In the year 408 CE, Pelagius proposed an idea that contradicted the established teachings of the Catholic church, but which he felt was a better representation of the truth. Now called Pelagianism, the movement he started held “the denial of any Original Sin” as its “one essential article of belief” (Bonner 35). This denial of original sin was a denial of a key component of the Catholic doctrine of the Fall. Catholics believe that the earth fell from an innocent, perfect state, called the Garden of Eden, into a place of suffering and death. They further believe that that fall was a result of the disobedience of Adam and Eve, the first humans on earth. They see Jesus Christ and his Grace as the only means to overcome the consequences of that disobedience (Catechism of the Catholic Church 415-420). Original sin is this state of being “deprived of original holiness and justice” (Catechism of the Catholic Church 417). Instead, Pelagianism held that individuals entered the world guiltless and included the belief that “man could, by the natural power of free will and without the necessary help of God's grace, lead a morally good life,” which St. Augustine rejected (Catechism of the Catholic Church 406). The tenets of Pelagianism were officially condemned by the Catholic church in 431 (Bonner 39). The mainstream ideas of Catholicism—that the Fall of Adam and Eve left the human race “subject to ignorance, suffering and the dominion of death, and inclined to sin”—prevailed (Catechism of the Catholic Church 405).
But Pelagianism didn’t die out. Their view, which “[was] utterly opposed to making human weakness the measure of human achievement,” found its place in the secular world (Bonner 39). The idea that people can live good lives without God’s grace is commonly accepted today. And yet, both Flannery O’Connor and J.R.R. Tolkien see history as proving the opposite. Living in decimated, post-war societies—O’Connor in the post-Civil War South and Tolkien in post-World War I England—they see their broken world as a retelling of the ancient Biblical Fall and as a symptom of the devastating effects of that Fall. Also following traditional Catholic views, they offer hope, in the form of Divine Grace, to the fallen world. Both O’Connor and Tolkien achieved popularity, ultimately revealing why the traditional Catholic view has consistently dominated Pelagianism.

O’Connor writes that the South “[has] gone into the modern world with an inburnt knowledge of human limitations” (The Regional Writer 59). She believed that the Civil War brought about this “inburnt knowledge” that it functioned as a “Fall” that had similar results to the Biblical Fall of Adam and Eve, namely a loss of innocence and a creation of a “sense of mystery” (59). She directly states that religion is “a means to interpret” the Civil War and the state of the South after it (59). She thus clearly sees the South as a representation of her Catholic worldview and displays this in her writing. O’Connor also reveals why she writes specifically about these themes. She writes that these characteristics of the South, this “knowledge of human limitations” and “sense of mystery” “[have] not sufficiently developed in the rest of our country (The Regional Writer 59). Thus, O’Connor writes to spread these things to the rest of her country and world. Whether she explicitly understands it or not, O’Connor believes the world guilty of Pelagian heresy. She thinks that the world believes, as did Pelagius, that grace is unnecessary and that humankind will progress on its own merits.
Tolkien witnessed perhaps the most advanced version of Pelagianism that the world has known: pre-World War I Europe. Historian Joseph Loconte writes of Herbert Spencer’s Social Darwinism, which emerged around that time, that “Darwin’s theory about biological change had ripened into a social assumption—a dogma—about human improvement even perfection” (27). Society showed its acceptance by producing literature and theory to match it. In 1909, five years before the war broke out, Norman Angell, a British writer, published a book entitled *The Great Illusion* (Loconte 27). One of the major arguments of this book was that humans were “losing the psychological impulse to war” (qtd in Loconte 27). In 1914, the same year the war began, Britain’s National Peace Council claimed that “War, the product of anarchy and fear, is passing away under the growing and persistent pressure of world organization” (qtd in Loconte 27). Such were the sentiments just before the atrocities of trench warfare and advanced killing machines swept through Europe.

Tolkien served as an officer in the First World War and witnessed the complete failure of such blind optimism (Loconte 27). He admits that these experiences influenced his writing. Explaining his description of the remains of an ancient battlefield, he claims that it “[owes] something to Northern France after the Battle of the Somme” (qtd. in Loconte 28). He also writes that the bravery shown by heroes in his stories “is indeed a reflection of the English soldier [. . .] in the 1914 war” (qtd. in Loconte 29). Much as he represented these aspects of the war in his writing, he also interpreted the post-war world around him. His works represent another fallen world, very similar to the one of which O’Connor writes.

A typical Catholic view sees the fallen world as “alien and hostile” (Catechism of the Catholic Church 403). In “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” arguably O’Connor’s most popular short story, a sense of mourning reveals how alien and hostile the world has become. A
conversation between Red Sam and the grandmother illustrates the feeling. One of the grandmother’s first comments is that “people are certainly not nice like they used to be,” calling to mind the “inclination towards evil” supposedly brought about by the fall (O’Connor, “A Good Man” 122; Catechism of the Catholic Church 403). As the two discuss specific examples of this observation, Red Sam’s wife joins the conversation stating, “It isn’t a soul in this green world of God’s that you can trust” (O’Connor, “A Good Man” 122). The mentioned “green world of God’s” points directly to the Garden of Eden, very much the green world that God intended to create. The allusion to the Fall is further complicated by the fact that Red Sam’s wife is looking at him as she says it (122). When God comes and asks if Adam and Eve have eaten the forbidden fruit, Adam immediately puts the blame on Eve for the sin, telling God, “the woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat” (King James Version, Gen. 3:11-12).

Having been thus betrayed by both the serpent and her husband, the woman is able to say that there “isn’t a soul [. . .] you can trust.” It becomes evident, then, that O’Connor is pointing to the effects of the Fall in this story. An allusion to Gone With the Wind in relation to a now-desolate plantation and a mention of “when Sherman came through” in connection with longing reminiscences by the grandmother imply that the Civil war is the Fall in which the longed-for times were lost. Thus, O’Connor draws a parallel between the South’s fall from glory and the Biblical Fall of Adam and Eve.

In his works, J. R. R. Tolkien also revealed a similar mourning for what was lost. A dive into the depths of the Tolkien mythos showcases many parallels to Catholic theology and the Fall, but only a brief discussion of his most famous works can be attempted here. In his trilogy, The Lord of the Rings, these nostalgic themes are unmistakably evident. Critic Andrew Lynch writes that the series “abounds in laments for lost landscapes and departed glories, and dwells
repeatedly on scenes of decay and desolation” (102). For the sake of brevity, we will view the most pronounced example of this: the Ents. In a conversation with Merry and Pippin, Treebeard speaks of when “the Great Darkness came” and wishes for “days that would never come again” (Tolkien 457). The parallel of this “Great Darkness” as sin and the “days that would never come again” as the innocent, Edenic state of humans is apparent. Specific to the Ents and their fallen condition is the loss of the Entwives. In the days of the “Great Darkness” all the female Ents, called Entwives, disappeared. Treebeard reminisces about how the Ents and Entwives slowly drifted apart, the Entwives eventually disappearing completely during a time of war (464-465). The Catholic Catechism specifically mentions that “the union of man and woman [became] subject to tensions” as a result of the Fall (400). Revealed here as slow diversion of interest, these “tensions” are definitely visible in the history of the Ents. Tolkien’s races, as characterized by the Ents, are also living in a fallen world, pining for the peace and harmony that has been lost.

Further revealing this universal fallen condition is the corruption of the protagonists in *The Lord of the Rings* and “A Good Man Is Hard to Find.” Of Frodo’s failure to destroy the ring of power, Tolkien explained “one must face the fact [. . . that] the power of Evil in the word is not finally resistible by incarnate creatures” (qtd. in Loconte 29). Frodo, after having walked countless miles and faced death on several occasions with his only intent being to destroy the ring, ultimately succumbs to its corrupting influence on the very slopes of Mount Doom, the only place the ring can be destroyed. In the very moment that the fate of the world rests in his hands, Frodo says, “I do not choose now to do what I came to do. I will not to this deed. The Ring is mine!” (Tolkien 924). He thus fails completely. This corruption of the hero reflects the Catholic doctrine of the “universality of sin” (Catechism of the Catholic Church 401). No person can escape the clutches of sin, and all will ultimately fall to its corruption. Pelagianism, on the other
hand, holds that “in practice, even good Christians [sin]” but that all ought to be taught that they are “capable of avoiding sin” (Bonner 35). Tolkien thus writes sharply in contrast to Pelagian thought by revealing the utter failures of even his most heroic characters.

In “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” the grandmother reveals a similar corruption. Though cast as the protagonist, she is flawed and prejudiced. Kathleen G. Ochshorn describes her as “a full-blown agent of disaster” (115). Stephen C. Bandy isn’t any kinder, saying the grandmother is “utterly self-absorbed,” given to “mindless racism” and a “spiky, vindictive woman” (108-109). She is unable to gain any ground against the Misfit, ultimately failing in her own quest for her life (O’Connor, “A Good Man” 132). The failures of these protagonists and their inherent flaws demonstrate perfectly the fallen setting of these stories.

And yet, neither Tolkien nor O’Connor leaves the reader without hope. The Misfit says of the grandmother, “she would of been a good woman [. . .] if it had been someone there to shoot her every minute of her life” (O’Connor, “A Good Man” 133). In the case of the grandmother, true progress is possible, even if it takes some outside influence. Of the Misfit’s influence in the actions of the grandmother, O’Connor writes that she “has been touched by the Grace that comes through him in his particular suffering” (qtd in Hendricks 207). By this grace, the grandmother is given the opportunity to overcome her selfish tendencies and a chance to begin overcoming the Fall. O’Connor thus reveals that she sees grace as the only solution to the Fall, again directly in line with her Catholic background. Reads the Catechism, “The victory that Christ won over sin has given us greater blessings than those which sin had taken from us” (420). The divine grace created by Christ allows for the lamenting discussed earlier to be swallowed in ultimate victory. This is yet another indictment of Pelagianism. Because Pelagius denied the doctrine of Original Sin, and denied the absolute need of grace, he cannot see it as the better route.
Tolkien recognizes the same themes in his own literature. In the very moment that Frodo fails, Gollum attacks him and steals the Ring. He then trips and falls into the fires of Mount Doom, destroying the Ring, completing Frodo’s quest, and saving the world. Tolkien calls this moment a “eucatastrophe[,] a sudden and miraculous grace” (qtd. in Sandner 171). In the moments after this “miraculous grace,” Frodo and Sam are together, contemplating what has happened. They are about to be engulfed by a volcanic eruption caused by the destruction of the Ring. Their conversation reflects the hope that Tolkien sees for the world. Frodo, who has just fallen to the ring and been saved by a power beyond his own, is pessimistic about their situation and the world itself. Says he, “Hopes fail. An end comes. We have only a little time to wait now. We are lost in ruin and downfall, and there is no escape” (Tolkien 929). This is a very normal response to the Catholic doctrine that all are sinners, that we are fallen with no means of escape. It is how Europe felt after the first World War; it is what Tolkien saw in the world around him. That war, as no other before, “assaulted the concepts of heroism, valor, and virtue” (Loconte 29). Tolkien’s writing reflects the failure of humanity’s dreams of perfection on its own terms. David Sandner writes that “Tolkien’s position can be described as disappointed in humanity” (176). And yet, that disappointment, bred by the horror of World War I, is eroded by the growth of hope. In Sam’s voice, Tolkien rejects the prevalent pessimism, stating that “after coming all that way I don’t want to give up yet. It’s not like me” (929). Sam sees hope in the eucatastrophe he has just witnessed and believes that there is still more to the story. His hope is realized as he and Frodo are saved by the eagles (930). This is the Catholic faith that Tolkien writes for, a staunch trust and hope that things will work out, a hope fertilized by the evidence of the compassion of a higher power than humanity that tips the balance and knocks Gollum and the ring off the edge into the fires of Mount Doom.
Loconte calls “Tolkien’s literary aims profoundly countercultural” (29). Indeed, they are. Both O’Connor and Tolkien attempt to accomplish two things. First, they display the universal fallen condition of humanity. They depict the inability of their characters—and, by extension, humans at large—to avoid and overcome sin without outside help. Second, they give hope by revealing the workings of that outside help, which they deem to be grace.

This first aim runs directly against Pelagianism. Those that subscribed to Pelagianism believed that the only hope for progress was to believe that people could avoid sins and mistakes. It is against this philosophy that Tolkien and O’Connor write, emphasizing the weakness of humans and revealing how helpless they are to in perfecting themselves. And yet, both Tolkien and O’Connor realize that they are both writing in post-Pelagian societies. The cultures in which they live, post-World War I England and post-Civil War South, had believed in human self-perfection but had been crushed because of it. By pointing out the misery and hopelessness that are part of the human condition, Tolkien and O’Connor connect with their audiences. These arguments resonate with the societies that have seen their dreams of peace and perfection collapse.

But, neither Tolkien nor O’Connor stop there, which is what makes their writing countercultural. They go on, ultimately claiming that there is no hope for us alone, but there is hope. They preach of ultimate progress, ultimate victory through the aid of divine grace. At the time that both were writing, there was “an animus against the old religious orthodoxies” mainly fueled by the catastrophic effects of both of the previously mentioned wars (Loconte 28). By writing within these “religious orthodoxies,” emphasizing the fallen condition of humans and then pointing towards grace as an ultimate means of salvation, O’Connor and Tolkien produced works that went against the cultural current and yet were accepted by it.
This acceptance of O’Connor and Tolkien, despite the lack of religious faith in the
general society, is primarily a result of their being covertly religious rather than overtly religious.
Although their texts contain religious themes and their outside comments reveal their intentions,
the works themselves do not contain anything that explicitly identifies grace or religion. In fact,
the lack of obvious religion has caused critics, especially in O’Connor’s case, to question
whether or not religion and faith ought to be applied to them. By putting their Catholic views
into their work but not directly calling it Catholicism and achieving popularity, O’Connor and
Tolkien reveal the unconscious appeal of the Catholic worldview to an audience that consciously
rejects it. They show that, in both theory and practice, people may be fooled by Pelagianism for a
time, but ultimately reject it when they trip over their own pride. Not willing to give up, they
recognize their fallen nature but silently hope that there is still a way to progress. Humanity as a
whole longs for the chance to grow beyond its limits. The Catholic view of redemption by divine
grace presents just that opportunity.
Works Cited


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