

“Stories, Shoes or Rabbit Hutches” as Christian Work Well-Done: C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien,  
and Dorothy Sayers on Writing Fiction as a Christian

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In the Christian literary community, the names C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, and Dorothy Sayers invoke a sense of awe. These three writers have captivated the world with their fiction. Both secular and Christian audiences enjoy reading Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*, Lewis’ *The Chronicles of Narnia*, and Sayers’ Lord Peter Wimsey novels. Yet because many solely focus on these authors’ stories, their commentary on writing fiction as Christians is overlooked. In truth, this group of writers is indispensable not only to Christian *readers* but also to Christian *writers*. In this project, I will argue that Lewis, Tolkien, and Sayers believed that Christian writers are not bound to writing “explicitly” Christian fiction but are called to write “good”, truthful stories. The paper goes deeper by noting that the works of these storytellers suggest that a writer's Christian faith will naturally seep into any story if this call is answered.

Drawing on nonfiction pieces by Lewis, Tolkien, and Sayers, as well as the conversation of scholarly voices surrounding them, I will close read what these writers had to say about stories, faith, and writing. I structure my argument to first look at these writers’ thoughts on Christian fiction broadly before narrowing down into how Christians should write fiction:

1. Christian Fiction:

“Explicitly” Christian fiction is fiction in which Christian themes are obvious. An example of this kind of story would be John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*, in which the book is an allegory for the Christian faith journey. Some of Lewis and Sayers’ stories, such as *The Screwtape Letters* and “The Man Born to Be King”, are overtly Christian. However, Lewis and Sayers believed that Christians are not necessarily called to write these kinds of stories. Lewis articulates this idea in

a letter to Cynthia Donnelly, in which he advises that she not “try to ‘bring in’ specifically Christian bits” (Lewis, *Letters...*, 503). In her essay “Towards a Christian Aesthetic”, Sayers denounces works that try to force morals, Christian or otherwise, on people, arguing that such art is “not art in the proper sense” (Sayers, “Toward...”, 157). Tolkien himself disliked Christian allegory and criticized Lewis for writing it. But, as scholar Josh Long notes, both Tolkien *and* Lewis denounced Christian allegory in their some of their fictional works. All of these ideas combine to support my argument that these authors believed that Christians are not bound to writing literature with explicit ideals from their religious beliefs. However, I will deepen my argument by reiterating the complexity of the fact that these creators did not find all overtly Christian stories to be unfavorable, especially considering Lewis and Sayers’ own works.

## 2. Good Fiction:

Lewis and Sayers are two of the strongest voices on the subject of a Christian writer’s fiction needing to be good fiction. By good, Lewis and Sayers mean something of quality that one can be proud of and find dignity in, as Michelangelo could have found dignity in creating *The Pietà*. Building on this definition of good, Lewis stresses that a story is to first and foremost “be a GOOD STORY” and that a Christian may glorify God through creating anything good be it “stories, shoes or rabbit hutches” (Lewis, *Letters...*, 502-503). In her essay “Why Work?”, Sayers argues that all good work is Christian work and that only good work can truly glorify God. Tolkien placed a great deal of value in writing good fiction, although this drove him to the point of perfectionism. Thus, good writing is Christian writing in the eyes of these writers. Because of this, I argue that Lewis, Tolkien, and Sayers believed that Christians are called to write good fiction, since this kind of fiction is what will best glorify the perfect Creator, God.

## 3. Truthful Fiction:

Lewis, Tolkien, and Sayers expressed the importance of story as a form of truth-telling. For Sayers, art itself is a form of truth-telling. In the case of fiction, it is a writer expressing their experiences truthfully through a story. Then, those who read it may relate to a fundamental human truth and take knowledge from it. For Tolkien, story and allegory intersect in truth, since story reflects truth in its barest form and allegory may thus be applied to it (Tolkien, *Letters*., 121). Tolkien and Lewis further suggest that through myths reality becomes even more real. Tolkien calls this “recovery” in his essay “On Fairy-Stories”, and Lewis addresses this in his essay, “The Dethronement of Power”, arguing that mythicizing things helps people to see them more truthfully. I will creatively agree with Lewis and Tolkien before expanding their argument to include all fiction. Thus, because Christians are called to tell the truth and the Gospel itself is truth, I argue that these authors believed that Christians are called to write truthful fiction.

#### 4. Faith in Story Nonetheless:

Through their nonfiction and fiction, these authors suggested that faith will naturally come into a Christian’s story. According to Sayers, “as we *are* so we *make*.” (Sayers, “Why...”, 323). Drawing on this idea, if a writer is a Christian, then their writings will reflect that. In his letter to Donnelly, Lewis agrees with Sayers’ idea by noting that faith may come naturally into a Christian’s writing. Turning to these writers’ fiction, readers may easily see that faith is part of the story-worlds of Narnia, Middle-Earth, and first-century Jerusalem. Even though Tolkien argued against his works being religious allegories, Thomas Smith points out that they are deeply Christian because of the Catholic values and convictions behind them. Therefore, while Christian faith is present in differing degrees through these writers’ fiction, it undeniably exists. I argue that ultimately, these authors’ works and beliefs prove that Christian faith will naturally become part of the writer’s story if the writer tells a good, truthful story.

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Pilgrim's Progress is an allegory, a narrative that can reveal a hidden, figurative, meaning beyond the literal one: typically, it will be a moral or political meaning, and in this case, it is Latest answer posted October 31, 2018 11:33 am UTC. 2 educator answers. The Pilgrim's Progress. John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* is an allegory; that is, Bunyan uses names to represent abstract qualities. Christian, the main character of the allegory and a sort of Christian "every man," desires to travel from the City of Destruction (the Earth) to the Celestial City (Heaven). He seems, at first *Pilgrim's Progress* uses the literary device of a narrator: the person who recounts the story to the reader. How does this narrator say that he knows Christian's story? he is carrying a heavy burden. Why is the man at the beginning of the story so discouraged? he says that heaven will burn down their city. What does the man tell his family about the future? Christian insists that the information he is getting is true because it says so in his book. What book do you think he is reading and why? what they will receive. Underneath the literal story of an allegory is a network of true. Jesus' parables are examples of allegories. A reference to something else. What is an allusion? Christian, who lives in the City of Destruction, foresees that the city will be destroyed by God for its sinfulness. A man named Evangelist advises Christian to flee and make his way to the Celestial City—that is, Heaven. Christian sets off, carrying a heavy burden of past sins on his back, and a series of trials and adventures begins. He falls into a bog called the Slough of Despond—the bog of despair. After nearly drowning because of his burden, Christian meets Worldly Wiseman, who lives a merry life without religion and tries to convince Christian to do the same. Turning down this bad advice *The Pilgrim's Progress* from *This World, to That Which Is to Come* is a 1678 Christian allegory written by John Bunyan. It is regarded as one of the most significant works of religious, theological fiction in English literature. It has been translated into more than 200 languages, and has never been out of print. It appeared in Dutch in 1681, in German in 1703 and in Swedish in 1727. The first North American edition was issued in 1681. It has also been cited as the first novel written in English. *Pilgrim's Progress* study guide contains a biography of John Bunyan, literature essays, a complete e-text, quiz questions, major themes, characters, and a full summary and analysis. Bunyan also draws from the historical Christian tradition of dreaming, especially prevalent in the Old Testament. Bunyan describes sleeping, on the other hand, as blindness to God's truth. Christian loses his mark of election when he falls asleep, and other pilgrims that are asleep miss out on God's message. Bunyan describes pilgrims as awakening to the truth. This shift from sleeping to waking marks a transition between worlds and consciousness. 2. Describe and Comment on the prisons that Bunyan depicts.