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Adopting and Adapting Christian Elements in Wallace Stevens' and J. R. R. Tolkien's Writings

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Abstract:

This article examines how Wallace Stevens' Americanism and secularism and J. R. R. Tolkien's universalism and Christianity affect their use of Christian elements in their writings. Taking its methodological bearings from Harold Bloom's anxiety of influence, this article shows that Stevens' ironic use of Christian figures of Satan and Jesus enables him to exploit a tension between the religious and the secular emphasizing that Christianity is no longer credible in modern America.

Tolkien uses the same Christian figures but for different purposes. Tolkien attributes but without acknowledging many features of Satan and Jesus to his fictional characters, respectively Gollum and Gandalf, in his ambition to make his The Lord of the Rings an epic fantasy that has a universal appeal.

Keywords:

Americanism, secularism, universalism, Christianity, irony.

لملخص:

يناقش هذا المقال كيفية تأثير كلا من أمريكانية وعلمانية والاس ستيفنس بالإضافة الى عالمية ومسيحية ج.ر.ر تولكين عليهما عند استعمالهم للعناصر المسيحية في كتاباتهما.

استنادا الى منهجية نظرية قلق التأثر لهارولد بلوم الوثيقة الصلة في هذا الصدد، تبرز لنا هذه الدراسة أن بتوظيف ستيفنس لأسلوب التهكم في الصور النصرانية للشيطان والمسيح يمكنه من استغلال التوتر القائم بين الدين والتشديد العلماني الذي يقول بأن النصرانية لم تعد محل ثقة في أمريكا الحديثة بينما يستعمل تولكين نفس الصور المسيحية على نحو مخالف لستيفنس لينسب ضمنيا دون الجهر ببعض من صفات الشيطان والمسيح الى شخصياته الخيالية مثل جولوم و جاندالف تطلعا منه بجعل روايته الموسومة بـ سيد الخواتم ملحمة خيالية تتمتع بجاذبية عالمية.

الكلمات المفتاحية:

أمريكانية؛ النصرانية؛ والاس ستيفنس؛ ج.ر.ر تولكين؛ هارولد بلوم.

1. Introduction

This article is a comparative study of the use of Christian elements by the American poet Wallace Stevens and the English fantasy writer J.R.R. Tolkien. The basis for that comparison is that Stevens' and Tolkien's attitudes toward Christianity affect their way of using these Christian elements in their texts which they intend to create as new mythologies for their respective countries. Stevens and Tolkien are two contrasted cases in presenting the modes of Harold Bloom's anxiety of influence. Stevens employs Christianity to challenge the view that the spiritual vacuum of modern times can only be filled through a return to Christian orthodoxy. Accordingly, he incorporates Christian elements to show how this traditional religion is no longer credible in modern America. In contrast, Tolkien uses the same elements to emphasize the relevance of Christian values to modern life while at the same time these values are presented implicitly to make his mythology for England more universally attractive.

1. Stevens's Search for a Secular Americanist Mythology

Aware of the absence of a typical American mythology, and rejecting T.S. Eliot's appeal to European cultural traditions to confront the past with the present to show how the values of the past have been ignored in the present, Stevens strives to forge a new secular American mythology that focuses on the immediate conditions of American experience. This new American mythology is the aesthetics of the disappearance of the gods and the search of faith in the "Supreme Fiction"; that is, poetry based not upon the past, but upon present-day America.

Many reasons may explain Stevens' attitude against Christianity. As a secular poet, he attempts to develop an earthly poetics based on physical reality as opposed to Christianity which rests mainly on supernatural foundations. Another reason has to do with Stevens' defence of the present and his scepticism about the past. His poetry tries to find what is fresh and attractive in the present divorced from traditional beliefs like Christianity. A further reason is related to Stevens' aim to establish a background for American mythology that springs from American roots. From here, any reliance on any tradition, like Christianity, that does not originate in America may hinder the poet's endeavour to reach his aim.

Stevens was raised in a Christian family and educated in this religion in parochial elementary schools and at Sunday-school classes (Richardson, 2007, p. 10). It was at Harvard that he gave up his orthodoxy and recognised that art was the most suitable candidate substitute for Christianity. However, despite his attempt to exclude Christianity from his "Supreme Fiction," his poetry is not devoid of Christian material. In Harold Bloom' terms, it is an "anxiety of influence" that seems to have developed between Stevens and Christianity. Stevens strives to get rid of Christianity, but Christianity, as his faith of his childhood, returns to haunt his poetry.

3- Tolkien's Search for Christian Universalist Mythology for England

Tolkien, like Stevens who is upset about the absence of a typical American mythology, regrets the lack of a singularly English mythology comparable to those of the Greeks, Celts, Scandinavians, Finns and other peoples. Most folktales and national epics that originated in Britain, in languages recognized as English, had disappeared due to the various migrations and conquests of earlier peoples. Even Beowulf which he valued and on which he wrote his essay "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics" could not meet his criteria for a work of English myth because it is set in Scandinavia rather than England.

Tolkien also shares Stevens' desire to forge new and radical national mythology, yet his idea of what mythology for England should be is different from Stevens' "Supreme Fiction." While Stevens offers American immediate experience as the reality that constitutes the basis of his poetry, Tolkien relies on figments of his imagination to make his work aspire to a universal rather than merely national resonance. Another reason that may explain this difference is their reaction to religion: Stevens' atheism and Tolkien's Christian orthodoxy.

Unlike Stevens, Tolkien never renounced his Christianity. Tolkien was born into a Christian family and received a solid Christian education at home and at school. From 1934 to 1939, he attended St Philip's school, which was run from the Oratory. Before his mother's death in 1904, she had appointed an Oratorian priest, Fr. Francis Xavier Morgan, to be the guardian of her sons (Pinsent, 2014, p. 448). It is not surprising that Tolkien's Christian education and his lifelong commitment to the Catholic Church are detectable in his approach to art.

In his essay, "On Fairy-Stories," Tolkien considers the artist as "sub-creator" and God as the "primary creator." He also distinguishes between God's creation as the "primary world" and the artist invention as the "secondary world." This secondary world is the pure creation of the artist's imagination that he defines as the human ability to form "mental images of things not actually present" (Tolkien, 1997, P.138). It is the power of the mind that creates such imaginary creatures as dwarfs, witches, trolls, giants, and dragons that constitute the narrative reality of his epic fantasy, *The Lord of the Rings.*

Thus, the secondary world does not have the same practices as the primary world, and Christian elements will be out of place in the secondary world. However, since Tolkien believes that truths of Christianity are universal, those truths could be expressed but only implicitly in the secondary world. Though Tolkien escapes direct Christian themes or allegories, this does not mean that Christianity is definitely absent in his creative fiction. In fact, Christianity, in Harold Bloom's sense, is the precursor that Tolkien strives to clear away, but the precursor imposes its presence.

In what follows, the biblical figures of Christ and Satan will serve as an illustration of the way Stevens and Tolkien use Christian allusions.

4. Stevens ironic use of the Christian Symbols of Satan and Christ

Stevens attributes to Satan the two required conditions that should be fulfilled to make modern secular poetry credible for America: adherence to the physical world and changeability. These two qualities are absent in Christ. Satan in Stevens' poetry functions as an objective correlative of both human conditions in a secular world and the poet's ability to produce new poetry. It is these qualities found in Satan that make Stevens (1997) declare: "The death of Satan was a tragedy / For the imagination" (p.281). To put it differently, Satan as a fallen angel from heaven is a reminder of human experience of pain and mal in a secular world while at the same time his rebellious nature suggests new art that protects the modern man from that experience.

For Stevens, poetry is the balance between reality and the imagination, and one's alienation from the world he lives in results from the failure to achieve this balance. It is either the dominance of reality over the imagination when reality is apprehended without the projection of human imagination or the supremacy of the imagination over reality. Both conditions tend to result in a divorce of the imagination from reality.

When reality overwhelms the imagination, the poetic output is merely the chaotic world of the absolute facts, yet this world constitutes the basis from which the "supreme fiction" springs. Stevens makes use of the serpent, the biblical symbol of Satan, to emphasize the importance of the adherence of poetry to reality. In "The Aurora of Autumn," he brings the serpent, which is a heavenly being in Christian tradition, down from the cosmological to the physical: "This is his [the serpent's] nest, / These fields, these hills, these tinted distances, / And the pines above and along and beside the sea"(Stevens, 1997, p. 355). Yet, Stevens is aware of the ugliness, imperfection, and violence of that reality. For him, "The world is ugly / And the people are sad"(Stevens, 1997, p. 69). In "Examination of the Hero in a Time of War," Satan with his massive violence of wars is endued with physicality that reinforces the commitment of the poem to reality. In the poem, "Satanas," an archaic form of Satan, shows the barbarity of man in time of war. What comes out in the bestiality of "Obscure Satanas" (Stevens, 1997, p. 247) as a brutal warrior is only death and destruction transforming the world "into a barbarism as its image" (Stevens, 1997, p. 247). However, such violent reality is not merely a source of man's alienation; it is also the origin of inner nourishment. In Stevens' words, it is "a violence within that protects us from a violence without" (Stevens, 1997, p. 665). It is the substance that the poet's imagination reshapes to create an embellished image

of the world through poetry. In this respect, Joseph Riddel (1965) argues that in Stevens' poetry "mal corrupts the good, but there is no good without mal"(p.216).

The other situation is the opposite. It is when the imagination takes over reality, and the poet finds himself cherishing the fallacious world of his imagination in which reality disappears. Hence, poetry would resemble the world of dreams and fantasies.

In the following lines from "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," the imagination loses its solidity when the imagined object does not belong to the physical world:

> Suppose these houses are composed of ourselves,
> So that they become an impalpable town, full of
> Impalpable bell, transparencies of sound,
> Sounding in transparent dwellings of the self,
> Impalpable habitations that seem to move
> In the movement of the colors of the mind. (Stevens, 1997, p. 397)

Poetry that does not belong to the physical world is like houses without buttresses, houses with no reality except as they are "composed of ourselves" in the mind. Since the houses seem to exist only in the operations of the mind, they would be without substance, "impalpable" and "transparent" in that they consist of no visible actual effects in which they are perceived. Even its clearest constituents like "the clearest bells" show vague images of themselves: "Obscure in colors whether of the sun / Or mind, uncertain in the clearest bells" (Stevens, 1997, p. 398). It is this approach to reality that urges the mind, in romantic fashion, to seek refuge in an idealized nature rather than facing the true reality. However, according to Stevens, this romantic delight in unspoiled scenery is a disappointing falsification of reality that increases rather than decreases human disappointment boredom, and alienation.

Stevens uses Satan to describe the lassitude as a kind of pain and evil that result from the mind's refusal to join reality. In "Banal Sojourn," Satan is in the midst of joyful nature where flowers bloom and the birds sing. However, Satan thinks little of the beauty of the scenery: "who can care at the wigs despoiling the Satan may sing?"(Stevens, 1997, p.49). The joys of nature cannot dispel the boredom that he feels: "one has a malady, here, a malady. One feels a malady" (Stevens, 1997, p.49).

The other quality that Stevens attributes to Satan through the symbol of the snake, in addition to the quality of belonging to reality, is the quality of change. In "The Auroras of Autumn," the snake becomes the epitome of the poet's mind to make new poetry to correspond to changing reality. The snake is "Relentlessly in possession of happiness"(Stevens, 1997, p. 355).The word "relentless," which is a reminder of Satan's refusal to submit to the rule of God, indicates that the serpent ceaselessly seeks happiness and therefore its constant renewal. In a secular modern

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America, the poet needs the snake's spirit of change to abandon traditional beliefs like Christianity that functions in the supernatural world and to offer poetry that belongs to the physical world as a substitute.

On the other hand, adherence to reality and changeability, the two main conditions of making modern poetry which Stevens attributes to Satan, are absent in Christ. Stevens, whose poetic career is an attempt to inhabit the physical world through poetry that springs from reality, rejects any Christian element that functions in a realm separated from the real existence. Instead of embracing such a cipher of a divinity of the metaphysical world, man should embrace his own divinity. He should let himself be part of the nature rather than to separate himself from it since the "beauty of the earth, / Things to be cherished like the thought of heaven?"(Stevens, 1997, p. 53).

Unlike Satan who lives the here and now, in modern America, Christ who comes only "in silent shadows and in dreams" (Stevens, 1997, p. 53) embodies the perception of the past in fossilized form which hinders rather than furthers the vital activity of the mind. Since the old beliefs such as Christianity are no longer credible in the modern secular world, the poet promulgates in his poetry new beliefs, based on satisfactory integrations of reality and the imagination."In an age of disbelief," says Stevens, "it is for the poet to supply the satisfaction of belief in his measure and his style" (Stevens, 1997, p. 748).The poet has to free his imagination from the ancient religious hindrances to make secular poetry. In this respect, Stevens (1996) says that "one of the visible movements of the modern imagination is the movement away from the idea of God," (p. 378), and it is now the job of poetry "to take the place \ Of an empty heaven and its hymns"(Stevens, 1997, p. 137).

Stevens reduces religion to the level of poetry since both are the creation of human mind. For him, the poets who created the gods "were in fact, as we see them now, the clear giants of a vivid time, who in the style of their beings made the style of their Gods and the Gods Themselves One"(Stevens, 1997, p. 841). Yet religion must become obsolete one day and due to its obsolescence, it loses its divinity. Stevens believes in the religious progression of the divine over time from inhuman god through the partly human Jesus to the fully human god. Jove with "inhuman birth"(Stevens, 1997, p. 54) is the primitive Jesus born out of human blood mixed with heaven "in a star" (Stevens, 1997, p. 54) of Bethlehem. However, both Jove and Christ who represent "The obsolete fiction of the wide river" (Stevens, 1997, p. 226) must be replaced with the fully human god, the poet. Stevens declares that "Phoebus is dead," (Stevens, 1997, p. 329) and "the death of one god is the death of all gods"(Stevens, 1997, p. 329) including the Christian God. In modern America, the poet, "this man [who] loved earth, not heaven," (Stevens, 1997, p. 174) offers poetry that he calls the "final belief"(Stevens, 1997, p. 474) as a substitute for traditional religion.

Unlike the rebellious Satan who suggests poetic renewal, Jesus is, therefore, associated with the dead formulae of tradition, or what Stevens calls "the varnish and dirt of generations" (Stevens, 1996, p. 427). In "The Death of a Soldier," Stevens eliminates Christ's consecrated feature of the Resurrection, and in so doing he creates a tension between the secular present and the religious past to emphasize the poet's refutation of Christianity and his embrace of humanism:

The soldier falls.

……..
He does not become a three-days personage,
Imposing his separation,
Calling for pomp.

……
Death is absolute and without memorial,
As in a season of autumn. (Stevens, 1997, p. 81)

Death, for the soldier, "is absolute and without memorial." Like the autumn, it is part of a natural rhythm of all life and thus belongs to a pattern of renewal. After death, there is no separation from earth, and the soldiers do not ascend. The soldiers do not become "The three days personage," a reference to three persons of the trinity, and their Christian consolation is denied.

4. Tolkien's Implicit use of the Christian Symbols of Satan and Christ

As for Tolkien, he alludes implicitly to Christ and Satan by transferring Godly attributes to Gandalf and by allocating Satanic features to Gollum. Thus, Gandalf is endowed with the power and the sense of mystery, death and resurrection, and the ability to guide the people making him indirectly comparable to Jesus Christ while Gollum who is groveling, fawning, insincere, and annoying, is implicitly associated with Satan. Tolkien's religious worldview is evident in the Christian theme of the struggle between good and evil and in the necessity of defeating evil in *The Lord of the Rings.* However, owing to his ambition to make his work universal, he tends to avoid direct allusions to Christianity. Although Christ and Satan never actually appear in the narrative, still, a type of Christ is provided in the figure of Gandalf and a type of Satan in Gollum. Gandalf's and Gollum's respective roles are determined by their attitudes to the Ring of Power: while Gollum is consumed with the desire to possess the Ring of Power, Gandalf's unceasing ambition is to destroy it.

In *The Lord of the Rings*, the Ring of Power, also known as One Ring, is created by the dark lord Sauron to accomplish his goal of bringing the peoples of Middle-earth under his dominion. Sauron marshals his armies to seize the Rings of Power by force, and in the Siege of Barad-dur, the ring cuts from his hand and loses

in the River Auduin. Déagol discovers it while on a fishing trip, but his cousin Gollum murders Déagol and steals the Ring. However, the Ring abandons him, and the Hobbit Bilbo Baggins finds it. As Frodo grows to manhood and Bilbo becomes old, Bilbo chooses Frodo to inherit the ring. When Gandalf warns Frodo that the ring is the One Ring of great evil power and that its maker Sauron is actively seeking to regain it, Frodo embarks on a perilous journey to destroy the ring in Mount Doom in Mordor where it was first forged by Sauron.

On his journey, Frodo is accompanied by Sam and Gollum. The two companions represent the potential struggle between good and evil desires in Frodo. Sam who represents the good is the only quester who is able to transcend the evil of the ring, and he remains largely unaffected by the ring though he becomes the Ring-bearer in Mordor due to his false belief that Frodo is murdered thus preventing the orcs searching Frodo's body from finding the ring. In contrast, Gollum personifies the will to power without regard for moral restraint. Gollum kills his cousin to gain possession of the ring. After he loses it, he has his insatiable desire for the ring, a desire which he reveals when he repeats: "We wants it, we wants it, we wants it!" (Tolkien, 2005, p. 552).

There are many similarities between the degeneration of Satan and the depiction of Gollum in the *Lords of the Rings*. Satan begins as Lucifer, an "anointed cherub" (Ezekiel 28:14) whose heavenly beauty is the brightest of all angels. He is "the seal of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty" (Ezekiel 28:12–19). Because of his disobedience to God and his lust for power, he is turned to a serpent and loses his beauty. Like Lucifer who changes into Satan after his fall into sin, Sméagol becomes Gollum after murdering his cousin to gain possession of the Ring. Gollum, originally a hobbit-like being, undergoes a degeneration that makes his new condition similar to that of Satan. He is a small slimy creature with shining eyes, hiding in dark caves, and eating only fish. It is also reflected in his speech. For example, he nearly always talks in the third person, avoiding the use of "I."

In conjunction with Gollum, Frodo represents the idea that the power of evil is too great to be resisted by any individual. As Frodo's double, Gollum is the satanic side of Frodo, and his function is to warn about the power of the Ring to corrupt even an initially moral hobbit like Frodo. Frodo's sympathetic view of Gollum represents Frodo's will to power or the darkest side inseparable of and inherent in every human being. His pity and his pledge to care for Gollum keep the wretched creature alive through all their journeying east of the river despite Sam's warnings. Frodo cannot bring himself to kill Gollum because to do so he must kill part of himself, his darkest side.

The closer Frodo gets to Mount Doom, the more identifiable he is to Gollum. At the Cracks of Doom, defeated by his satanic double, Frodo becomes overcome by the lure of the ring which he claims for himself: "I will not do this deed. The Ring is mine!" (Tolkien, 2005, p. 834). It is only when Gollum snatches the ring from him that it falls, with Gollum himself, into the fiery mountain. Frodo is thus rewarded for his Christian virtue of "love your enemies, do good to them that hate you" (Matthew 5:43). His goodness towards the devilish Gollum turns out to a significant element in riding himself of the ring and fulfilling the quest. Gollum is only there to fall to his death with the ring saving Frodo from temptation because Frodo has taken pity on him.

While Gollum represents the devil, a type of Christ is provided in the figure of Gandalf though Tolkien does not ascribe all good to him. In fact, Gandalf, who lacks many Christ's traits, knows that he is limited in power and that "Black [the Enemy] is mightier still,"(Tolkien, 2005, p. 432) and he remains limited in knowledge: "I thought I knew, and learned again much that I had forgotten" (Tolkien, 2005, p. 428). More importantly, Gandalf, unlike Christ, is prone to temptations. Consequently, he refuses to wear the One Ring when Frodo offers it to him. Gandalf replies: "I dare not take it, not even to keep it safe, unused. The wish to wield it would be too great for my strength"(Tolkien, 2005, p. 37).

On the other hand, Gandalf's behavior reflects many of the qualities displayed in the character of Jesus. Like Jesus, he rejects the temptations to employ miraculous means to have control over the world. It is only when their followers face the forces beyond their power that Christ and Gandalf step in to show their own great powers. This can be illustrated in their use of their supernatural powers to save their followers from perishing or to cure their disease. In the midst of the storm on the Sea of Galilee, His Disciples call out to Jesus, to save them. (Luke 8:24–25). Just as Jesus is portrayed by Luke as having no difficulty in calming the storm, Gandalf is able to overcome perilous situations like when Frodo and his friend Sam, after the Ring's destruction, find themselves surrounded by the fire of the erupting Mount Doom and slowly being covered by it. Gandalf appears with three great Eagles to pick up Frodo and his companion to safety.

Moreover, Gandalf endowed, like Jesus, with the ability to cure different spiritual diseases. For example, in Matthew 8:28-34, Christ as a divine physician uses his powers to heal a man possessed by a demon. In the same way, Gandalf uses his powers to heal the aged king who is locked under the spell of Wormtongue, his evil counsellor and secret ally of Saruman. Accordingly, Théoden starts to suffer from physical degradation and to become a man "so bent with age that he seemed almost a dwarf" (Tolkien, 2005, p. 443). After rescuing the king from the spells of Wormtongue, Gandalf persuades him to join in the fight against Saruman. Theoden gathers his riders and travels to meet his enemies.

Another similarity between Gandalf and Christ is their readiness to die for those they lead. Like Jesus who sacrificed for the good of others, Gandalf is willing to die to make others safe. In the Chamber of Mazarbul, while the Fellowship engages in a skirmish with a band of orcs, Balrog, the shapeless monster of dark fire and great power appears. While his followers retreat through the east door, Gandalf attempts to guard it against the Balrog. He fights with the Balrog, face to face on the narrow Bridge of Khazad-dûm which has no railing. As the bridge crumbles, the Balrog falls into the abyss, but as he falls his whip catches hold of Gandalf' s leg and pulls him down.

In the Battle of the Black Gate, which takes place just before Frodo and Sam reaches Mordor, Gandalf is again ready to sacrifice himself in order to guarantee their safe passage. Gandalf warns that Sauron, despite having been defeated at the subsequent Last Debate, will prevail if any other battle breaks out because Sauron still commands other legions. Frodo the Ring-bearer and his companion Sam are within the borders of Mordor, and if Sauron captures them and seizes the Ring, Gandalf's army will certainly be defeated. Gandalf proposes to sacrifice himself and his soldiers to save Middle-earth. He decides to take the risk of leading out a small army from Gondor and to attack the Black Gate of Mordor to draw Sauron's attention from Frodo and Sam.

Again, Gandalf's coming to life unmistakably recalls the Gospel accounts of Christ's resurrection. Though it is assumed that Gandalf does sacrifice himself in Moria in battle with the Balrog, Gandalf is rescued by the eagle that bears him from the fire of the abyss to safety. He is, in fact, resurrected as Gandalf the White instead of Gandalf the grey since his hair and his robe are now gleaming white. This transformation echoes that of Jesus in Luke 9:29 and Mark 9:3 when he appears in glory to disciples on the road to Emmaus. The disciples do not recognize him, and express their sadness at the death of Jesus. They persuade him to come and eat with them, and at the meal they recognize him. This meeting deepens their faith and eases their despair. Like Jesus, Gandalf first returns, and his followers see him not as Gandalf but as a grey-bearded old man, cloaked and hooded, wearing a wide-brimmed hat and leaning on a staff (Tolkien, 2005, p. 868). Then Gandalf reveals his identity: "I am Gandalf, Gandalf the White, but Black is mightier still" (Tolkien, 2005, p. 432). Gandalf's return brings new hope to his soldiers and increases their willingness to fight bravely against Sauron.

5. Conclusion

This article has discussed how Stevens and Tolkien's represent two types of anxiety of influence in their use of Christian elements. It has shown that Stevens 's ironic use of Christian figures of Satan and Jesus enables him to exploit a tension between the religious and the secular emphasizing that Christianity is no longer credible in modern America. The same figures of Satan and Jesus are also employed by Tolkien but differently. Tolkien uses them implicitly by attributing, but without overtly acknowledging, many Christian features to his fictional characters. Though Tolkien's original ambition in writing The *Lord of the Rings* was to create English mythology, his implicit method makes his work a universal piece of writing that transcends national and religious boundaries.

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