The Great Eucatastrophe

When children listen to Fairy-stories, they know that the tale will end “happily ever after.” Tolkien introduces the concept of eucatastrophe to describe this fairy-tale motif. He defines eucatastrophe in opposition to tragedy:

Tragedy is the true form of Drama, its highest function; but the opposite is true of Fairy-story. Since we do not appear to possess a word that expresses this opposite – I will call it eucatastrophe.¹

Whereas tragedy is an ultimate and undefeatable loss, eucatastrophe is an ultimate and unimpeachable victory. But for Tolkien, eucatastrophe has more than just a mere literary significance: the concept of eucatastrophe is deeply connected to Christian theology. Tolkien argues that the good news of Jesus Christ is “The Great Eucatastrophe.”² By comparing Christ’s atonement to a literary device, Tolkien implies that storytelling and the world of Faërie are intricately bound with the Christian faith; Tolkien implies that creation is a Fairy-story told by God. This paper will explicate the implications of viewing creation as a Fairy-story told by God, and what ramifications such a view has for the theology of atonement.

Presenting Christ’s atonement as eucatastrophe provides an interesting look at the problem of freedom. Unlike other possible gifts, eucatastrophe preserves intellectual freedom in its recipients; those who receive the gift of eucatastrophe are free to deny its reality.³ Thus if Christ’s atonement is eucatastrophic, we may deny it freely as characters in God’s story. In this

¹ On Fairy-stories, pg 153
² On Fairy-stories, pg 156
³ In this paper, I will use the term eucatastrophe in two different ways. If I speak of eucatastrophe as an event, I speak of a phenomenological event which occurs to a character in a story which the character views favorably. However, if I talk about a character denying the reality of eucatastrophe, I do not mean that the character denies that an event of eucatastrophe has occurred. Instead, I simply imply that the character does not see any agency in the event: he does not see the event as anything more than blind chance.
sense, Christ’s sacrifice is received as a pure gift under Derrida’s definition. However, when considered as a member of God’s audience, humans realize the gift which they have been given and thereafter cannot accept it as a pure gift. By becoming self-critical, the Christian can see himself as the recipient of a benevolently bestowed gift, and is thereby obligated to reciprocate the gift of God’s grace. As Christians, we are simultaneously protagonists in God’s Fairy-story and members of God’s audience; we receive God’s gift purely from the phenomenological perspective, but faith in divine providence destroys the purity of God’s gift. It is only by sacrificing the purity of God’s grace that we can appreciate him as the master storyteller.

**The agency behind eucatastrophe is unprovable, but its existence is hinted at**

In defining eucatastrophe, Tolkien identifies three themes which intellectually liberate the characters in a Fairy-story from eucatastrophe: for a character in a story, eucatastrophe is always unexpected, empirically seamless, and unreliable. From these themes, I conclude that there is no logical necessity under which the protagonist of a fairy-story must believe in eucatastrophe. However for those who notice the agency behind a story (i.e. the members of the audience), the three themes of eucatastrophe illustrate the literary mastery with which a Fairy-tale is written. While surprise, seamlessness, and originality cannot prove the agency behind creation, these traits hint at that agency. Thus once individuals recognize the hand of providence in reality, they only see more and more evidence that eucatastrophe is governed by agency.

**First, Surprise:** Tolkien argues that eucatastrophe is a victory in opposition to worldly expectation: the protagonists of Fairy-tales always face unconquerable odds only to witness a

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4 I use the descriptor “character” and “protagonist” identically to denote an individual who phenomenologically experiences a story. If there is differentiation between a protagonist and character, this value judgment is only imposed externally by an audience of the story, or the author. The audience of a story is the group of individuals who recognize the story qua story. Under these scantily clad definitions, I point out that a character can be both a protagonist and a member of the audience simultaneously.

5 Originality is the counterpart to unreliability. Or more accurately, unreliability is the counterpart to originality. If a story is to be original, it cannot be reliable and cliché. Equivalently, a story can only become reliable by way of unoriginality.
“sudden joyous turn”\(^6\) of events. Thus a key element of eucatastrophe is surprise. For members of an audience, the use of surprise provides evidence that there is agency behind the story. The denouement of a good Fairy-story provides a cathartic\(^7\) experience: spectators experience a “catch of the breath” and a “lifting of the heart.” Yet the audience members of a Fairy-tale do not approach the story without presuppositions: the words “happily ever after” are an unbreakable tradition for Fairy-stories. Thus however much an audience claims to be surprised by a happy ending, their surprise is mitigated by their underlying assumptions about Fairy-stories. After the denouement of a Fairy-story, audience members will chuckle to themselves and admit they knew the outcome all along. “Of course it ends happily ever after! It’s a Fairy-story!” Protagonists experience surprise in a manner quite the opposite: surprise liberates a character from reading any agency into the whims of fate. If eucatastrophe is always unexpected, reason cannot predict it. Thus eucatastrophe preserves the intellectual freedom of story characters through surprise, but only works to prove the storyteller’s agency to members of the audience.

**Second, Foreshadowing:** Eucatastrophe is always seamlessly integrated into a story and thereby imperceptible for those who wish to deny its existence. Tolkien writes that eucatastrophe “depends on the whole story.”\(^8\) This implies that eucatastrophe does not function like a *dues ex machina* mechanic, which would destroy the intellectual freedom of a Fairy-story’s protagonist: if God were to directly and perceptibly intervene in a Fairy-story, then the protagonists would have little choice but to admit God’s role as a giver of gifts. Rather, eucatastrophe occurs seamlessly, so as not to raise any suspicion of divine interaction. Thus a character in Fairy-story is intellectually free to deny agency in eucatastrophe.

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\(^6\) On Fairy-stories, pg 153

\(^7\) In this case, I use cathartic to mean “cleansing.” Fairy-stories cleanse humans of their cynicism and disenchantment

\(^8\) On Fairy-stories, pg 154
Yet the audience of a Fairy-story is bound to recognize agency in eucatastrophe because it “reflects a glory backwards.” As audience members can recognize a Fairy-story *qua* Fairy-story, they can appreciate the subtlety with which the author crafts his work. Writing a mystery with a good plot twist is one of the most difficult and most beloved forms of art; rather than seem like an instance of blind fate, an artistic use of foreshadowing reveals the agency of a storyteller. Thus a seamless conclusion to a Fairy-story reveals the agency behind the story to its audience all the more.

**Third and finally, Originality:** Tolkien says that eucatastrophe is a “sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur.” For the protagonist of a Fairy-story, eucatastrophe is unreliable. Even after the conclusion of eucatastrophe, the works of providence are hidden to the eye of cynicism, and there is no guarantee that eucatastrophe will happen again. The protagonist of a Fairy-story always perceives the work of providence mixed with the fact of *dyscatastrophe*, or temporal ailment. While Tolkien argues that dyscatastrophe is “necessary to the joy of deliverance,” it also obscures the work of eucatastrophe; nothing empirically differentiates temporal ailment from the works of providence. From the phenomenological perspective of a literary character, good luck could be the result of blind chance. After all, God rains on the righteous and unrighteous alike! Because there is no empirical difference between the works of chance and the works of agency, the characters in a story see eucatastrophe as unreliable, and thereby have no evidence with which to prove or disprove the agency behind eucatastrophe.

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9 On Fairy-stories, pg 154
10 On Fairy-stories, pg 153
11 On Fairy-stories, pg 153
12 On Fairy-stories, pg 153
13 Matthew 5:45
Yet again, the audience of a story sees the unreliability of eucatastrophe in a very different way than the characters themselves. To the audience, the unreliability of eucatastrophe is but a side effect of the storyteller’s creativity and originality. If eucatastrophe could be relied upon in all instances, stories would be boring and repetitive. If characters could rely on eucatastrophe, they would never need diligence and virtue. Instead, the author of a story entertains his audience by explicating an original way that eucatastrophe comes about. Nothing is more exciting than an original story with an exciting plot twist. Originality keeps the audience on their toes, even while it makes eucatastrophe seem unreliable to the story’s characters. Thus an author’s attempt to create an original story makes eucatastrophe unreliable for his or her characters, though this ultimately liberates the characters intellectually from the concept of eucatastrophe.

All together, Tolkien presents three themes of eucatastrophe which preserve intellectual freedom in the recipient, but also simultaneously hint at the agency behind a story for the audience. Tolkien defines eucatastrophe to be unexpected, empirically seamless, and unreliable. As characters in a Fairy-story, reason does not necessitate that we admit eucatastrophe, and thus we are at liberty intellectually to deny eucatastrophe. However for audience members who recognize the role of the storyteller, surprise, empirical seamlessness, and originality reveal the artistry of a Fairy-story’s author.

**Eucatastrophe as a pure gift: Seeing ourselves as characters and audience members**

I propose that we might be able to see eucatastrophe as a pure gift, under Derrida’s definition. Derrida defines a pure gift as one which satisfies three requirements:

1) The giver does not realize that he or she gives a gift
2) The recipient does not realize that he or she has received a gift
3) The gift itself does not appear in the world
Derrida’s definition is problematic; as soon as we recognize something as a pure gift, it has appeared in the world and is therefore no longer a pure gift. Even though Derrida’s definition of a pure gift is innately contradictory, I think this difficulty can be sidestepped by the following differentiation: as characters in a story, we can receive eucatastrophe as a pure gift, but as spectators who are aware of that story, we cannot receive eucatastrophe as a pure gift.

If we consider eucatastrophe merely from the vantage point of a character, there is no intellectual reason to think of eucatastrophe as a gift. Eucatastrophe is always unexpected, empirically seamless, and unreliable, therefore characters are free to deny the existence of any agency behind eucatastrophe. Once characters are capable of denying the reality of eucatastrophe, the gift no longer holds any sway over them socially, and thus they can receive eucatastrophe as a pure gift.

Moreover, to the characters in a story, the agent behind eucatastrophe need not exist. Oedipus might curse the cruel fates for his tragedy, but the fates are an empty concept: they do not exist in the normal manner. Oedipus cannot reach out and touch the fates themselves! In the same way, when St. Augustine praises God for his fateful conversion, he is thanking an empty concept, a giver which cannot be found within the bounds of experience. Thus as characters, we have no reason to see ourselves as the recipient of a gift. From the vantage point of a character, the perceived agency behind eucatastrophe might not exist at all, for he/she/it does not stick around to be thanked!

Finally, to characters in a story, the gift of eucatastrophe has no reality as a gift. Without a giver, how can the gift itself appear qua gift? Isn’t that what defines a gift? A gift is something which passes from a giver to a receiver without payment. Without recognizing a giver, the

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14 And empty concept “is a concept without the object, as are the noumena, which cannot be counted among the possibilities, though they are not therefore claimed to be impossible either.” Kant, CPR, B347/A291.
characters in a story cannot perceive eucatastrophe as a gift, cannot perceive a storyteller as the giver, and cannot recognize eucatastrophe as a gift in general. And when eucatastrophe is not recognized as a gift in general, it does not appear in the world. Thus, for characters in a story, eucatastrophe is received as a pure gift.

When we consider eucatastrophe as a member of an audience, however, the situation is entirely the opposite; we cannot consider eucatastrophe to be a pure gift as an audience member. As a spectator to the telling of a story, we see eucatastrophe as the result of one agent in particular: the storyteller. Thus the gift of eucatastrophe has actually been granted by someone, and the gift must be reciprocated with good deeds. As audience members, we would become outraged if the protagonist of a story did not act heroically after receiving fortunate circumstances. If the protagonist of a story refused to reciprocate the gifts bestowed upon him, that protagonist would not be a proper protagonist at all, but instead a villain. Thus from the vantage point of an audience member, eucatastrophe can never be a pure gift and the recipient of eucatastrophe is always obliged to recognize his or her fortune and reciprocate.

**The Great Eucatastrophe: are Christians protagonists or audience members?**

Hoping that it is not too presumptuous, Tolkien put forward his own views that the eucatastrophe found in Fairy-tales is an “echo of *evangelium* in the real world.” With every example of eucatastrophe, Tolkien sees a “fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief.” But more than that, every fictive example of happily-ever-after is but a shadow of “The Great Eucatastrophe,” the great gift of divine favor which has been given to man. Every eucatastrophe which authors bestow upon their literary creations, according to

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15 Some stories, like *Dexter* and *Breaking Bad*, purposely feature antiheros. But these are clearly not Fairy-stories.  
16 On Fairy-stories, pg 155  
17 On Fairy-stories, pg 153  
18 On Fairy-stories, pg 156
Tolkien, parallels the eucatastrophe which God bestows upon the real human race. In this sense, every instance of eucatastrophe is but one facet of the divine gift bestowed by the Christian God.

Through this, Tolkien claims that Christ’s sacrifice is a form of eucatastrophe. Under the assumption that Christ’s atonement can properly be categorized as eucatastrophe, what does this imply? I’ve argued that eucatastrophe is always unexpected, empirically seamless, and unreliable; I’ve also argued that these three traits intellectually liberate the recipient of eucatastrophe: the benevolent agency behind eucatastrophe cannot be proven. But while these three traits prevent humans from proving the existence of agency behind eucatastrophe, they also lend a greater beauty to eucatastrophe when it occurs. For those who already believe in the hand of providence, experience will only reconfirm this idea. Those who recognize the gift of eucatastrophe cannot receive it purely: as conscientious spectators to God’s great gift, they are obligated to reciprocate that gift, or else risk becoming a villain.19 Eucatastrophe always occurs unexpectedly, but this only shows that God knows how to use the element of surprise in crafting a good story. Eucatastrophe is empirically seamless, but this just shows that God understands the importance of foreshadowing. Eucatastrophe is unreliable, but this just shows that God is original and would never write the same story twice. Viewing Christ’s atonement as “The Great Eucatastrophe” shows the unprovability of the good news, but also reveals God to be the greatest literary genius of all time.

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19 We must inquire as to how a protagonist could reciprocate the gift of eucatastrophe when given by a storyteller. Storytellers are not usually perceptible to protagonists, so it would be difficult or impossible for a protagonist to directly reciprocate their author. Yet when protagonists are given the gift of good fortune, the audience sees the protagonist as being indebted in some way. Essentially, from everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded (Luke 12:48). Or equivalently, with much power comes much responsibility (Stan Lee). From the perspective of the audience, protagonists are expected to reciprocate their good fortune by doing great and noble deeds for other characters and other protagonists. A storyteller cannot receive a return on the gifts of good fortune which he gives to his protagonists, except vicariously through his other characters and the overall beauty of his creation. Jesus says “Whatever you did for the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me” (Matthew 25:40).