiction they represent. While Tolkien and Lewis both predominantly lived in Oxford, England, worked in the early-to-mid twentieth century, and prominently produced works of fantasy, Walker Percy, on the other hand, predominantly lived in the American South, worked in the mid-to-late twentieth century, and wrote essays, novels, and works of satire. Percy, therefore, is an intriguing writer to study alongside these earlier authors, because his writing points beyond just the influential approach of the Inklings to all the other diverse and compelling ways authors have used fiction to explore Christian ideas over the last hundred years. In fact, Percy, who was known for his ability to “reflect upon morality, the theological and metaphysical meanings of mankind, the current state of world events, or Johnny Carson’s latest guest star,” particularly distinguished himself as a compelling author due to his unique way of blending a wide variety of literary approaches to creatively explore deeper themes, including those of religion and spirituality.¹⁰² Therefore, in order to provide insight into Walker Percy’s unique approach to exploring Christian ideas in fiction, this chapter will analyze Percy’s understanding of storytelling

¹⁰² Walker Percy, *More Conversations with Walker Percy*, (Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 1993), 109.

as a medium of intersubjective connection, his diagnostic and prophetic style of communication, and his use of exaggerated worlds in his works.

Intersubjective Connection

Much like Lewis and Tolkien, Walker Percy had a profound interest in linguistics and the nature of human communication, an interest which shaped the way he both understood and approached storytelling. In contrast to Tolkien and Lewis, however, Percy also had a rather extensive background in the medical field which lead him to pull from psychology in addition to philosophy and philology in developing an understanding of storytelling, as fundamentally intersubjective in nature.¹⁰³ Therefore, in order to understand Percy's approach to storytelling one must first understand his approach to human psychology and proper clinical therapy. For Percy, much of modern psychology and therapy function in an overly materialistic and reductionist framework by treating people as merely "stimulus response machines," thus failing to recognize their full humanity.¹⁰⁴ Percy instead argues that in its use of legitimate "signifiers" in language and "acts of interpretation" humanity demonstrates a fuller sense of consciousness and personhood than the more mechanistic stance taken by some modern psychologists.¹⁰⁵ In light of this understanding of humanity, Percy concludes that holistic physiological therapy approaches the patient through an "I-Thou" mindset not an "I-It" mindset, which allows both therapist and patient to connect as full people and create an "intersubjective

¹⁰³ Walker Percy, *Signposts in a Strange Land*, (New York, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1991), 250.

¹⁰⁴ Jan Nordby Gretlund and Karl-Heinz Westarp, *Walker Percy: Novelist and Philosopher*, (Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 1991), 156.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 156.

community.”¹⁰⁶ Therefore, by allowing a legitimate connection between two conscious selves, this intersubjective community created in therapy actually allows each person involved to gain or grow in their consciousness by being drawn outward not inward.¹⁰⁷

Then in his essays on the writing process, Percy connects writing to therapy and describes the novel in similarly intersubjective terms. For Percy, language inherently invokes the intersubjective through an “exchange between two people” in which “one man encounter[s] another, speaking a word and through it and between them discovering the world and himself.”¹⁰⁸ Therefore, novels and stories, in facilitating the communication of language and meaning between two people, actually create a type of intersubjective community between the author and reader through the text. For Percy, this intersubjective aspect of storytelling explains “why it [makes] a man feel better to read a book about a man like himself feeling bad,” since in the act of reading the person experiences a feeling of solidarity and community by connecting in his own conscious experience to that of the author.¹⁰⁹ By understanding storytelling as intersubjective in this manner, Percy ultimately presents the story as an important part of human growth and connection as it, much like the experience of therapy, allows the readers to come to a greater understanding of their own consciousness and a deeper understanding of the

¹⁰⁶ Gretlund and Westarp, *Walker Percy*, 165.

Walker Percy, *The Message in the Bottle: How Queer Man Is, How Queer Language Is, and What One Has To Do with the Other*, (New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975), 2011.

¹⁰⁷ Gretlund and Westarp, *Walker Percy*, 165.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 155-256.

Walker Percy, *The Message in the Bottle*, 234.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 5.

human experience which ultimately allows them to develop in their own sense of personhood.

In this manner, therefore, Percy's understanding of story as intersubjective is not unrelated to his willingness to explore Christian ideas and themes in his fictional writing. As Lewis Lawson indicates in the essay, "The Cross and the Delta," the culmination of the intersubjective process of outward connection and growth for Percy is ultimately a "communion both human and heavenly," in other words becoming fully connected to God, others, and oneself.¹¹⁰ In this manner, Percy connected the "outward turning" involved in telling and experiencing a story with the spiritual process of connecting to God, the ultimate source of consciousness and personhood, and thus presents storytelling as containing an inherently spiritual dimension, much as Lewis and Tolkien did. Therefore, based on his understanding of storytelling and spiritually, Percy would naturally integrate Christian ideas in his fiction writing, since for Percy we communicate our religious experiences to one another not objectively but intersubjectively.

Therapeutic and Prophetic Communication

In addition to influencing his understanding of the nature of story, Percy's background in medicine and understanding of psychology also influenced his approach to balancing authorial intent and the freedom of the reader in exploring Christian ideas in his fiction. Based on his understanding of the intersubjective connection involved in a novel, Percy approached communicating Christian ideas to his readers through what he often referred to as a "diagnostic" or "therapeutic" framework.¹¹¹ In this diagnostic

¹¹⁰ Gretlund and Westarp, *Walker Percy*, 11.

¹¹¹ Percy, *Signposts*, 250.

approach to writing, Percy utilized the novel as a sort of “cognitive art” where it is his responsibility as the therapist-writer to help the reader address what has gone wrong both in society and in the individual and to then begin to explore how these ills, whatever they are, may be cured.¹¹² To achieve this diagnostic or therapeutic effect in his writing, Percy intentionally presents religious, philosophical, or psychological ideas in his work through creative means.

In an interview Percy, himself, explained how he approached this communicative task, saying, “I use the fiction form as a vehicle for incarnating ideas...it is the embodiment of ideas of both philosophy and psychiatry into a form through which the reader can see a concept which otherwise might not be recognized.”¹¹³ In this quote, Percy provides several valuable insights into how he intentionally utilizes the medium of fiction to explore Christian ideas in a diagnostic manner. First, Percy emphasizes how he uses fiction to “incarnate” religious ideas by presenting them within a form of particularity and concreteness such that readers may engage with how an idea might function when actually manifested in reality. For example, when exploring in *Love in the Ruins* the idea of the religious malaise characterizing the modern world, Percy presents Dr. Tom More, “the bad catholic,” who provides a concrete presentation of how one’s religious beliefs come into conflict with the moral and psychological confusion so often present in the modern cultural landscape.¹¹⁴ Second, Percy emphasizes how this

¹¹² Ibid., 140-141.

¹¹³ Walker Percy, *Conversations with Walker Percy*, (Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 1985), 9.

¹¹⁴ Walker Percy, *Love in the Ruins: The Adventures of a Bad Catholic at a Time Near the End of the World*, (New York, Picador, 1971), 6.

incarnational element of fiction allows readers to engage with ideas that might normally be overly familiar or complex in a refreshing manner as though the reader is engaging with the idea as if for the first time. This recovery element of Percy's approach is also present in the characterization of Tom More, whose compelling characterization provides a fresh take on the common character-type of the religious hypocrite and whose personal struggles provide a new perspective on how one's conception of the relationship between the mind and the body might impact how that person lives. Overall, therefore, in presenting Christian ideas through fiction in this manner, Percy aims to resemble the work of the therapist in presenting deeper truths about humanity and reality in a concrete manner such that the patient-readers can hold them up as a mirror to their own complex consciousness.

In this manner, Percy is certainly more intentional and conscious than either of the two previous authors regarding how he includes Christian ideas and themes in his fictional stories and worlds. When reading through many of Percy's novels this intentionally religious aspect of his work is quite apparent, as Percy explicitly addresses the Catholic faith, presents his characters participating in Christian practices, and addresses important interpretations of Christian beliefs.¹¹⁵ However, it is important to note that Percy quite adamantly opposes crafting a story with the primary purpose of communicating a message or teaching a lesson. For Percy, this type of "moral fiction" fails to be effective, because it comes off as preachy, since it uses "literature to influence what people do" in a heavy handed way and thus manipulates reality to present a certain

¹¹⁵ Percy, *Love in the Ruins*, 183, 254.

message or understanding of the world to readers.¹¹⁶ In his diagnostic approach to exploring Christian ideas, however, Percy aims not to manipulate reality but to equip his readers to explore reality.¹¹⁷ Therefore, while he intentionally integrates Christian concepts in his fictional works, Percy also attempts to creatively present these ideas in such a manner that readers can freely engage with them and discover a sense of meaning instead of having meaning imposed on their literary experience.¹¹⁸ In this manner, Percy's diagnostic, therapeutic approach to exploring Christian ideas in fiction does resemble his understanding of intersubjective therapy, since he as the author attempts to provide readers with an experience of engaging with another conscious person's interpretative understanding of life and humanity which allows the reader to explore these deeper realities and "grow through the narrative process."¹¹⁹

This diagnostic approach which intends to consciously engage Christian ideas without removing the interpretative freedom of the reader is particularly manifest in Percy's novel, *Love in the Ruins*. On simply a literal narrative level, *Love in the Ruins* features psychological and therapeutic elements quite prominently. Dr. Tom More, the protagonist of the novel, is actually a psychologist who personally suffers from psychological strain and also spends much of the novel attempting to diagnosis the psychological and spiritual ills of both the individuals he encounters and America as a society. Based on the representational function of the characters, however, *Love in the*

¹¹⁶ Percy, *More Conversations*, 140-141.

¹¹⁷ Gretlund and Westarp, *Walker Percy*, 165.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 160.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 160.

Ruins also serves as a therapeutic exploration of the spiritual ailments affecting the modern individual and society. Instead of following a typical plot-centric progression, much of the story of *Love in the Ruins* seems to revolve around Dr. More's repeated encounters with various characters who serve as incarnations or representations of different philosophical and spiritual ideologies in America. For example, Ted Tennis, one of Dr. More's patients, represents the idea of "angelism" where a person becomes overly abstracted and thus disconnected from the body and self.¹²⁰ Percy's diagnostic approach in *Love in the Ruins* is perhaps seen in no clearer place than at the climax when Dr. More prays to his forbearer and "patron saint," Thomas More, for help in overcoming the temptation and influence of Art Immelmann.¹²¹ By resolving the conflict through the rather surprising method of a small prayer for help, Percy creatively portrays how genuine spiritual connection with others and God overcomes the corrupting influence of unrestrained individualism and thus provides readers with a unique opportunity to explore how the pursuit of individual fulfillment contributes to spiritual malaise. In this manner, *Love in the Ruins* demonstrates one of the greatest strengths of Percy's diagnostic approach in that it both utilizes intersubjective connection in its medium as a novel and simultaneously enables readers to explore how intersubjective connection contributes to spiritual growth through the contents and ideas found within the novel.

In addition to its use of a diagnostic framework, Percy's approach to exploring Christian ideas in his fiction is also characterized by his unique use of prophetic voice. As Karl-Heinz Westarp points out, one of Percy's greatest strengths as a writer is his ability

¹²⁰ Percy, *Love in the Ruins*, 34-35.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 376-377.

to “see universal significance in the particular” and thus address questions of meaning and corruption not only at the individual level but also at the societal levels.¹²² In many of his fictional works, therefore, Percy takes on a quasi-prophetic role in creatively directing the reader’s attention to certain moral and religious ills present in a certain community and thus allowing readers to explore what it actually means to live a moral life in their communities. It is important to note that Percy does distinguish that novelists, such as himself, are not in fact prophets, since, unlike prophets, novelists are not called directly by God and also issue warnings in order to be wrong not in order to be right.¹²³ Despite making these distinctions, however, Percy does indicate that in his fictional writing he often takes on a type of prophetic role or voice which blends social satire and moral exploration with a certain predictive element. As a “prophetic” novelist, Percy understood his role of creatively exploring social moral ills as being like the “canary that coal miners used to take down into the shaft to test the air.”¹²⁴ In this manner, Percy presents the novelist as containing a unique insight about the current moral state of society, perhaps due to the novelist’s ability to examine the community as though an outsider, and then provide a warning regarding how the moral elements of these issues might currently be affecting the people in the community or how it might impact them in the future.

¹²² Gretlund and Westarp, *Walker Percy*, xii.

¹²³ Percy, *The Message in the Bottle*, 101.

Percy, *Signposts*, 248.

¹²⁴ Percy, *The Message in the Bottle*, 101.

Percy utilized this prophetic approach to communicate or explore moral and religious ideas in his fictional works in several important ways. First, Percy utilizes a prophetic approach to creatively reveal and explore how certain religious ideas or ideologies are currently affecting society in ways that might be commonly ignored or overlooked. This revelatory dimension of Percy's prophetic approach is demonstrated in *Love in the Ruins* when Tom More reflects on America's enslavement and oppression of African people and describes it as God's "one little test" regarding the moral heart of the nation which it failed, corrupting its entire enterprise of striving to be a God-blessed society.¹²⁵ In this manner, Percy utilizes the fictional characters and world of *Love in the Ruins* to serve as a sort of prophetic mirror revealing the full scope of the moral evil involved in racism and how often religious patriotism in America ignores its severity.

Second, Percy utilizes a prophetic approach to creatively illustrate how current religious ideas or ideologies could affect society if they are allowed to continue to grow and be carried out to their logical conclusions. This predictive element is also evidenced in *Love in the Ruins* when Percy describes how religion becomes further entangled in cultural politics in a future version of America. In this "predicted" world, Christianity has been so coopted by cultural and political forces that Jesus is treated by many as no more than a spiritualized reflection of one's own identity and tribe. For example, the American Catholic Church in *Love in the Ruins* celebrates "Property Rights Sunday" as a feast day and presents "Christ holding the American home, which has a picket fence, in his two hands."¹²⁶ In a similar manner, the "Bible Brunch" at the golf course in Paradise Estates

¹²⁵ Percy, *Love in the Ruins*, 57.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 181.

prominently displays a banner, stating, “Jesus Christ, the Greatest Pro of Them All.”¹²⁷ In both of these examples, Christ and Christianity have been stripped of all their authentic and unique challenge such that they can be used merely as cultural-political symbols to support one’s own views or ways of life and oppose those held by others. By presenting this fictional “prediction” of the religious future of America, Percy’s prophetic approach allows readers to reflect on how religion might already be used as merely a cultural identity marker in current society and consider how such a use of religious ideology might be morally harmful both now and in the future. Therefore, Percy’s prophetic approach, both in its revelatory and predictive uses, provides readers with the unique opportunity to approach the moral and societal implications of religious ideas as though the readers were outsiders in some way, since it emphasizes potentially overlooked aspects of current issues and thus allows readers to approach them with fresh or renewed perspectives.

By combining this quasi-prophetic voice with his diagnostic framework, therefore, Walker Percy ultimately crafts an approach to exploring Christian themes in his fiction that is quite intentional and explicit, at least in comparison to the two previous authors. As one might expect based on the analysis of those previous approaches, the more intentional and explicit nature of Percy’s approach contains both potential strengths and dangers for allowing readers to engage with Christian ideas without causing their experience of the story to be overwhelmed by these Christian elements. Both his diagnostic and therapeutic approaches can be effective in that they allow readers to more actively engage with the religious, philosophical, or psychological ideas present in his

¹²⁷ Ibid., 83

work. Since Percy intentionally presents different religious ideologies in his fictional work instead of more passively integrating religious themes, most readers will be able to identify more clearly the religious ideas presented, connect them to their real world counterparts, and then explore the implications of these religious ideas through the framework of the fictional world. In this manner, Percy's intentional integration of Christian ideas in his works provides the opportunity for readers to reciprocate such intentionally and engage the ideas in an equally active manner, which creates the sort of interpersonal exchange of ideas and perspectives at the core of Percy's diagnostic approach. Additionally, by explicitly addressing certain aspects of religious belief, Percy's approach allows readers to explore certain aspects of religion that may be more difficult in a more implicit approach, such as providing satirical critiques of actual religious systems. While it is certainly possible to satirize religion without explicitly mentioning it, Percy's critiques of the racism and power politics found in American religion are all the more convincing, because of how they explicitly mention particular iterations of Christianity as points of reference.

The intentional and explicit nature of Percy's diagnostic, prophetic approach, however, also contains the danger of turning off some readers by overwhelming their experience of the story with the religious and philosophical ideas presented to them. As previously mentioned, Percy did have similar concerns to Lewis's and Tolkien's that centering a fictional story around a single message would come off to readers as "preachy" and, therefore, aimed to diagnostically allow readers to explore different ideas in the story instead of attempting to impose meaning on readers. However, just because Percy recognized the potential danger of moralizing in his approach does not mean that

he always avoided falling into this particular error. While Percy does aim to preserve the interpretive freedom of the reader, there are times in Percy's later novels where his own religious or philosophical perspective is stated so strongly or clearly that it is nearly impossible for the reader to avoid. For example, William Allen argues that "Father Smith's Confession" in *The Thanatos Syndrome* "overpowers the rest of the novel" and demonstrates a shift from "fiction as philosophical quest to fiction as religious polemic" by making such an abundantly clear and overwhelming declaration about the ethics of abortion and its implications for American society.¹²⁸

While not all Christian ideas in Percy's works are presented in this overwhelming manner, this aspect of Percy's diagnostic, prophetic approach does ensure that most readers will not be drawn to Percy's fiction just for the story, without also intentionally desiring to engage with philosophical and religious ideas to some degree. Additionally, the complex nature of the philosophical, psychological, and religious ideas Percy presents in this approach often make his works not easily accessible to those who do not already have some interest or background in these areas. Overall, therefore, Percy's diagnostic and prophetic approach to exploring religion in fiction enables readers to more actively and intentionally engage with religious or philosophical ideas while also presenting potential roadblocks for readers who simply want to engage a compelling story without this type of religious inquiry.

Exaggerated Fictional Worlds

Finally, Percy's unique approach to Christian fiction is also distinguished by his use of exaggerated fictional worlds as the medium for presenting and exploring Christian

¹²⁸ Gretlund and Westarp, *Walker Percy*, 189.

ideas in many of his fictional works. In works such as *Love in the Ruins*, Percy creates a compelling and intriguing literary experience for readers by blending together elements of different literary genres and storytelling approaches to produce something that feels distinct. Because of this approach, *Love in the Ruins* is difficult to categorize neatly into one literary genre. For example, *Love in the Ruins* has been described as being “southern metafiction,” an “end of the world” or dystopian novel, “futuristic satire,” and fantastical science-fiction.¹²⁹ These various elements of Percy’s stories, including the satiric, futuristic, and fantastic, might make Percy’s fictional works difficult to label, yet they function together quite effectively to produce a single creative yet surprisingly believable type of fictional world, which I will refer to as an exaggerated world.

The story of *Love in the Ruins* is clearly presented as occurring in the “real” world not some separate fantasy world, since it involves references to actual countries and historical events and largely functions based on the same scientific laws and phenomena experienced in reality. However, while being realistic in the sense that it is presented as occurring in a future continuation of our present reality, the world of *Love in the Ruins* also includes satiric, futuristic, and fantastic elements that heighten the experiences within it and cause it to function in an exaggerated, slightly unrealistic manner. Therefore, while reading *Love in the Ruins*, one might feel a certain sense of familiarity with the world and might be able to imaginatively view its world as a continuation of our own, yet one would never actually expect many of the fantastical events that occur within

¹²⁹ Gretlund and Westarp, *Walker Percy*, xi.

Percy, *The Message in the Bottle*, 101.

Percy, *Signposts*, 247.

this world to occur in our own world, even at some future point in time. In this manner, Percy's exaggerated world represents a further continuation along the spectrum from fantasy to realism than either Tolkien or Lewis's fictional worlds. While Tolkien sets his fiction in a separate fantasy world and Lewis takes his characters from the world of reality to the fantastical, Percy, on the other hand, actually brings elements of the fantastical to our own world.

Percy's exaggerated world is primarily characterized by three unique qualities that enable it to believably integrate the fantastical into the realistic while serving as a creative medium for exploring Christian ideas: a futuristic setting, satiric characterization, and mechanism of science-fiction. First, Percy sets his fictional story at some undisclosed point in the future to produce a state of suspended disbelief in regards to the exaggerated nature of his world. For example, *Love in the Ruins* is described as occurring "at a time near the end of world" and in "these dread later days of the old violent beloved U.S.A."¹³⁰ In this manner, Percy sets the story of *Love in the Ruins* in a time that is sufficiently near to 1960s America that it could reflect elements of this divisive time but also is sufficiently distant from the time of his intended readers that the characteristics witnessed in the real world could believably develop to an exaggerated, apocalyptic point.

Second, Percy often describes events or people in an over-the-top and comical manner in this type of exaggerated world, so that readers know not to take the world too seriously but rather regard it as functioning to satirically heighten the moral issues that easier to overlook in reality. For example, during Dr. More's intellectual debate in the Pit,

¹³⁰ Percy, *Love in the Ruins*, 3.

Percy describes the scene in near gladiatorial terms, stating, “Students roost like chickens along the steep slopes, cracking and fluttering their white jackets as they argue about the day’s case. Bets are placed, doctors attacked and defended.”¹³¹ Percy’s exaggerated depiction of a situation usually regarded as stale and academic is intended to be comical, yet it also is intended to satirically reveal the danger of tribalism and mob-mentality even in supposedly enlightened, intellectual institutions. In this manner, therefore, the futuristic and satiric elements of Percy’s exaggerated world actually serve to strengthen his prophetic approach of exploring Christian ideas, since they enable Percy to both satirically reveal aspects of current religious ideologies and warn about where certain religious beliefs could lead if allowed to carry on into this supposed future world.

Finally, Percy’s exaggerated world is characterized by science-fiction devices and tropes that allow for integration of the fantastical elements into a realistic world. Similar to Lewis, Percy uses devices or mechanisms in his fictional world to bridge the gap between the realistic and the fantastical, yet unlike Lewis, Percy primarily utilizes devices of supposed science not magic such that the characters solidly remain in the world of realism instead of exiting into a world of pure fantasy. For example, the story of *Love in the Ruins* largely revolves around Dr. More’s invention, the “More Qualitative-Quantitative Ontological Lapsometer,” which can diagnose the ailment and conditions affecting peoples’ soul and tangibly change their psychological states.¹³² The existence of the lapsometer, therefore, distinguishes the world of *Love in the Ruins* as one of

¹³¹ Ibid., 218.

¹³² Percy, *Love in the Ruins*, 29-30.

“scientific magic,” since metaphysical and spiritual realities are imaginatively given tangible form under the guise of some extraordinary scientific discovery.¹³³

In this manner, the science-fiction elements of Percy’s exaggerated world allow his therapeutic exploration of Christian ideas to take a more prominent and compelling place in the fictional story. By imaginatively portraying different spiritual and psychological ailments as tangibly represented in the world, Percy’s exaggerated world allows readers to more readily connect with and explore the ideas represented by these ailments in a manner that allows for therapeutic growth. Additionally, by introducing these imaginative representations through pseudoscientific means, Percy both reinforces that these spiritual conditions do in fact exist in the real world, albeit in a less tangible manner, and emphasizes the prominent theme in Percy’s concerning how science has taken on a nearly religious place in the modern world. Overall, therefore, Percy’s exaggerated world, through its futuristic, satirical, and scientific elements, provides a medium in which Percy’s diagnostic or prophetic exploration of religious and philosophical ideas can be effectively integrated into the fictional story without feeling unnatural or out of place in the world of the story.

In comparison to the fictional worlds of fantasy utilized by Lewis and Tolkien, therefore, Percy’s exaggerated world places a greater emphasis on entering deeper into our own reality to explore Christian ideas than journeying out of our own reality to encounter an imaginative experience. This increased realism of Percy’s fictional world can be particularly effective at times, because it allows Percy to explicitly mention actual political, cultural, moral, and scientific realities in our world and then creatively explore

¹³³ Percy, *Love in the Ruins*, 34.

certain religious dimensions of them. Additionally, Percy's exaggerated world does still contain some fantastical elements that allow readers to encounter imaginatively presented ideas and experience the discovery of a compellingly crafted fictional world in ways that function similarly to Tolkien and Lewis's worlds of fantasy. However, in its increased realism, Percy's exaggerated worlds do lessen the feeling of pure wonder and awe in encountering another world, which stirs an almost spiritual longing in Tolkien's and Lewis's fantasy worlds, and also further restricts the ability of readers to read the story without having to actively confront the spiritual messages within it. In this manner, Percy's use of an exaggerated world demonstrates both the inherent strengths and weaknesses of balancing realism and fantasy in exploring Christian ideas through fictional stories.

Overall, therefore, Percy's approach to exploring Christian ideas in fiction is primarily directed by these three overarching characteristics: his intersubjective understanding of story, his diagnostic and prophetic presentation of Christian ideas, and his medium of exaggerated fictional worlds. In the fantastical elements of his exaggerated world and the quasi-prophetic descriptions, Percy demonstrates an approach, also present in Tolkien and Lewis's work, which uses fictional stories to imaginatively portray Christian ideas in a way that allows readers to examine these ideas in a new light or from a new perspective. Then in his intersubjective and therapeutic approach to communicating Christian ideas, Percy also represents a different type of Christian fiction where both author and reader more actively engage in an exchange of religious ideas and perspectives, which can be a spiritually rewarding experience for the readers by expanding their understanding of the nature of humanity and by engaging them in the

process of connecting outward to other persons and potentially to God. However, all three of these distinctive elements of Percy's approach also demonstrate how a more intentional approach to integrating religious growth can also overwhelm the story by subjecting it to an external religious message or perspective. Therefore, Percy's approach ultimately represents a creative attempt both to balance the intent of the author with the freedom of the reader and to balance elements of realism with elements of fantasy when crafting a fictional story that explores Christian ideas in compelling ways.

CHAPTER FOUR

Marilynne Robinson and Apophatic Exploration

Much like Walker Percy, Marilynne Robinson, as an American writer in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, represents a background and approach to writing different from that of the popular, well-regarded Oxford Christian writers. However, Marilynne Robinson also has an important similarity to Lewis and Tolkien in that she is a Christian writer who similarly became recognized as a public intellectual with popular interest. While Percy was certainly an influential author, most of his recognition and popularity was concentrated in more specific or niche circles interested in topics such as literary criticism, culture in the American south, or Christian social critique. Robinson, on the other hand, has gained notoriety and recognition not only within niche religious or literary circles but also within the broader intellectual and popular spheres, even being referenced by President Barack Obama as being a writer who had a profoundly positive impact on him.¹³⁴

In this broader sphere of influence, Robinson represents the return of the popularly recognized Christian writer to public discourse in a manner that has not really occurred seen since the time of Lewis and Tolkien. Robinson's unique approach to Christian fiction thus proves to be of particular interest, because her writings demonstrate a creative ability to address Christian themes and ideas in a way that connects even with

¹³⁴ Lisa, Allardice, "Interview-Marilynne Robinson: 'Obama Was Very Gentlemanly ... I'd like to Get a Look at Trump'," *The Guardian*, Accessed July 18, 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/jul/06/marilynne-robinson-interview-barack-obama-donald-trump-writer-theologian>.

people who are more “secular” and resistant to religious preaching in literature. Therefore, by analyzing three important features of her literary approach, her understanding of storytelling as an exploration of the human soul, her character-driven framework for integrating Christian ideas, and her use of realistic worlds in her fiction, this chapter aims to provide insight into how Marilynne Robinson is able to uniquely and creatively explore Christian ideas in her fiction in this manner.

Exploration of the Soul

First, Robinson’s unique approach to exploring Christian ideas in fiction is influenced and impacted by her understanding of storytelling as an artistic exploration of the human soul and consciousness. Throughout both her works of fiction and non-fiction, Robinson emphasizes the apophatic nature of reality and the seemingly sacred nature of human consciousness as two of the primary interests of her writing.¹³⁵ In her collection of essays entitled *When I was a Child I Read Books*, Robinson expresses concern that the modern intellectual world tends to be overly reductionistic in its philosophical inclinations, particularly in the way it regards human consciousness and experience.¹³⁶ For Robinson, the behaviorist framework which attempts to describe humanity entirely in materialistic and deterministic terms actually fails to fully express the lived experience of human consciousness by failing to recognize the “apophatic” or the mysterious and inexpressible aspects of reality.¹³⁷ Robinson instead argues that “the human ability to

¹³⁵ Perhaps mysterious is a more accurate term than apophatic in this context . However, since Robinson does use apophatic in this manner in her essays, I will also use the term here.

¹³⁶ Marilynne Robinson, *When I Was a Child I Read Books*, (New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012), 3-5.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 19-20.

consider and appraise one's own thoughts" which is commonly referred to as "self-awareness" indicates a complex, mysterious, and seemingly miraculous aspect of human consciousness that cannot fully be captured by human language or current intellectual frameworks.¹³⁸ Therefore, Robinson advises preserving the language of "soul" when discussing human consciousness and personhood in order to adequately express this mysterious element and also adequately "identify sacred mystery with every individual experience, every life."¹³⁹

This understanding of the human soul and consciousness then influences Robinson's understanding of the nature of story and thus her approach to storytelling. Based on her understanding of the human mystery, Robinson does not attempt to provide any comprehensive explanation of the nature of story, "where it comes from," or "why we need it."¹⁴⁰ Robinson, however, does explain that she personally finds storytelling to be interesting and compelling due to its unique ability to explore and express the mystery of human consciousness or the soul. For Robinson, this exploratory element of story is largely based on its roots in human language, since language, particularly when used allegorically or imaginatively, has the ability to "evoke a reality beyond its grasp" or "make inroads on the mass terrain of what cannot be said."¹⁴¹ In her essay, "Freedom of Thought," Robinson specifically explains her approach to storytelling, saying, "When I write fiction, I suppose my attempt is to simulate the integrative work of a mind

¹³⁸ Ibid., 7-8.

¹³⁹ Ibid., xiii, 8.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 7.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 19-20.

perceiving and reflecting, drawing upon culture, memory, conscience, belief or assumption, circumstance, fear, and desire—a mind shaping the moment of experience and response and then reshaping them both as narrative.”¹⁴² In this manner, Robinson presents storytelling as a uniquely powerful form of a creative expression for simulating what it is actually like to experience human consciousness, which naturally involves narrative-building.

As Robinson explained, forming experience and ideas into a narratological framework is a natural way in which the human consciousness responds to and interprets the world. Since, storytelling is the product of the self-aware and narratological aspects of human consciousness, stories are by their nature linked to human consciousness and thus provide creative windows into the nature and interworking of these aspects of consciousness. By simulating human consciousness, which interprets the world as a narrative, a fictional story can powerfully express what it feels like to experience the world as a human consciousness, while also providing readers the unique experience of intimately connecting to a simulated consciousness apart from their own. Together, this creation of a simulated consciousness and this opportunity to interact with a consciousness other than one’s own enable both the author and the reader in storytelling to explore the complex and mysterious nature of human consciousness in a manner that is not available in many other media. Therefore, by connecting the nature of storytelling to the complex and mysterious nature of human consciousness in this manner, Robinson ultimately presents storytelling as a uniquely powerful medium for exploring the mysteries of the human soul.

¹⁴² Ibid., 7.

Based on her understanding of storytelling as an exploration of the soul, therefore, Robinson naturally views storytelling as an effective medium for exploring Christian ideas, particularly for those who have experienced or are interested in the religious or spiritual elements of human consciousness. Robinson's understanding of the mysterious and mystical nature of human consciousness is inseparable from her understanding of genuine spirituality and theology. Robinson often points to theological figures, such as John Calvin and Jonathan Edwards, for helping provide her with a framework for acknowledging and expressing the mystery of the human soul in a way that transcends strictly behavioristic terms. The form of Christian humanism practiced by these theologians helped provide Robinson with the framework to understand and express the richness of human experience and the transcendent value of each person by grounding such values in the concept of *imago dei*, in which human nature reflects in some way the divine image.¹⁴³ In fact, this tradition of Christian humanism was so influential for Robinson that she personifies the tradition in *Gilead* through the character of John Ames, who lives exploring this mystery of what it means to be alive and human by regularly interacting with the ideas of these theological thinkers.¹⁴⁴ In a similar manner, therefore, Robinson understands the mystery of human consciousness as both evidence for the existence of a transcendent or spiritual dimension of reality and an indication of the means through which humanity might connect to this spiritual reality.

¹⁴³ Alex Engebretson, *Understanding Marilynne Robinson*, (Columbia, SC, University of South Carolina Press, 2017), 11.

Jennifer L. Holberg, "A Conversation with Marilynne Robinson," *Image Journal*, Accessed July 18, 2019. <https://imagejournal.org/article/conversation-marilynne-robinson/>.

¹⁴⁴ Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead: A Novel*, (New York, Picador, 2004), 124-125.

Therefore, since a story, at its core, involves the exploration of the human soul, storytelling for Robinson contains an inherently spiritual element by revealing aspects of the spiritual nature of human consciousness even if religious ideas are never explicitly discussed. In this manner, Robinson's exploratory understanding does bare some similarities to Percy's intersubjective understanding, since both emphasize how story functions based on a connection between two souls that are in an inherently spiritual interaction. However, while Percy's intersubjective approach emphasizes a therapeutic element in which the reader develops spiritually through the encounter, Robinson's understanding of story focuses more on artistic expression whereby the author creatively portrays some aspect of the spiritual nature of humanity with little intention that the reader be changed by it. Overall, therefore, Robinson's understanding of storytelling as exploration of the human soul both influenced why she naturally integrated Christian ideas into her fictional works and how she chose to integrate those ideas, as will be discussed in the following sections.

"Fleshed Out" Theology

Second, Robinson's unique approach to exploring religion in her fiction is distinguished by her use of a character-centric framework for integrating Christian ideas in her works without overwhelming the story with a religious message. On the whole, Robinson's fictional works are more character-focused than plot-focused or world-focused both in the way they broadly tell their stories and in the way they more specifically address Christian topics or themes.¹⁴⁵ Character takes this central role in

¹⁴⁵ Rachel Sykes, "Reading for Quiet in Marilynne Robinson's Gilead Novels," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 58, no. 2 (2017): 108.

Robinson's fictional works in large part, both because of her understanding of storytelling and because the unique voice of a character is often the foundational point around which she builds her fictional worlds and stories. Describing her writing process in an interview with *Image*, Robinson explains, "No novel begins for me until it presents itself as a voice speaking."¹⁴⁶ For example, Robinson's classic literary work *Gilead* began simply as the compelling and unique voice of Pastor John Ames, which came to Robinson in what she would describe as an almost "mystical" experience.¹⁴⁷ Robinson recognizes that the foundational voice of this character is in some way her own voice, since it is a product of her own consciousness.¹⁴⁸ However, since the voice is also a product of her external experiences with other conscious people, it eventually becomes a voice that is in some ways distinct from her own.¹⁴⁹

Eventually, as Robinson's creative process continues, this voice further develops into the sense of a fully embodied and realized character.¹⁵⁰ For example, when reading John Ames voicing his thoughts and feelings on the experiences of his life, such as when he decided to baptize cats as a child, the character conveys such a unique sense of personhood that it is difficult not to view him as his own person with his set of unique quirks, beliefs, and perspectives.¹⁵¹ By writing in this manner, therefore, Robinson

¹⁴⁶ Holberg, "A Conversation with Marilynne Robinson."

¹⁴⁷ Debra Bendis, "A Pastoral Voice: An Interview with Marilynne Robinson," *The Christian Century*, Accessed July 18, 2019. <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2006-04/pastoral-voice>.

¹⁴⁸ Holberg, "A Conversation with Marilynne Robinson."

¹⁴⁹ Bendis, "A Pastoral Voice."

¹⁵⁰ Robinson, *When I Was a Child*, 6.

¹⁵¹ Robinson, *Gilead*, 22-23.

centers her stories around communicating the embodied sense of fully realized human beings, with all the complexity that comes with being a unique, conscious, and self-aware person, instead of simply using the characters as shallow actors to further the plot. This character-driven approach to storytelling thus obviously relates to Robinson's understanding of storytelling, since it highlights the medium's unique ability to explore the human soul both in how the story is formed and on what the story focuses.

Therefore, since developing and exploring character is such a prominent feature of Robinson's fictional works, it is understandable that Robinson largely introduces and explores Christian ideas in her stories through her characters. Regarding her use of religion in her fiction, Robinson explains, "I think and write about religion because I am religious."¹⁵² In this manner, Robinson's interest in Christian ideas becomes naturally, and perhaps subconsciously, integrated into many of her characters as she draws from her own conscious experience and understanding of the spiritual nature of reality to develop the voices and perspectives of the fictional characters she creates. Robinson also more intentionally integrates her interest in Christian ideas into the perspectives and experience of her characters, since exploring the spiritual nature of human consciousness is one of her primary interests in writing. By naturally integrating Christian perspectives into the conscious experiences and interactions of her characters in these two ways, Robinson thus aims to explore Christian ideas through an approach that feels both compelling and authentic to readers, since interacting with other people is often how Christian ideas are introduced to people in the real world.

¹⁵² Allardice, "Interview-Marilynne Robinson."

In her fictional works, Robinson utilizes this character-centric approach to introduce or explore Christian ideas and themes in two primary ways: explicit religious discussion and embodied theological ideas or spiritual frameworks. First, Robinson explores Christian ideas by having her characters explicitly reflect on Christian ideas, discuss their importance with other characters, and also participate in common Christian practices within her fictional works. In *Gilead*, for example, John Ames quite often reflects on Christian theology and discusses particular doctrines with other characters, such as when he specifically discusses how to understand the Calvinist doctrine of predestination with Jack Boughton.¹⁵³ These particular discussions often reflect a certain level of insider knowledge regarding theological complexities, such as when Jack questions how a conception of perdition can coexist with human free will, and also reflect an intimate knowledge of how such debates and dialogues often play out in real life, such as how Glory immediately leaves when predestination is brought up.¹⁵⁴

By including such reflection and discussion, Robinson demonstrates a determination to accurately portray what Christians actually believe and practice instead of shying away from such topics as too religious or too complex. In this manner, therefore, Robinson's character-centric approach to exploring Christian ideas is certainly more explicitly religious than the approaches of some the previously examined writers, such as Lewis and Tolkien. Through her character-centric approach, however, these explicit discussions of Christian ideas often feel natural instead of preachy or

¹⁵³ Robinson, *Gilead*, 149-153.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 150-151.

manipulative, since the primary focus is on the interaction between the characters not between the author and the reader.

The primary purpose of these instances of religious interaction in Robinson's work is to illustrate how these different religious conceptions and frameworks impact the way the character understands the world, engages with complex issues, and interacts with other characters with differing perspectives, not simply to communicate a spiritual message to the reader. For example, in Ames's discussion of predestination with Jack, the primary focus of the passage is not simply to explain the theological doctrine to readers but rather to illustrate some of the tension between the two characters and indicate how each character grappled with the possibility of genuine human change and redemption.¹⁵⁵ Therefore, while reading Robinson's work, a reader might be introduced to a Christian idea or be invited to engage a spiritual practice in renewed manner, yet these explicit ideas are presented in a way that more deeply connect readers to the characters instead of pulling the reader out of the narrative to receive an external message.

Second, Robinson utilizes characters in her approach to express a "fleshed out" or "lived out" theology in which the characters tangibly illustrate certain Christian ideas or certain ways of living within a spiritual framework.¹⁵⁶ Since the way they understand and interact within the world is deeply connected to their religious or philosophical beliefs, the characters in Robinson's works can come to serve as tangible representations of certain Christian ideas or themes. Therefore, by following the lives of these complex characters, readers are presented with Christian ideas within the fuller context of lived

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 149-153.

¹⁵⁶ Andrew Brower Latz, "Creation in the Fiction of Marilynne Robinson," *Literature and Theology* 25, no. 3 (2011): 284-285.

experience and are challenged to consider “the relationship between a mode of being in the world and beliefs about the nature of the world.”¹⁵⁷

For example, *Gilead*’s narrative is intentionally presented to mirror that of the Biblical parable of the Prodigal Son, such that Jack Boughton comes to represent the search for restoration and John Ames the difficult process of redemptive forgiveness.¹⁵⁸ However, the full character and consciousness of Boughton or Ames is never reduced or subordinated so that they can become simple, flattened representatives of these spiritual ideas. Instead, these characters are presented as fully-fleshed out people, who personify some aspects of these spiritual ideas or paradigms, while also reflecting the complexity of how such ideas would actually manifest themselves in the lives of real people. In Boughton, Robinson expresses the difficult reality of what it is like to feel as though one is the “lost son” and the complex, often tragic circumstances that often produce such people.¹⁵⁹ Then in Ames, Robinson illustrates how the mindset of the “spiritual father” can subtly involve religious superiority and how difficult it can actually be to actually forgive a person¹⁶⁰. Therefore, by presenting theology through the framework of fleshed out characters, Robinson not only provides a tangible presentation of a Christian idea but also allows readers to explore how Christian ideas actually impact the ways people view the world and interact within it.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 285.

¹⁵⁸ Robinson, *Gilead*, 161, 164.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 217-220.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 238, 241-242.

Additionally, by providing a “fleshed out” theology, Robinson utilizes the character-centric focus to allow readers to imaginatively enter into the consciousness of a person who interprets the world through a Christian framework and thus experience the world as a such a person would experience it. Since the voice of characters, such as John Ames, are often the foundational feature of Robinson’s works, readers will be intimately connected with the unique interpretive framework this voice reflects. Therefore, if these central characters reflect some Christian background or interest, the reader, by repeatedly engaging with their unique voices, is imaginatively able to experience the world through these characters’ Christian framework. For example, much of the appeal of engaging with Ames’s voice in *Gilead* is not based on how his voice introduces readers to specific theological beliefs but rather on how it introduces readers to the conscious experience of what it feels to interact in the world with a very real sense of the sacred.

Therefore, when describing this dimension of Robinson’s character-centric approach, Chad Wriglesworth explains, “Robinson’s artistry shows readers what a theocentric and transformative way of being-in-the-world still might look like, but without prescribing or insisting upon it.”¹⁶¹ In this manner, Robinson allows readers to explore Christian ideas in a particularly compelling manner by actually communicating the tangible experience of what it feels like to live within a certain spiritual framework. As Wriglesworth indicated in the previous quotation, this element of Robinson’s character-centric approach also reveals how Robinson’s stories can be explicitly religious without feeling like they are intentionally communicative. In simply portraying a

¹⁶¹ Chad Wriglesworth, “Becoming a Creature of Artful Existence: Theological Perception and Ecological Design in Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead*,” In *This Life, This World: New Essays on Marilynne Robinson’s Housekeeping, Gilead, and Home*, by Jason W. Stevens, (Leiden, Brill, 2015), 106.

complex character who functions within a Christian framework, Robinson makes no demands that the audience accept or adopt what the character believes religiously. Instead, readers are given the freedom to decide whether they personally find the Christian frameworks of characters such as Ames to be compelling ways of understanding and interacting with the world and to then reflect on how their own interpretive frameworks and beliefs affect their conscious experience. Therefore, the primary focus of Robinson's approach remains on artistically exploring human consciousness instead of communicating an intended Christian message.

Overall, therefore, Robinson's approach to exploring Christian ideas in fiction distinguishes itself from the approaches of authors such as Tolkien and Lewis by explicitly addressing religious topics and by primarily portraying the Christian ideas through the literal beliefs and interactions of the characters instead of through the imaginative elements of the story. While this explicitly religious element does share similarities with Percy's therapeutic and prophetic approach, Robinson's approaches does also diverge from Percy's in some important ways, since the focus is less on intentionally presenting an idea to the reader and more on exploring the complexity of human consciousness and experience. Because of these distinctions, however, Robinson's approach does contain some potential dangers that could prevent readers from actually engaging with the Christian ideas in her works in a compelling manner. First, because of her character-centric approach, some of her works could receive the critique that not enough happens within them. Since the primary focus is on character-driven storytelling not narrative-driven storytelling, her approach might be considered somewhat boring or inaccessible by readers interested simply in engaging with a compelling or action-packed

story and not also in exploring how people's religious frameworks impacts the way they interpret the world. Additionally, because of the explicitly Christian element of Robinson's approach, readers who are not in some way interested in religious or at least philosophical reflection will likely be turned off by the approach, since it features such topics quite prominently.

Despite these potential dangers, however, Robinson's character-driven approach does have the considerable strength of explicitly addressing Christian ideas and themes without distracting from the story or feeling manipulative. In this manner, Robinson is able to quite effectively balance the desire to present Christian ideas and the need to avoid overwhelming the story with a Christian agenda. Because they are presented simply as people trying to discover how to live in the world in a meaningful way, the characters introduce and explore such Christian topics in a way that is natural and refreshing, while also leaving open the possibility for other different and diverse viewpoints. Overall, therefore, Robinson probably best summarized the thrust and appeal of her character-centric approach when she described healthy, curious religion expression as being when "creeds fall away and consciousness has the character of revelation."¹⁶²

Realistic Worlds in Fiction

Finally, Robinson's unique approach to exploring Christian ideas in fiction is characterized by her use of realistic worlds as the medium in which to present and explore these ideas. Unlike the previous writers who largely aimed to create fictional worlds that are distinct from the real world or at least in some way different from it, Robinson largely attempts to portray the real world in her fictional writing as it actually

¹⁶² Robinson, *When I Was a Child*, xiv.

exists and operates. Rather than attempting to create a world of pure sub-creation as Tolkien did, Robinson instead focused her sub-creative energies on developing unique and compelling fictional characters, locations, and events that could still exist in the real world as we experience it. In this manner, the fictional worlds presented by Robinson represent a further continuation along the spectrum from imaginative expression to realism than Percy's exaggerated world, since Robinson's realistic worlds are presented as not only occurring in the real world but also as functioning in largely the same way as the real world does.

Overall, there are two primary characteristics of Robinson's fictional worlds that contribute both to their realism and their ability to highlight or illustrate certain Christian ideas: their particularity and their historicity. First, Robinson infuses her fictional worlds with a very palpable sense of particularity when it comes to location. Often, Robinson's fictional works occur in one particular location which is described with specificity and detail such that it really feels alive for the reader. In fact, a significant amount of Robinson's novels occur within the same fictional town of Gilead, Iowa, which is described with such detail and care, by narrators such as Ames as they walk its streets and interact with its citizens, that readers often feel as though they have actually been transported to a real town.¹⁶³ In fact, John Ames as a character is largely defined by his devotion to this one particular location and by the profound impact it has on him, so when he describes a "homesickness" for a place he has never left, readers actually begin to feel a homesickness for a place they have never visited.¹⁶⁴ The particularity of

¹⁶³ Robinson, *Gilead*, 56-57.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 9, 235.

Robinson's fictional worlds not only increases their sense of realism but also further draws the reader into the world. Since the Robinson realistic world contains shared elements with the reader's own world, the reader experiences a degree of familiarity, yet since it is also describing a particular location distinct from any direct real counterpart, the reader also experiences curiosity to discover the particular elements of this fictional location that make it distinct. Therefore, by evoking both familiarity and curiosity in their particularity, Robinson's realistic worlds intentionally emphasize and draw the reader's attention to certain aspects of reality that the reader might not notice.

Second, Robinson conveys a tangible sense of realism in her fictional worlds by placing them within a specific historical time period distinct from the readers' contexts. For example, *Gilead* largely occurs within America during the 1950s, and throughout the work John Ames actually reflects on several significant historical events from the preceding decades such as the abolitionist movements, the post-Civil War racial conflicts and the two World Wars.¹⁶⁵ For Robinson, the past can serve as a "testimony to the experience of everything that human life entails," since there are timeless elements of the human consciousness.¹⁶⁶ Therefore, by placing many of her works in a specific historical context, Robinson is able to draw from the real lessons of history and the timeless truths of human experience, while also creating enough distance between her fictional worlds and the world of the readers such that readers can engage with these ideas in a way that feels new or refreshing. In this manner, both the particularity and the historicity of Robinson's fictional worlds work together to evoke a sense of realism within the works,

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 9, 41-42.

¹⁶⁶ Holberg, "A Conversation with Marilynne Robinson."

while still distinguishing these worlds as works of creative and artistic expression to be explored. Therefore, the particularity and historicity of Robinson's realistic worlds actually function in a similar manner to the imaginative elements of the preceding authors' worlds, since they create enough distance from the readers' own lived experiences such that ordinary or overlooked aspects of reality can be explored in a new light.

Because of this ability to provide a renewed look at reality, Robinson's realistic worlds in her fictional works are particularly effective mediums for exploring Christian ideas relating to the theology of the ordinary and the "sacredness implicit in the human circumstance."¹⁶⁷ In her foreword to Peter Orner's *Esther Stories*, Marilynne Robinson explains that "literary realism" can often convey a deeper significance "innocent of pretense and full of implication," since the medium often revolves around "the poetry of common speech and the revelations of ordinary daylight."¹⁶⁸ Robinson's own use of realism functions in a similar manner by avoiding the pretension and manipulation often involved in forcing the world of a story to arbitrarily fit a Christian conception and instead simply attempting to honestly portray reality and to then let any spiritual implication or significance naturally present itself.

In this manner, Robinson's realistic world is a particularly effective medium for expressing the mystery in all existence and the sacred nature of supposedly ordinary objects, people, and events. In *Gilead*, John Ames regularly emphasizes that all of

¹⁶⁷ Marilynne Robinson, *The Givenness of Things: Essays*, (New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015), 286.

¹⁶⁸ Marilynne Robinson, "Foreword," In *Esther Stories*, by Peter Orner, (New York, Back Bay Books, 2013), xvii.

existence is a sacred and mystical experience, such as when he explains to his son, “Wherever you turn your eyes the world can shine like transfiguration. You don’t have to bring a thing to it except a willingness to see.”¹⁶⁹ These insights from Ames are particularly impactful, though, because the nature and quality of the world presented in the story serves to consistently reinforce and validate them. Throughout *Gilead* the reader has been presented with ordinary or natural occurrences, such as a cat, a child or even a celestial event, been provided the opportunity to examine them through a Christian framework, and been challenged to explore how they might contain sacred significance.¹⁷⁰ In fact, arguably the most mystical moment of the book, when Ames and his father saw the sun and moon on opposite horizons following his grandfather’s death, is a natural phenomenon Robinson, herself, has experienced.¹⁷¹ Therefore, Robinson’s realistic world actually helps provide readers with the eyes to see the transfiguration in all things that Ames describes to his son.

Additionally, this type of realistic world provides readers insight into the complex and beautiful conscious experience of ordinary people living supposedly ordinary lives and thus affirms the “democratic” and Christian ideal that every individual has immense inherent worth.¹⁷² By providing a window into the lives of a few representatives of the “great multitudes about whose inward life nothing is known,” Robinson’s realism

¹⁶⁹ Robinson, *Gilead*, 245.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 22-23, 66.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 48-49.

Bendis, “A Pastoral Voice.”

¹⁷² Robinson, *When I Was a Child*, xiv.

reminds readers the people and lives that surround them every day are no less sacred, valuable, or complex than that of John Ames, Lila Ames, or Jack Boughton.¹⁷³ Therefore, Robinson's realistic world often conveys a sense of what she would refer to as a "higher realism," since it does not force human experience into an overly reductive framework but rather allows for the full scope of conscious experience including that which is often regarded as sacred or spiritual.¹⁷⁴

In this manner, Robinson's realistic artistic worlds prove to be effective mediums for exploring Christian ideas in fiction, even if they do so in a manner that differs from the more "purely" imaginative worlds of previously described writers. Robinson's realistic world, however, does share a function with Tolkien's disconnected, Lewis's connected, and Percy's exaggerated worlds in that they all in some way aim to allow readers to explore and rediscover deeper and overlooked aspects of reality by expressing them in an artistic manner. However, while more imaginative worlds such as Tolkien's and Lewis's draw the readers out of reality so they may return to reality with a fresh perspective, Robinson's realistic world invites readers more directly to enter and engage with the deeper aspects of reality from the very beginning. In this manner, Tolkien, Lewis, and even Percy at times employ elements of escapism in their exploration of Christian ideas, while Robinson largely eschews escapism altogether in her stories and instead utilizes other elements of her fictional worlds to present Christian ideas in a compelling and refreshing manner. In this manner, Robinson's realistic worlds serve as effective mediums for Robinson's more explicit and character-centric approach to

¹⁷³ Robinson, *The Givenness of Things*, 281.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 286.

exploring Christian ideas, since a realistic setting naturally accommodates complex, fleshed out characters with actual, existing Christian ideas and frameworks.

Additionally, these realistic elements of Robinson's fictional worlds often make them a more natural medium for exploring concepts of religious immanence than some of the other Christian works addressed in this thesis. While the imaginative worlds of writers like Lewis and Tolkien seem to be particularly effective for exploring ideas of religious transcendence based on how they center around interaction with an "other world," Robinson's worlds prove to be particularly effective in conveying how there is a spiritual closeness to the human life and how there is a sacred significance to ordinary things. Certainly the imaginative world at times communicates ideas of spiritual immanence, and Robinson's realistic world at times conveys ideas of religious transcendence. However, Robinson's fictional worlds seem to just naturally contain a proclivity to express spiritual immanence, based on the way they aim to artistically present the real world.

However, by focusing on portraying the world as it actually operates, Robinson's realistic world also involves limits and restriction on the ways Robinson can explore Christian ideas that the more imaginative worlds simply do not have. Since they do not need to function based on the laws of reality, the more imaginative worlds can convey Christian ideas in a wide variety of artistic ways, such as using a ring to represent corrupting evil or the transformation of a dragon to express spiritual change, such that creative expression is only really limited by the author's own imagination and the need for inner consistency. However, based on her realistic settings, Robinson can only really portray Christian ideas and conceptions as they might appear in the real world or else her

story will lack believability. Therefore, by utilizing a realistic world as her artistic medium, Robinson is equipped to explore a wide range of religious ideas and topics in her fiction, particularly those regarding spiritual immanence and the sacredness of the ordinary, but the ways in which she can imaginatively represent these ideas are limited by some of the constraints of these realistic settings.

Overall, Robinson's unique approach to exploring Christian ideas in fiction is largely characterized by the collaborative impact of her consciousness-based understanding of story, her character-centric framework of storytelling, and her use of realistic worlds as the settings for these stories. By beginning with a compelling voice, developing complex and fully fleshed characters, and crafting distinct realistic worlds for these characters to inhabit, Robinson manifests a highly character-centric approach to storytelling, which allows her to deeply explore the mysterious element of the human soul and consciousness. Based on this human-centric approach, Robinson is able to effectively portray how religious ideas manifest themselves in human life and explore how religious ideas help people make sense of the complexities of human consciousness and experience.

In this manner, Robinson's unique approach to Christian fiction is also characterized by its ability to explicitly address topics and ideas without really ever containing an intentional spiritual message or agenda external to the fictional works. Therefore, Robinson's approach does bear similarities to Tolkien's approach in that it is not intentionally communitive and to Percy's approach in that it is intentionally religious, but differs from both of their approaches in the opposite respect. Lewis seems to represent the most contrasting approach to Robinson's, since his approach is intentionally

communitive while also only implicitly expressing Christian ideas. However, even Lewis's approach has some commonalties with Robinson's approach in that both primarily seek to balance conveying Christian ideas with maintaining the interpretive freedom of the reader in engaging with the characters and stories. Overall, therefore, Robinson's unique approach to exploring Christian fiction is ultimately defined by how it establishes artistic exploration of the mysterious and spiritual nature of the human soul as its foundational aim and how it effectively conveys the sacred quality of the ordinary, the tangible, and the realistic.

CONCLUSION

Overall, based on a collective and comparative analysis of the literary approaches of Tolkien, Lewis, Percy, and Robinson, one can draw some valuable conclusions both regarding the distinct strengths and weakness of each writer's particular approach in relation to the others' and regarding how these differences provide insight into the larger appeal and function of fiction as a medium for exploring religious ideas on the whole. First, when compared to each other, all four of these writers reflect a shared conviction that storytelling is somehow inherently spiritual in nature. From Tolkien's understanding of storytelling as sub-creation to Robinson's understanding of storytelling as an exploration of the human consciousness and soul, each of these writers understands fictional writing to be in some way a spiritual mystery and endeavor that is deeply enriching for both author and reader, even if religious ideas are never explicitly mentioned. This commonality between the four writers is significant, because this spiritual understanding of story informs and influences, whether consciously or sub-consciously, how each of them approaches writing fiction. In this manner, it is not exceptionally surprising that Tolkien, Lewis, Percy, and Robinson all integrate Christian ideas into their novels, since all of them have personally been impacted by a deeper experience of truth and beauty in stories and thus believe that their stories similarly have the potential to impact others.

Of course, the success and recognition of these authors does not necessarily validate their personal, philosophical conceptions of the nature of storytelling. Readers

could find their literary works appealing for reasons entirely separate from any of the spiritual or interpersonal reasons provided by the conceptual frameworks of the authors. Therefore, these writers could simply be describing their own personal experiences with storytelling and not be describing any larger or universal truths about the nature of storytelling. However, based on this significant similarity between how each of these four writers conceive of storytelling, one could reasonably suggest that a potential reason why many readers connect with the Christian elements found within these stories is that all of these writers had personally been impacted by stories in a similar manner and thus wrote based on this understanding that storytelling could be a deeply spiritual experience. Therefore, based on the testimony of these four writers, one can at least conclude that something about the nature of fictional storytelling provides it with the potential to connect authors and readers to deeply spiritual experiences, which provides a limited explanation for why fiction can be a compelling medium for exploring religious ideas.

Second, comparing the different approaches of these four writers reveals that they each attempts to balance the intent of the author and the interpretive freedom of the writer in a slightly different manner. All four of the writers desired to weave together a creative and compelling story, which for them has an intrinsic value, with the type of imaginative or artistic experience that provides for a deeper reflection on the nature of reality. However, each writer also attempted to do so by utilizing different degrees of intentionality and explicitness when it comes to religious topics in their approach. Tolkien employed an implicitly religious and unintentionally communicative approach, Lewis employed an implicitly religious and intentionally communicative approach, Percy employed an explicitly religious and intentionally communicative approach, and

Robinson employed an explicitly religiously and unintentionally communicative approach.

Therefore, I would argue that the comparison between these four Christian writers reveals a foundational dynamic for whether fiction can be effectively used as a medium to explore religious ideas: the intersection between intentionality and explicitness when it comes to integrating religious ideas into a fictional story. Since the primary aim of fiction, unlike more homiletic mediums, is to communicate a creative and compelling story and not to just communicate some external message, authors of religious fiction must balance the degrees to which they are intentionally communicative and explicitly religious if they are to provide religious exploration in their works without overwhelming or dominating the story with an external religious message. Therefore, because of its importance to both the approach of these writers and to the broader use of fiction as a religious medium, I have visually depicted this intersection between intentionality and explicitness and how each of the four writers fit into its dynamic in *Figure 1*.

Figure 1:

	<u>Implicitly Religious</u>	<u>Explicitly Religious</u>
<u>Unintentionally Communicative</u>	Tolkien	Robinson
<u>Intentionally Communicative</u>	Lewis	Percy

As previously addressed when comparing the approaches of the different authors, each of these four broad approaches, as represented by the four different authors and the four different quadrants of *Figure 1*, have different strengths and limitations for being utilized to explore religious ideas in fiction. The more unintentionally communicative approaches, such as Tolkien's and Robinson's, or more implicitly religious approaches, like Tolkien's and Lewis's, tend to be more easily accessible to non-religious readers, more resistant to overbearing messages, and more inclined to symbolic portrayals of religious ideas, while also containing the danger that all religious ideas in the work might be missed and the limitation that real religious movements and contexts cannot easily be addressed. Comparatively, the more explicitly religious approaches, like Robinson's and Percy's, and the more intentionally communicative approaches, like Lewis's and Percy's, tend to more actively engage readers in an exchange of philosophical and religious concepts and to more effectively address the implications of real world religious institutions and practices, while also having more of a danger of overwhelming the story with religious elements or of alienating non-religious readers.

In addition to revealing the different strengths and weakness of how Tolkien, Lewis, Percy, and Robinson each integrated Christian ideas in their stories, this comparison of the four writers also provides insight into how fiction overall can be used as an effective medium to explore religious ideas. As *Figure 1* attempts to illustrate, the four approaches, represented by the four quadrants, are not intended to imply that there are only four narrow ways of writing but rather that there is a spectrum of intentionality and explicitness in religious fiction. In this spectrum, Tolkien, Lewis, Percy, and Robinson all utilize approaches that exist near the center of the intersection. While each

of these authors utilize a slightly different combination of explicitness-implicitness and intentionality-unintentionality, their approaches all demonstrate a strong commitment to balancing authorial intent and interpretive freedom and thus cannot really be classified as extreme approaches. Even, Tolkien, whose approach is both implicit and unintentional, still integrates Christian concepts in his works in some recognizable ways, and even Percy, whose approach is both explicit and intentional, still affirms that fictional works should not be based primarily on an overt religious message from the author if they are to remain compelling stories. Therefore, based on the comparison of these four authors' approaches, I would argue that the effectiveness of most religious fiction will be determined in some way by how its author balances his or her own authorial intent with the interpretive freedom of the reader when integrating religious ideas in his or her stories.

Third, the comparative analysis of these four writers and their literary approaches reveals that each utilized vastly differing types of fictional worlds as mediums for portraying or exploring Christian ideas in their fictional works. As was partially presented in the arrangement of the four chapters, Tolkien, Lewis, Percy, and Robinson all represent different points on a spectrum between fantasy and realism regarding the type of fictional worlds utilized in their stories. Tolkien creates disconnected worlds of fantasy, Lewis creates connected worlds of fantasy, Percy creates exaggerated worlds, and Robinson creates highly realistic worlds. In *Figure 2*, I have visually illustrated where these four approaches to world-building fit into the spectrum between realism and fantasy, which allows one to more tangibly recognize how they relate to each other.

Figure 2:

	Fantasy	Realism
<u>World-centric</u> (Third-Person)	Tolkien Lewis	
<u>Character-centric</u> (First-Person)		Percy Robinson

As with how the author balances intentional and explicit religious content, the different types of fictional world provide certain strengths and limitations for exploring or illustrating religious ideas in their corresponding fictional works. The more fantastical worlds, such as Tolkien's or Lewis's, tend to be more effective at imaginatively portraying religious concepts, at conveying ideas of religious transcendence, and at allowing readers to rediscover overlooked aspects of reality by presenting them in a new light, while also having the danger of confusing readers regarding what should be interpreted as simply part of the fictional world and what should be interpreted as a real spiritual truth. Comparatively, the more realistic worlds, such as Robinson's or Percy's, tend to be more effective at directly addressing real religious beliefs and their implications, at conveying ideas of religious immanence, and at allowing readers to enter more deeply into reality to discover the spiritual dimension present in ordinary existence, while also having the limitation that spiritual ideas cannot really be presented in ways that might inhibit the reader's ability to suspend disbelief.

Additionally, *Figure 2* also highlights the fact that the type of fictional world utilized as a medium in the works of Tolkien, Lewis, Percy, and Robinson tends to directly correlate with whether the author has a more character-centric or world-centric approach to exploring religious ideas. The more realistic approaches, like Robinson's and Percy's, tend to utilize characters as the means of naturally introducing religious ideas into their works and tend to emphasize how human consciousness and interpersonal connection can provide insight into spiritual realities, while the more fantastical approaches, like Tolkien's and Lewis's, tend to utilize their worlds as the means to naturally portray religious ideas and tend to emphasize how transcendent and mysterious experiences with the world around us can provide insight into spiritual realities.

This link between the types of fictional worlds and the types of literary focuses in these fictional worlds is further illustrated in how they utilize narrative perspectives in their works. The two more realistic writers tend to tell their stories from a first-person perspective, and the two more fantastical writers tend to tell their stories from a third-person preservative. There are certainly a wide variety of explanations for why these particular authors might have chosen to write from that perspective, such as literary background or simply personal preference. I would argue, however, that Lewis and Tolkien choose to write from a third-person perspective, because it, much like their fantastical worlds, provides them with the tools to creatively portray an imaginative world and then explore spiritual ideas related to this world-centric approach. In a similar manner, I would argue that Robinson and Percy choose to employ a first-person perspective, because it provides them with the tools to more intimately explore characterization and the spiritual aspects of human consciousness. In this manner,

therefore, one could conclude that realistic worlds are linked with first-person perspectives in the works of Robinson and Percy and fantasy worlds are linked with third-perspectives in the works of Tolkien and Lewis not because such literary qualities are universally or necessarily linked but rather because these corresponding qualities similarly allow for a more character-centric or a more world-centric, which were primary aims for these particular writers.

This comparative analysis of the different fictional worlds utilized by Tolkien, Lewis, Percy, and Robinson also provides broader insight into how fiction on the whole can serve as an effective medium for exploring religious ideas. As a comparison between *Figure 2* and *Figure 1* portrays, the approaches of these four writers differ more drastically when it comes to how manage realism and fantasy than when it comes to how they balance authorial intent and interpretive freedom. While Tolkien, Lewis, Percy, and Robinson all have a similar inclination towards integrating Christian ideas into their works without overwhelming the story, they all utilize vastly different types of worlds as the mediums for exploring these Christian ideas, from that of pure fantasy to that full realism yet all still create works of compelling religious fiction. Therefore, one could reasonably conclude that different types of fictional worlds might be more effective at portraying certain types of religious ideas but that the type of fictional world, as long as it is crafted in a creative and compelling manner, does not necessarily determine the effectiveness of the story as a medium for exploring religious ideas.

Finally, this comparative analysis of the literary approaches of Tolkien, Lewis, Percy, and Robinson provides some potential insight into why many people in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have found fiction to be a particularly compelling

medium for exploring and connecting with Christian ideas. Definitively determining the reason why different populations of people have uniquely connected with Christian fiction over the last hundred years would require a quantitative study beyond the scope of this thesis. However, based on the work of these four authors, who in many ways represent the new significance of Christian fiction during this time period, I would argue that many readers might find fiction to be a compelling medium for encountering religious ideas, because it allows these ideas to be presented in new and refreshing ways and because it allows readers the freedom to personally engage with these ideas instead of being demanded to accept them.

As illustrated in the collective approaches of Tolkien, Lewis, Percy, and Robinson, religious fiction is largely distinguished as a uniquely effective medium for exploring religious ideas when compared to other religious media, based on these two qualities: creative expression and interpretive freedom. By using a fictional world, whether realistic or fantastical, authors of religious fiction are provided the opportunity to tangibly portray religious ideas either in ways that allow complex concepts to be more easily understood or in ways that allow well-known concepts to be represented free of familiarity or past baggage. Additionally, by integrating religious ideas without preaching a religious message, authors of religious fiction are able to invite readers, whether religious or non-religious, to personally engage with religious ideas in the context of a broader world and story and then determine their interpretive analysis of these ideas.

While authors using the creative expression and interpretive freedom inherent in fictional storytelling to effectively connect people to religious ideas is an approach that predates the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, one could argue that these two qualities

are particularly suitable for portraying or communicating religious ideas within the cultural context of increased secularization and religious pluralism that has occurred over the last hundred years. In a world with increasing amounts of religious perspectives and increasing resistance to “being preached at,” effective works of religious fiction, like those represented by the authors addressed in this thesis, can be particularly compelling for readers, because they allow religious ideas to be presented and explored while also allowing readers the freedom to interpret the validity of these ideas as they so choose. Therefore, one could speculate that religious fiction’s use of creative expression and allowance for interpretive freedom might at least be partially responsible for why Christian fiction has taken on a new function and significance for many people during the changing cultural context of the last hundred years.

Overall, therefore, this comparative analysis of the different literary approaches of Tolkien, Lewis, Percy, and Robinson to exploring Christian ideas in their fictional stories provides unique insight into both how fiction can be used as a religious medium and why many readers over the past hundred years have found it compelling. Based on these authors’ similar convictions regarding the sanctity of the story and the danger of domineering messages, one can conclude that providing the reader interpretive freedom, through different degrees of intentionality and explicitness regarding religious content, is a vital part of the appeal of religious fiction. Additionally, because of the vastly different types of fictional worlds utilized by these four authors, one can conclude that different types of fictional world can all effectively be used to explore religious ideas in fiction, as long as they still involve compelling, creative expression. Finally, based on this comparative analysis of the approaches of Tolkien, Lewis, Percy, and Robinson, one can

conclude that these two attributes, interpretive freedom and creative expression, are related to what enables fiction to be an effective medium for exploring religious ideas when used effectively, and one can speculate that these two attributes of effective religious fiction are at least partially responsible for why some readers have ascribed to this medium a new significance and function in the modern world of secularization and pluralism.

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