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# Tolkien's surrealistic pillow: Leaf by Niggle

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## **Abstract**

Much has been written in regards to the content and meaning of J.R.R. Tolkien's semiautobiographical short story *Leaf by Niggle*, yet there has been little discussion around its origins (Hyde 1986, Collier 2005, Nelson 2010, Glycer and Long 2011, Hanks 2012, McIntosh 2013, Wilde 2015). The scholarship focusses on autobiographical and everyday aspects, placing it amongst Tolkien's small collection of short stories and alongside works such as *Farmer Giles of Ham*. Unlike the latter, *Leaf by Niggle* contains elements which suggest the realm of surrealistic fantasy. This article proposes a connection between *Leaf by Niggle* as published in 1945 and twentieth century Surrealism (Tolkien 1945). It seeks to clarify the story's singular origin and consider its role as the antithesis of Tolkien's slowly developed narratives, including his monumental Middle-earth saga *The Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien 1954-5) and the lesser known, though more expansive, *The Silmarillion* (Tolkien 1977). Within the aforementioned discussions, the dream-like qualities of *Leaf by Niggle* have generally been sidestepped, perhaps in deference to the author's thoughts on that subject as revealed in his 1939 public lecture on fairy-stories (Tolkien 2008). *Leaf by Niggle* did not derive from a dream per se, but arose in connection with a sleep episode and the immediate aftermath thereof. As Tolkien awoke one morning, the story appeared somewhat mysteriously - at least to the author - from his subconscious imagination.

## **Keywords**

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Tolkien's surrealist pillow: *Leaf by Niggle*

Much has been written in regards to the content and meaning of J.R.R. Tolkien's semi-autobiographical short story *Leaf by Niggle*, yet there has been little discussion around its origins (Hyde 1986, Collier 2005, Nelson 2010, Glycer and Long 2011, Hanks 2012, McIntosh 2013, Wilde 2015). The scholarship focusses on autobiographical and everyday aspects, placing it amongst Tolkien's small collection of short stories and alongside works such as *Farmer Giles of Ham*. Unlike the latter, *Leaf by Niggle* contains elements which suggest the realm of surrealist fantasy. This article proposes a connection between *Leaf by Niggle* as published in 1945 and twentieth century Surrealism (Tolkien 1945). It seeks to clarify the story's singular origin and consider its role as the antithesis of Tolkien's slowly developed narratives, including his monumental Middle-earth saga *The Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien 1954-5) and the lesser known, though more expansive, *The Silmarillion* (Tolkien 1977). Within the aforementioned discussions, the dream-like qualities of *Leaf by Niggle* have generally been sidestepped, perhaps in deference to the author's thoughts on that subject as revealed in his 1939 public lecture on fairy-stories (Tolkien 2008). *Leaf by Niggle* did not derive from a dream *per se*, but arose in connection with a sleep episode and the immediate aftermath thereof. As Tolkien awoke one morning, the story appeared somewhat mysteriously - at least to the author - from his subconscious imagination.

A number of biographical studies reveal Tolkien's not infrequent use of dream memory as a writing tool, beyond the usual application of an active imagination (Kocher 1972, Fisher 2011, Duriez 2012, Hoffman 2014, Charlton 2015). Dreams and sleep-related episodes have long provided a well of inspiration for those who nurture the imagination

through story-telling and artistic expression. Tolkien, as a philologist, was well versed in the centuries-old dream vision narrative tradition (Wilson 1993, Kabir 2001, Kenyon-Jones 2004). Dating back to at least the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC, with works such as Cicero's *Somnium Scipionis* and the later biblical book of *Apocalypse*, such narratives have appeared throughout the ages. Tolkien's teachings, for example, named works such as the 8<sup>th</sup> century Old English *Dream of the Rood*, the 10<sup>th</sup> century Old Norse *Balder's Dream* and the 14<sup>th</sup> century *Pearl* (Guite 2011, Guanio-Uluru 2015). More recent examples of the form include Mary Shelley's 'waking dream' and nightmarish creation of the Frankenstein monster in 1818, the surrealistic dreamscapes of Salvador Dali during the 1920s, Merian C. Cooper's *King Kong* of 1933 which came about as a result of a dream of a gorilla terrorising New York city, and Stephanie Myer's *Twilight* vampire trilogy, which the author said came to her in a dream on 2 June 2003. The lines between reality and periods of sleep, dreaming and waking are often blurred, with the doorway left open for writers, film makers and artists to enter and plunder (Hunt 1989, Epel 1993). Tolkien was no exception, being aware of his dreams and night time imaginings since earliest childhood, and making use of them as narrative sources on numerous occasions (Organ 2013). So it was that one morning in 1939, just prior to the outbreak of World War II on 3 September, he awoke from a deep sleep with his mind full of a wondrous story, miraculously and 'virtually' fully formed as if by divine rapture (*Letters* 113, Nenyia 2013). Lifting his head off the pillow and arising from the bed, Tolkien set about putting the story down on paper. He achieved this, as he later remembered, 'almost in a sitting and very nearly in the form in which it now appears' (*Letters* 257). Taking just a few hours to write out and copy, *Leaf by Niggle* was born in a frenzy of activity that can be likened to the automatic writing or uncensored thought processes popularised by proponents of Dada and Surrealism during the 1920s (Richter 1995).

This quaint piece of fantasy was to prove Tolkien's most successful short story, with one author going so far as to suggest that *Leaf by Niggle* is an autobiographical work which provides us with 'a window into his soul' (Boffetti 2001). As such, its deconstruction is relatively straightforward, revealing elements which reflect events occupying Tolkien's mind at the time of writing. He personally noted sources of the tale as being his great love of trees - specifically the great poplar tree that he could observe as he lay in his bed at Oxford - alongside the laboured writing of *The Lord of the Rings* (*Letters* 320-2). Having commenced that latter task during the Christmas – New Year period of 1937-8, by the middle of 1939 he had advanced as far as the near-complete drafts of those chapters describing the arrival of the hobbit party at Rivendell and the ensuing Council of Elrond (Tolkien 2002).

*Leaf by Niggle* – which the author initially called *The Tree* - appeared during a period of intense intellectual activity for Tolkien, when, as he noted, 'I was anxious about my own internal Tree, *The Lord of the Rings*' (*Letters* 320). There was also talk of impending war in Europe, the possibility of his own sons' involvement in that conflict, and renewed memories of horrific experiences on the Western Front during World War I, having served there as a signals officer (Carpenter 1977). In addition, Tolkien's wife Edith was sick at the time and he had recently suffered concussion during a fall. On top of this, Tolkien faced a busy workload as a university professor with additional teaching and administrative duties whilst Britain prepared for war, and everyday responsibilities as breadwinner to a young family. All in all, 1939 saw a heightened state of anxiety for the aging author, which in turn fed into the creation of the story of Niggle.

The initial manuscript proved to be an allegorical / mythical piece of phantasmagoria describing the adventures of the artist Niggle and his efforts - amidst numerous distractions - to complete a large landscape painting featuring a leaf-laden tree (Shippey 2001). This difficult task ultimately led Niggle to adventures which culminated in his dream-like melding

with the canvas and passage to a reality within that canvas. Niggle's journey assumed greater significance as he progressed from the safety of home to the purgatory of a workhouse and unseeable controlling voices. It was a journey from life and suffering to death, culminating in the artist's salvation as he headed off, in the final paragraphs, towards distant mountains and – hopefully - the bliss of the hereafter. In Niggle's absence the original canvas was destroyed, barring a small corner piece portraying a leaf which found its way into the local museum. Here it was suitably labelled: *Leaf / by Niggle*, and treated as a rare thing of beauty, heavy in history and meaning.

In and of itself the tale is entertaining and readily digestible, with a surrealistic core beneath the simple narrative. Everything is put before the reader in a straightforward manner as befits an allegorical work, and the journey from Niggle's workshop to a version of the Buddhist shambhala or Christian heaven is a brief, though enchanting one. In 1945 David Unwin, son of Tolkien's publisher Stanley Unwin, read the version published in the *Dublin Review* earlier that year and told his father that it was an 'exquisite piece of work' and should be re-published by their firm of George Allen & Unwin (Scull and Hammond 1: 288). On the surface it presents as an innocent children's story; however, superficiality was never the mark of Tolkien the man or writer. *Leaf by Niggle* is like nothing else in his canon, and it certainly does not remind one of *The Hobbit* or the complexities of Middle-earth as developed in *The Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien, 1937). In fact, *Leaf by Niggle* stands alone, outside of Tolkien's legendarium. It is like the tree at its core – the tree of life – which at first only exists on canvas and in an unfinished state, before becoming a reality into which Niggle the artist is consumed. Being so different, an appreciation of its origin is helpful in understanding and appreciating the work.

## Origins

It is not clear precisely when *Leaf by Niggle* was conceived or the initial draft written, though we know that it was ‘an overnight inspiration scribbled down in the morning’ (Hanks 44). Tolkien makes a number of comments upon its origin, and various draft manuscripts survive in archival collections. Within the introductory note to the 1964 published version, the author stated that both *Leaf by Niggle* and his essay *On Fairy-stories* were written in ‘1938-9’ (*Tree and Leaf* vii). The latter was presented at the University of St. Andrews, Scotland, on 8 March 1939. Tolkien also noted that early the following year (1940) he first read the story to his friends (*Letters* 320-2). It may have then been amended in light of the reading and subsequent discussion, as was commonly the case. The author then sat on the story for a number of years whilst he was otherwise occupied with the writing and editing of *The Lord of the Rings*, alongside continued development of his Middle-earth legendarium. *The J.R.R. Tolkien Companion and Guide: Chronology* suggests that Tolkien wrote *Leaf by Niggle* in ‘?April 1942’ (Scull & Hammond 1: 253). However, a precise reading of surviving letters and manuscripts suggests an earlier date.

On 21 April 1943 Tolkien wrote to poet Alan Rook promising to send him a story to read – presumably the unpublished *Leaf by Niggle* (Scull & Hammond 1: 260). On 6 September 1944 he received a request from the editor of the *Dublin Review* for a piece of verse or narrative, and just over a month later, on 12 October 1944, he sent *Leaf by Niggle* off in response, noting his action that day in a letter to his son Christopher (*Letters* 97). The story was published the following January and in March 1945 read by David Unwin, who commented favourably upon it (Scull & Hammond 1: 288). His father Stanley Unwin, having successfully published Tolkien’s *The Hobbit* in 1937, passed this comment on to the author, who replied in a letter dated 13 March 1945:

Since you have seen ‘Leaf by Niggle’ – I was going to advert to it myself, as part apologia, part confession – I need say no more. Except that that story was the only thing I have ever done which cost me absolutely no pains at all. Usually I compose only with great difficulty and endless rewriting. I woke up one morning (more than 2 years ago) with that odd thing virtually complete in my head. It took only a few hours to get down, and then copy out. I am not aware of ever ‘thinking’ of the story or composing it in the ordinary sense. All the same I do not feel so detached as not to be cheered, indeed rather bowled over, by your son’s comment - the only notice of, or observation on, The ‘Leaf’ that I have had at all, outside my own circle. Well! ‘Niggle’ is so unlike any other short story that I have ever written, or begun, that I wonder if it would consort with them. Two others, of that tone and style, remain mere budding leaves like so many of silly Niggle’s. (*Letters* 113).

During 1946 there were further discussions with Unwin about the story’s re-publication; however, Tolkien felt it did not fit in with any other work and he was unable, at that time, to produce additional material to accompany it (*Letters* 117). Tolkien went on to mention *Leaf by Niggle* within a September 1948 letter to his Inklings colleague C.S. Lewis, wherein it was used to support a belief in the transitory nature of life on earth (*Letters* 128). This indicated that, though the origin of *Leaf by Niggle* was largely an unconscious one, it very much reflected Tolkien’s deep-seated spiritual (Catholic) beliefs (Purtill 2003). Six years later, in September 1954, he drafted a letter to Peter Hastings, manager of the Newman Bookshop in Oxford, and cited elements of the story as representing an allegorical purgatory (*Letters* 195). A further letter to research student Caroline Everett in 1957 included significant information on the story, its background and importance:

I have not published any other short story but Leaf by Niggle. They do not arise in my mind. Leaf by Niggle arose suddenly and almost complete. It was written down almost in a sitting, and very nearly in the form in which it now appears. Looking at it myself now from a distance I should say that, in addition to my tree-love (it was originally called The Tree), it arose from my pre-occupation with The Lord of the Rings, the knowledge that it would be finished in great detail or not at all, and the fear (near certainty) that it would be 'not at all'. The war had arisen to dark all horizons. But no such analyses are a complete explanation even of a short story (*Letters* 257).

In reflecting upon *Leaf by Niggle* Tolkien can perceive an expression of meaning in his own life – one which perhaps was heretofore unseen. Suggestions that the story was premeditated are not sustainable in light of such comments, for they point to the author experiencing revelations relating to *Leaf by Niggle* which would normally arise as part of the lengthy process of drafting and development. He is quite emphatic in regards to its seemingly spontaneous origin. In a 1962 letter to his aunt Jane Neave, Tolkien presented more detail regarding this:

I am now sending you 'Leaf by Niggle'. . . It was written (I think) just before the War began, though I first read it aloud to my friends early in 1940. I recollect nothing about the writing, except that I woke one morning with it in my head, scribbled it down – and the printed form in the main hardly differs from the first hasty version at all. I find it still quite moving, when I reread it. It is not really or properly an 'allegory' so much as 'mythical'. For Niggle is meant to be a real mixed-quality person and not an 'allegory' of any single vice or virtue. . . Of course some elements are inexplicable in biographical terms (so obsessively interesting to modern critics that they often value a piece of

'literature' solely in so far as it reveals the author, and especially if that is in a discreditable light.) There was a great tree – a huge poplar with vast limbs – visible through my window even as I lay in bed. I loved it, and was anxious about it. It had been savagely mutilated some years before, but had gallantly grown new limbs – though of course not with the unblemished grace of its former natural self; and now a foolish neighbour was agitating to have it felled. Every tree has its enemy, few have an advocate. . . Also, of course, I was anxious about my own internal Tree, The Lord of the Rings. It was growing out of hand, and revealing endless new vistas – and I wanted to finish it, but the world was threatening. And I was dead stuck, somewhere about Ch. 10 (Voice of Saruman) in Book III – with fragments ahead some of which eventually fitted into Ch. 1 and 3 of Book V, but most of which proved wrong especially about Mordor – and I did not know how to go on. . . But none of that really illuminates 'Leaf by Niggle' much, does it? If it has any virtues, they remain as such, whether you know all this or do not. I hope you think it has some virtue. (But for quite different reasons, I think you may like the personal details. That is because you are a dear, and take an interest in other people, especially as rightly your kin.) (*Letters* 320-2).

Tolkien is here referring to the light heart of the story, perhaps in contrast to the darkness of his more famous Rings saga. In 1963 discussions once again opened with George Allen & Unwin, this time through Rayner Unwin, the brother of David. Out of this arose publication of the book *Tree and Leaf* during 1964, containing both *Leaf by Niggle* and *On Fairy-Stories*, along with a brief introductory note by Tolkien. Within that note the author again referred to the genesis of the story:

It has not been changed since it reached manuscript form, very swiftly, one day when I awoke with it already in mind. One of the sources was the great-limbed poplar tree that I could see even lying in bed. It was suddenly lopped and mutilated by its owner, I do not know why (*Tree and Leaf* viii).

When *Tree and Leaf* was published in the United States during 1965 by Houghton Mifflin Co., the author wrote to them expressing his distaste at a cover image which featured a 'fat and apparently pollarded trunk, with no roots, and feeble branches, [which] seems to me quite unfitting as a symbol of Tale-telling, or as a suggestion of anything that Niggle could possibly have drawn!' (*Letters* 351-2, Tolkien 1965). This latter reference highlights Tolkien's personal attachment to the story, alongside the practical and symbolic importance of trees in his life. Whilst links between *Leaf by Niggle*, trees, the tree of life and *The Lord of the Rings* were subsequently highlighted by Tolkien and others, its underlying surrealistic elements were largely ignored.

### **Surrealistic landscape**

*Leaf by Niggle* is surrealistic and allegorical, even though clearly defining both in the context of Tolkien's writing is problematic. Allegory was a method frequently used by members of the Inklings, though Tolkien was adverse to it (Zaleski 2015). Both he and Lewis had survived the hellish battlefields of World War I and were on many occasions drawn to consider the eternal struggle between good and evil and its modern-day manifestations (Keuthan 2009). As devout Christians they were naturally drawn to the presentation of strongly held beliefs through their writing. However they did not want to limit readership by being overtly religious or doctrinaire. *Leaf by Niggle* is a fantasy for public consumption, and

like the 1998 Hollywood movie *What Dreams May Come*, which was based on an original novel by Richard Matheson, the Christian dimensions of heaven, purgatory and hell are evident throughout, though never explicitly stated (Matheson 1978, Ward 1998). Within that film the lead character played by Robin Williams journeys from reality to afterlife in search of family and salvation. In both Hollywood movie and Tolkien short story a metaphysical world with elements of a surreal landscape is accessible to living souls through a painting – a canvas portal – which links life and death. Within *What Dreams May Come* Williams must rescue his suicidal artist wife from an eternity in hell by entering her painted landscape and, with the help of their two deceased children, bringing her back from damnation into ultimate rebirth. The surrealistic landscapes of both book (*Leaf by Niggle*) and film (*What Dreams May Come*) challenge the reader and viewer, however the internal integrity of the work – what Tolkien referred to as the ‘secondary world’ - allows one to suspend disbelief and engage with the characters and the wonder of the narrative. Whilst the setting and events may be surreal or dream-like, both stories present as realistic experiences for Niggle and Williams.

To date, the everyday aspects of *Leaf by Niggle* have garnered most discussion, as against the surreal. In light of this omission, the story warrants greater reflection upon its origins and relation to the 20<sup>th</sup> century Surrealism movement which sought to better understand and express encounters with the subconscious, with hyper-reality through dreaming and imagination, and related experiences by artists and writers, including Tolkien (Hammond and Scull 1995).

It should be noted that there are two historic definitions of Surrealism – the earliest was coined by French writer and poet Apollinaire during 1917 in reference to things that were beyond realism and dream-like (Bohn 1977, Brandon 2000). The second, which is the most commonly accepted, was defined by Andrew Breton in 1924 primarily with reference to art and literature and their association with manifestations of the subconscious. The word

'surreal' first attained widespread usage in association with the Dada movement around the time of World War I and the immediate post-war years. Its proponents made use of the irrational reality of dreams, and unconscious thought and imagery, to inspire and create fantastic works on canvas, in print and through bizarre performance pieces. The rise of Surrealism as a specific artistic, literary and performance-based movement after World War I extended beyond Europe into the United States and Great Britain, where it would have come to the attention of Tolkien. In 1934 controversial artist Salvador Dali exhibited in London, and two years later presented a lecture on surrealism during the London International Surrealist Exhibition. The German artist Max Ernst's landmark work '*L'Ange du Foyer ou le Triomphe du Surréalisme*' [The Triumph of Surrealism] was painted in 1937, the same year as the release of *The Hobbit*.

'Surrealistic' is not a label usually associated with literary work by Tolkien. The word, for many readers, has a connection with the art movement that rose to prominence in the years prior to World War II, or to the later Sixties era with its brightly coloured, swirling graphics and the widespread use of psychedelic drugs such as marijuana and LSD. The San Francisco rock band Jefferson Airplane popularised the word with the release of their February 1967 record album *Surrealistic Pillow*. The hit single off the album - *White Rabbit* - was a retelling, in part, of scenes from Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* (Carroll 1866). Both book and song dealt with the dream-like state which could be induced naturally or through the use of drugs, whether they be medicinal or recreational. The latter struck a chord with the youth of the day who were seeking solace beyond the harsh realities of a world engaged in war – both Cold and real – alongside burgeoning cultural revolutions. Tolkien had referred to his own spontaneous and non-recreational drug-induced and dream-related 'Eureka!' moment in a letter to his son Christopher:

I was riding along on a bicycle one day, not so long ago, past the Radcliffe Infirmary, when I had one of those sudden clarities which sometimes come in dreams (even anaesthetic-produced ones). I remember saying aloud with absolute conviction: 'But of course! Of course that's how things really do work'. But I could not reproduce any argument that had led to this, though the sensation was the same as having been convinced by reason (if without reasoning). And I have since thought that one of the reasons why one can't recapture the wonderful argument or secret when one wakes up is simply because there was not one: but there was (often maybe) a direct appreciation by the mind (sc. reason) but without the chain of argument we know in our time-serial life. However that's as may be. (*Letters* 101)

This account of a waking-dream, though written in 1944, is similar to descriptions from the 1960s of the effect of hallucinogenic drugs such as LSD on users. The so-called 'doors of perception' to one's mind are opened and consciousness is expanded.

*Leaf by Niggle* successfully mixes fact - or reality - with fantasy to a degree where both are not easy to differentiate. It is not a fairy tale, but a consummate example of Tolkien's theory of sub-creation and the writing of fantasy as explained in his lecture *On Fairy-stories* (Hammond 2010). *Leaf by Niggle* has a number of significant surreal elements, including the disembodied voices talking about Niggle, but not to him; the passage through a tunnel and sleep, placing him inside his painted canvas; and the strange journey from home to workhouse. What we know of the author's attitude towards surrealism is focussed around its more popular manifestation as art, such as is seen in the work of Max Ernst, Enrico de Chirico, Marcel Duchamp and Salvador Dali, rather than through performance and writing, though these were integral to surrealistic expression from the time of its predecessor Dada, through to the post World War II period.

Tolkien was obviously aware of surrealism, with some of his artworks reflecting this. We have a single reference to the term by him, and that in a note to his published lecture on fairy-stories, originally delivered approximately 6 months prior to the writing down of the Niggle episode. Therein he commented that: 'There is, for example, in surrealism commonly present a morbidity or unease' (*On Fairy-stories* 81). This statement reflects the surrealist preference for the nightmarish and oppressive. It is also seen to a degree in the stressful environment Niggle inhabits. *Leaf by Niggle* was surreal by definition, if not intent, for it dealt with things that were beyond realism and not simply mythical or historic. It came from the world of the subconscious, though it did not specifically deal with it, or refer to it, to any degree. There is a reference within the text to Niggle having dreamt of a grassy landscape, and to a later critic referring to him as a day-dreamer in relation to his work as an artist. However, the story at large is not presented as a dream, but rather as an altered reality. It was also a product of its time, with prominent exponents of Surrealism popularising new ways of seeing and new forms of artistic expression at the very same time that Tolkien was constructing his Middle-earth fantasy and incorporating some of his own dreams and subconscious thoughts into various narratives. *Leaf by Niggle* is especially of interest because Tolkien identified its creation as different to any of his other work. Within the lecture on fairy-stories he excluded from his definition those stories which used the framing device of a dream ('dream-machinery') to explain entry into, and exit from, the world of Faërie. Such a framework is applied, for example, in *Alice in Wonderland*. However, Tolkien did not completely ignore the role of dreams and the subconscious:

It is true that Dream is not unconnected with Faërie. In dreams strange powers of the mind may be unlocked. In some of them a man may for a space wield the power of Faërie, that power which even as it conceives the story, causes it to take living form and

colour before the eyes. A real dream may indeed sometimes be a fairy-story of almost elvish ease and skill - while it is being dreamed. But if a waking writer tells you that his tale is only a thing imagined in his sleep, he cheats deliberately the primal desire at the heart of Faërie: the realisation, independent of the conceiving mind, of imagined wonder (*On Fairy-stories* 35)

Tolkien was aware of the irrational aspect of dreaming, noting of it in his 1939 lecture that ‘there is no Art’ (*On Fairy-stories* 60). He returned to the subject in the introduction to 1964’s compilation *Tree and Leaf*, observing that:

This is not true of all dreams. In some, Fantasy seems to take part. But this is exceptional. Fantasy is a rational, not an irrational, activity’ (*On Fairy-stories* 60).

*Leaf by Niggle* was a manifestation of this sentiment and, as such, a recognition of the personal and biographical elements contained therein. Tolkien himself accepted this reading of the auto-biographical nature of dreams but down played it (*Letters* 320-2). He believed that *Leaf by Niggle* – whilst it was his and his alone – took elements of his life and formed of itself, as if he were a mere observer. He did not preconceive it or labour over its construction, as he did with *The Lord of the Rings*. Unlike his colleague C.S. Lewis, whose dreaming was more often than not nightmarish, Tolkien’s experiences whilst asleep (dreaming) or upon waking were not generally dark. As Bruce Charlton has noted in his blog postings on Tolkien’s *Notion Club Papers*:

Tolkien, by contrast, reports dream content that is both more varied and includes a lot of positive, euphoric, beautiful experience as well as the eerie, oppressive, nightmarish (Charlton 2013).

The message of *Leaf by Niggle* is overwhelmingly a positive one, in that at the end of the story the main character has found a path to redemption, and heaven is within reach. Perhaps this is why he was averse to what he saw as the morbidity of surrealism.

Niggle's journey has also been likened to the concept of *flow* which is at the heart of modern gaming theory (Chambers 2012). Flow describes a mental state of energised joy elicited by focusing on an activity, such as playing a game, learning a skill, beating the level and going to the next. Niggle encounters challenges in his journey, overcomes them and moves on to the next level, never reaching the end but positive in his pursuit of it, just as a game player is. Tolkien had coined the related concept of *eucatastrophe* for those occasions when a positive turn of events at the conclusion of a story ensures that the protagonist does not meet an unfortunate end (Tolkien 1964). The best example is when Gollum grabs the ring at the end of *The Lord of the Rings* and ensures its destruction, following Frodo's failed attempt to do so. Eucatastrophe and flow are both terms which attempt to clarify positive and happy experiences in connection with fantastical experiences, either real or imaginary.

Within the story as written by Tolkien, Niggle's solution to the difficulties encountered in completing the painting of the tree is to become one with the canvas and accept his fate. This, once again, reflects the author's attitude to the writing of *The Lord of the Rings* at the time – he would be taken along by it, open to its internal energy and the evolutionary process of the writing. As of August-September 1939 – around the time he wrote the initial draft of *Leaf by Niggle* - he did not know where that larger work would lead, or if it would even end, for he was a 'natural niggler', busy with, and distracted by, trifles

(*Letters* 236). His unfinished account of the origin of the universe and creation of Arda, issued after his death as *The Silmarillion*, and additional large collection of unpublished Middle-earth stories, are testament to this. Nevertheless, Tolkien would keep at it and, like Niggle, head off into the mountains to see where the journey would lead. The ultimate salvation for Tolkien came with the publication of the three volumes of *The Lord of the Rings* between 1954-7. Niggle's fate is unknown, for Tolkien never returned to the subject.

Numerous interpretations of *Leaf by Niggle* have been made since it was first published, including the identification of similarities with the late fifteenth century play *Everyman* and Dante's *Divine Comedy* (Nelson 2010, Milburn 2011). Tolkien may have had difficulties with such readings, as its very creation remained inexplicable to him until the end of his days. Unrelated to his Middle-earth legendarium, *Leaf by Niggle* is a pure form of writing which appeared quickly, apparently without preliminary thought or plan, and free of angst or niggling prevarication. Whilst there is no doubt that there are similarities between *Everyman* and *Leaf by Niggle*, the latter was, at least in Tolkien's mind, the result of unconscious thought. D. Thomas Hanks notes that Tolkien's original manuscripts 'show that the story was not so easily or quickly written' and in fact 'a more orthodox approach to writing a story' was adopted (Hanks 2012).

When we ask: 'Where did *Leaf by Niggle* come from?', there is no clear answer. We know that it reflects elements of Tolkien's life; that it came to him one morning, all but fully formed; and that it was edited to a limited degree prior to publication. In relation to dreams, there has been much discussion around their origin, and this has some relevance to *Leaf by Niggle*. According to various commentators, ordinary dreams independently form from the events of the previous 24 or 48 hours in a person's life, whilst 'big' or 'extraordinary' dreams – into which class we could allocate the appearance of the *Leaf by Niggle* story within the author's imagination – are characterised by 'the fantastic metamorphoses of time, space,

character and consciousness' (Bulkeley 2006). Tolkien dreamt regularly and recorded on a number of occasions the dream he experienced from birth and throughout his life featuring a huge wave, which he made use of in writing his Atlantis legend as part of *The Silmarillion* and also within the river crossing scene in *The Lord of the Rings*. Such dreaming falls into the class of archetypal-spiritual dreams which are distinguished by 'vivid, subjectively powerful encounters with numinous forces, often also including extremely strong or 'titanic' sensations.' When *Leaf by Niggle* came so forcefully to him, he was able to take advantage of previous experiences in reflecting upon dreams and other flurries of original imaginative thought to record it in full before the memory faded. He also perhaps felt free to go down this path following upon insights gained during the writing and presentation of *On Fairy-stories* earlier that year, just prior to the Niggle episode. Tolkien's awareness of the liberating, though rather anarchic tenets of Dada and Surrealism, may have expanded his awareness of such opportunities, though as a regular churchgoer his mind was open to the search for a higher plain and meaning. In an environment in which Dali was popularising images of melting clocks and fantastical landscapes, Tolkien was knowingly, or unknowingly, able to accept the tale of Niggle and, without any qualms, journey beyond its realistic elements into the surreal world it presented.

Just as dreams and imaginative thoughts are often fantastical adaptations of events in one's life, they can also contain elements totally unexperienced or unconnected, and unique or repetitive, as in Tolkien's great wave dream. They can be extremely literary, whereby you become part of a story; or they may be presented as a complete package, with beginning, middle and end, or as a mere fragment of a bigger story. *Leaf by Niggle* was such an experience – an episode from a grander tale, but complete in and of itself. Tolkien chose not to place it within a Middle-earth context, or journey beyond the experience to any degree in

order to enhance the narrative. He held himself back from this - from his natural niggling tendencies – and accepted it for what it was, namely, an entity unto itself.

Like many of Tolkien's works, *Leaf by Niggle* strives to be devoid of religious doctrine, whilst dealing with Catholic themes such as creation, purgatory, free will and sin. Tolkien's writing does not overtly preach Christian dogma but, rather, expresses 'the essential goodness of the universe' as in right versus wrong and good versus evil (Overland 2013, Duriez 2015). The stripped-down values of Christ, and indeed Buddha, are seen in characters such as Frodo Baggins, Gandalf, Aragorn and Niggle – humility, mercy, charity, forgiveness, honour and bravery are their guiding principles. Niggle is a painter, Tolkien is a writer, and through their vocations as artists they attain their full spiritual potential. In a Christian sense, one reaches heaven through deeds and work, and in the case of Niggle (aka Tolkien) through labour and artistic expression.

Tolkien's personal attachment to the story is evident in his 1962 letter to Jane Neave, as is his own deep sense of connection with trees, including the poplar outside his window (Finseth 2014). He speaks of *The Lord of the Rings* as 'my own internal Tree' as if to reinforce this connection (*Letters* 321). It has been said that the character Treebeard from *Rings* is the one closest to the author. Tolkien loved trees – he sat with them, hugged them, drew them, talked to them and was photographed with them on numerous occasions during his later years. He advocated for their protection and believed they possessed a life force. This found expression in the Ents he created for Middle-earth, and the Willowman of the Old Forest. This deep sense of attachment to, and understanding of trees can, in part, explain why the story of Niggle was so well-formed in almost a single instant, and universally expressed in *Leaf by Niggle*.

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