BOOK REVIEW:

Utopian and Dystopian Themes in Tolkien's Legendarium

Adam McLain

Doyle, Mark. *Utopian and Dystopian Themes in Tolkien's Legendarium.* Lexington Books, 2020. ISBN: 978-1498598675.

In *Utopian and Dystopian Themes in Tolkien's Legendarium*, Mark Doyle argues that the reason Tolkien's legendarium is enjoyed, even revered, across many different cultures around the world is because of its delivery of "utopian ideals and dystopian warnings" (15). Indeed, Doyle's fundamental argument is that the utopian and dystopian themes that he has uncovered in Tolkien's legendarium will provide new and generative insight to the legendarium, especially concerning intersections with history, environmental studies, politics, and myth. This approach to Tolkien's work allows Doyle to present thorough and innovative arguments about Tolkien. For instance, in Chapter Three, Doyle uses his focus on the cities within the legendarium to argue that Tolkien's environmentalism differs from contemporary environmental views because it favors a world that respects the environment equally with society, even a society that is built out of and in respect of the environment. However, the text lacks much critical engagement with utopian and dystopian studies, strangely treating them as afterthoughts to work on Tolkien's legendarium rather than as conversations that could have benefited both Tolkien and those fields. This glaring oversight ultimately harms the entire project, leaving it a work diminished in its usefulness.

In his introduction and first chapter, Doyle begins his argument by attempting to show how utopian and dystopian literature and themes intersect with Tolkien's world. Doyle defines utopia as an "ideal state and culture (in the broadest senses of those words)", placing emphasis on the "politics, laws,

mores, and social structures of the imagined society" (10). This definition, he explains, differs from more-standard definitions by Lyman Tower Sargent and Darko Suvin, which emphasise a "'non-existent society … that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as" better or worse (Sargent) and that is constructed from estrangement (Suvin) (11). For Doyle, Sargent's definition provides a too-broad argument that could possibly encompass the entirety of Tolkien's work along with almost any SF or fantasy narrative because Sargent sees any society that is "better or worse" as utopian or dystopian. Suvin offers a better definition of utopia in Doyle's view, except that Suvin relies too heavily on estrangement, whereas Doyle believes Tolkien uses enchantment in "making the ordinary sacred" instead of using estrangement to create the reader's connection to his fantastical worlds (10–12). In arguing for utopian and dystopian *themes* in Tolkien's literature rather than characterizing Tolkien's work as specifically utopian or dystopian itself, Doyle skirts having to engage thoroughly with utopian and dystopian scholars like Tom Moylan, Ruth Levitas, and Peter Fitting. For example, Moylan is only mentioned in a footnote, and Levitas and Fitting receive no acknowledgement at all. This lack of engagement weakens Doyle's entire project as, later in the book, the reader becomes entangled in Doyle's use of the terms "utopia" and "dystopia", and it is ambiguous whether he means, like Sargent, that utopia and dystopia have three faces (as literature, practice, and social theory) or that utopia and dystopia simply reflect culturally conceived notions of good and bad. Indeed, as I state later in this review when bringing Doyle into conversation with Ursula K. Le Guin, the way Doyle equates utopia with *good* and dystopia with *bad* is problematic because, as dystopian studies and literature have revealed, the point of utopias and dystopias is not to reflect good or evil but rather to assess contemporary problems as well as their possible solutions.

Instead of relying on the previous work of utopian and dystopian scholars, Doyle engages in a lengthy explanation of how Tolkien's work resembles and differs from "traditional" utopian and dystopian novels, particularly Plato's *Republic*, More's *Utopia*, Huxley's *Brave New World*, and Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. In Chapter One, rather than engaging with how Tolkien's efforts could be compared to and illuminate these works, Doyle meticulously outlines how Tolkien's work differs from them. His analysis of the traditional books leaves much to desire, though, as he pursues a many-paged attempt to highlight a feature about one traditional text and show how Tolkien's work departs from that feature or performs it better, since, as Doyle sees it, Tolkien's work is "unusually powerful, and in a strange way, more plausible to his readers than the 'standard' utopia and dystopia" (4). Thus, it is as if Doyle sets Tolkien's work on a pedestal for the standard utopian and dystopian works to worship, rather than letting them converse as equals.

This lack of conversation between utopian and dystopian studies is seen most prominently when Doyle, throughout the book, seems to see *utopian* and *dystopian* as synonymous with *good* and *evil*. He spends little to no time analysing how Gondor or the Shire, both dubbed "utopian", might be considered dystopian or hold dystopian themes, while Mordor and Thangorodrim, being evil, are related only to dystopia. These simplistic equations, along with much of Doyle's arguments regarding utopia and dystopia, lack critical and theoretical depth. For example, seeing utopia as favoring "good" forgets that Ursula K. Le Guin's "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" (1973) upends

the central meaning of utopia –a "no place" that exonerates and exhibits the good or what is better in society – and argues that all utopias are built on the back of tragedy. Instead of critically engaging with his own claims that the Shire or Gondor relate to utopian ideals or themes, Doyle uses his work to consider utopian and dystopian themes as preconceived cultural conceptions of good and bad, respectively.

This is not to say that all Doyle's scholarship is for naught; indeed, Doyle adds some exceptional insight on Tolkien's legendarium through his lens of utopian and dystopian themes. For example, in Chapter Two, Doyle makes compelling connections that broaden Tolkien's place within literary history. Doyle first argues that Tolkien's medievalist view is refracted through a prism of the "Victorian medieval", giving his work the ability to be both alien and familiar to the reader and creating what Doyle calls a nostalgic feeling that strengthens the reader-text connection. At the same time that Tolkien is creating this nostalgia, Doyle nuances Tolkien's place in literary history by arguing that he is not only looking back to the medieval through the Victorian but also, because of how Tolkien handles his characters and societies, reacting to and interacting with his current literary moment. For example, Doyle argues that Frodo's character arc, which ends in a failure of will, epitomises mid-20th-century views of selfhood (62), and that Tolkien reacts against those same period views by showing Mordor's and Thangorodrim's evil as a result of modernisation, especially through technology (61). Doyle therefore shows Tolkien as both a reactionary and traditionalist thinker during his 20th-century moment. Thus, Tolkien resists canonisation within a particular literary movement because of his complicated and nuanced views. This deft contextualisation of Tolkien's works and arguments is a great strength of Doyle's text

Chapter Three provides Doyle's most useful contribution to Tolkien studies. Instead of arguing that Tolkien fits into a specific camp of environmentalist thought, Doyle sees Tolkien's environmentalism as "orthogonal to the philosophy that gave rise to modern environmentalism" (78). This neat side-stepping is on par with Matthew Dickerson and Jonathan Evans's in-depth study *Ents, Elves, and Eriador: The Environmental Vision of J.R.R. Tolkien* (2006), in which they place Tolkien as precursor and herald of modern environmental tenets. Although Doyle doesn't cite Dickerson and Evans specifically despite repeating many of their environmentalist arguments, Doyle maintains Tolkien's usefulness for contemporary environmental justice while nonetheless displacing him from common discourses on the subject. Indeed, Doyle's approach to Tolkien through utopia and dystopia allows him to show that Tolkien's environmentalism does not argue for a return to an Edenic paradise; rather, Tolkien, for Doyle, displays a middle ground that grants as much respect to nature as to humanity and civilisation. In Doyle's estimation, Tolkien wishes civilisation to be a boon to the environment as well as the other way around. This approach can and should lead to many further engagements as Tolkien studies specifically, and fantasy studies more broadly, turn toward the Anthropocene, including what the world can and should look like post-Anthropocene.

Afterwards, Doyle argues in Chapter Four that "Tolkien's works are a modern-day myth with a specifically utopian purpose" (123). To make his argument, Doyle relies heavily on Tolkien's "On Fairy-Stories", the conceptions of myth by Carl Jung and Joseph Campbell, and two obsolete books of Tolkien

scholarship: Randel Helms's *Tolkien's World* (1974) and Timothy R. O'Neill's *The Individuated Hobbit: Jung, Tolkien, and the Archetypes of Middle-Earth* (1979); however, his argument that Tolkien's overarching mythos makes Tolkien's utopian and dystopian themes more believable or relatable fails to recognise the worldbuilding and myth-making that occurs in many utopian and dystopian novels. For example, he never touches on the myth-making performed by Orwell in his appendices to *Nineteen Eighty-Four* or in Le Guin's utopian and dystopian works, many of which are in her universe-stretching Hainish cycle. While he does close the chapter by stating that myth-making is "utopian in demanding not just a new way of living, but a new way of imagining the world", he does not elaborate further on what this new imagined world may be, or on any engagement with utopia as myth in and of itself (133).

This lack of utopian contextualisation continues in the fifth chapter, which focuses on Tolkien's politics. Doyle staunchly argues that Tolkien was a Tory anarchist, as outlined in Peter Wilkin's *The Strange Case of Tory Anarchism* (2010). This Tory anarchism was centred in Tolkien's political desire to "rehabilitate old values" (145), like charity and conservation, while shunning new modernisation techniques like fascist control of a population and the mechanisation of labor and work. Indeed, Doyle shows that the evil, dystopian leaders in Tolkien's legendarium exhibit "controlling, narrow, paranoid" command, while his good, utopian leaders are "more laissez-faire, multi-talented … yet more flexible" (168). Although Doyle shows that Tolkien favored a more libertarian view of government and argues (in a rather lackluster way) that political desire makes Tolkien's politics utopian, he never addresses or outlines whether Tolkien is, in fact, engaging *in* utopian politics. Instead, the reader is told that Tolkien engages in projects that *seem* utopian but cannot be considered utopian politics according to 20th-century utopian political theories.

Throughout the book, Doyle attempts to argue that "Tolkien reinvigorates the formulas for utopian and dystopian literature, so that they speak more clearly to his readers' hopes and misgivings about their current culture" (3); however, in my reading, it seems more plausible to say that Doyle is more interested in how Tolkien reinvigorates *good* and *bad* rather than *utopian* and *dystopian*. The conversations, politics, and themes surrounding utopia studies in academia are largely lacking. That said, I can still recommend Doyle's work as a piece of Tolkien scholarship that can offer new avenues of thought for Tolkien's legendarium and diverging pathways with which Tolkien scholarship can further engage.

> *Biography*: Adam McLain holds a Bachelor of Arts in English with minors in editing and women's studies from Brigham Young University and a Master of Theological Studies in women, gender, sexuality, and religion from Harvard Divinity School. For 2021–2022, he is a Harvard traveling fellow studying the history of sexual violence and dystopian literature in the United Kingdom.