

You Bow to No One:
The Lord of the Rings' Aragorn as a Christ Figure

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Abstract

Christ-figures are prevalent in the media as characters that exemplify the attributes and behaviors of Jesus Christ. Audiences everywhere, from every culture and region, can identify with this type and role because of its universal application and emotional connection. This article covers a brief history of Christ-figures in fictional media, an extensive study of current literature dealing with Christ-figures and their semiotic similarities, and an analysis of the coronation scene at the end of *Lord of the Rings: Return of the King* which exemplifies Aragorn of Gondor as a Christ-figure.

Introduction

Though entertainment media is commonly sought as an escape or release from reality, the texts that endure are often the ones that enrich. Texts with themes of kindness, humility, love, long-suffering, and triumph in the face of hardship inspire and remind us that there is more to life than our nine-to-five jobs and household responsibilities. Sometimes at the center of these inspiring and enduring texts is a Christ-figure. Anton Kozlavic claims that Christ-figures are “outsiders of their communities” who usually have “alter-egos.” They are, “very special beings,” even though to others they “appear normal.” They are often surrounded by a group of friends or followers, sometimes in “the iconic number of twelve.” They may appear to be near the “mythical age of thirty” during their quest or journey. They may “die and then miraculously come back to life again.” The Christ-figure may be “clothed physically to look like Jesus.” They are also “frequently depicted with blue eyes,” probably more as a result of western Christian artwork, and less as Christ may realistically have looked as an ethnic Jew (Kozlovic, 2004, pp. 26-30). Though the Bible does not ever explicitly describe the appearance of Jesus Christ, Christian artists throughout history have developed their own interpretations of how he might have looked. One of the most famous of these is Warner Sallman’s “Head of Christ.” Sallman portrays Christ as light-skinned and blue-eyed with shoulder-length, wavy, brown hair, and a trimmed beard and mustache. “Head of Christ” has been called “the basis for [the] visualization of Christ” for “hundreds of millions” (Lippy, 1994). Elements of a Christ-figure may also include sacrifice, suffering, loyalty to others over self, one who is destined for something great from birth, a "saving" of others, or allusions to things that the Jesus Christ of the Bible is claimed to have said.

We see these elements throughout popular culture. C.S. Lewis's Aslan (1950) sacrifices himself in place of Edmund. Aslan rises again and defeats the White Witch. J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter (1997-2007) is dubbed "The Chosen One," born to defeat Lord Voldemort. Despised and rejected along the way, he dies, returns, and conquers the evil that has struck terror in the hearts of witches and wizards everywhere. The BBC's Doctor Who (1963-present) is a mysterious being who comes to Earth and saves it, time and time again. Often, the Doctor "dies" after receiving a mortal wound, only to regenerate to live and save and conquer another day. The Doctor even has faithful followers. J.R.R. Tolkien's Gandalf (1954-1955) sacrifices himself to save The Fellowship from the Balrog, only to return, resurrected, as Gandalf the White. Christ symbolism has even been extracted from Steven Spielberg's E.T. (1982). The diminutive alien comes to Earth with supernatural healing powers, dies, revives, and famously points to Elliot's forehead saying, "I'll be right here," before returning home. The pervasiveness of these elements, even when not recognized as allegorical, shows the power of the original story.

Christian symbolism may be less overt, but nevertheless a key part of the texts that contain a Christ-figure. For example, the color white is a common symbol of purity, which likely stems from the Bible verse, "though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be white as snow" (Isa. 1:18, King James Version). These more subtle symbols can represent elements of Christ's story, and offer clues to the intentions of the author. Such symbolism may be the author's way of guiding us to finding a parallel between Christ's story and their own, or may even be proof that the story of Jesus Christ is so embedded in our culture that it presents unintentionally. When pressed on the Christian symbolism of E.T., Steven Spielberg, who is Jewish, responded, "If I ever went to my mother and said, 'Mom, I've made this movie that's a Christian parable,' what

do you think she'd say? She has a kosher restaurant on Pico and Doheney in Los Angeles” (McBride, 2011, p. 336).

We might find ourselves asking why authors like C.S. Lewis, J.K. Rowling, and J.R.R. Tolkien, among others, include characters with attributes that so closely resemble Christ's. Is it because we feel the need to have a hero who comes and saves the day? Is it to appeal to our pathos needs and to provide a way of escape or salvation to us mere mortals, who can't achieve such greatness on our own? Whether it was their intent or not, these authors felt that Christ-like characteristics like kindness, sacrifice, redemption, long-suffering, and triumph would add value to their stories and draw in the reader or viewer even more.

Through a lens of semiotics, we hope to show how this symbolism reveals itself in one of the most popular movie franchises of this millennium. The enduring legacy of *The Lord of the Rings* is proven in the success of J.R.R. Tolkien's books and Peter Jackson's film adaptations. The book is one of the best-selling of all time, with over 150 million copies sold (Grabianowski, 2011). A survey conducted by the BBC in 2003 found *The Lord of the Rings* to be the UK's "Best-loved Book" (BBC Press Office, 2003), while a 1999 poll conducted by Amazon found it to be the "Book of the Millennium" (Calisuri, 1999). Jackson's films have been equally successful. Together, the three films grossed \$5.85 billion worldwide at the box office (Statista, 2021). They were nominated for a total of thirty Academy Awards, winning seventeen. *The Return of the King*, where we have discovered the most Christian symbolism, is tied for the most Academy Award wins of any film. Its eleven wins include Best Picture of the Year, and it won every award for which it was nominated (Oscar Awards, n.d.).

The character Aragorn is a strong model for a Christ-figure throughout *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, as he possesses many of the attributes listed above. Aragorn, like Christ, comes

from humble beginnings, but amasses a group of followers who crown him King. Both also sacrifice themselves for the greater good. They both forgive others and perform healing miracles. Aragorn's appearance is similar to a common Christian perception of Christ's appearance: they both have dark shoulder length hair and piercing blue eyes. The text displays significant parallels to the ministry and character of Jesus Christ, including various symbolic elements and motifs that run through the character of Aragorn, his development, and the storyline's dealing of his role as destined king and warrior savior. Aragorn is a good example of a hero and a Christ figure because of the way that director Peter Jackson portrays the character, and the way the actor Viggo Mortensen performs the part. Even the character's dialogue often aligns closely with that of Christ in the Bible. There is substantial evidence of powerful parallels between Aragorn of Gondor and Jesus of Nazareth.

Literature Review

Introduction

Semiotics and allegorical usages of Christ-figures are extremely prevalent in modern media today. They permeate music, video, literature, and other mediums that relate and tell stories. We plan to analyze qualities and characteristics from other Christ-figures in the media and then apply these semiotic features to Aragorn of Gondor. This perspective will help support our position that Aragorn is a strong model of a Christ-figure.

Central Themes

Christ-figures as heroes

Christopher R. Deacy claims, “There is no salvation without suffering and sacrifice” (1999, pp. 336). Suffering is unappealing in every aspect, but it becomes bearable when we have someone by our side helping us along the way. Likewise, we don’t like to see others suffer alone. With the help of a savior, suffering becomes bearable. Christ is the ultimate savior as he can save us all from suffering. For this reason, heroes in stories who resemble Christ as savior or liberator appeal to the reader or viewer. While suffering is unappealing, it is often underappreciated as an opportunity for learning and growth. Through Christ, we can recognize the purpose of our suffering. A Christ-like figure such as Aragorn can provide the same effect in stories and films, as heroism and a sense of purpose is added to the story itself.

The film *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (Noyce, 2002), tells the true story of three young girls taken from their mother to live in a government institution with unorthodox rules and standards of living. The girls escape with the plan to make the long trek home to return to their mother. The girls follow a fence that is over two thousand miles long, and is meant to keep rabbits out. The story of these three brave girls is not one with immediate liberation. They face many obstacles

and endure a great amount of suffering. Their story is about the journey. Films like *Rabbit-Proof Fence* act as a reminder of oppression and the need for a hero, liberator, or savior when suffering becomes too much and we can't make the journey alone (Malone, 2012, pp. 25-26).

Aragorn, from *The Lord of the Rings*, isn't the only Christ-figure in film who is seen as heroic. Deacy (1999) provides examples from several films where a Christ-figure character is seen as a hero. One of the examples he includes on his list is Obi Wan Kenobi, the Jedi master from *Star Wars* (Lucas, 1977-1983). He is seen as a hero throughout the series of films, especially as he fights to defeat The Empire. Indiana Jones is also on Deacy's list. Jones is portrayed as a hero as he wins his fight against those trying to thwart justice and righteousness in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (Spielberg, 1981). Deacy's examples even include one of the most famous heroes of all time, Superman (Donner, 1978), who is constantly saving Lois Lane and other citizens in distress (pp. 327-328). These famous characters among many others are not only heroic, but also possess attributes of Christ in their stories. Obi Wan Kenobi sacrifices himself to assist in the rebellion against The Empire. He dies at the hand of Darth Vader, who is likened to Judas for his betrayal. Indiana Jones is seen as the embodiment of good and morality throughout the series of films, much like Christ is seen as the embodiment of good. Superman came from another world and helped people, taking no credit for himself. Likewise, Christ came in perfect form and performed miracles, giving all credit to His Father and taking none for himself (Deacy, 1999).

Peter Malone said, "although film-makers may not be committed to belief in the Person of Christ, many of them—whether consciously or unconsciously— use Christ-figures in their work" (Deacy, 1999, as cited in Marsh & Ortiz, 1997, pp. 78). Kozlovic (2004) claimed that Christ-figure characters in film are often a result of filmmakers being influenced by Joseph

Campbell's theory, the Hero Cycle – aka the hero's journey (pp. 5). Directors of films such as *Star Wars*, *Indiana Jones*, and *Superman* felt that a heroic Christ-figure would add purpose to the suffering of other characters. Richard Donner, the director of *Superman* initially disavowed the Christian origins of the comic book superhero (Kozlovic, 2004, pp. 4). Whether or not filmmakers intended these heroic representations of Christ, research suggests that these characters remind audiences that their own suffering is not in vain and that liberation or salvation can be found in Christ.

The pervasiveness of Christian symbolism in film

From Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments* (1923; 1956) to Richard Donner's *Superman* (1978) to Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* (2001-2003), Christian symbolism is pervasive in film. The symbolism may be overt, as in the case of *The Ten Commandments*, or it may be more hidden, as in the case of *Superman*. There are symbols of Jesus Christ himself as a capable and charismatic leader with humble beginnings and pure intentions. There are less obvious symbols of Jesus Christ's story, such as the color white, that may show up in film. Through symbolism, DeMille was even able to portray another Biblical figure, Moses, as Jesus Christ (Kozlovic, 2002; Kozlovic, 2006; Stucky, 2006).

Many speculate as to why this symbolism permeates modern film. Some say it is an act of ministry. DeMille, whose movies were called "the most notorious example of the Hollywood religious epic" (Kozlovic, 2006, p. 1) had the intention to share his beliefs about the Bible. He said, "My ministry was making religious movies and getting more people to read the Bible than anyone ever has" (Kozlovic, 2006, p. 2). Tremper Langman III mused, "Perhaps Cecil B. DeMille is more responsible for [public knowledge of the Biblical Ten Commandments] than are today's modern preachers" (Kozlovic, 2006, p. 2). After being forced to deny the religious

undertones of the *Superman* films because of the unease of the public and studio bosses, Donner admitted years later, “It’s a motif I had done at the beginning when [Marlon] Brando sent Chris [Reeve] to Earth and said, ‘I send them my only son.’ It was God sending Christ to Earth” (Kozlovic, 2002, p. 1). Peter Jackson, who is not a Catholic like J.R.R. Tolkien, acknowledged the religious symbolism in his films. He claimed merely to be preserving Tolkien’s intentions (Stucky, 2006).

Kozlovic and Stucky discuss the symbolism of the aforementioned texts. Some of the symbolism conspicuously points toward the Biblical Jesus Christ. Gandalf fights a satanic creature, the Balrog, before dying, and then returning, as Gandalf the White, white being a Biblical symbol of purity (Stucky, 2006). DeMille’s Moses is portrayed not as the Biblical Moses who struggles with public speech (Exod. 4:10), but as a strong “warrior-king hero” who expertly commands crowds and the audience (Kozlovic, 2006, pp. 5). Superman is sent by his father to Earth in a ship that resembles the Star of Bethlehem (Matt. 2:2). He, who is “not of this world” (Kozlovic, 2002, pp. 23), is humble, kind, and saves humanity. Some of the symbolism is more covert. Superman’s blue eyes represent from whence Christ came: the skies, the heavens (Kozlovic, 2002). DeMille used an actor, H.B. Warner, who was old and dying (and coincidentally portrayed Christ in a previous work). His weak body, reminiscent of Jesus’ broken body, was carried during the exodus scene by an actor who was actually a minister-in-training (Kozlovic, 2006).

As a popular form of entertainment and diversion, both Kozlovic and Stucky argue that cinema may be the best way to share the story of Jesus Christ with the masses. The use of symbolism makes it more palatable to audiences who may balk at the idea of being preached to, when their intention was to be entertained (Kozlovic, 2002; Kozlovic, 2006; Stucky, 2006).

Christ-figures engage the audience's emotions

Pathos is the emotional aspect of rhetorical content. Movies, books, social media posts, and other forms of media fall into this category. Rhetorical content also attempts to persuade people. This rhetorical persuasion may try to modify the behavior of the audience or affect how the audience thinks or feels about a certain subject. In the case of movies featuring a Christ-figure character or allegory, the audience feels emotionally drawn into the story as the Christ-figure leads the imperfect characters to salvation and victory over the forces of evil.

Audience members admire Christ-figures for their good examples and sturdy opposition to evil (Yergensen, 2006, pp. 33). Many Christ-figures also enjoy the company and help of angelic figures and characters, such as the elves, especially Legolas, in *The Lord of the Rings* (Yergensen, 2006, pp. 59). The audience often feels sympathetic to the plight of the good guys because the Christ-figure underlines the approval of God—thus, God is on our side (Yergensen, 2006, pp. 59). Flawed characters, mostly human, follow Christ-figures faithfully, gaining salvation and redemption from sin and transgression, providing the audience with a positive example to emulate (Yergensen, 2006, pp. 60). Yergensen neatly outlines how Christ-figures appear in cinematic environments and mediums and strongly draw in and connect the invested Christian audience.

Ford and Reid (2009) dive deep into the historical significance of a traditional king returning to govern and watch over his people (pp. 72). The authors analyze Aragorn of Gondor and discover several elements to his character that align with ancient Germanic kings. Typical Germanic kings functioned as priests and spiritual leaders of their people, guiding them on a journey toward pleasing God. Germanic kings performed rites and rituals and led warriors on conquests and military campaigns to defend their kingdom. Preserving his subjects was a main

concern of a Germanic king, along with keeping his right to rule in the forefront of the minds of his people. To achieve demigod status, Germanic kings would trace their lineage through mortal beings to God Himself (Ford & Reid, 2009, pp. 72). This family history would automatically demand reverence and respect from the kingdom and solidify the king's place on the throne. The Christ-like parallels are many, including the divine mandate, ancestry, and spiritual leadership of others.

There is a very important gap in the research under the subject of "Christ-figures appealing to audiences" concerning our chosen text. The coronation scene at the end of *Return of the King* (Jackson, 2003) is not included in any of the articles and analyses that we have uncovered. Looking at this scene in greater detail will shed light on particular symbols and characteristics of Aragorn himself as a Christ-figure, once evil has been vanquished. It will also demonstrate how flawed characters, such as dwarves, humans, and hobbits act in Aragorn's kingly presence.

Christ-figures have been presented in films in a wide variety of genres, ways, and to different ends. Aragorn in *The Lord of the Rings* is a prime example of a Christ-figure because he embodies many powerful attributes and characteristics, and is draped in strong imagery and symbols that lead the audience to believe in Aragorn's true return as the true king of Gondor. In all of the literature that we found, the prevalent semiotics concerning Christ-figures in film can seamlessly be applied to the coronation scene in *The Lord of the Rings: Return of the King* featuring Aragorn of Gondor.

Analysis

The Lord of the Rings (Jackson, 2001-2003) is a story of good overcoming evil. The wicked Lord Sauron forges a ring which embodies his power, and will allow him to rule over Middle Earth. The One Ring has power to tempt and influence those who find it in their possession. By happenstance, it ends up in the hands of Frodo, a small and humble creature called a hobbit. Frodo realizes he must destroy the ring by throwing it into the fires of Mount Doom. No easy task, he is assisted on his hero's journey by a fellowship. Some key figures are Gandalf the wizard, and Aragorn, who is in fact the heir of Gondor, the realm of men in Middle Earth. In the end, and after bloody battles and much tribulation for all involved, The Ring is destroyed, and Aragorn assumes his rightful place as king. Peace is restored to Middle Earth.

Parallels to the Bible

Christ often used the words "thy sins are forgiven" and "be at peace" or "go in peace" interchangeably. In Luke, we see one example of Christ using the words "go in peace" to forgive a woman of her sins (Luke 7:43-50). Like Christ, Aragorn uses these words with Boromir to express his forgiveness. Boromir is a member of The Fellowship who assists Frodo in his quest. He is eventually overcome by the temptation to possess The Ring. In *The Two Towers - Extended Edition* (Jackson, 2002), Boromir has a moment of weakness where he tries to steal the ring from Frodo. Shortly after, Boromir dies fighting to protect the hobbits. In his final moments, Boromir says to Aragorn, "Forgive me, I have failed you all." Aragorn responds saying, "No Boromir, you fought bravely and have kept your honor...I will not let our people fall." Boromir faintly replies with his dying breath, "I would have followed you my brother, my captain, my king." Aragorn answers saying, "Be at peace." Boromir recognizes Aragorn as his King just as

Christ's followers recognize Him as their King. Like Christ, Aragorn used the words "be at peace" to express forgiveness.

Christ's most famous act is his sacrifice on the cross. Christ sacrificed himself for the greater good so that we might be forgiven of our sins. Sacrifice of one's own self for a greater good is one of the most recurring elements of a Christ-figure in film. In the second installment of *The Lord of the Rings, The Two Towers* (Jackson, 2002), Aragorn falls off a cliff in battle while fighting to protect the people of Rohan. Presumably dead, the people mourn Aragorn's death as he fought for good and sacrificed himself to save others. The parallel to Christ is then strengthened when Aragorn returns, as Christ did in the resurrection.

In the first film, *The Fellowship of the Ring* (Jackson, 2001), Frodo and the other hobbits find themselves in a place of darkness. A Nazgul, slave to Sauron, finds Frodo and stabs him with a sword. Amidst the darkness, Aragorn comes with a torch of fire, a source of light, and fights off the Nazgul, ultimately saving the hobbits and taking Frodo to safety. Aragorn uses light to fight evil just as Christ is known to fight evil with light. Genesis 1:4 says, "And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness." Light throughout the Bible is seen as goodness. Christ is also referred to as "light" throughout the Bible. Aragorn using a torch of light to fight off evil is a parallel of Christ. While Aragorn's Christ-like attributes can be seen throughout the series, they come together in the Coronation Scene at the end of the final movie in the series, *The Return of the King* (Jackson, 2003). Here we see Aragorn's rise to throne after humble beginnings, his group of followers, and even his physical similarities to Christ.

A Heroic King

Heroes in film are often worshipped, praised, or followed because they remind viewers that we aren't alone in our fight for good. Christ is seen as a King and worshipped and praised around the world because of His sacrifice for mankind and His heroic fight for good among so much evil. In the Coronation Scene, Aragorn is crowned King of Gondor. Christ, being the son of God the Father, has "royal blood" but being born of Mary, in Nazareth, He was not seen as kingly at all. Instead, He was seen as a poor son of a carpenter. It wasn't riches or hierarchy that Christ used to gain the loyalty of so many followers. It was the miracles He performed, the sacrifice He made, the things He taught, and the respect He showed his fellowman that ultimately earned Christ the title of King. Likewise, Aragorn was the rightful heir to the throne of Gondor, but it was not his wealth nor his genealogy that made him a king. He was known as Strider in the beginning of the series because he was a traveler with little money. What truly made him a king was earning the respect of the people of Gondor and of Middle Earth. He did not gain this respect overnight, but through a constant fight for good and selfless acts of bravery, putting himself in harm's way to protect Frodo and the fellowship of The Ring so that good could prevail.

An Image of Christ

In *The Return of the King* (Jackson, 2003), the scene, "The Coronation of Aragorn" is rich with Christian symbolism. A majestic view of Minas Tirith slowly fades in. Previously crippled in battle, the city is mended, perfected, and brilliant white. The setting itself has undergone a kind of resurrection. A grand orchestra sets the tone with a triumphant score. After strife, hardship, and uncertainty, the music proclaims victory.

God-like in his robes, flowing white hair, and beard, Gandalf places a crown upon Aragorn's head. The king has taken his rightful place. There is a reverence on the faces of all

who witness this spectacle. Likewise, Christians around the world await the day when their King will be crowned, rule the earth, and put an end to hardship, trouble, and uncertainty (Rev. 20:1-6). Gandalf proclaims, “Now come the days of The King.” The striking celestial blue of Aragorn’s eyes are the focal point of this moment. They are reminiscent of the skies, the heavens, and even Sallman’s aforementioned heavily influential painting of Christ.

Aragorn faces the crowd. As Christ came from humble beginnings, and had “no form nor comeliness” and “no beauty that we should desire him” (Isa. 53:2), Aragorn’s appearance has been humble, unkempt, even dirty for much of the trilogy. Now he stands-glorious, pristine. Though many of the men in *The Lord of the Rings* are bearded with long hair, Aragorn’s hair is brown and wavy. Again, he is the most reminiscent of Sallman’s painting of all characters in the trilogy.

The crowd cheers, just as the multitudes cried, “Hosanna” for Jesus Christ (Matt. 21:9). There is a hush as Aragorn speaks: “Let us together rebuild this world that we may share in the days of peace.” In Christian lore, when Christ returns, Satan, the adversary, will be bound for one thousand years during the “millennium” (Rev. 20:1-6). White rose petals fall from the sky, as though the heavens bless the coronation. Again, white as purity is represented. Aragorn walks through the crowd and the people bow before him, as “every knee shall bow” to Christ (Rom. 14:11).

Arwen appears. Against the wishes of her father, Arwen has chosen to give up the immortal life to which elves are entitled in order to be with Aragorn. Christians are asked to give up “all that [they hath],” like the rich young man in Luke 18:18-30, in pursuit of the blessings promised by following Jesus Christ. By choosing Aragorn, she gives up much, but gains all.

The scene culminates in Aragorn approaching Frodo and the three other hobbits. Diminutive in size, but strong in heart, the hobbits are ultimately the reason the One Ring was destroyed in the fires of Mordor. Aragorn stops them from bowing to him and says, “My friends, you bow to no one.” He bows to them himself. The hobbits look on in wonder as the entire crowd follows suit. It is as in Jesus’ proclamation that the meek “shall inherit the earth” (Matt. 5:5). There is also a parallel in Christ’s teaching of how we treat the smallest among us: “Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me” (Matt. 25:40).

Conclusion

The coronation scene at the end of *The Return of the King* (Jackson, 2003) exemplifies Aragorn of Gondor's conduit as a Christ-figure through the semiotic significance and inspiring consolidation of Christ-like characteristics and attributes. Overwhelming parallels demonstrate Christ's influence and echo His teachings and mannerisms as recorded in prophetic writings. Christ's influence and echoes of His ministry and purpose still inspire and draw the audience to the edge of their seats. The actions of Jesus Christ, reflected in the decisions of many of our favorite Christ-figure characters, inspire us to follow Him and His commandments and reciprocate His kindness, courage, and virtue. Many people know that Christ's story is fraught with drama and tragedy, only to have the ending be redemptive and transcendent.

Including Christ-figures in stories helps to engage the audience and teach them something about themselves. This tells us that people everywhere crave a character and a figure that saves others selflessly. We all desire to be valued, believed in, and moved beyond the travails of despair and darkness in which this earth is so often plunged. We want to be saved, and we know that Jesus Christ is the one figure and symbol that can do so.

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