

# Theology and Fairy-Stories: A Theological Reading of Tolkien's Shorter Works?

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## ABSTRACT

This article will examine the possibility of a theological reading of Tolkien's shorter works by theologically analyzing his essay "On Fairy-stories" concerning the aspects of his theory of sub-creation, the functions of fantasy (Recovery, Escape and Consolation) and the connection between fantasy and *evangelium*. Thus, it will be shown that Tolkien depicts the creative activity of Man as analogous to God's creating activity and as necessary for accomplishing his own likeness to god. Although Tolkien does not deny the Fall, it does not abrogate the right to be creatively active. Arising out of Man's creative activity, successful fantasy can be – by its functions Recovery, Escape and Consolation and the eucatastrophe contained in it – a gleam of *evangelium*.

The second part of the paper deals with four shorter works and the way in which these elements are present in them: *Roverandom*, *Leaf by Niggle*, *Farmer Giles of Ham*, and *Smith of Wootton Major*. Whereas *Roverandom* shows clearly how Tolkien worked as a sub-creator and how his depiction of Faërie and fairy-stories changed, *Leaf by Niggle* and *Smith of Wootton Major* cannot be regarded as classical fairy-stories either, since they illustrate narratively the central characteristics for a fairy-story which are demanded by Tolkien. Only *Farmer Giles of Ham* seems to represent the main characteristics as a story and not a narrative illustration of a concept. But each of the four analyzed works support Tolkien's theory of sub-creation and fantasy in its own way.

## INTRODUCTION

A theological reading of Tolkien's shorter works? Whereas this might suggest itself in the case of *Leaf by Niggle* and seems helpful with *Smith of Wootton Major*, it does not appear so with works like *Farmer Giles of*

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*Ham* or *Roverandom*. The parody of a medieval text or the travel-story of an enchanted dog do not seem to have any theological meaning.

However, a specifically theological as well as a specifically Tolkienian foundation of a theological reading of the shorter works exists. The genuine theological one for which I wish to argue is based on some convictions of intercultural philosophy; theology has “to widen its field of theological rationality, or – better said – to not restrict this field on the areas ruled by logical categories or analytical concepts” (Fornet-Betancourt 194; my translation). Therefore, the limits of a rational theological discourse do not necessarily have to correspond with the limits of a strict categorial knowledge which is logically-conceptually and analytically orientated. Encountering poetry and literature, theology learns to esteem folksongs, legends, oral traditions and so on especially for their hermeneutical and cognitional relevance. Similarly to this, in his fundamental reflections on salvation history and salvation in the history of theology the renowned liberation theologian Ignacio Ellacuría SJ demands: “Faith and theology must take the world of today in all seriousness” (Ellacuría 7). Eventually, theology has to orientate itself towards the situations and needs of real life. “Now if the growth of the *saeculum* (the temporalized world) and the decline of the sacral-religious realm are facts, it is obvious that only a secularized faith and theology have, or can have, complete meaning for an increasingly secularized world” (Ellacuría 7). Therefore, in my opinion, it is necessary for a theologian to reflect especially on the elements of a secularized culture – for example fantasy as a very influential current in popular culture..

Epistemologically expressed, human culture and human art are *loci theologici* – no doubt *alieni* (recurring to Cano’s typology), but nevertheless *loci theologici*. For the initial sentence of Vatican II pastoral constitution *Gaudium et spes* is still valid:

The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way

afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts. (GS 1)

That does not limit a theological examination of works of art and culture only to those with obvious theological or religious connotations, but also includes those seemingly secular.

The specific Tolkienian grounds are expressed in "Mythopoeia" and "On Fairy-stories". The possible basis for a theological reading even of those fairy-stories which do not explicitly contain religion or religious elements consists in Tolkien's concept of sub-creation and the functions of fairy-stories because in successful fairy-stories there may be a "far-off gleam or echo of *evangelium*" (FS 71).

Before turning to the shorter works mentioned above and depicting some of the elements that may be of interest for theology, I will discuss the theological implications of Tolkien's concept of sub-creation.

#### SUB-CREATION AND FANTASY TOLKIEN'S THEORY OF SUB-CREATION<sup>2</sup>

At first it is important to mention some conditions of the Primary World Tolkien believed in and which are necessary for his concept of sub-creation (but which had also an impact on his *Legendarium*). First, there exists an (almighty) God who created all things. Second, this God created free beings as his image in his likeness. Third, Man fell and his ontological status was substantially changed with this fall.

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. in general Birzer 37-44; Ferré 92-96; Flieger 40-48 and Agøy for a comparison of Tolkien's and Grundtvig's position. He bases his explanations on the conviction that Tolkien's theory of sub-creation is rooted in a deeply felt personal theological dilemma and concludes: "In short, all the central elements in Tolkien's sub-creation theory can be found in Grundtvig and are expressed in very similar terms." (34)

Man's actual status in comparison to his original one is discussed by Tolkien especially in his poem "Mythopoeia":

The heart of man is not compound of lies,  
 but draws some wisdom from the only Wise,  
 and still recalls him. Though now long estranged,  
 man is not wholly lost nor wholly changed.  
 Dis-graced he may be, yet is not dethroned,  
 and keeps the rags of lordship once he owned,  
 his world-dominion by creative act:  
 (*My* 87)

In these lines, Tolkien refers to Man as God's image. According to Tolkien, this quality consists mainly in Man's creative capacity. This is the means by which Man accomplishes the command of Gen 1:28 to subdue the earth and have dominion over fishes, fowl and every living thing. It includes all areas of Man's artistic activity, whereby Tolkien is mainly concerned with the literary one. Even the fall has not led to the loss of Man's exposed status in creation, his godlikeness and his capacity ("not dethroned"<sup>3</sup>). "In acting as a prism and this refracting light and word, 'Man, sub-creator' fulfills God's purpose by making a fantasy world that will of necessity reflect the phenomena of our world. Sub-creation, then, is not idle play or random imitation of God; it is part of His intent" (Flieger 47). Furthermore, Tolkien refutes a total corruption of Man's nature as an effect of the Fall and underlines Man's still present fundamental orientation or remembrance respective to God and his wisdom. He may be long estranged from God, but that does not mean

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<sup>3</sup> Flieger refers to Tolkien's lecture on Beowulf in which Tolkien talks of "man fallen and not yet saved, disgraced but not dethroned" (*BMC* 23) and states a connection of essay and poem. "There, it was used to characterize pagan yet noble man doomed to find his only glory in the losing battle against the monsters. Here it refers to "man, sub-creator," man the maker rather than man the fighter; fallen, yes, but not dethroned, still the child of God and capable, like his creator, of creating" (43).

that he is wholly lost or corrupted.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, Tolkien can be convinced that even in Paradise Man will be creative:

Be sure they still will make, not being dead,  
and poets shall have flames upon their head,  
and harps whereon their faultless fingers fall:  
there each shall choose for ever from the All.  
(*My* 90, cf. *OFS* 73).

By equating Man's godlikeness with his creative capacity, Tolkien goes beyond the traditional theological mainstream. Generally, the fathers of the church regarded the soul of Man as the main characteristic of the godlikeness. According to the scholastic theologians, the natural godlikeness consists in rationality and the supernatural in the grace of justification. Even today, the creative capacity of Man is seldom treated in connection with his godlikeness. Johann Auer is an exception; he

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<sup>4</sup> The lies of which "the heart of man is not compound" are primarily myths and mythical expressions which seem to contradict the scientific approach of the same phenomena. Tolkien does not understand them as lies because of his optimistic anthropology and his conception of human art as sub-creation, which is analogous to God's creation, and also serves as memory of the divine wisdom, whereby a certain truth is inherent in them. "For Tolkien, however, even pagan myths attempted to express God's greater truths. True myth has the power to revive us, to serve as an *anamnesis*, or way of bringing to conscious experience ancient experiences with transcendence" (Birzer xxiii).

Furthermore, Tolkien refuses the challenge that myths are "wish-fulfilment dreams" (*My* 87) to deceive frightened hearts. Wishes, dreams and the distinction between beautiful and ugly (good and evil respectively) are necessary, they arise out of the experience that evil is. Man's creative capacity is opposed to this. "Blessed are the legend-makers with their rhyme / of things not found within recorded time. / It is not they that have forgot the Night, / or bid us flee to organized delight, / [...] They have seen Death and ultimate defeat, / and yet they would not in despair retreat, / but oft to victory have turned the lyre / and kindled hearts with legendary fire, / illuminating Now and dark Hath-been / with light of suns as yet by no man seen." (*My* 88f).

This is the kind of world Tolkien wants to live in and not one of "progressive apes, / erect and sapient" (*My* 89) which progress tends to lead to a dark abyss, not a world with no part for a little maker with his maker's art. "I bow not yet before the Iron Crown, / nor cast my own small golden sceptre down." (*My* 89) Tolkien refuses vehemently any self-abolition of Man by technique or scientific progress which forgets Man's transcendence. The Iron Crown is a reference to Melkor/Morgoth who wants to replace Eru and subject all free beings in Arda.

discusses Man's creative art in context of his reflections on cultural anthropology. Man is not autonomous but all his deeds as *geschöpfliches Schöpfertum* ("created creativity") have to serve higher, ultimate realities, "serving God and his creation, deeply Man, who is God's image and finally destined to the 'participation on God's glory'" (365).

Stressing this transcendence, Tolkien mentions another important aspect at the beginning of his essay "On Fairy-stories". He refuses the term *supernatural beings* for *fairies*.

For it is man who is, in contrast to fairies, supernatural (and often of diminutive stature); whereas they are natural, far more natural than he. Such is their doom. The road to fairyland is not the road to Heaven; nor even to Hell, I believe, though some have held that it may lead thither indirectly by the Devil's tithe. (*FS* 5)

Consequently, Tolkien defines the nature of Man in contrast to fairies by way of their different eschatological destination. Whereas Man is inclined to a supernatural doom, the fairies are not. Because neither Heaven nor Hell is their doom, obviously they are completely bound to earth.<sup>5</sup> While both share the possibility of acting as a sub-creator, Elves are able to do so to a greater degree or with more success than men. In view of his *legendarium*, Tolkien writes to Milton Waldman concerning the elven magic: "Their 'magic' is Art, delivered from many of its human limitations: more effortless, more quick, more complete (product, and vision in unflawed correspondence). And its object is Art not Power, sub-creation not domination and tyrannous re-forming of Creation" (*L* 146).

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<sup>5</sup> This reflects Tolkien's conception of the Elves bound to Arda and being subject to the Music of the Ainur. This is discussed in *Athrabeth Finrod ah Andreth* where Finrod utters the hope that by Man and Arda Remade Elves may be delivered from this final death (cf. *MR* 319).

Whereas in “Mythopoeia” the term “sub-creator” is mentioned only once and barely further explained, in “On Fairy-stories” Tolkien describes in more detail how sub-creation happens:

When we can take green from grass, blue from heaven, and red from blood, we have already an enchanter’s power – upon one plane; and the desire to wield that power in the world external to our minds awakes. It does not follow that we shall use that power well upon any plane. We may put a deadly green upon a man’s face and produce a horror; we may make the rare and terrible blue moon to shine; or we may cause woods to spring with silver leaves and rams to wear fleeces of gold, and put hot fire into the belly of the cold worm. But in such ‘fantasy’, as it is called, new form is made; Faërie begins; Man becomes a sub-creator. (*FS* 23)

Consequently, in sub-creation the artist creates something not present in the primary world. But he uses categories known from the primary world (e.g. green, blue, red). The new results from a novel type of combination; it is not the ingredients that are new, but the composition. Man’s artistic creative activity is a gift and a task given by God which Man performs with the things created by Him. Flieger mentions an important difference between this passage of “On Fairy-stories” and the corresponding lines of “Mythopoeia” (“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.” [87]). She points out: “The sub-creative process is now the splintering or dividing and recombining of light to create the ‘living shapes that move from mind to mind,’ whereas in the prose passage it was simply the combining of words, the incantatory use of adjectives in a mythical grammar” (43). But in both texts, it is a re-combination of something given. Therefore: “The heart of man is not compound of lies, / but draws some wisdom from the only Wise, / and still recalls him” (*My* 87). This explains why in “On Fairy-stories” and “Mythopoeia”

Tolkien does not distinguish sharply between *make* and *create* although he stresses ceaselessly that Melkor/Morgoth has lost his creative capacity and cannot create something of his own but only corrupt.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, this shows that the term *sub-creation* should not be used only by men who believe in a creating God. Rather, it is demanded by the dependence on the real world (cf. Weinreich 50). For example, the Gods of (higher and lower) mythologies doubtless are human constructs, but they need a reference to the real world. When Man relates them to natural phenomena which are derived from sun, moon and clouds, “their personality they get direct from him; the shadow or flicker of divinity that is upon them they receive through him from the invisible world, the Supernatural.” (FS 24)<sup>7</sup> By creatively re-combining the given material, an essential power of Faërie consists in making immediately effective the visions of *fantasy*. By no means are they purely beautiful or wholesome, because the fantasies of fallen Man are not purely beautiful and wholesome and “he has stained the elves who have this power [...] with his own stain” (FS 23).

*Fantasy* is to be understood in close connection to sub-creation. “Successful Fantasy is the conscious sub-creation of a Secondary World by man, whose birthright it is to make in imitation of his Maker” (Flieger 25). The success of a sub-creation is measured by the belief the audience credits the story with. Tolkien refuses Coleridge’s depiction of a *willing suspension of disbelief* and states that a successful sub-creation

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Fornet-Ponse “Tolkiens Verständnis des Bösen”. 208-210.

<sup>7</sup> In this respect, a fundamental difference between higher and lower mythologies does not exist. In both of them Man’s orientation to God, which is present even after the Fall, is expressed, because at times something Higher can be seen: “Divinity, the right to power (as distinct from its possession), the due of worship; in fact ‘religion’” (FS 26). Mythology and religion are – though they have to be distinguished – closely related to one another.

“In his essay ‘On Fairy Stories’, Tolkien makes a distinction between primary belief, which is what believers in a gospel give to that gospel, and secondary belief, which we give to fiction. As Tolkien himself was well aware, the kind of belief that the pre-Christian world gave to original myth was somewhere in between primary and secondary belief; in fact, for convenience we will call it intermediate belief” (Purtil 4).

can be *entered* and the accounts and tales from it are – according to its laws – *true*. Belief in a story is not necessarily limited by the impossibility of this story in the primary world. “You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside. The moment disbelief arises, the spell is broken; the magic, or rather art, has failed” (*FS* 37).<sup>8</sup> The disbelief may be suspended, but then it remains only a substitute for a genuine experience. The belief in a story has nothing to do with its possible realization in the primary world. “Fairy-stories were plainly not primarily concerned with possibility, but with desirability” (*FS* 40pp.). Tolkien explains this point in a draft letter to Peter Hastings reacting to the question whether he had gone too far in metaphysical matters. Tolkien answers by stating that his whole mythology is concerned with the relation of Creation and sub-creation. Things may be wrong from the external point of view.

But they cannot be wrong inside this imaginary world, since that is how it is made.

We differ entirely about the nature of the relation of sub-creation to Creation. I should have said that liberation ‘from the channels the creator is known to have used already’ is the fundamental function of ‘sub-creation’, a tribute to the infinity of His potential variety, one of the ways in which indeed it is exhibited, as indeed I said in the Essay. I am not a metaphysician; but I should have thought it a curious metaphysic – there is not one but many, indeed potentially innumerable ones – that declared the channels known (in such a finite corner as we have any inkling of) to

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“To create secondary belief in the reader of a modern tale of marvels, there must be no break in the mood, no laughing at the magic, no metaphorical nudging of the reader in the ribs. This seriousness about the work must be in the writer before it can be in the reader, and it is one reason why Tolkien speaks of his stories as if they were discovered rather than invented, one reason why in lecturing to a university audience on fairy stories he deliberately speaks as if it were an open question whether the Elves and the realm of Faerie exist in reality” (Purtill 20).

have been used, are the only possible ones, or efficacious, or possibly acceptable to and by Him! (*L* 188pp.)

Consequently, the recombination in sub-creative art of things and issues known from the primary world is an expression of God's infinity.<sup>9</sup> God gave Man imagination especially with its quality to transcend the known material and to cope with it creatively.<sup>10</sup>

The operative link between imagination and sub-creation is the art which Tolkien provisionally calls *Fantasy*. "Fantasy (in this sense) is, I think, not a lower but a higher form of Art, indeed the most nearly pure form, and so (when achieved) the most potent" (*FS* 48). To make credible a secondary world with a green sun probably requires labour and thought and certainly demands "a special skill, a kind of elvish craft" (*FS* 48). In human art Fantasy is achieved best in literature, because the visual presentation of the imagined in painting is technically too easy.<sup>11</sup>

In order to prove the legitimacy of Fantasy, the sub-creational art, in "On Fairy-stories" Tolkien quotes a passage from "Mythopoeia", in which he stresses the analogy between divine creation and human artistic sub-creation as expression of Man's status as God's image:

not his to worship the great Artefact,  
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.

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<sup>9</sup> "Fantasy is made out of the Primary World, but a good craftsman loves his material, and has a knowledge and feeling for clay, stone and wood which only the art of making can give" (*FS* 59).

<sup>10</sup> "Faëry might be said indeed to represent Imagination (without definition because taking in all the definitions of this world): aesthetic: exploratory and receptive; and artistic; inventive, dynamic, (sub)creative" (*SWM* 101).

<sup>11</sup> "For Tolkien, story is the most effective carrier of truth because it works with images rather than concepts, with forms rather than abstract ideas, and with action rather than argument" (Flieger 10).

Though all the crannies of the world we filled  
with elves and goblins, though we dared to build  
gods and their houses out of dark and light,  
and sow the seed of dragons, 'twas our right  
(used or misused). The right has not decayed.  
We make still by the law in which we're made.  
(*My* 87, cf. *OFS* 55)

By stressing this analogy, Tolkien claims the reasonability of Fantasy: "Fantasy is a natural human activity. It certainly does not destroy or even insult Reason; and it does not either blunt the appetite for, nor obscure the perception of, scientific verity" (*FS* 55). On the contrary, inner logic is necessary for a credible secondary world – a world which does not follow its own laws cannot be a successful sub-creation because it cannot be accepted as true. Even if Man's right and obligation (given by God) can be used in a wrongful way, they are not decayed. The light of divine wisdom is splintered to many hues by Man and recombined "in living shapes that move from mind to mind." Likewise referring to Man as God's image, Tolkien defends his right to use his fantasy though it can be misused: "Fantasy remains a human right: we make in our measure and in our derivative mode, because we are made: and not only made, but made in the image and likeness of a maker" (*FS* 56). Therefore, probably every human artist wants to create something real: "Probably every writer making a secondary world, a fantasy, every sub-creator, wishes in some measure to be a real maker, or hopes that he is drawing on reality: hopes that the peculiar quality of this secondary world (if not all the details) are derived from Reality, or are flowing into it" (*FS* 70pp). Without any participation in reality, the inner consistency of reality cannot be achieved. In Tolkien's *legendarium*, this aspect of sub-creation is shown most distinctly by the Ainur, as he writes in a draft letter to Rhona Beare: "The Ainur took part in the making of the world as 'sub-creators': in various degrees, after this fashion. They interpreted according to their powers, and completed in

detail, the Design propounded to them by the One" (L 284). Even they do not create arbitrarily but are following the propounded theme and thereby realizing creation. But they cannot call it into being, only by the word of the One did their tale become history – as is shown clearly in the origin of the dwarves. But Tolkien claims that God does not give any sub-creative powers to created beings without guaranteeing to grant the reality of creation to their sub-creation: "So in this myth, it is 'feigned' (legitimately whether that is a feature of the real world or not) that He gave special 'sub-creative' powers to certain of His highest created beings: that is a guarantee that what they devised and made should be given the reality of Creation" (L 195). Although he does not explicitly claim that this is a feature of the Primary World, the line of argument as in "Mythopoeia" and "On Fairy Stories" seems to support the assumption that human artistic sub-creation can be understood as cooperation with God in the work of creation (cf. *GS* 39). This is further backed up by a hint concerning *Leaf by Niggle*. "I tried to show allegorically how that [sub-creation] might come to be taken up into Creation in some plane in my 'purgatorial' story *Leaf by Niggle* (Dublin Review 1945)" (L 195).

Because of the participation of a successful sub-creation in reality, the peculiar quality of the joy evoked by the *eucatastrophe* (the "sudden joyous 'turn'" *OFS* 68), "can thus be explained as a sudden glimpse of the underlying reality or truth" (*FS* 71). While it is primarily related to the secondary world, in the *eucatastrophe* something greater appears, "it may be a far-off gleam or echo of *evangelium* in the real world" (*FS* 71).<sup>12</sup>

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In view of myths and Tolkien's defence of myths in *On Fairy-Stories*, respectively, Birzer states: "Indeed, for Tolkien, myths expressed far greater truths than did historical facts or events. Sanctified myths, inspired by grace, served as an *anamnesis*, or a way for a people to recall encounters with transcendence that had helped to order their souls and their society. Myth, inherited or created, could also offer a "sudden glimpse of Truth,"

## FUNCTIONS OF FANTASY

Based on Tolkien's remarks concerning successful Fantasy as "a far-off gleam or echo of *evangelium* in the real world" (*FS* 71), we can turn to the three functions of Fantasy he discusses in his essay: Recovery, Escape and Consolation.

Fairy stories offer their readers four things that the human spirit needs: Fantasy, Recovery, Escape, and Consolation. Of these, the primary element is Fantasy, for the other three derive from it. Fantasy is both a mode of thinking and the created result of that thinking. Recovery, Escape, and Consolation are experiential terms describing varieties of response to Fantasy. (Flieger 24)

Recovery means the regaining of a clear vision. "I do not say 'seeing things as they are' and involve myself with the philosophers, though I might venture to say 'seeing things as we are (or were) meant to see them' – as things apart from ourselves" (*FS* 57pp).<sup>13</sup> He compares this to the cleaning of windows that is necessary to free things from the blur of familiarity, triteness or possessiveness; one may learn to marvel at things again.<sup>14</sup> This is made possible by the willingness to be enchanted by the narrative power. Fantasy in the sense of Chesterton's *Mooreffoc* also allows a re-gaining of a clear view – England might be perceived as a totally different land. "But it cannot do more than that: act as a time-telescope focused on one spot. Creative fantasy, because it is mainly trying to do something else (make something new), may open your

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that is, a brief view of heaven. At the very least, sanctified myth revealed the life humans were meant to have prior to the Fall" (Birzer 24).

<sup>13</sup> Birzer interprets this passage as concerning the Eucharist and transubstantiation (cf. 39).

<sup>14</sup> "Indeed, as high art forms, fairy stories and fantasy offer much to human existence. First, fairy stories illuminate the vast inheritance our ancestors have bequeathed to us. Second, fairy stories give us a new sense of wonder about things we have taken for granted or which have become commonplace" (Birzer 38).

hoard and let all the locked things fly away like cage-birds” (*FS* 59). In principle, this is made clear by fantastic elements in verse or prosa, but nowhere as clear as in a fairy-story. “By the forging of Gram cold iron was revealed; by the making of Pegasus horses were ennobled; in the Trees of the Sun and Moon root and stock, flower and fruit are manifested in glory” (*FS* 59). Fairy-stories are mainly concerned with fundamental or simple things – untouched by fantasy – (such as iron or horses), but these simplicities are seen more clearly by their fantastic setting. A story-maker who is ‘free with’ Nature is not her slave but can be her lover. “It was in fairy-stories that I first divined the potency of words, and the wonder of the things, such as stone, and wood, and iron; tree and grass; house and fire; bread and wine” (*FS* 60).

The two other functions of a fairy-story, Escape and Consolation, are closely connected. The connection of Recovery with Escape is treated by Tolkien in his essay on *Smith of Wootton Major*.

Faëry represents at its weakest a breaking out (at least in mind) from the iron ring of the familiar, still more from the adamantine ring of belief that it is known, possessed, controlled, and so (ultimately) all that is worth being considered – a constant awareness of a world beyond these rings. (*SWM* 101)

If Faëry is more potent, it represents an unpossessive love and respect to all things as *other*. This love produces truth and delight and leads to respect things in this light, to regard them as delightful, beautiful, wonderful, even glorious.

Regarding Escape (and the blame of *escapism*), Tolkien’s distinction of the two fundamentally different ways of escape is highly relevant because the critics of escape “are confusing, not always by sincere error, the Escape of the Prisoner with the Flight of the Deserter” (*FS* 61). Whereas the deserter wants to run away from reality, the possibility of escape by the means of a fairy-story is rather resistance

than flight. The *breaking out* of the familiar mentioned above is the active escape of a prisoner with its inherent protest against the familiar. Thus not mentioning any mass-produced electric street-lamps may express their rejection. Because the escapist does not simply regard things as indispensable, his opponents have no guarantee that he will not “rouse men to pull down the street-lamps. Escapism has another and even wickeder face: Reaction” (*FS* 62). Furthermore, Tolkien objects to ideas like the opinion that factories or cars are more real (or *alive*) than centaurs or dragons:

For my part, I cannot convince myself that the roof of Bletchley station is more ‘real’ than the clouds. And as an artefact I find it less inspiring than the legendary dome of heaven. The bridge to platform 4 is to me less interesting than Bifröst guarded by Heimdall with the Gjallarhorn. (*FS* 63)

Fairy-stories have in common with romances and other stories out of or about the past the *escapist* aspect of critique of modern life and its rawness and ugliness. The connection between beauty and goodness is lessened: Whereas in Faëry a place with a good purpose cannot be sickeningly ugly, it is not so in the present.

Very important and hinting at the aspect of consolation is the more profound escape from hunger, thirst, poverty which are much more terrible than the noise, stench, etc. of the modern world. “And even when men are not facing hard things such as these, there are ancient limitations from which fairy-stories offer a sort of escape, and old ambitions and desires (touching the very roots of fantasy) to which they offer a kind of satisfaction and consolation” (*FS* 66). An expression of these is the desire to converse with other living beings.

Nevertheless, the oldest and deepest desire is “the Great Escape: the Escape from Death” (*FS* 68) – fairy-stories provide many examples and possibilities of this.

Consequently, Tolkien understands the possibilities of escape made possible by fairy-stories primarily as “a possibility of fulfillment of desires and satisfactions, which the primary world cannot offer” (Weinreich 54, my translation).<sup>15</sup>

Besides this consolation by the imaginary fulfillment of ancient desires the consolation of a fairy-story has yet another dimension. “Far more important is the Consolation of the Happy Ending” (*FS* 68). While tragedy is the true and highest function of drama, the opposite is true with regard to fairy-stories. In the absence of a word for this state Tolkien invented the term *eucaastrophe*. “The *eucaastrophic* tale is the true form of fairy-tale, and its highest function” (*FS* 68).<sup>16</sup>

The consolation of fairy-stories, the joy of the happy ending: or more correctly of the good catastrophe, the sudden joyous ‘turn’ (for there is no true end to any fairy-tale): this joy, which is one of the things which fairy-stories can produce supremely well, is not essentially ‘escapist’, nor ‘fugitive’. In its fairy-tale – or otherworld – setting, it is a sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur. (*FS* 69)

Thereby, the existence of suffering and pain is not denied; on the contrary their possibility is the condition of the joy at the redemption of this suffering. The universal final defeat is denied, whereby this consolation “in so far is *evangelium*, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief” (*FS* 69). As mentioned above, this joy may be a gleam of *evangelium* in the real World.

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<sup>15</sup> “And though in Tolkien’s view the Christian gospel does satisfy certain intense longings in the human personality, it should not be accepted *because* it satisfies those longings: rather, it can really satisfy those longings only because it is true” (Purtill 20).

<sup>16</sup> Tolkien’s use of ‘fairy-tale’ in this passage is exceptional.

## FAIRY-STORY AND EVANGELIUM

On this basis, Tolkien mentions his long felt conviction that God redeems his “corrupt making-creatures, men” (*FS* 72) according to their nature. “The Gospels contain a fairy-story, or a story of a larger kind which embraces all the essence of fairy-stories” (*FS* 72). Among the many marvels they contain is “the greatest and most complete conceivable eucatastrophe” (*FS* 72): the birth and resurrection of Christ. The difference of this story to all others is that it has entered history and the primary world.

The desire and aspiration of sub-creation has been raised to the fulfilment of Creation. The Birth of Christ is the eucatastrophe of Man’s history. The Resurrection is the eucatastrophe of the story of the Incarnation. This story begins and ends in joy. It has pre-eminently the ‘inner consistency of reality’. (*FS* 72)

The supremely convincing success of this story is due to it being Primary Art, Creation. Tolkien compares the joy about the historicity of an especially beautiful fairy-story with the joy caused by a eucatastrophe because both hint at the Great Eucatastrophe.

The Christian joy, the *Gloria*, is of the same kind; but it is pre-eminently (infinitely, if our capacity were not finite) high and joyous. Because this story is supreme; and it is true. Art has been verified. God is the Lord, of angels, and of men – and of Elves. Legend and History have met and fused. (*FS* 73)

“On Fairy-stories” and “Mythopoeia” both end with an expression of eschatological hope. In Paradise, the likeness of the True will be renewed, “looking on the Blessed Land ‘twill see / that all is as it is, and yet made free: / Salvation changes not, nor yet destroys, / garden nor gardener, children nor their toys.” (*My* 90) Evil is not seen because evil

lies in crooked eyes and malicious choice and not in God's picture or the source.

Likewise, Tolkien says in "On Fairy-stories": "Redeemed Man is still man. Story, fantasy, still go on, and should go on. The Evangelium has not abrogated legends; it has hallowed them, especially the 'happy ending'" (*FS* 73). There is still work, suffering, hope and death, but people of Christian faith may perceive that all has a purpose. "All tales may come true; and yet, at the last, redeemed, they may be as like and as unlike the forms that we give them as Man, finally redeemed, will be like and unlike the fallen that we know" (*FS* 73).

#### SUMMARY

Consequently, in "Mythopoeia" and "On Fairy-stories" Tolkien depicts the artistic and, above all, the literary activity of Man as sub-creation, analogous to God's creating activity. Sub-creation is highly relevant for Fantasy. Creativity is a capacity given by God to Man and necessary for Man to accomplish his godlikeness. Without denying the grave change of Man's actual nature this capacity continues after the Fall. Furthermore, the right to be creatively active was not abrogated. Via this capacity Man can draw nearer to the complete reality of the world, he can struggle with Evil and hope for redemption, which is not understood as limitation but as completion of Man's creative activity. Without explicitly treating religious subjects, successful fantasy can provide – especially through its functions Recovery, Escape and Consolation and the eucatastrophe contained in it – a gleam of *evangelium*.

All this is in accordance to a demand Tolkien expressed in a letter to Milton Waldman: "Myth and fairy-story must, as all art, reflect and contain in solution elements of moral and religious truth (or error), but

not explicit, not in the known form of the primary 'real' world" (*L* 131).<sup>17</sup>

## THE SHORTER WORKS – FAÏRIE-STORIES?

### WHAT IS A FAÏRIE-STORY?

After this detailed analysis of Tolkien's theory of sub-creation I will give only a short quotation which explains what constitutes a fairy-story (and thereby fulfills the functions discussed above):

The definition of a fairy-story – what it is, or what it should be – does not, then, depend on any definition or historical account of elf or fairy, but upon the nature of *Faërie*: the Perilous Realm itself, and the air that blows in that country. [...] *Faërie* cannot be caught in a net of words; for it is one of its qualities to be indescribable, though not imperceptible. (*FS* 10)

As quoted above, *Faërie* begins where Fantasy is effective and when Man becomes a sub-creator. Furthermore, Tolkien mentions three faces of fairy-stories<sup>18</sup> referred to by Purtil who states with regard to the three shorter works known by then:

This passage gives us the essential clue to understanding Tolkien's minor works of fiction. 'Leaf by Niggle' shows us the mystical face of fairy story; *Farmer Giles of Ham* shows us the mirror of Man, pity and scorn masked by laughter

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. Tolkien's statements in *The Monster and the Critics*: "The significance of a myth is not easily to be pinned on paper by analytical reasoning. It is at its best when it is presented by a poet who feels rather than makes explicit what his theme portends; who presents it incarnate in the world of history and geography, as our poet has done" (*MC* 15). Cf. in more detail Fornet-Ponse, *Tolkien* 52pp.

<sup>18</sup> "The Mystical towards the Supernatural; the Magical towards Nature; and the Mirror of scorn and pity towards Man. The essential face of *Faërie* is the middle one, the Magical. But the degree in which the others appear (if at all) is variable, and may be decided by the individual story-teller" (*FS* 26).

but still there as in all comedy with any depth. *Smith of Wootton Major* gives us the central, magical face of fairy tale. (Purtill 36pp)

#### ROVERANDOM

Written in 1925-27, this is the earliest of the analyzed works. Hammond and Scull already mentioned a discrepancy between “On Fairy-stories” and *Roverandom*, for Tolkien criticizes “flower-and-butterfly minuteness” (*FS* 6) in his essay, but in *Roverandom* there are “whimsical ideas such as moon-gnomes riding on rabbits and making pancakes out of snowflakes, and sea-fairies who drive in shell carriages harnessed to tiny fishes” (*R* xxi). Scull and Hammond refer to a draft letter of 1959 in which Tolkien admits that in the 20s and 30s he was convinced that fairy-stories are literature for children – which he refuses strictly in “On Fairy-stories”. Finally, there are interesting connections between *Roverandom* and his *Legendarium*, e.g. the depiction of Elvenhome and Valinor at this time and the forbidden entrance to it for living beings of the Outer Lands.

Regarding other characteristics of fairy-stories, *Roverandom* is a striking example of Tolkien’s sub-creational work, of his use and recombination of the known material of the primary world: the Man in the moon, Rover and Roverandom flying across the area, the sea-fairies, the whale – all shows a creative and playful dealing with the materials of the primary world, producing something new in their combination.

Even eucatastrophe is present, for as Roverandom nearly loses the hope to get his original size back due to Artaxerxes believing that he has no more magic left, the hint of Artaxerxes’s wife causes a sudden joyous turn (cf. *R* 85); furthermore, when it is known that Roverandom’s original owner is the grandmother of *Little Boy Two* (cf. *R* 88). Out of the three functions of Fantasy the first two are existent already by virtue

of the fantastic setting of the story – which consolation it causes depends on the one hand on the effect of the eucatastrophe and on the other hand on the situation of its origin – since *Roverandom* was written as consolation for Michael Tolkien who had lost his toy dog.

Consequently, *Roverandom* in comparison to *Smith* shows clearly how Tolkien worked as a sub-creator and how his depiction of Faëry and fairy-stories changed – for *Roverandom* is unequivocally a story for children, while he stresses in “On Fairy-stories”: “The value of fairy-stories is thus not, in my opinion, to be found by considering children in particular” (*FS* 36).

#### LEAF BY NIGGLE

Although in this work one can find religious and theological connotations without any problems and it is therefore not necessary to point out the legitimacy of a theological analysis – Tolkien’s own characterization of this story as a “purgatorial story” (*L* 195) supports (and demands) it – its strong allegorical character does not support a characterization as a fairy-story.<sup>19</sup> If we include this work nevertheless, it is because the concept of sub-creation and its possible integration into Creation is realized very clearly in the narrative. This explains Ellison’s statement that it is “a fictional and poetic counterpart of the essay, a fable or fantasy woven around the theme of ‘sub-creation’” (23).

Within the scope of this article, it is not necessary to deal with the autobiographical aspect of this work extricated by Shippey and other scholars (cf. Shippey, *Author of the Century* 266pp). More important is the depiction of Niggle’s picture:

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<sup>19</sup> Shippey (*Author* 266pp) analyzes it as an “autobiographical allegory”. Purtil mentions three different possibilities of allegorical applicability: the moral, the aesthetic and the religious (cf. Purtil 24pp). “The very fact that it can be given a religious interpretation at all makes it unique among Tolkien’s work; there is no plausible religious interpretation of, for example, ‘Smith of Wootton Major’ or *The Hobbit*” (Purtil 35).

There was one picture in particular which bothered him. It had begun with a leaf caught in the wind, and it became a tree; and the tree grew, sending out innumerable branches, and thrusting out the most fantastic roots. Strange birds came and settled on the twigs and had to be attended to. Then all round the Tree, and behind it, through the gaps in the leaves and boughs, a country began to open out; and there were glimpses of a forest marching over the land, and of mountains tipped with snow. (LN94)

Besides the clear, already analyzed parallels of Niggle's picture with Tolkien's *legendarium* this depiction shows clearly how a highly sophisticated (literary) sub-creation exceeds what was intended in the beginning and gets a life of its own.

Although Niggle knows that he has to begin a journey and wants to finish the picture, for different reasons he is not able to do it before his journey. After his treatment he enters his picture and with the aid of his neighbour Parish is able to complete it. Because the landscape *Niggle's Parish* is appropriate even for other human beings as an introduction to the mountains, the sub-creation is integrated in the Creation and fulfills a good purpose (cf. LN118).

In *Leaf by Niggle*, the functions of Fantasy are illustrated by the stark contrast of this world, in which Niggle is soon forgotten because he did not produce anything useful for society (cf. LN 116pp), to the world in which his sub-creation is given being and assumes a positive function.<sup>20</sup> Chance regards Niggle's knowledge that some of the most beautiful leaves could only originate in cooperation with Parish as a part of the recovery of the clear vision. On the other hand Parish is finally able to understand his neighbour. Both can escape from the sufferings of this world depicted distinctly in the story, "to receive Consolation in the

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"Tolkien here illustrates the virtues of Fa rie's secondary world in this 'world' called Niggle, the virtues of Escape, Recovery, and Consolation" (Chance 97).

secondary world” (Chance 98). *Leaf by Niggle* is able to console in different ways: on the one hand, it can console a sub-creator who is afraid of being completely forgotten after his death and his work being regarded as worth naught. Otherwise – read as *purgatorial story* – it can reduce the fear of death by depicting death and purgatory as necessary states to final redemption (cf. Fernet-Ponse, *Theologie*).

Furthermore, *Leaf by Niggle* contains a eucatastrophe: “‘Leaf by Niggle’ is a ‘eucatastrophic’ story in Tolkien’s terminology. The final sentence, ‘They both laughed. Laughed – the Mountains rang with it!’, is a flash of pure joy” (Ellison 30). According to Shippey, this successful end depends on the cooperation of Niggle and Parish who are often regarded as two sides of one personality (sometimes even Tolkien himself; cf. Ellison, Chance). This cooperation leads so far “that ‘Niggle’s Picture’ and ‘Parish’s Garden’ combine, to become ‘Niggle’s Parish’” (Shippey, *Author* 274). But this positive end exists only in the world which Niggle enters after his purgatorial sojourn since the real world forgets him – from its point of view his story is a tragedy. “The *other* real world, the world after death, turns to ‘eucatastrophe’” (Shippey, *Author of the Century* 276).

Although *Leaf by Niggle* cannot be regarded as a classical fairy-story, it illustrates narratively the central characteristics for a fairy-story which are demanded by Tolkien in “On Fairy-stories”. Therefore, it can have the functions of Recovery, Escape and Consolation only through mediation.

#### FARMER GILES OF HAM

In contrast to *Leaf by Niggle*, *Farmer Giles of Ham* cannot be regarded as a narrative explanation of his theory of sub-creation and in contrast to *Roverandom*, it does not nearly contain such a playful and vast dealing with traditions and elements of the primary world. Furthermore, *Farmer Giles of Ham* is localized in our world by the names, dates and other

elements and the preface is also an argument for a parody as which Chance regards it (Chance 125-133). Whereas Shippey proposed an allegorical reading in *The Road to Middle-earth* (Shippey *Road to Middle-earth* 89pp), he criticizes this view in *Author of a Century*. “I freely concede, however, that this is probably *furor allegoricus*, or allegorist’s mania: *Farmer Giles of Ham* makes too much sense as a narrative in its own right to need an allegorical reading, and is furthermore entirely light-hearted” (Shippey *Author of the Century* 289). In referring to the only successful person apart from Giles (the parson with his learning), Shippey refers to the significance of legends forgotten in a society – similar to the people of Laketown in *The Hobbit*. That hints at a necessary recovery of a clear view and at the possibility of escape from the profane modern world in which legends play a less and less significant role.

Nevertheless, the existence of a dragon, a giant, a famous sword, etc. pleads for a characterization as fairy-story in Tolkien’s sense. The success of the story argues for a credible sub-creation – e.g. the existence of the dragon does not lead to disbelief but is an integral part of the story and proves the repression of the old legends at court exemplified by the Mock Dragon’s Tail degenerated to a confection “of cake and almond-paste, with cunning scales of hard icing-sugar” (FGH 15).

Even some small eucatastrophies may be found – after Chrysophylax’s attack on the knights, when only Giles resists and triumphs with the aid of Caudimordax; but also finally at the King’s attempt to claim the dragon’s treasure for himself:

‘Lightning of Heaven! Seize him and bind him!’ cried the King, justly enraged beyond bearing. ‘What do you hang back for? Seize him or slay him!’

The men-at-arms strode forward.

‘Help! Help! Help!’ cried Garm.  
 Just at that moment the dragon got up from the bridge.  
 (FGH 53)

With regard to the question of the existence of the different functions of successful fantasy, it is possible to find them too. Shippey mentions in particular the function of recovery:

The story of *Farmer Giles* is therefore largely the triumph of native over foreign (for in Giles’s court ‘the vulgar tongue came into fashion, and none of his speeches were in the Book-latin’), as simultaneously of worth over fashion and of heroic song and popular lay over pompous pernickety rationalistic scholarship. (*Road to Middle-earth* 89, cf. *Author of the Century* 291)

This implies the possible escape in this simple world and thereby can offer consolation. Assuming that the defense of the simple, unlearned and the old legends may be a gleam of *evangelium*, it could consist in the defense of popular piety, of the *sensus fidelium*, of the belief against the attacks of rationalism, of the old theology against the new ones – one is reminded of of Tolkien’s contemporariness with the Roman Catholic Church’s opposition to the so-called “modernism” – etc.

#### SMITH OF WOOTTON MAJOR

Characterizing *Smith* as a fairy-story meets with similar difficulties as is the case in *Leaf by Niggle* – especially if one follows Martin Simonson’s depiction of it as a “re-enactment of *On Fairy-Stories*” (cf. Simonson in the present volume). Furthermore, it is regarded by Shippey and Ilgner – in contrast to Flieger and Doughan – as an autobiographical allegory (cf. Shippey *Author of the Century* 296; Ilgner 290). Tolkien himself refuses an allegorical interpretation for the most part but admits that the Great Hall could be understood as allegory of the village church, the

Master Cook as representing the parson, etc. – wherein Tolkien’s refusal of some changes of the Second Vatican Council is shown or his prejudices against the protestant churches surface (*SWM* 100). But he insists on the statement that religion is not the primary subject of the story.

Regarding the genesis of the *Smith* and Tolkien’s essay, the attention is focused mainly on the question about essence and effects of Faëry. Thereby, it fulfills the above quoted definition of a fairy-story in depending more on Faëry than on fairies. He stresses unmistakably in which sense *Smith* should be understood as a fairy-story:

It is a ‘Fairy Story’, of the kind in which beings that may be called ‘fairies’ or ‘elves’ play a part and are associates in action with human people, and are regarded as having a ‘real’ existence, that is one in their own right and independent of human imagination and invention. (*SWM* 84)

Following this, Tolkien discusses the relationship of Faëry and the real world. In *Smith* a transition between both worlds is possible without any problems. But although they are connected to each other they occupy a different time and a different space – which explains the different spans passed in each realm.

The story plays at a time at which the vulgarization of the village – paradigmatically shown by Nokes – is progressed quite far and is manifested in the way of celebration. Now the feasts are solely about eating and drinking, whereas songs, legends and dancing do not play an important part any more. Also the legends about Faëry are less regarded. The King of Faëry’s coming to Wootton Major as countereffect to this trend shows that Faëry is concerned with Mankind. But since it is independent of the world of Men it has to be a relationship founded on love: “the Elven Folk, the chief and ruling inhabitants of Faëry, have an ultimate kinship with Men and have a permanent love for them in

general" (*SWM* 93). Tolkien further characterizes this love as a relationship to all living and non-living things, which includes love and respect and removes or modifies the spirit of possessiveness and domination (cf. *SWM* 94, 101). In this regard men could learn much from the elves which is very obvious in the story of Rider and Smith.

The contact with Faëry is of great advantage for men – which is shown in the art of the Smith and his delight at work. Furthermore, it is about the restoration of a culture of celebration which transcends the mere satisfaction of material needs and refers to something else in songs, legends, music and dance.

The functions of a successful Faëry (story) mentioned by Tolkien are realized and illustrated in this story: Rider and Smith escape from their world by the visits of Faëry which are possible only for them. They return refreshed and have a different view of things than before.<sup>21</sup>

From this point of view Tolkien's statement in his essay may be explained: "BUT Faëry is *not* religious. It is fairly evident that it is not Heaven or Paradise" (*SWM* 100). This is in accordance to "On Fairy-stories" since the elves are not concerned with the improvement of the religious devotion of men – but they indeed wish to escape from the iron ring of the familiar, they want to keep alive the knowledge of a world beyond this ring. Furthermore, this is about the love mentioned above.

By representing the imagination and establishing a connection to the consciousness of an unlimited world beyond our domesticated area, to the unpossessive love of all things which are contained in it and to the desire for wonder and miracles, Faëry is "as necessary for the health and complete functioning of the Human as is sunlight for physical life:

<sup>21</sup>

Smith "seems to have reached in life the balance which characters like Niggle and Parish could only achieve jointly, and then only after death. The star seems, then, to represent something like Tolkien's own impulse towards fantasy, the quality of vision; while Smith represents the ideal response to it, using it as an enrichment of normal life rather than a distraction. In this view the story begins to look like another 'mediation', this time a successful one, between fantasy and reality" (Shippey *Author* 300).

sunlight as distinguished from the soil, say, through it in fact permeates and modifies even that" (*SWM* 101).

Thus combining and narratively demonstrating the three functions of Fantasy but also providing these functions for the reader and with Faëry playing a very important part, *Smith of Wootton Major* can be regarded as a fairy-story although it also is a narrative realisation of Tolkien's concept of fairy-stories. By realising it, *Smith* implicitly supports his remarks in "On Fairy-stories".

#### IS THAT THEOLOGY?

It should have become clear how each of the analyzed shorter works of Tolkien support his theory of sub-creation in their own way by containing or narratively exposing the decisive elements of a fairy-story – with exception of the only work which is older than "On Fairy-stories", *Roverandom*, which is nevertheless an excellent example for the way a sub-creator works.

Following Tolkien's argument that a successful sub-creation may be a far-off gleam of *evangelium*, and following his conviction that a fairy-story should only implicitly contain elements of religious truth or error, these can be looked for precisely in his fairy-stories. The functions of Fantasy or Faëry respectively (Recovery, Escape and Consolation) show the needs of Men and the limits of a (fallen) Creation – while at the same time hinting at the *eschaton* and the supernatural fulfilment of Man. In this way they indeed can be a gleam of the *evangelium* of God's universal will of salvation, and a discussing them is worthwhile from a theological point of view – not to analyze these traces in a speculative-theological sense but rather in a pastoral interest which is in accordance to the last canon of the *Codex Iuris Canonici*: "salus animarum suprema lex debet esse" ("The salvation of souls must always be the supreme law").

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