# Lembas: Exploring Narratives, Christianity, and the Psychological Substrate of Ideas Through the Food of *The Lord of the Rings*

Pastures of soft grass shroud rolling hilltops concealing small homes with circular entrances. A cart carries two figures: a smaller, shoeless individual, and a larger man donning a pointed hat and gray beard, merrily rolling down a dirt path. Additional shoeless humanoids chase after the cart and the visual pans across dazzling rivers and rolling gardens while the sounds of soft agrarian music and warm laughter drift in the breeze. But the whimsical levity loses its grip on my immersion as I feel my pain relievers wane, and with it, an acute awareness of cotton balls scratching my gums overpowers my senses. I am only a few hours into my wisdom teeth removal recovery and have decided to enter the world of Middle-Earth on a *The Lord of the Rings* film trilogy binge. Despite my physical incapacitation, I attentively journey alongside the characters Frodo Baggins and Gandalf the Grey in their attempt to destroy the all-powerful ring to rule them all. On this adventure, I take notice of a curious item accompanying the characters throughout the story: lembas, a magical food that sustains the travelers on their journey.

*The Lord of the Rings* film trilogy, released from 2001 to 2003, was directed by Peter Jackson and is an adaptation of the high fantasy book series published by J.R.R Tolkien in 1954. This series is a sequel to Tolkien's previous book, *The Hobbit*, which he created first out of whim and then as a full-fledged story for the entertainment of his children. A year after *The Hobbit's* publication in 1937, Tolkien's work was considered an award-winning success with a prize from the *New York Herald Tribune* and a nomination for the Carnegie Medal. As a result of these achievements, his publisher, George Allen & Unwin, requested a sequel which Tolkien would take 17 years to publish. The next series, *The Lord of the Rings*, achieved unbridled success, selling over 150 million copies to this day. It has continuously placed high on the top 100 books, this year placing 5th, as chosen by the *Gazette*. Oftentimes,

*The Lord of the Rings* has been credited for the genre of high fantasy and its surge in popularity in the last century. Tolkien is often called the Father of Fantasy; despite taking inspiration from other fictions, his work is thought to be the quintessential example of sophisticated fantasy. Tolkien's famous trilogy takes place in Middle-earth and focuses on the journey of a young Hobbit, Frodo Baggins, and his quest to save his world from the evil Sauron, who once cruelly ruled over Middle-earth. Frodo must destroy Sauron's ring in order to prevent Sauron from regaining power over the realm, thus saving his and his fellow hobbits' way of life and the entirety of Middle-Earth. With the help of a fellowship made up of various characters he meets along his journey, Frodo must resist the temptations of the ring and ignore his growing feelings of greed and desire, which challenge him throughout.

Scholars tend to focus on the aspects of industrialization and themes of power throughout *The Lord of the Rings*. For example, in the novels, resources are excessively extracted to satisfy an individual's ambition, as seen in secondary antagonist Saruman's destruction of trees to raise an army of Uruk-hai, a hybrid race requiring an assembly line-like production process. This analysis raises concerns about the misuse of resources for self-interested purposes and invites comparisons to instances of unchecked capitalism or other harmful societal power structures. Yet amid their analyses, little attention has been paid to a key feature of J.R.R. Tolkien's world-building in Middle-earth, including his creation of details like lembas, a magical food that sustains the travelers on their journey. This bread-like substance plays a significant role in establishing how audiences relate to and understand the characters throughout their character arcs.

In the story, typical nourishment is not guaranteed throughout their journey, so the travelers must look to their supply of alternative sustenance: lembas. Endlessly crumbly and cream-colored, lembas is a bread-like, wafer cracker gifted to the Fellowship by the Elven queen Galadriel of Lothórien. "The lembas had a virtue without which they would long ago

have lain down to die… it fed the will, and it gave strength to endure, and to master sinew and limb beyond the measure of mortal kind" (Tolkien 50). Preserved in vibrantly golden mallorn leaves, the narration explains, this bread could last months as a form of fuel and rejuvenation for the Fellowship.

Etymologically, the word *lembas* comes from the elvish language, a Sindarin word, "lenmbass." The original word is broken into two parts, the first being "lenm" meaning "go travel." The second part, "(m)bass" is the word for bread (Tolkien 427). According to *The Silmarillion*, Tolkien's follow-up lore explication text, the translation to "journey-bread" is fitting because its enriching properties make it the perfect snack for endeavors such as Frodo's and the Fellowship's. Notably, in the Quenyan tongue, another Elven language, the bread is called Coimas and translates to "life-bread" (Tolkien 427). This adds an additional intrigue to the role of the food with a name paying homage to both its direct ability to maintain the life of a traveler and its indirect contribution to Frodo's journey. Frodo must destroy Sauron's ring in order to prevent him from regaining power over the realm, thus saving his and his fellow hobbit's way of life and the entirety of Middle-earth. "Life-bread" fits the stakes of this series and channels the power that food has over the characters and the outcome of their journey. According to Gimli, one of the Fellows, the lembas had a sweetness "better than the honey cakes of Beornings" (Tolkien 481). As a gift, these pieces of bread are special due to their regulated creation. Only Elven women knew the recipe and could have the honor to bake them using the native silver corn of the Aman, and only an Elven queen could be the one to distribute the bread. For the bread to be shared, most notably with non-Elves, the gift shows the significance of how strong Galadriel's trust in the Fellowship is and how direly she wants them to be successful, once again helping establish the story and raising the stakes.

Just as Tolkien uses Galadriel's gift of lembas to raise the stakes, he also uses the characters' relationship with food to further the characterization of their different personas and individual priorities. An example of this is a scene filmed between the Elf Legolas and the hobbits Pippin and Merry. In this scene, Legolas, a member of the Fellowship, informs the pair that Lembas has a magical quality, the ability to sustain a man's appetite an entire day with one bite. Legolas then prudently nibbles on the corner of a piece of bread before putting it away into the travelers' stack of supplies. Untroubled, Merry looks at Pippin asking, "How many did you eat?" Pippin responds with "Four," with an accompanied belch. This scene was initially going to be used to help advance Pippin's arc throughout the series by establishing Pippin's priorities, and further characterizing him as not only gluttonous but someone who lacks discipline. As the plot develops, the audience sees more of Pippin's tendency to make mistakes and clumsily force the group into danger; at one point, he even unintentionally aids Sauron. Pippin's guilt from his mistake would lead him to committing himself to the Steward of Denethor in Gondor representing his growth and newfound responsibility. He later helps save the day by lighting a beacon in order to call for the help of the city of Rohan to aid Gondor in battle. This explanation of Pippin's character arc elucidates the significance of the relationship between a hobbit and their food and its effect on how the audience views the character, allowing for the construction of more impactful scenes later on.

As a result of their overindulgent lifestyle in the Shire, all four hobbits are affected by the lack of variety of foods that they must consume on their travels. The habitants of the Shire are peaceful creatures accustomed to an idyllic life and bountiful harvests. In the first *The Lord of the Rings* movie, Peter Jackson adds a scene which does not happen in the book series to provide the audience insight into the hobbits' lifestyle– during this scene, Merry and Pippin talk about "second breakfast" along with several other meals and snack times enjoyed by the hobbits such as "elevenses", "luncheon", and "afternoon tea." Through this understanding of

how much food hobbits generally eat, Jackson accentuates the stark difference between the hobbits' old lives and their current adventure. As a result of another film-exclusive scene, lembas appears in online discourse about the effect of adding non-canonical scenes to the film. In Jackson's scene, a dispute over lembas threatens to diminish the "unbreakable" friendship between Samwise Gamgee, another hobbit, and Frodo. Director Peter Jackson opts for a scene between Samwise, Frodo, and Gollum– a severely mentally ill hobbit who accuses and frames Samwise of eating their remaining lembas. This accusation leads to a huge fight between Samwise and Gollum, and eventually leads to Frodo kicking Samwise out of the posse and demanding that he abandon the quest. This scene is controversial because it makes Frodo look especially disrespectful towards his relationship with Samwise. On the other hand, people also praise the scene because of how well it helps characterize the influence of the dark powers the ring has had over Frodo and Gollum. Lembas plays an essential role in advancing the story arc between the hobbits, symbolizing the importance of sustenance and trust. The dispute over food highlights the growing tension between the characters, as what seems like a minor issue becomes a catalyst for revealing deeper fractures in their relationships.

Tolkien uses the connection between food and its symbolic meanings, particularly in religious contexts, to provide audiences with better understandings of the subtext of the plot. Catholic convert and podcaster Kaitlyn Fascista published an episode analyzing lembas through a religious lens, noting the similarities between lembas and the Catholic Eucharist. In her podcast, Fascista points out in J.R.R Tolkien's letter to a fan that he has admitted that his pious, Roman Catholic views bled into his books such as through the resemblance between the Eucharist and lembas. The Eucharist, also called Holy Communion, is the commemoration of the blood and body of Christ which is done through the consumption of a piece of bread and wine. Fascista suggests that the reason Gollum has a distaste towards

lembas is, “A person cannot receive the Eucharist while in a state of mortal sin without placing themselves in grave danger” (Fascista, “On Lembas and The Eucharist,” 6:31). Fascista overlooks an important point: both Eucharist bread and lembas are pieces of unleavened bread. In alignment to greater themes of good and evil, throughout the novels, the description of lembas being thin and wafer-like is in accordance with the Christian belief that leavened bread is associated with sin and hypocrisy and unleavened bread is associated with purity (Luke 12:1). This insight may account for why lembas is considered disgusting to both Gollum and the Orcs, establishing the lembas as an embodiment of righteousness. The connection between the biblical view of unleavened and leavened bread sets up, for those familiar with the Bible, an instinctual understanding of the bread’s purpose. Fascita is right that another notable similarity is in their names: lembas’ etymological roots translate to “journey-bread” and the Latin name for the bread component of the Eucharist is Viaticum which translates to “provisions for the journey.” (Fascista, “On Lembas and The Eucharist,” 5:40)

Deeper exploration shows that not only are their physical and linguistic qualities similar but their intended effects on those who consume them are as well. Pope Francis said in 2014, “the Body of Christ is the bread of the last times, able to give life, eternal life, because the substance of this bread is Love.” Through this assertion the Pope conveys the belief that bread represents Christ’s love and will grant eternal life to those taking the sacred offering. Although lembas does not grant eternal life it certainly prolongs the lives of those who eat it, and both the Eucharist and lembas are gifts from a divine source with the intent of strengthening and sustaining the body and will. This symbolizes a divine providence, providing readers familiar scenarios to those they have read before, which allows them to associate the two and have a greater clarity towards the plot. The gift of lembas being similar to that of the Eucharist, emphasizes the divine care and guidance from Galadriel, who

bestows lembas onto the travelers, to provide for the upcoming adventure that the Fellowship will face. Lembas serves not only as a nourishing sustenance but as spiritual support for their journey.

Similar to Tolkien's inclusion of lembas in his fantasy, food is prevalent in various works of fiction and is often used as a method of creating heterotopias. A heterotopia is a place that does not match the norms of everyday life; it is unlike ordinary spaces and generally provides alternative experiences as a method of conveying critiques of natural life. While in the real world this can be disconcerting, authors create heterotopias as a means of immersing readers in their fictional worlds. An example of a heterotopic book is Lewis Carroll' *Alice in Wonderland*; Carroll creates a world of dreamlike whimsy in order to reflect on Victorian England social norms. But a heterotopia doesn't have to be an entire universe and can occupy a small space and exist in a story for a brief time in order to criticize a larger world. João Santos, a PhD student from the University of Porto, points out in his essay, "*A Bittersweet Recipe: Spaces of Utopia and Imagination in "Harry Potter" Meals*," J.K. Rowling's utilization of heterotopia in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*. In the story, Harry Potter and his companions finally find shelter where they begin to relax and drink their butterbeers, a warm recurring drink throughout the series, and in this space they cherish a moment of comfort. Soon, after Harry learns through a visiting friend that his beloved Wizarding World has gone to shambles as a result of the rise of the series villain, Voldemort. Throughout the series Rowling builds up a positive association with 'butterbeer', establishing it as a mark of comfort and warmth thus constituting sanctuary. As a result, this builds a heterotopic space in contrast to the state of the Wizarding World, making the dark news more impactful (João 5). Similarly, in *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe* by C.S Lewis similarly uses a joyous and pleasant meal to juxtapose the dire circumstances that immediately follows. The characters enjoy a delicious dinner with generous beavers when

they receive news of their friend's capture and realize the danger they are now in. Immediately after their meal, they are on the run, terrified of their pursuer and their potential of doom. Both JK Rowling and C.S Lewis rely on the audience's conceptions of food to develop a heterotopic space for their protagonists to exaggerate the difference between the peaceful scene and reality.

Although sharing warm meals may be used to emphasize the harsh truths of reality it can also serve as a method of establishing bonds between characters. In *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* Harry and Ron's first meeting is on a train on their way to school and Harry shares candy with Ron. Rowling describes Harry's feelings: "It was a nice feeling, sitting there with Ron, eating their way, through all Harry's pasties, cakes, and candies" (Rowling 114). Rowling described Harry's sharing with Ron rather than providing explicit commentary on the blossoming of the bond because the concept of sharing food conveys friendship and familiarity. Audiences associate sharing with the concept of "breaking bread," also a religious and social ritual. The most notable example of "breaking bread" in Western Culture is The Last Supper– a dinner Jesus shared with his disciples the night before He was crucified. At this meal, Jesus took bread and wine and equated them to his body and blood. The consumption of these artifacts in the Eucharist, represents the covenant between Jesus and his followers, symbolizing sacrifice and eternal unity. This act transforms simple bread into a powerful symbol of both spiritual and communal sustenance, providing for those who eat it throughout their own, respective journeys, much like Tolkien's lembas.

The understanding of "breaking bread" is present amongst cultures and it appears to be a world wide symbol for community. Dr. Nadezhda Savova, anthropologist at Princeton University, depicts the widespread applications of breaking bread in her dissertation *Bread* and *Home: Global Cultural Politics in the Tangible Places of Intangible Heritage*. Savova's text says, "The very choice of where to 'break bread' thus allows us the opportunity to assess

social and cultural patterns as they are evolving" (Savova 6). She refers to spaces where people share food, marking the creation of cultural communities, specifically in Bulgaria, Cuba, and Brazil, and inciting a collaboration across communities to rebel against their oppressors. A cultural community of varying personas and species is created through the Fellowship in *The Lord of the Rings.* These fellows too come from unique backgrounds and distinct cultures– and yet they are united via the facilitation of food.

Storytellers use various psychology-driven devices to effectively communicate ideas in their works; throughout fiction, the concept of food is often used to exploit pre-existing associations humans have with respect to food. This phenomenon can be explained by the concept of schema theory– a psychological framework that explains how humans perceive information based on pre-existing conceptual scaffolds. Psychologist Frederic Charles Bartlett explores schema theory in his work *Remembering: A Study in Experimental and Social Psychology*. Bartlett describes schemas as "some active, developing pattern, some form of arrangement, which is not rigid, self-contained, and unchanging, but is itself a living organization of past reactions and experiences" (Bartlett 193). His assertion suggests that when people process new information, they actively construct meaning based on their existing schemas rather than simply recalling facts. He emphasizes that "remembering appears to be far more an affair of construction than of reproduction" (Bartlett 188). This view of human psychology entails the proposition that memory, and thus perception of the world, is not wholly derived from sensory information in and of itself but partially from existing mental structures. Food is a strong tool for reflecting values of characters and communicating world building elements because it is an intrinsic part of the human experience. Ubiquitous experiences with food are why humans have a pre-existing, meal-oriented schema, allowing storytellers to leverage this shared understanding to convey dense packets of information without explicit linguistic exposition.

Lembas, a magically restorative, bread-like substance occurring throughout *The Lord of the Rings*, piqued my interest in a recent revisit of the film trilogy. Its intriguing role in the story and the potential implications sparked my curiosity, leading me to explore the topic further. I quickly realized that the bread served as a mechanism to exposit details of specific characters and contributed to driving the story forward. Lembas is gifted to the story's travelers by Galadriel, the Elven queen and embodiment of Good, to provide for the travelers sanctified mission. This bread invites comparison to the concept of the Christian Eucharist, bread and wine encapsulating the body of Christ, meant to represent love and divine sanctity– only to be consumed by those traveling a path en route to eternal life in heaven. However, upon further analysis, it became evident that these specific uses of food in narrative contexts were narrow instances of a general association of food throughout human culture. From fictional stories to cross-continental norms, food is universally associated with concepts of security, levity, and comfort. These ubiquitous associations with food allows storytellers to import dense packets of data with minimal words and thus capture and communicate finer points to a story. The psychological phenomenon that makes this possible is the concept of schema– the idea that humans cultivate conceptual infrastructure that shapes our perception of ideas. In the context of food, humans have a pre-existing schema that files food closely to the aforementioned feelings: security, levity, and comfort. This exploration of lembas from J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* has uncovered the rich symbolism and underlying etiology of lembas, tracking the topic down to the psychic substrate on which humans perceive ideas. However, fully exhausting the study leaves the discovery of additional schema leveraged throughout Tolkien's works, and more fundamentally, the nurtured or natural mechanisms which give rise to psychological schemas themselves.

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