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When evaluating any writer's legacy, the most rewarding questions to ask are not always the obvious ones. Questions like "What is the meaning of such-and-such work?" and "How did this or that event in the writer's life influence their writing?" are helpful, but such questions have a tendency to keep the reader's attention focused internally on the writer or the work itself. Just as important are the external questions that explicitly call our attention to the world outside of the writer. Examples of external questions include "How does this writer help us to better appreciate the works of *other* writers?" and "How does this writer's worldview equip us to face the world at large?"

Scholars have been asking such questions about J.R.R. Tolkien for decades. In his oft-quoted and much-discussed essay "On Fairy-stories," Tolkien coined a term that has enabled a deeper understanding of what makes fairy-stories—and other types of stories, for that matter—so attractive and so powerful. The term is "eucatastrophe" and consists of the Greek prefix "eu" meaning "good" and the word "catastrophe" meaning "catastrophe." It is tempting to define this term by resorting to a more familiar phrase like "happily ever after" or simply "happy ending," but Tolkien does not quite allow us to get away with this. "Eucatastrophe" refers not to the ending of a fairy-story in and of itself, but to the "sudden, joyous turn" leading

to that happy ending. Eucatastrophe is "a sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur" (86). Tolkien insisted that the joy this sudden turn invites in the reader "is not essentially 'escapist,' nor 'fugitive' . . . It does not deny the existence of . . . sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance" (86).

Much has been made of Tolkien's description of the eucatastrophe concept and of how it helps us understand the effect a good story can have on the reader. Richard Fehrenbacher argues that eucatastrophe is the "major narrative trope" in *The Lord of the Rings* and cites "Gandalf's resurrection after his duel with the Balrog" and "Sam and Frodo's rescue by eagles on the slopes of Mount Doom," among other episodes from the text, in laying out his case (104-105).¹ This is not to say that Tolkien's description of eucatastrophe is easy to grasp in its fullness, much less is it the final word on the subject. Derek Shank insists that "the eucatastrophe is precisely the point where words fail us, where any attempt at explication by the critic is in vain. All Tolkien can hope to accomplish is to re-create . . . the same effect that he himself has felt" (158). In spite of this so-called impossibility of explaining the eucatastrophe, critics continue to apply the term to more recent literary bestsellers such as J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series. Susan Johnston calls the structure of eucatastrophe "essentially Christian" and echoes Tolkien's

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own statements that connect the eucatastrophe of the fairy-story with “the mere Christianity of the Inklings, which takes the narrative of Christ’s Incarnation, Passion, and Resurrection as explicitly a structure of hope” (68). Johnston labels the *Harry Potter* series as “fundamentally hopeful, in a very specific Christian sense” (69).

Such arguments are helpful but have tended as a whole to focus on a very narrow range of literature. The eucatastrophe may be present in the best fairy-stories, and it may be present in *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, and *Harry Potter*. What is the curious scholar to do with other genres and mediums that Tolkien was either unable or unwilling to consider for his readers? What of film and television? If we dare to venture a short distance outside the box of Western literature and civilization, will we find the eucatastrophe in the popular entertainment of the East? I believe the answer to that last question is a resounding yes. The eucatastrophe is a device well-known to cultures around the globe. While it may not be known by that name, it is a literary rose that smells as sweet, whether found in the West or the East. Of course, there is not enough time or space in this context to prove that the eucatastrophe is a device that is universally acknowledged. On the other hand, it is possible to demonstrate that the eucatastrophe is present in a much wider cultural context than Tolkien gave it. Fairy-stories and fantasy novels are just the beginning. I will use select examples from Japanese film and Korean TV drama to show the extreme versatility of the eucatastrophe or “sudden happy turn” as Tolkien defined it.

First, I think it is important to establish that the eucatastrophe is not limited by genre. One example, a little closer to Tolkien’s geographical context than Japan or Korea, is the 1869 novel *Lorna Doone* by British writer R.D. Blackmore. *Lorna Doone* is not a fairy-story or a fantasy novel, at least in the sense that is apparently intended by Tolkien in “On Fairy-stories” and in his personal correspondence with his son Christopher.² In his original preface to the

novel, Blackmore offers a short explanation of the genre he chose:

This work is called a “romance,” because the incidents, characters, time, and scenery, are alike romantic. And in shaping this old tale, the Writer neither dares, nor desires, to claim for it the dignity or cumber it with the difficulty of an historic novel.

And yet he thinks that the outlines are filled in more carefully, and the situations (however simple) more warmly coloured and quickened, than a reader would expect to find in what is called a “legend.” (3)

Lorna Doone is a romance in the vein of Sir Walter Scott’s novel *Waverley*. It is thus a mixture of history and fabrication. There are no elves or wizards or fairy godmothers here except in the folklore of the locals. What readers do get is a major eucatastrophe. The main thread of *Lorna Doone* is the love story between John Ridd the farmer and Lorna, the last surviving member of an aristocratic family. After many trials, John succeeds in rescuing Lorna from the Doones, the tribe of robbers who kidnapped Lorna as a child. For his bravery in clearing out the Doone stronghold, John is rewarded with a knighthood enabling him to marry the highborn Lorna. The eucatastrophe comes in when Carver Doone, John’s rival for Lorna’s affections, shoots Lorna at the altar on her wedding day. Everyone assumes Lorna is dead—all except John’s cousin Ruth, who immediately leaps to Lorna’s aid with her medical expertise. After a miserable period of waiting, the turn comes at last thanks to Ruth’s ministrations. The eucatastrophe in *Lorna Doone* is explicitly Christian. First, when Lorna is shot, John refers to her as “the young death in my arms” and describes her using several other images of death (649, ch. LXXIV). When Ruth takes over, one of her first actions is to call for Spanish wine and pour it into Lorna’s mouth using a christening

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spoon, all while Lorna lies senseless on the door of the church pulpit (656, ch. LXXIV). When Lorna begins to show signs of recovery, John expresses his feelings in terms of his religious faith: “I felt my life come back, and glow; I felt my trust in God revive; I felt the joy of living and of loving dearer things than life; who feels can never tell of it” (661, ch. LXXV). “Who feels can never tell of it” recalls Shank’s assertion that the eucatastrophe cannot be adequately pinned down with words alone. For the last few decades, scholars have largely ignored *Lorna Doone*, though it once enjoyed a wide readership. Still, Max Keith Sutton has noted this important similarity between Blackmore and Tolkien: “Promising disaster, with quotations from Greek tragedy sometimes on the title page, [Blackmore’s] stories move from ominous beginnings and acts of violence toward providential ends—the ‘eucatastrophe’ or good turn of fortune that J.R.R. Tolkien admired in fairy tales and brilliantly created at the climax of *The Lord of the Rings*” (38).

It is outside the scope of the present argument to discuss why Tolkien chose to embed such an intriguing concept as the eucatastrophe within an article specifically devoted to fairy-stories, leaving out so many other literary genres and mediums. Suffice it to say that we need feel no obligation to keep the concept strictly within the confines of fairy land. Now that I have shown a compelling example of how the eucatastrophe can spill over from one genre to another, I would like to extend the argument further by using examples from popular Japanese films and Korean television series to affirm the amazing cultural and geographical dexterity of the concept Tolkien so eloquently codified.

The first example I have chosen is the 2005 Japanese film *Train Man*. Hector Garcia classifies *Train Man* as a “worldwide Japanese pop culture phenomenon” and charts the story from its humble beginnings as a “series of messages on the largest Internet forum in Japan” to a film, a TV series, multiple literary and graphic novel adaptations, a stage play, and so on (125). *Train Man* is allegedly based

on the true story of a 22-year-old geek or “otaku” who decided to break out of his antisocial cocoon and intervene one night on the subway when a drunken businessman began harassing the other passengers, including a young office woman. The young woman expresses her gratitude for Train Man’s assistance by sending him a set of expensive Hermes tea cups. Lacking the confidence to interact with women, Train Man seeks advice from the denizens of his favorite Internet chat room. From shaving cream and hair salons to sport coats and dress shoes, Train Man learns the ropes from his anonymous benefactors and gathers up the courage to invite the young woman to dinner. The relationship proceeds smoothly until Train Man reaches the point where he relies so much on the advice of his online peers that he loses his confidence and tells the woman—always referred to as Hermes and never by her real name—that he just doesn’t think their relationship is going to work out. In the climax of the film adaptation, after Train Man’s friends have lectured him into believing that he might still have a chance with Hermes, he pursues her into Akihabara, the Japanese equivalent of Silicon Valley. As in fairy-story, Train Man believes that sorrow and failure are very real possibilities. Train Man begins to comb the innumerable electronics stores of Akihabara, since he knows that Hermes has gone out to buy a computer using advice he had previously offered her. His lowest point comes when he loses his glasses and trips over a bicycle lying in the road, landing on his face. Train Man stays on the ground, assuming final defeat until a familiar pair of women’s shoes enters the frame and pauses in front of his prostrate form. This leads into a scene in which both parties confess their true feelings and Train Man admits that he had always assumed he would die alone, never getting close to another human being. Though all of this bears an undeniable resemblance to the framework of countless romantic comedies in film and literature, the marks of the eucatastrophe are clearly present. Train Man’s defeated mindset

leading into his final pursuit of Hermes and his providential encounter with her in the streets of Tokyo's densely packed Akihabara district are nothing if not a sudden joyous turn, a miraculous grace never to be counted on to recur. After thinking he had lost the greatest opportunity of his life, Train Man is rewarded with the fulfillment of his hopes, and the story closes in happiness.

Christophe Thouny has pointed out one of *Train Man's* mythological dimensions, which contributes to the effect of the eucatastrophe at the end: "The story starts in the space of transit . . . the commuter train that gives its name to [Train Man] and brings the goddess Hermes, the messenger of the gods" (122). The sheer unlikelihood of locating a specific person in the absurdly crowded Akihabara district of Tokyo may lead some to accuse the filmmakers of using a *deus ex machina* to reunite Train Man and Hermes. Jeffrey Allinson, in his exploration of how the eucatastrophe has been used through film, would likely deny the truth of this accusation. In the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Film*, Allinson asserts the following:

Eucatastrophe is not synonymous with *deus ex machina* . . . which is an implausible or inept plot device used to escape a storytelling quagmire, nor is it used merely for commercial appeal. Rather, eucatastrophe makes the bold claim that the arc of human history ultimately curves towards justice, restoration, and hope. From this perspective, rescue comes not from a conveniently inserted god but is part of the very fabric of a fictive world. The approach is easily distinguished from films that seek to demonstrate the gritty reality of human existence, such as one might find in film noir. (175)

At heart, *Train Man* is a film of hope and restoration, allowing for sudden unlikely turns and a series of major transformations in

the life of its protagonist. The initial response to *Train Man* suggests that the story hit a nerve: "The [*Train Man*] phenomenon spurred spin-off events and discussions on the Internet and television shows and was the topic of numerous feature articles in weekly and monthly magazines, many of which suggested a need to reevaluate the negative view of otaku practices" (Fisch 133).

Directors and scriptwriters in the Korean television industry have a similar fascination with the eucatastrophe. The "Hallyu" or "Korean Wave" is a term that refers to the increasing popularity of Korean pop culture overseas. "Javabeans" and "Girlfriday," the online names for two Korean-American women who blog regularly about Korean culture—especially Korean TV dramas—have written a book that clarifies many aspects of the Korean TV drama or "K-Drama" phenomenon. In the introduction to this book, it is explained, "By the early 2000s, the Korean Wave had amassed a huge international following, and now grosses billions of dollars annually . . . online access to content has enabled an immediacy of consumption abroad, to the point where international fan response is practically in real time with Korean response" (ch. I). The 2011 K-Drama *City Hunter* contains a typical example of the use of the eucatastrophe in this medium. The series consists of twenty episodes that follow the trials of a South Korean black ops agent who is hell-bent on taking revenge for the lives of his men who were assassinated by their own government during a raid on North Korea. The agent intends to kill the men who are responsible for ordering the assassination, but his adopted son argues that a far more effective plan would be to expose the crimes of these men publicly so that the citizens of Korea will know the truth and punish the men accordingly without necessarily killing them and starting a cycle of needless revenge. In the final episode, the black ops agent makes an assassination attempt on the South Korean president—who happens to be one of the five officials who ordered the killing of the agent's men—and the agent's adopted son throws

himself in the path of the bullet to save the president. The closing frames of the climactic shooting scene depict the father and his adopted son in a bloody circle symbolizing, among other things, the end of their quest for revenge, and at first the viewer is left pondering the possibility that both have died. In the epilogue, the adopted son's love interest is seen strolling through Incheon International Airport, presumably preparing for a flight out of the country. Suddenly, she turns around and finds herself face-to-face with the man she loves, who is alive and well despite the bullet he took to the chest. The violence of the preceding shooting and the unexpected survival of the son instantly morphs the tone of the finale from utter bleakness to redemption and the possibility of future happiness, as is reflected not-so-subtly in the smiles exchanged between the two young people. To borrow Tolkien's words from "On Fairy-stories," this kind of ending "denies . . . in the face of much evidence . . . universal final defeat . . . giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief" (86). Death gives way to life, sorrow to joy, in an unexpected act of grace on the part of God—or in this case, the screenwriter or sub-creator.

Such eucatastrophic endings abound in the realm of Korean TV drama. I will mention one more very quickly. The 2013 drama *You Who Came from the Stars* features the romance between an actress and a man from another planet who takes the form of a human being. The tension in the series revolves around the man's impending departure to his home planet, since delaying that departure apparently means giving up the opportunity to return home altogether. Numerous twists and characters spice up the basic plot, but in the end, the significant point is that the man is forced to return to his planet or die. The actress who loves him is devastated, naturally. Three years go by, and the actress is attending an award ceremony, when she looks into the crowd and sees her lover approaching. Somehow, he has gained the ability to return from his planet. The

actress begins to sob, just before what one online reviewer described as "the kiss of the century" takes place (hjlyon). Again, the words of Tolkien are relevant in this context: "It is the mark of a good fairy-story . . . that however wild its events . . . it can give to child or man that hears it, when the 'turn' comes, a catch of the breath . . . near to (or indeed accompanied by) tears as keen as that given by any form of literary art" (86). In what should probably be read as a forecasting of the joy the main characters experience in the ending—as well as an apt definition of the eucatastrophe's effect on the audience—the actress's apartment contains a couch with several pillows that the audience glimpses during many scenes set there. On these pillows are sewn the words of the prayer of Moses from the Old Testament book of Numbers:

The LORD bless you and keep you;
the LORD make his face shine on you
and be gracious to you;
the LORD turn his face toward you
and give you peace. (Num 6.24-26)

Grace and peace are exactly what most of the characters are left with in *The Lord of the Rings*, *Lorna Doone*, *Train Man*, *City Hunter*, and *You Who Came from the Stars*. The eucatastrophe is a device that exceeds not only the fairy-story genre; it also exceeds the geographical and cultural bounds of Western literature to embrace non-Western film and television. That sudden turn, that catch of the breath, and that beat of the heart accompanied by tears and the Consolation of the Happy Ending is a powerful and versatile device capable of touching hearts and minds all over the world.

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¹ Fehrenbacher notes the obvious parallels between *Beowulf* and the Rohan sections of *The Lord of the Rings*, but he also points out an intriguing difference. Where the worldview of *Beowulf*'s Danish warrior society is essentially pessimistic, foretelling death and destruction, Rohan experiences the eucatastrophic trajectory of Tolkien's vision, becoming almost an anti-*Beowulf* symbol by end of story.

² See Tolkien's letter to his son on October 28, 1944, for a discussion of the eucatastrophe that is very similar to the content of "On Fairy-stories." The letter can be read in the collection of Tolkien's correspondence edited by Humphrey Carpenter (98-102).

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